



Province of Alberta

The 27th Legislature
Fifth Session

Alberta Hansard

February 7, 2012, to March 22, 2012
and Index

The Honourable Kenneth R. Kowalski, Speaker



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Alberta Hansard

Tuesday, February 7, 2012

Issue 1

The Honourable Kenneth R. Kowalski, Speaker

Legislative Assembly of Alberta
The 27th Legislature

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Zwozdesky, Gene, Edmonton-Mill Creek, Deputy Chair of Committees

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Party standings:

Progressive Conservative: 67 Alberta Liberal: 8 Wildrose: 4 New Democrat: 2 Alberta: 1 Independent: 1

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Legislative Assembly of Alberta

3 p.m.

Tuesday, February 7, 2012

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

[The Clerk read the Royal Proclamation dated 7, 2012, summoning the Members of the Legislative Assembly of Alberta to convene on this date]

The Clerk: Please be seated.

[The Sergeant-at-Arms left the Chamber]

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

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

Prayers

The Speaker: Good afternoon and welcome. Please join with me in the opening day prayer.

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

Hon. members and ladies and gentlemen, I would now like to invite Mr. Paul Lorieau to lead us in the singing of our national anthem. Please join in in the language of one's choice.

Hon. Members and Guests:

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

The Speaker: Please be seated.

Well, good for all of us. Without any doubt in my mind that was the most stirring rendition of our national anthem I've ever heard sung.

Entrance of the Lieutenant Governor

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

[The Mace was draped]

The Speaker: The Premier is on her way to escort the Lieutenant Governor back to the Assembly. As we await, the Royal Canadian Artillery Band will now play a brief musical interlude, the details of which are in the program that you have. The RCA Band, Canada's oldest regular army band, was formed in Quebec City in 1879. It was subsequently stationed in Montreal and Halifax. It has seen service in both world wars and in Korea, and it has travelled across Canada and beyond our borders. Reconstituted in the city of Edmonton in 1997, the band is today under the direction of Captain Eric Gagnon, CD, who is in the Speaker's gallery. Maestro.

[The Sergeant-at-Arms knocked on the main doors of the

Chamber three times. The Assistant Sergeant-at-Arms opened the doors, and the Sergeant-at-Arms entered]

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

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

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

[A fanfare of trumpets sounded]

[Preceded by the Sergeant-at-Arms, His Honour the Lieutenant Governor of Alberta, Colonel (Retired) Donald S. Ethell, OC, OMM, AOE, MSC, CD, LLD, and Mrs. Ethell, their party, the Premier, and the Clerk entered the Chamber. His Honour took his place upon the throne]

Speech from the Throne

His Honour: Pray be seated.

My fellow Albertans, hon. members, and distinguished guests, welcome to the Fifth Session of the 27th Alberta Legislature. It is my honour to deliver the Speech from the Throne and my privilege to serve the people of this province as Lieutenant Governor.

While these are trying times, other nations' difficulties do serve to remind us of how fortunate we are to live in the grand province of Alberta. We are blessed with a free and fair political system built on enduring constitutional foundations, and in 2012 this arrangement will receive the attention it deserves as we celebrate the Diamond Jubilee of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II. Sixty years ago yesterday His Majesty King George VI passed away, and Her Majesty ascended the throne. For six decades she has dedicated herself to serving as the anchor of the Commonwealth and the monarch of our great nation. I know that many Albertans are as eager as I am to congratulate Her Majesty on her distinguished record.

We are blessed to reside in a province with unlimited opportunity. Alberta has abundant resources, world-class industries, and an indomitable spirit of enterprise and innovation. We have the ability, desire, knowledge, and freedom to attain our full potential.

In my lifetime alone Alberta has come a long way. I arrived in this province in the early '50s as a young soldier in the Canadian army. Forced into hospital by a leg injury, I found myself surrounded by convalescent First World War veterans. They were receiving the very best care, and while it kept them alive, that was all it could do. These individuals and their families faced a very limited future. Today we have innovative institutions like the Glenrose rehabilitation hospital and the University of Alberta's Faculty of Rehabilitation Medicine using previously unimaginable techniques like robotics and neural engineering to restore function and help heal the hidden trauma of disabilities and restore mental health. Now such individuals have a future without limits.

This is the future your government wants for all Albertans. The key to Alberta's success is its people and the vision they have for what this province can become. Our lives today are immeasurably better because Albertans in the past were inspired to look beyond the limits of their times to a vision of unmet needs and a greater future and then act upon it.

A little more than 40 years ago Alberta set out on the road to the modern age under the leadership of people with such foresight. Four decades ago our province was just beginning to find its place in an uncertain, fast changing world. New and untested opportunities glimmered on the horizon, and Alberta's government in 1971

resolved to make the most of them, promising to build a society that is not inferior to that in any province or state in North America. It succeeded magnificently.

That government set forth with a clear vision for Alberta and fulfilled it but not by playing it safe. Recognizing the need for imaginative new programs, it made bold decisions that built up the province we take for granted today. It nurtured Alberta's energy sector, identifying the oil sands' potential and implementing the policies necessary for its long-term success. To save for future generations, it created the heritage fund. Alberta would never have become a global leader without such foresight. This was a government that boldly used an uncertain environment to its advantage, looking beyond the demands of the present to build lasting success and modernize Alberta.

Now, two generations on, Alberta faces fresh challenges. Long-established ways are being called into question, and comfortable assumptions are being examined anew while Albertans themselves are growing older. Your government will not miss the opportunity to reshape Alberta in response.

Alberta's families and businesses have a government that will help them adapt and build a province that present and future generations will be proud of. The actions we take today will help us reach our potential as individual Albertans and as a province. Our time is now, and your government will lead.

Your government will secure this province's economic future at home with smart spending and abroad by improving our competitiveness in global markets. Your government will listen to Albertans, engaging them on the issues that matter to bring about the change they want and need. Together with Albertans your government will make Alberta the best jurisdiction anywhere, based on a thriving economy and a quality of life that is the envy of the world.

Your government will start with the root of success, sound finances. Our main trading partners are struggling with debt and low growth, yet Alberta is in a stronger position. We are heading toward balanced budgets, reliable revenue streams, and strong economic growth.

However, Alberta's current fiscal framework relies too heavily on volatile energy revenue as a source of income. It's time for foundational change. It won't be easy, but it is the right way to better manage the annual unpredictability in the budgeting process. It begins now. Budget 2012 will bring predictable funding on a three-year cycle to education, advanced education, and municipalities. Your government will work with its partners in these areas to allow for greater stability, improved long-term planning, and delivery of outcomes.

Your government will also introduce a new budgetary review process that includes a results-based approach, one that will allow for a thorough examination of how public spending is achieving outcomes for Albertans. Your government will examine its entire fiscal framework to ensure it spends Albertans' tax dollars appropriately while saving intelligently for your future and for generations to come. This will include reviews of the Alberta heritage savings trust and sustainability funds, capital and infrastructure projects, gaming revenue, our operating budget, and income taxes along with reviews of existing programs.

Once in every three-year cycle each part of the government, including agencies, boards, and commissions, will come under the spotlight. Your government will scrutinize all costs and challenge the automatic growth of spending, assigning funds only where they are needed. There must be a disciplined relationship between public expenditures and benefits for Albertans, resulting in no unjustified increases to departmental budgets.

With a new and robust plan linking expenditures to actual

outcomes, your government will treat Albertans' money with the same care and respect they do, spending wisely on the services Albertans count on for an outstanding quality of life. Education is one way to protect that standard of living. The nature of work and progress is changing, and as technology advances, the demand for highly skilled, educated workers will increase.

Alberta must be able to succeed and thrive in the global knowledge economy, and that means giving every Albertan the opportunity to benefit from a cutting-edge education from kindergarten to postsecondary so everyone can reach their full potential.

Your government will strengthen Alberta's postsecondary sector, recognizing it as a key driver of a robust knowledge-inspired economy. By enhancing our trade and technology institutes and colleges, this government will help Alberta nurture the most highly skilled and trained workforce anywhere. Through the building and educating tomorrow's workforce strategy your government will increase the supply of highly skilled, educated, and innovative people and high-performance work environments that make maximum use of innovation and technology.

Your government will attract the world's top talent to Alberta to contribute to a research agenda that will position this province on the international stage as a leader in helping to solve many of the world's challenges in energy, water, food, health, and improving our quality of life.

Your government will identify strategies to recruit more students from Métis and First Nations communities so they can continue to contribute to Alberta's success and solidify the bonds that sustain their heritage and keep their communities together.

Albertans' quality of life is driven in large part through finding innovative approaches to deliver publicly funded health care. Your government is committed to improving access to primary care for all Albertans. In 2012, building on the success of primary care networks, your government will embark on a plan to expand community-based care through the introduction of family care clinics staffed by multidisciplinary teams of health care professionals. Patients in need of medical attention will be able to get it quickly and easily at publicly funded clinics close to home. Your government will begin with the implementation of three pilot projects this spring.

Expanding access also means enhancing the way allied professionals such as pharmacists, nurses, and nurse practitioners interact with patients, allowing front-line staff to handle more duties and easing pressure on the health care system. Your government will enable health care providers to better meet Albertans' needs through a team-based approach.

Your government has fulfilled its commitment to empower the Alberta Health Quality Council to run an independent inquiry into various aspects of the health care system to make sure it delivers timely, unprejudiced, and equitable outcomes in which Albertans can have confidence.

The strength of the publicly funded health care system of today rests on the foresight and commitment of our local communities. This requires a strong relationship with government that offers communities a meaningful role in long-term planning and co-ordination of services at the local level. Recognizing this fundamental principle, your government will give local health advisory councils a more active voice and greater input in decisions that impact their communities.

A successful Alberta is one in which every Albertan is empowered to be part of the economic, social, and cultural life of the province. Your government is bringing these values to the services it provides to all Albertans.

Your government will provide seniors with the supports, services, and care they need to remain healthy, happy, and

productive. This includes measures to help them stay in the peaceful security of their own homes, surrounded by the warmth of family, for as long as possible.

Your government's commitment to protecting property rights embraces all Albertans. To strengthen those rights, it created a task force that met with Albertans and listened to learn what property rights mean to them. Your government will use Albertans' contributions to make common-sense decisions on this issue.

Your government believes that a vibrant arts and culture scene is vital to the fabric of Alberta's communities, and it will continue to work with partners to keep the sector flourishing. Your government looks forward to engaging constructively with community leaders from diverse cultural and creative organizations to find the best methods of encouraging growth.

Healthy businesses are a crucial part of a strong economy. Your government will work hard to create and maintain the conditions for their success before getting out of the way.

Your government is committed to the development of northern Alberta as a prosperous and attractive place to live, work, and play. It will initiate a comprehensive northern Alberta development strategy to help the region continue to grow and develop in a sustainable manner with an outstanding quality of life. Your government will work creatively with municipalities and industry to address infrastructure challenges. The north is the source of much of our prosperity, so success there is critical for a successful Alberta overall.

A terrific quality of life requires the province to work closely with all municipalities. Your government will continue to build on its long tradition of effective partnership with municipal governments as part of the review of the municipal sustainability initiative. The review will focus on having a streamlined program with increased flexibility, giving municipalities an even greater ability to meet local needs. Your government will work towards establishing three-year funding cycles so municipalities can count on stable, predictable funds.

Municipalities support strong communities, and strong communities are safe communities. Your government will continue its support for antigang initiatives while reaching out to at-risk youth to deny organized crime new recruits.

Your government will proudly tell Alberta's story and promote Albertans' vision and actions on the world stage. Your government will better integrate our global strategies as we continue to bolster Alberta's reputation abroad, showcasing our diversity in everything from tourism to arts and culture, education, and trade and investment opportunities, and Albertans can be sure this government will fulfill its role responsibly and honestly.

It will co-operate closely and openly with Ottawa, building on its strong relationship with the federal government. A strong Alberta is one that can put aside jurisdictional differences and stand as a proud, committed, and constructive member of Confederation. The federal government and the province share much in common, including the desire to give farmers more choice through the dismantling of the Wheat Board and a commitment to bringing down crime through new, more stringent federal legislation. Albertans expect government to work together on their behalf, and your government will not let you down. But in doing this, it will not shy away from standing up for this province. Your government will never hesitate to reiterate Albertans' perspectives at federal, provincial, and territorial levels.

A Canadian energy strategy will play a major role in this effort. Energy is critical to our prosperity, but Alberta must diversify its customer base to achieve the greatest returns. Your government will actively design initiatives to access global markets and assist Canadians and our trading partners in understanding Alberta's

energy goals. The infrastructure necessary to get our resources to new markets must cross other jurisdictions, so any expansion will involve various partners at the provincial, national, and international levels. The more we work together to co-ordinate our efforts, the greater our success and the more prosperity for everyone involved.

The people of this province share a deep love and respect for its environment and natural resources, and your government will develop them responsibly in the interests of all Albertans. Your government will continue to partner with Ottawa to defend Alberta's energy sector and develop an improved oil sands environmental monitoring program that is among the best in the world. Both governments are now standing together behind a plan that is credible, science based, and fully transparent. Your government's action on establishing and reaching key environmental outcomes and sharing its performance with Albertans and the world will leave no doubt of its commitment to these goals.

Albertans know their livelihoods and communities are tied to the land and water we all cherish. They want their children to inherit a province as clean, healthy, and productive as the one they inherited. The twin needs of keeping Alberta beautiful and its economy healthy are not starkly opposed. By investing in emerging technologies, this government will do both.

But our natural resources extend beyond oil and gas. Agriculture is the largest renewable industry in our province, and your government wants it to stay that way. Alberta's rural communities are a critical piece of Alberta's success story. Settlers and farmers founded this province, and their values run deep. Through policy development, advocacy, and programs and services that reinforce market access and economic competitiveness your government will preserve and expand the legacy they left us, ensuring our farmers are the best in the world. Our prosperity is intimately tied to the strength of rural Alberta, and government will never forget it.

Over 40 years ago a bold government saw the need for sweeping change and rose to the occasion, ushering in a new era of prosperity and progress for Alberta. Now the time has come to bring that spirit and vision into the 21st century. The world is changing faster than ever, and we must stay at the forefront.

Alberta can be proud of rich natural resources, North America's most competitive business environment, and a vibrant technology and innovation sector that helps push human achievement to unparalleled heights. All these advantages rely on the passion and drive of Albertans, who make them possible, and it is Albertans who will always remain the central focus of this government.

It will help all Albertans reach their full potential, setting the stage for future generations to enjoy even greater success. It will revitalize publicly funded health care services to increase access and suit an aging population with diverse needs. It will find new and effective ways to reach out to vulnerable Albertans and make them a part of the province's success story. It will revamp Alberta's education system so all graduates can hit the ground running and contribute more effectively than ever. It will budget for the long term and be rigorous in managing our fiscal framework so all Albertans can count on the services they need for many years to come.

History has shown us that short-term focus can result in long-term problems. Your government will address the root causes of problems rather than just respond to symptoms. Albertans expect better and demand excellence. And so above all, your government will not waver. It will not be deterred from change. Your government will not let you down.

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

God bless Alberta.

God bless Canada.

God save the Queen. [Standing ovation]

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

The Speaker: Hon. members, ladies and gentlemen, I would now invite Mr. Paul Lorieau to lead us in the singing of *God Save The Queen*. Please remain standing at the conclusion.

Hon. Members and Guests:

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

The Sergeant-at-Arms: Order!

[Preceded by the Sergeant-at-Arms, Their Honours, their party, and the Premier left the Chamber as a fanfare of trumpets sounded]

The Speaker: Please be seated.

[The Mace was uncovered]

The Speaker: Hon. members and ladies and gentlemen, as His Honour has so eloquently advised us, yesterday marked the Diamond Jubilee of Queen Elizabeth II's reign. She became Queen of the United Kingdom and Head of the Commonwealth on February 6, 1952, and was the first monarch to be styled as such. Commonwealth countries whose head of state was the Queen passed legislation through their respective parliaments to acknowledge the monarch of the United Kingdom as their own. In 1953 in this country the Royal Style and Titles Act formally conferred upon her the title of Queen of Canada, making her the first of Canada's sovereigns to have this title.

The Diamond Jubilee central weekend is scheduled for June 2 through 5 to coincide with the anniversary of her coronation, which took place in Westminster Abbey on June 2, 1953.

Queen Victoria was the only other monarch to celebrate a Diamond Jubilee in over 1,200 years of British history. She reigned for 63 years and seven months, with her Diamond Jubilee occurring in 1897. Queen Elizabeth II, hopefully, will reign until September 10, 2015, to reign longer than her great-great-grandmother Queen Victoria, who reigned from 1837 to 1901.

Queen Elizabeth II is the 32nd great-granddaughter of King Alfred the Great, who was the first effective king of England from 871 to 899. She became Queen at the young age of 25. The Queen celebrated her Silver Jubilee in 1977 and her Golden Jubilee in 2002.

Her reign of 60 years has seen 12 Prime Ministers of the United Kingdom, beginning with Winston Churchill. As Canada's head of state there have been 11 individuals who served as Prime Minister, and the province of Alberta has had seven Premiers since 1952.

Queen Elizabeth has visited the Alberta Legislature four times. Her first visit took place in October of 1951 as Her Royal Highness Princess Elizabeth made the trip in place of her father, King George VI, who was in poor health at the time. Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II returned in July of 1959 as part of a 45-day cross-country Canadian tour. The fountain in the rotunda of the Legislature Building is a permanent reminder of that visit. The Queen returned to the Legislature Building in August of 1978 while in Edmonton to celebrate the 11th Commonwealth Games. On May 24, 2005, Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II toured the

Legislature Grounds and became the first reigning monarch to address Albertans from the throne in the Legislative Assembly as Alberta celebrated its centennial.

Please let us all join together to extend our best wishes to Her Majesty on this remarkable occasion and invite all Albertans to celebrate this historic event throughout the coming year.

[The Premier returned to the Chamber]

Tablings

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

Introduction of Bills

The Speaker: The hon. the Premier.

Bill 1

Results-based Budgeting Act

Ms Redford: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I request leave to introduce Bill 1, the Results-based Budgeting Act.

This bill, if passed, will establish a new approach to government budgeting, one that emphasizes results for Albertans and fiscal discipline for government. It will require that all government programs and services, including agencies, boards, and commissions, be reviewed on a regular three-year cycle to ensure that they are delivering the outcomes that Albertans want.

Once the review process is completed for a given program, the budget for that program will be rebuilt from the ground up. We will scrutinize every dollar spent to ensure that it is being used in the most effective way possible. This will be a transparent process, with the findings and recommendations of program reviews made public. This is about challenging automatic growth in government spending while making sure that we're providing all of the right services at the right time and in the right way to meet Albertans' needs.

Results-based budgeting means treating Albertans' tax dollars with the same care and respect that they do their own. It's a way of imposing new discipline on our budgeting process and on our performance.

Bill 1 shows Albertans that this government is responsive and accountable, ensuring that they have the quality of services that they pay for and deserve.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

[Motion carried; Bill 1 read a first time]

Motions

Ms Redford: Mr. Speaker, I move that the speech of His Honour the Honourable the Lieutenant Governor to this Assembly be taken into consideration on February 8, 2012.

[Motion carried]

The Speaker: The hon. Government House Leader.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I move that the Assembly stand adjourned until Wednesday, February 8, 2012, at 1:30 p.m.

[Motion carried; the Assembly adjourned at 3:55 p.m. to Wednesday at 1:30 p.m.]

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Province of Alberta

The 27th Legislature
Fifth Session

Alberta Hansard

Wednesday, February 8, 2012

Issue 2

The Honourable Kenneth R. Kowalski, Speaker

Legislative Assembly of Alberta
The 27th Legislature

Fifth Session

Kowalski, Hon. Ken, Barrhead-Morinville-Westlock, Speaker
Cao, Wayne C.N., Calgary-Fort, Deputy Speaker and Chair of Committees
Zwozdesky, Gene, Edmonton-Mill Creek, Deputy Chair of Committees

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Benito, Carl, Edmonton-Mill Woods (PC)	Liepert, Hon. Ron, Calgary-West (PC)
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Forsyth
Notley
Rodney
Rogers
Swann
Woo-Paw

Legislative Assembly of Alberta

1:30 p.m.

Wednesday, February 8, 2012

[The Speaker in the chair]

Prayers

The Speaker: Good afternoon. Welcome back.

Let us pray. Life and health are precious. When they are lost, all of us are impacted. Let us remember those who are no longer among us with the most positive of thoughts, and let us reach out with compassion, understanding, and prayer to those who suffer. May blessings be upon them, and may they find eternal salvation in an eternity of peace. Amen.

Please be seated.

Hon. members, on our first day when we return, we take the time after prayers so that we may pay tribute to a former colleague who has passed away, and in respect would you all stand, please.

Mr. Brian C. Downey
November 5, 1950, to January 12, 2012

The Speaker: Mr. Brian C. Downey, former Member of the Legislative Assembly, passed away on January 12, 2012, at the age of 61 years. Mr. Downey was first elected in the election held May 8, 1986, and was re-elected on March 20, 1989. He served until April 8, 1989. During his years of service he represented the constituency of Stettler for the Progressive Conservative Party. During his term of office Brian Downey served on the select standing committees on Private Bills, Public Accounts, Public Affairs, and as chair of the Special Committee to Prepare and Report Lists of Members to Compose the Select Standing Committees. With our admiration and respect there is gratitude to members of his family, who are with us today in the Speaker's gallery, who shared the burdens of public office. Our prayers are with them.

In a moment of silent prayer I'd ask each of you to remember the hon. member, Brian C. Downey, as you have known him. Rest eternal grant unto him, O Lord, and let light perpetual shine upon him. Amen.

Please be seated.

Introduction of Visitors

The Speaker: Hon. members, it's an honour for me to rise today to introduce to you guests who are seated in the Speaker's gallery. These guests are family members of our former colleague Brian Downey. I'd ask them to rise, please, as I mention their names: Mrs. Trudy Downey, widow of Mr. Brian Downey, former MLA for the constituency of Stettler. His parents, Cliff and Frances Downey, are here with members of their family as well, including Brian's daughter, Allison Downey-Damato, with Marc Downey-Damato; Brian's son, Dustin Downey, and Jovina Downey; and grandchildren Matteo Downey-Damato, Kestrel Damato, Duke Downey, and Jasmine Downey. Please offer them the warm welcome of the Assembly.

Introduction of Guests

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Creek.

Mr. Zwozdesky: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It's a great pleasure for me to introduce to you and through you to all

members of the House here some very special visitors from Velma E. Baker school in my constituency. They are accompanied by their teacher, Ms Peacock, and by parent helpers Mrs. Erickson, Mrs. Krysa, Mrs. Schmidt, Mr. Ruda, and Mr. Ollerhead. Velma Baker has the distinction of being absolutely one of the finest schools in all of Alberta, and these students are a testament to that outstanding education system we have. I would ask all of these members from the school and the parent helpers and teachers to please rise and receive the warm applause of the Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands-Norwood? The hon. Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development.

Mr. Berger: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise today to introduce to you and through you to all members of this Assembly a unique group of University of Alberta students. They are the stars of a program called Heifer in Your Tank. This program was started by Dr. Frank Robinson, professor, who wanted the animal science class to develop something more original than a term paper. The result is project-based learning. The students perform live skits based on the rural chautauquas of the past to educate the public on the science related to the production of animals and their by-products that we use every day. I saw the students in November at Farmfair and was truly impressed with these young people and their program. They truly are the future of agriculture.

With that, I would like to introduce Dr. Frank Robinson, Martin Zuidhof, Dana Penrice, Dustin Banks, Erica Posteraro, Lucas Nickel, Airell Deslauriers, Chelsea Geiger, and Jami Frederick. I would ask them to rise and receive the warm traditional welcome of this Assembly. Thank you for coming.

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

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker, for the second chance that you have afforded me. I would like to introduce to you and through you to this Assembly Brian Topp. Brian is one of the candidates for the federal NDP leadership, and this evening he is participating in a debate with other candidates organized by the New Democratic Youth of Alberta and the Edmonton-Strathcona federal NDP. Brian Topp is a former Montreal business owner, Credit Union director, and a board member of ROI venture capital fund. He has also served as staff to former NDP leader Ed Broadbent and former Saskatchewan Premier Roy Romanow. I appreciate all of the candidates for the visits that they have paid to Alberta. I now ask Brian to rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of this Assembly.

The Speaker: We'll just move on to Edmonton-Decore, please.

Mrs. Sarich: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It is indeed an honour and a privilege for me to rise today to introduce to you and through you to all Members of the Legislative Assembly 13 guests seated in the members' gallery here in recognition of the 100th anniversary of the Catholic Women's League, Edmonton diocese. I would ask them to please rise as I say their names: Gladys Brown, Edmonton diocesan Catholic Women's League president for the archdiocese of Edmonton; Gwen Elliott, Catholic Women's League president-elect for the archdiocese of Edmonton; June Fuller, past president of the Edmonton diocesan Catholic Women's League; Mable Solomon, past president of the Edmonton diocesan Catholic Women's League; Ardis Beaudry, honorary life member of the Catholic Women's League, diocesan provincial and national president of Canada. Life members of the CWL and chairpersons of the upcoming national convention of the

Catholic Women's League, scheduled to be held in Edmonton in August, include Connie McBride and Mary-Lou Veeken.

Mr. Speaker, remarkable information collected regarding the preservation and distribution of a hundred years of commemoration of the Catholic Women's League, Edmonton diocese, its faith and service, also includes Rose-Marie McCarthy, Mary-Anne Warren, and Natalie Carley. Also, we have Cecile Shaul, a member of Catholic Women's League, St. Charles; Vera Huber, a member of Catholic Women's League, St. Charles; and Mary Hunt, council officer for the Catholic Women's League, Edmonton diocese.

I would ask all those here today to give them the traditional warm welcome. Thank you.

1:40

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

Mr. Xiao: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. On Monday evening a very successful Queen's Diamond Jubilee dinner was held with over 315 guests in attendance. Twenty-four hon. members participated in that event, including yourself, Mr. Speaker. The Deputy Premier, the Official Opposition House Leader, and I were joined by representatives from the judiciary, the military, the business community, and the public at large. The dinner committee presented a cheque for over \$10,000 to Valour Place, a privately funded, assisted living residence for the bereaved families of fallen members of the Canadian Forces, wounded and injured soldiers, members of the RCMP and their families who are undergoing rehabilitation in Edmonton, a well-recognized regional centre of excellence for rehab medicine in Canada.

In the Speaker's gallery is Captain Robert Clarke, chairman of the Diamond Jubilee dinner. I would thank Captain Clarke for his leadership and for the work of his committee and invite him to rise and receive the warm traditional welcome of this House.

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

Dr. Sherman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'd like to introduce to you and through you the love of my life and my better half, Sharon MacLean, seated in the Speaker's gallery. I'd like to ask her to rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of the Assembly.

Mr. Speaker, I have one other introduction. It's a young fellow who at the age of 13 volunteered on Grant Mitchell's campaign. He also ran federally in Red Deer and finished very close in the mayor's race in Edmonton recently. He is now my constituency assistant, Andrew Lineker. I'd like Andrew to rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of the Assembly.

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

Mr. Hehr: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's an honour to introduce three people to you and through you to this honourable Assembly. The first is Mr. Peter Rilstone. Peter has been a teacher for the Calgary board of education for the last 40 years. He is now retired. He's helping me out door-knocking in Calgary-Buffalo and has been a tremendous amount of support both to me personally and to my family over the course of the last 30 years.

I'd also like to introduce to you my mother, Judy Hehr. Having two children who are lawyers who are sometimes argumentative, she still provides us with advice, love, and nurturing on an unconditional basis. I love you very much, Mum.

The last introduction is my father, and I will share with you that my father and I, growing up, would watch Stampede Wrestling. Even as I got older, we'd watch WWF, and maybe that's why I've

chosen this profession, Mr. Speaker. Bret Hart would say before his wrestling matches that he was the best there was, the best there is, the best there ever will be, and that saying can apply to my father.

Thank you very much.

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

Ms Notley: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'd like to introduce to you and through you to this Assembly three guests from the New Democratic Youth of Alberta, part of the growing wave of young people joining our party. Sean Weatherall and Jenna Hienemann are two students who recently started a new NDP club at MacEwan University. Bradley LaFortune is joining them. He studies at U of A and is helping organize tonight's federal NDP leadership debate. I'd now like to ask all three of my guests to stand as I call their names and receive the traditional warm welcome of the assembly: Bradley LaFortune, Sean Weatherall, and Jenna Hienemann. Welcome.

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

Mr. Mason: Thank you for that third opportunity that you've afforded me, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure to introduce a group of very bright young students from Delton elementary school. They are accompanied by their teachers Mrs. Dao Haddad and Miss Michelle Auger, who is their educational assistant. Delton elementary school is participating in the School at the Legislature program this week, and I'm looking forward to speaking with them tomorrow. Thank you very much. Please rise and receive the traditional warm welcome.

The Speaker: Are there others? The hon. Member for Calgary-North Hill.

Mr. Fawcett: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure to introduce to you and through you to all members of this Assembly someone that's going to be very important in my life for the next couple of months, and that's my campaign manager, Kirsten Sztain. Kirsten has a master's degree in political science and worked in my office for a couple of years, at which time she then left to work on a civic campaign in Calgary in which she brought her candidate to within 3 per cent of defeating an incumbent city councillor, so I do know I'm in very good hands. I'd ask Kirsten to rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of this Assembly.

The Speaker: Hon. members, a couple of anniversaries to acknowledge. Yesterday, February 7, the hon. Member for Lethbridge-West, the Minister of Advanced Education and Technology, reached another milestone in his life and today the hon. Member for Calgary-North West. Happy birthday to you, sir, as well.

Members' Statements

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

Catholic Women's League, Edmonton Diocese Centennial

Mrs. Sarich: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It is my honour and privilege to rise today in recognition of the Catholic Women's League, Edmonton diocese, for 100 years of faith and service. While the league was formally incorporated in Montreal in 1920, Edmonton is the birthplace of the Catholic Women's League in Canada. The Catholic Women's League is now a national organization with a proud and extensive history and which is

comprised of many councils throughout Canada, including the Edmonton diocese.

History notes that during the 1900s while travelling throughout the United Kingdom, Edmontonian Katherine Hughes became acquainted with their recently organized Catholic women's leagues. Upon her return the league concept went forward with Bishop Émile Legal, Oblate of Mary Immaculate, OMI, of Edmonton.

In 1912 the women who founded the Catholic Women's League began with a mission to protect and support immigrant women and girls seeking work in Edmonton and to promote spiritual and temporal good works. Mr. Speaker, the prayer of St. Francis of Assisi states: for it is in giving of ourselves that we receive. Truly this simple statement personifies the Catholic Women's League, Edmonton diocese.

Throughout the hundred years the outreach activities of the Catholic Women's League, Edmonton diocese, included in the early days establishing a hostel for girls, visiting hospitals, and providing employment services. Today their focus includes charitable involvement with Catholic Social Services and an initiative called Back Porch, which provides resources and information on unplanned pregnancies. Indeed, these are the living examples of the Alberta spirit.

Mr. Speaker, more than 10,000 Catholic women belong to the Catholic Women's League in Alberta and the Northwest Territories. I would like to extend my heartfelt appreciation and admiration to all the women of the past, present, and future of the Catholic Women's League, Edmonton diocese, for adding immeasurably to the creation of healthy, caring communities within our great city, province, country, and throughout the world. The longevity of the Catholic Women's League, Edmonton diocese, is truly a testament to a membership that inspires faith, hope, and humanitarian contributions within our communities. *My sincere congratulations and best wishes, and God bless the continued great success of the Catholic Women's League, Edmonton diocese.**

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Statement by the Speaker

Rotation of Questions and Members' Statements

The Speaker: Before we proceed, hon. members, as chair I would like to make a brief statement about the rotation of oral questions and members' statements. As has been the situation often during the life of this Legislature, there was a further realignment to the caucus memberships over the period of adjournment, with the result being that there is one independent member since the Assembly last met.

The current situation with one independent member and one member of the Alberta caucus is identical to the situation that existed when the Assembly convened on February 22, 2011, nearly one year ago. The rotation of oral questions was distributed with my letter to you dated January 27, 2012, concerning the Fifth Session of the 27th Legislature. Attachments 3 and 4 to the Speaker's procedural letter outline the Oral Question Period rotation and the projected sitting days calendar, which includes the rotation for Members' Statements. These schedules again mirror the rotations for both items of business that were in place one year ago.

Accordingly, the Member for Vermilion-Lloydminster is entitled to a question once every four days. As was the previous independent member, he will be entitled to the sixth question on day 3. Today is day 1 on the sitting calendar, so the independent member will be

able to ask a question next Monday, February 13, 2012. He'll be entitled to present a member's statement once every two weeks. His first opportunity will be next Wednesday, February 15.

1:50

Oral Question Period

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

Provincial Budget

Dr. Sherman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'd like to congratulate the Premier for recognizing in the Speech from the Throne the value of what Alberta Liberals have been saying for many years: the Alberta government has both a revenue problem and a spending problem. Will the Premier take the next bold step and implement a fair tax formula so that we don't have to sell off pieces of the family farm to pay the bills?

The Speaker: The hon. the Premier.

Ms Redford: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I am certainly looking forward to the Minister of Finance presenting the budget tomorrow. The throne speech was a hallmark in terms of saying that we as Albertans, all Albertans, need to be talking about what our fiscal framework is. We believe it's very important to make sure that Albertans are getting valuable services for the money that's spent, and we're looking forward to continuing that debate after tomorrow.

Dr. Sherman: Mr. Speaker, personal and corporate income taxes don't even cover what this government spends on health care, so will the Premier be honest and tell us how the government plans to raise enough revenue to pay the rest of the bills?

Ms Redford: Well, Mr. Speaker, as I said, I'm looking forward to the Minister of Finance's speech and the presentation of the budget tomorrow. You know, we have the tremendous privilege in this province of being the governing party that has been able to balance those issues very effectively, and we'll continue to do so.

Dr. Sherman: Mr. Speaker, if there was any balancing happening, we wouldn't be firing nurses and teachers.

Given that the Speech from the Throne suggests the Premier will yet again review problems without solving them, when will the Premier have the courage to do something about it instead of just talking about it?

Ms Redford: Mr. Speaker, every day since the 1st of October this government has stood up in this House. We have solved problems. We have identified problems. We have acted where we've needed to with respect to budgeting. We've acted where we've needed to with respect to legislation. We've acted where we've needed to with respect to making decisions in government that favourably impact Albertans, and we'll continue to do that.

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

Electricity Prices

Dr. Sherman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The Speech from the Throne included no plan to address one of this government's most obvious policy failures, electricity deregulation, which has led to higher power bills across the board. Why hasn't this Premier done anything to give consumers relief from skyrocketing power bills?

*The text in italics exceeded the time limit and was not read in the House.

Ms Redford: Mr. Speaker, what the Speech from the Throne did yesterday was refer to the fact that we have tremendous opportunities for economic development, that we have very important natural resources that have to be managed for the benefit of Albertans. As we move through doing what government needs to do with respect to legislation and policy development, we will do what this caucus and cabinet cares about. That is ensuring that Alberta is competitive. It's ensuring that Alberta consumers are paying rates that are competitive and fair and ensuring that industry is going to be able to afford to keep operating.

Dr. Sherman: Mr. Speaker, I'll tell you what they will ensure. They will ensure that on the coldest day in the winter a shortage of electricity shot it up to over 90 cents a kilowatt hour. Ninety cents. Will the Premier admit that the assurance of lower prices from deregulation is yet another one of this government's broken promises to the people?

Dr. Morton: Mr. Speaker, we are well aware of the fact that electricity prices have been higher in December and January. It's due to the unfortunate outage of three different power plants. I'm happy to report that one of them is back online now and that the regulated rate option for next month is predicted to be lower than it is this month.

Dr. Sherman: Mr. Speaker, given that the recent TransAlta example proves there is enormous profit to be made by breaking price gouging laws, will the Premier make sure that the fines for law-breaking are actually higher than the profits from cheating?

Dr. Morton: Mr. Speaker, the incident with TransAlta prior to Christmas shows that the system does work. The irregularities were spotted at the very hours that they happened. They were reprimanded.

I'm happy to report to the House and to Albertans that the price for electricity in this province for the last five years has averaged 8 cents a kilowatt hour. It's totally competitive.

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

PC Caucus Meeting in Jasper

Dr. Sherman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. In November the Premier said:

I believe it's important for political parties to pay for partisan activity that their leader undertakes . . . I think it's critical that if there are expenses related to pure political activity that they not be paid for by either the government of Alberta or the [people] of Alberta, and we're completely above board about that.

Will the Premier please explain how the PC caucus and many unelected Tory candidates going to a retreat immediately prior to an election can be considered anything other than a taxpayer-subsidized political activity?

Ms Redford: Everyone who sits in this House who ran for the Progressive Conservative Party is sitting as a member of the government caucus. There are many people in the opposition, who are members of other caucuses, who also receive caucus budgets, Mr. Speaker. We know that we follow the rules with respect to how we spend that money, and I presume that all hon. members on the other side do exactly the same thing. We had a very successful caucus. There is certainly no doubt that everyone in Alberta knew that we were having a caucus, and we got some good results.

Dr. Sherman: Mr. Speaker, it must have been nice to load up the luxury bus to go for a nice little retreat.

Given the Premier's insistence that the government will be more accountable and transparent than it has been in the past, will the Premier make all the receipts associated with the Jasper junket/retreat publicly available?

Ms Redford: Mr. Speaker, there is a system in place in this House that ensures that all spending is accounted for, that rules are followed, and of course we will follow those rules.

Dr. Sherman: Mr. Speaker, rest assured that this team will stretch those rules as far as they can.

Given that also in November the Premier said that she believes it's critical to be transparent about this kind of spending, what proof will the Premier give Albertans that shows her caucus didn't bend the rules by using taxpayer money for electioneering?

Ms Redford: Mr. Speaker, the LAO, as I understand it, is the office that ensures that caucuses spend their money appropriately. We have a whip that I trust to do that. We have an LAO that I presume has systems in place that audit that. We are incredibly confident that there was absolutely nothing untoward, and there's no reason to suggest otherwise.

Provincial Tax Policy

Mr. Anderson: Mr. Speaker, the Alberta income tax advantage of a 10 per cent flat tax is something that most Albertans are proud of. It's a tax that doesn't punish success, treats everyone equally, and makes our province attractive for highly skilled workers. In yesterday's throne speech it was noted that this government plans on reviewing income taxes, which likely means raising them. To the Premier. As you know, should Albertans choose a Wildrose government in the coming weeks, we will not raise income taxes. Will you clearly commit to Albertans that should a PC government be re-elected, you will not increase income taxes?

Ms Redford: Mr. Speaker, the throne speech yesterday set out a very important discussion that we need to have as Albertans. We need to talk about how we spend, and we have to talk about revenue. We have to talk about the heritage fund, and we're going to do all of that. I'll tell you that I'm looking forward to, as I said before, the budget tomorrow. The other thing is that I'm looking forward to this House passing this budget so that when we go to the polls, Albertans know exactly what this government stands for.

Mr. Anderson: I'm really trying to help you out here, Premier. Given your refusal to commit to not raising income taxes should you be re-elected, will you at the very least commit to Albertans that you will under absolutely no circumstances increase income taxes or implement any other kind of tax increase without disclosing your plans to do so before Albertans go to the polls on election day?

2:00

Ms Redford: Mr. Speaker, there is a budget coming to this House tomorrow that is going to set a very clear fiscal plan for the future of this province. I think that's what Albertans want, that's what they expect, and that's what they're going to see. There will be no doubt with respect to that.

Mr. Anderson: Well, that was as clear as mud.

Premier, given that your Finance minister has openly mused about a provincial sales tax and bringing back a health tax and now you are floating the idea of an increased income tax, will you

prove wrong all those who are out there saying that you are the most liberal tax-and-spend Premier in the history of this province and make it clear to Albertans that under no circumstances will you increase their taxes or that if you do increase their taxes, you will at least tell us which taxes you plan to increase and by how much before – that being the key word – Albertans go to the polls? How much are you going to raise taxes, Premier? How much?

Ms Redford: Mr. Speaker, in the budget to be brought to this House tomorrow, that will be passed before we go to the polls, it will be very clear to Albertans what this government stands for.

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

Electricity Prices

(continued)

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. On the weekend my wife and I looked at our electricity bill. My wife dug out the power bill from a year ago, and we compared them. We compared the bills, and she was shocked to see that, in fact, our power bill is double what it was a year ago. I want to ask the Premier: why is she prepared to let ordinary Alberta families remain at the tender mercies of the big power companies, who are reaping huge profits, and force people to pay double what they were paying a year ago for their power bill?

Dr. Morton: Mr. Speaker, I've already indicated to the House that the system we have has provided competitive electricity rates with all nonhydro jurisdictions. For the last five years it has averaged 8 cents a kilowatt hour. Albertans should know that if they don't like the regulated rate option, almost all customers have the option of a contract which will lock them in at a rate. Right now those contracts are running 8 to 9 cents per kilowatt hour. You can get them for three to five years.

The Speaker: The hon. member, please.

Mr. Mason: Thanks very much, Mr. Speaker. Well, you know, my neighbours and the people in my constituency and, in fact, all over Alberta are calling and e-mailing me about their power rates. Whatever the minister has said, the power rates are just way too high. I want to ask the Premier: why is she not going to take action to protect ordinary Alberta families from these outrageous power bills?

Ms Redford: What we know is that, as the Minister of Energy has said, with a deregulated market we are able to provide some of the lowest cost electricity in the country, Mr. Speaker. Over the long term that's very important. Sometimes with respect to markets we do see increases; we also see decreases. When we comparatively look over time, what we see is Alberta consumers having very competitive prices with respect to electricity.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Mason: Thanks very much, Mr. Speaker. Just last week I was visiting some of my seniors in my constituency, and they raised the question of the power bills that they have to pay on fixed incomes. Power rates go up and down like crazy, and they're wondering, you know, what the government is going to do to protect them from these rising prices, that they just can't afford to pay. Why doesn't the Premier have an answer for them?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I have the privilege of serving in a department called Human Services. I was asked to do so by the Premier because this Premier focuses very much on vulnerable Albertans and how we support them. If there are any vulnerable Albertans who are in distress because they cannot afford to meet their bills, Alberta Works and Alberta Supports will be there to help them.

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

Poverty Reduction

Mr. Taylor: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. On Monday the groups Vibrant Communities Calgary and Action to End Poverty in Alberta released *The Costs of Poverty*, an externally reviewed study that shows that keeping people in poverty costs Alberta between \$7.1 billion and \$9.5 billion a year. If poverty were a government ministry, only health would consume more of the provincial budget. Will the Premier commit today to do the right thing and the fiscally responsible thing and invest in a poverty reduction strategy?

The Speaker: The hon. the Premier.

Ms Redford: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The report on Monday was very interesting. I think it gathered a lot of information that many of us who've been active on these issues have known for many years. We know that it's the right thing to do not only because it has an economic interest for us but also because we want to make sure we're supporting vulnerable Albertans. That's why we created the Ministry of Human Services, so that we had the ability under a very strong minister to bring services together to develop policy and to create a social policy framework.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Taylor: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Again to the Premier. Since the approach to poverty that she inherited, a system of benefits and services for the poor which it sounds as though she wants to continue, actually keeps people poor rather than giving them a hand up, will she follow the recommendation of the former Standing Committee on the Economy and ask people who've had the experience of living poor what they need to get themselves out of the poverty trap?

Mr. Hancock: Mr. Speaker, we're on precisely that trail with our social policy framework discussions. Over the past two months I've been meeting with people who deal with social agencies across the province as well as people engaged in business. We're also going to be talking with people who are actually in poverty and people who are the recipients of social agencies as we move forward to develop a social policy framework which deals with both how you help people in need and how you prevent the situation where people get to need. [interjection]

The Speaker: The hon. member, please. We'll get to the hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre in question 17.

Mr. Taylor: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Again to the Premier. I keep hearing about this social policy framework, and I'm hoping that all you're doing is hanging a different name on a poverty reduction strategy because maybe you think it'll sell better that way. Given that Calgary reported its first homeless population decrease in 20 years this week, will the Premier acknowledge that the 10-year plan to end homelessness is working and, since housing is part, as is electricity deregulation, of the poverty

picture, make the same commitment to poverty reduction that her government has admirably made to ending homelessness?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Hancock: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. Yes, the 10-year action plan to end homelessness is working across this province, and it is a model. It's a model of how social agencies can work with government and community to create the opportunity for individual Albertans to be successful, and it's working. Unfortunately, it's probably the poverty reduction strategy that should be renamed because it is broader than just poverty reduction. It's about how people balance that income gap and those other things which affect social cohesion and how government and community work together to help people stay out of poverty as well as to get the tools they need to support themselves and their families and to be contributing citizens.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Strathcona, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Ambulance Services

Mr. Quest: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. My question is to the Minister of Health and Wellness. We're almost three years into the transition of ambulance service from the municipalities to the province, yet I in Strathcona and the Member for Sherwood Park, I know, and many of my colleagues here continue to hear about problems with response times, consolidation, and dispatch. Can the minister please tell us when these problems will be solved and Albertans will see a more seamless ambulance service?

Mr. Horne: Thank you to the hon. member for the question. I think it's important to note that we have seen improvement over the last three years in Alberta. In the case of Edmonton, for example, I had the opportunity to go on a ride-along with EMS staff here a couple of weeks ago, and I was pleased to see some of the advances that have been made in dispatch, the opportunities for EMS staff to hand off patients to other crews to reduce their waiting time and allow them to get back on the road. That said, there are many challenges, Mr. Speaker. I think the first improvement in the discussion about this issue will be with better data.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Quest: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My supplemental to the same minister. We've heard about lots of challenges, especially here in the capital region. Can the minister tell us what he personally has done to ensure that the people of Edmonton continue to receive a higher quality ambulance service as this transition continues?

Mr. Horne: Well, Mr. Speaker, a number of things have been done already. In the case of Edmonton we know that additional stations are needed, and plans are in place to open an additional five stations over the next few years. In addition to that, we need to ensure that we have adequate numbers of staff on the road.

All the while I think it's important that we recognize that the volume of visits in our emergency departments is increasing. In the last six months alone the volume of ED visits in Edmonton is up as much as 20 per cent. So while we continue to make improvements in resources that are allocated to EMS workers, we also have to continue our work to reduce waiting times in the emergency department.

The Speaker: The hon. member, please.

Mr. Quest: No supplemental.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar, followed by the hon. Member for Lethbridge-East.

2:10 PC Party Benefit Plan Trust

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you. In Alberta donations to political parties are eligible for a tax credit of up to 75 per cent, a benefit that costs the Treasury as much as \$5 million each year. My first question is to the Premier. Do donations to the PC Party fund the Premier's salary top-up, also known as the benefit plan trust? Those donations are eligible for at least a partial tax credit.

The Speaker: Well, we're on the edge here, but if you wish to proceed, proceed.

Okay. Second question, please.

Mr. MacDonald: Again to the Premier: why is it necessary to top up your \$215,000 annual salary with a benefit plan trust that is subsidized by the taxpayers of this province? Is your power bill that high?

Ms Redford: I vividly recall this discussion from last session, and I very clearly said at that time that this trust that this hon. member is referring to is not a trust that I have any knowledge of. It is not possible for me to answer questions about it. It is not something that touches my life in any way. I have no answer to the question because it is not connected to me as either Premier of the province or Leader of the PC Party, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. MacDonald: Again, Mr. Speaker, to the Premier: given that the former Premier, the hon. Member for Fort Saskatchewan-Vegreville, had a benefit plan trust set up for him from the PC Party, are you telling this House and taxpayers across the province that you are not to receive a benefit plan trust as the former Premier did?

Ms Redford: Mr. Speaker, I will say, as I said two minutes ago and as I said all of last fall, that I do not receive a salary top-up. I do not receive anything remotely related to anything that the hon. member is referring to. Whatever may have come before with respect to those arrangements has nothing to do with me.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Lethbridge-East, followed by the hon. Member for Calgary-Mountain View.

Impaired Driving

Ms Pastoor: Mr. Speaker, my question is for the Minister of Transportation regarding the impaired driving legislation. Certainly there is support for it in my constituency, and they have certainly gotten the message about drinking and driving. No one wants to get hit or killed by a drunk driver. At the same time I'm getting lots of questions about how it will work, when it's coming forward, how it will be implemented, and whether it's okay to have a drink with dinner. Can the minister offer some clarification to these questions?

The Speaker: Hon. minister, try one.

Mr. Danyluk: Mr. Speaker, this legislation is about making our roads safer for all Albertans. Let me clarify that this does not change the limits and what it means to be impaired. This also does

not prevent an individual from having a drink or going out after work with friends or with family. The only thing that's been changed . . .

The Speaker: The hon. member, please.

Ms Pastoor: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Perhaps the minister can continue that.

Also, which part of the legislation is going to go first? You're obviously targeting criminal offenders and repeat offenders the most. So which part of the legislation will be implemented first?

Mr. Danyluk: Mr. Speaker, I've always tried to make it clear that this legislation will be implemented in phases. What we hope will happen and what we're working towards is to ensure that the .08 and above is dealt with or implemented probably at the beginning of summer. Also, the .05 would be implemented at the end of summer.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Ms Pastoor: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Why will the penalties for the .05 to .08 take longer to implement?

Mr. Danyluk: Well, Mr. Speaker, we need to ensure with what we're doing that we do it right, that we get the tracking system in place. More critically important, we need to ensure that there is a public education portion, and presently we are working with the hospitality and restaurant industry. At the end of the day this is to ensure that our highways are safer, and we are working with industry and with people in Alberta to make sure that this does happen.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Mountain View, followed by the hon. Member for Bonnyville-Cold Lake.

Accommodation and Health Care for Seniors

Dr. Swann: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Certain phrases from the Speech from the Throne yesterday were very disconcerting for many Albertans, including myself, concerned about the future of health care in Alberta. The Premier has already indicated that she intends to encourage further privatization of long-term care and lift the cap on accommodation fees, which makes long-term care unaffordable for many Albertans. To the Premier: why would you choose higher costs for seniors' care?

Ms Redford: The hon. member's suggestion that this is the new order of the day is simply not the case. What we have is the opportunity right now to create institutions that will be more than places for people to be housed. We are going to create homes for people who are going to be able to have a quality of life through the entire time that they choose to be in some form of continuing care and assisted living. There will be a number of options available for seniors – and that's important – but no one will be left behind, Mr. Speaker.

Dr. Swann: If they can afford – if they can afford – the new levels of care.

Is the Premier aware that study after study has shown that the introduction of private, for-profit health care leads to not only increased costs but reduced quality of care?

Ms Redford: Mr. Speaker, the suggestion in the hon. member's question that health care would be privatized in any way is absolutely false. We have a system in Alberta where we have

accommodation and we have health care that are combined and delivered in one facility. We will do very creative work that will matter to Albertans with respect to accommodation. No Alberta senior ever has to be worried that their health care will be impacted.

Dr. Swann: Well, Mr. Speaker, the Premier assiduously avoids saying that this will be publicly funded and publicly delivered. By so doing, it's clear the agenda is private alternatives.

Ms Redford: Mr. Speaker, this hon. member's conclusion is not connected to his supposition. The fact that we are going to have an accommodation system that will allow Alberta seniors choice while still taking care of all seniors is what Alberta seniors have said that they want. We in this government have guaranteed that publicly funded health care will be available for all Albertans, including seniors.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Bonnyville-Cold Lake, followed by the hon. Member for Calgary-Fish Creek.

Athabasca Oil Sands Area Transportation Coordinating Committee

Mrs. Leskiw: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Last year the government signed an agreement with the regional municipality of Wood Buffalo committing to a number of initiatives intended to improve planning and co-ordination in the Fort McMurray oil sands region. My first question is to the Minister of Infrastructure, responsible for the oil sands secretariat. What tangible progress has been made in implementing this agreement? [interjection]

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Johnson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's a great question. The MOU is a very important agreement with both the government of Alberta and the Fort McMurray community, and we all know the pressures that they're dealing with up there. To better co-ordinate and do forward planning, there were two main commitments in this MOU. One was to establish the transportation co-ordinating committee; the other was to establish an urban development subregion. Both of these would empower the community and industry to do better forward planning, and we've made some good progress on those.

Mrs. Leskiw: My second question is to the same minister. Who is on this new committee, and what is its mandate?

Mr. Johnson: Mr. Speaker, the transportation co-ordinating committee, which was announced in January by both the Minister of Transportation and myself and reports to both the Minister of Transportation and myself, includes representatives from the Oil Sands Developers Group, the municipality, the Alberta Economic Development Authority, the Fort McMurray Airport Authority, the Northern Alberta Development Council. Really, it's a formal mechanism for these groups to come forward and do forward planning, help with high-level priorities and potentially alternative funding ideas on the transportation needs of the region.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mrs. Leskiw: Thank you. My second supplemental question is to the Minister of Transportation. How does the work of this committee tie in with the work done by Alberta Transportation?

2:20

Mr. Danyluk: Well, what happens, Mr. Speaker, is – I find it very interesting that the member opposite that represents the area talks about it being run by bureaucrats. In fact, the situation is exactly the opposite. I look forward to the advice that is coming from the committee that involves industry, that involves municipalities, that involves people of Fort McMurray to help decide what the transportation priorities should be. It is critical that we work with the community and not charge ahead with a plan that has no focus or direction.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Fish Creek, followed by the hon. Member for Calgary-*Buffalo*.

PC Caucus Meeting and Cabinet Tour

Mrs. Forsyth: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My questions today are about how this government defines results-based budgeting when it comes to Bill 1. Albertans have a few ideas about what getting results for their tax dollar means. It means prioritizing spending on front-line services, supporting our health professionals who hold our health system together, and, most importantly, balancing the books. It definitely doesn't include spending \$70,000 on a government getaway to the Jasper Park Lodge. Can the Treasury Board president then explain to Albertans how their two-day government getaway at the slopes is a priority for Albertans?

Mr. Horner: Well, as the Premier said, each of the caucuses in this Legislature is allotted an amount of money to be used for their caucus meetings, their caucus retreats, their expenses as a caucus. In fact, some of the caucuses even pay members that are outside of their particular sphere of influence, in some cases some leaders and whatnot. These caucus funds are all monitored by the Legislative Assembly. Under your auspices, Mr. Speaker, we have a set of rules that we must all follow, and this government caucus did follow those rules.

Mrs. Forsyth: Sir, you didn't answer the question. We're talking about priorities for Albertans.

Given that this government spent over a hundred thousand dollars of hard-earned tax dollars of Alberta families on a pre-election cabinet tour as the budget was already at the printing presses, can the Treasury Board president let Albertans know if that's what they call getting results for Albertans?

Mr. Horner: Mr. Speaker, I recall being on several cabinet tours. In fact, the only reason I missed the last cabinet tour was that I stepped down from cabinet to run for the leadership of our party. I can tell you that the tour last February was very well received by Albertans because they want us to be out there with them, not stuck in here all the time. They want us to be in their community, to be talking to them directly every year. We will continue to do that.

Mrs. Forsyth: Mr. Treasury Board President, that's your job as an MLA.

How can you, Mr. Treasury Board President, even rationalize spending over \$170,000 in the last month, and how can you even consider that a priority for Albertans?

Mr. Horner: Well, Mr. Speaker, Albertans have told us that their priority is for us to listen to them. That means getting into their communities and talking to them, and that's exactly what we did. We will continue to do that. The next election is four years away.

We're not going to stop talking to them. The next election is four months away. We're not going to stop talking to them. We're going to continue.

Aboriginal Education

Mr. Hehr: Over half the inmates in our prisons are aboriginal. Yesterday's throne speech said that this government will try to create educational opportunities for our First Nations communities, but the federal government, which funds First Nations education 30 per cent below the rest of society, has decided to build prisons instead of schools and handed us the bill. To the minister of aboriginal relations. It has become clear that this government will not stand up for Alberta when the feds are passing along costs for their insanity. Accordingly, I'll ask the minister to get a backbone and refuse to pay the bill for more prisons and demand that these millions be put into keeping people out of jail . . .

The Speaker: The hon. minister, please.

Mr. Lukaszuk: Mr. Speaker, this is a very inaccurate and unfair portrayal of what the federal government has done and is doing. As a matter of fact, I have to report to the Legislature that some three months ago I met with Minister Duncan, the Minister of Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada. We have decided to approach aboriginal education in Alberta together as partners, whether it's on- or off-reserve, to share our expertise both in delivering education and in federal government aboriginal relations, and to look at children as children irrespective of whether they live on- or off-reserve.

Mr. Hehr: I appreciate the minister's enthusiasm for answering that question, but it was meant for the minister in charge of aboriginal relations when I asked him whether we're going to pay for this insane prison program the federal government is running, or are we going to pay to put some schools on native reserves?

Mr. Dallas: Well, Mr. Speaker, I appreciate the hon. member raising the issue of education. It allows us an opportunity to talk about the initiatives that are under way with the MOU, the discussions that we're having with aboriginal leaders, aboriginal communities, the federal government, and certainly our ministries to advance very important issues around aboriginal education, critical issues to the people of Alberta.

Mr. Hehr: So a follow-up question to the same minister: are we simply going to pay the bill, then, for these prisons? Are we not going to say anything to the federal government about this?

Mr. Dallas: Mr. Speaker, the issue of paying bills is not relevant to the initiatives that we have in that we're working very closely with aboriginal peoples from around the province on to advance educational issues, recognizing this is an important pathway to achieving economic and social success for aboriginal communities throughout Alberta.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Mackay, followed by the hon. Member for Calgary-*Varsity*.

Homelessness in Calgary

Ms Woo-Paw: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Some research has identified Calgary as the centre of homelessness in Alberta due to the attractive job market but lack of affordable housing. A recent report on the state of homelessness in Calgary which says that the

number of people living on the streets in Calgary is down 11.4 per cent is certainly very, very good news. To the Minister of Human Services: how do you plan to ensure that this number continues to decrease and keep the momentum in this positive direction?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Indeed, the preliminary count results that came out this week in Calgary are very, very encouraging. By the straight numbers that's 411 fewer people on the street than the previous count, and we know that that's about 4,500 people across this province who now have places to live and the opportunity to live in dignity, access to the programs that they need to be successful. We're going to continue that good work with the community agencies and the municipalities across this province. The action on homelessness is working.

Ms Woo-Paw: Can the minister comment on the accuracy of this number in response to the recent criticism that this year's count took place on a frigid January evening rather than in May?

Mr. Hancock: Well, no, Mr. Speaker, I can't comment on the methodology that was used, but I can say this. On that frigid day that the count was done, approximately 98 per cent of the homeless were in some form of shelter. That was good news, that the people who were homeless were being appropriately taken care of so that they weren't out in that bitter weather. I do know that the Homeless Foundation is also planning to do a summer count.

The Speaker: The hon. member?

The hon. Member for Calgary-Varsity, followed by the hon. Member for Calgary-East.

Assured Income for the Severely Handicapped

Mr. Chase: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Yesterday's speech from the throne paid lip service to finding "new and effective ways to reach out to vulnerable Albertans." Meanwhile, a promise the Premier made during the Progressive Conservative leadership race last summer remains unfulfilled. To the Minister of Seniors. The Premier promised to increase assured income for the severely handicapped benefits by \$400 a month and to double the amount recipients can earn before the government claws back their payments. AISH recipients want to know: when will the Premier's promise becoming a reality?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. VanderBurg: Thank you for that question. Mr. Speaker, the most vulnerable Albertans do receive great services today, and I expect in the near future we'll hear lots of news about receiving even better service.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Chase: Thank you. Again to the Seniors minister: given the high cost of living in this province, will this government consider indexing AISH payments to the cost of accommodation and food?

Mr. VanderBurg: Well, Mr. Speaker, the member is right. There are vulnerable Albertans in many situations that are very, very difficult. Today's \$1,188 top-up is not enough, and we have to do something. I've heard very, very clearly from the Premier and from my caucus to get to work on this issue. Wait till tomorrow, sir.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Chase: Thank you. Given that AISH benefits were last increased in April of 2009, why has this government kept Alberta's most vulnerable waiting so long?

2:30

Mr. VanderBurg: Well, again, Mr. Speaker, 45,000 AISH recipients, all different types of needs: disabilities, mental issues, sometimes both. We have great services to help those individuals, and those services will be enhanced. Listen to the budget very, very carefully, and let's have a discussion next week about this.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-East, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

Advocacy for Seniors

Mr. Amery: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The number of seniors in our province is growing every day, and in the next 10 years it's projected that that number will increase by 55 per cent to over 650,000 seniors. Their needs and expectations are changing just as rapidly, and they will need help with concerns and problems they will face as they age. My question is to the hon. Minister of Seniors. When are you going to put a seniors' advocate in place?

Mr. VanderBurg: Well, thank you for that question. This is one of the issues that became very clear and near to me. As past chair of the Seniors Advisory Council I heard these concerns, and I heard these concerns reinforced by the Premier. I can tell you that together with my ministry staff this is one of the goals that I will be working on. In one year from now I commit: we'll have a seniors' advocate.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Amery: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Well, I am so pleased to hear this answer and the good news about the future.

Can the minister tell me what he and his ministry are doing right now to help seniors with their immediate concerns?

Mr. VanderBurg: Well, thank you for that question again. Mr. Speaker, it's not news to any of us that seniors' issues and the seniors' population are rapidly growing in this province. I know that with my own parents going through issues at the end of their lives, it took a lot of support from families and communities and from, you know, groups like the Seniors Advisory Council, our Alberta Supports line. We get a thousand seniors a day calling our Supports line, sir. Just imagine: a thousand calls a day. It makes logical sense that the Seniors ministry work with other ministers to establish a seniors' advocate.

The Speaker: The hon. member?

The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre, followed by the hon. Member for St. Albert.

Environmental Protection

Ms Blakeman: Thanks very much, Mr. Speaker. Yesterday's throne speech said, "The people of this province share a deep love and respect for its environment and natural resources," but clearly this government does not. Not once does the term or even the idea of environmental protection get mentioned. What we do see is the environment being dug up, clear-cut, and sold off. To the Minister of Environment and Water: how can this government claim that it

will protect the environment when every single reference in the document, in the throne speech, talks specifically about how to develop it?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mrs. McQueen: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and thank you, Member, for the question. I would politely disagree with the hon. member. I think the actions speak louder than words with regard to the actions our Premier has taken and that we have taken with regard to environmental protection. I speak to last Friday's announcement, where I stood hand by hand and side by side with Minister Kent with regard to environmental management and how we're going to make sure that we increase the monitoring with regard to the oil sands. That's just one example of the many things that we're doing to ensure that we have a balance in this province with strong . . .

The Speaker: The hon. member, please.

Ms Blakeman: Well, thank you. But I am talking about action. I'm not talking about press releases. I'm not talking about reviews. I'm not talking about possible plans. I'm not talking about vague budgeting. I'm talking about environmental protection. When are we actually going to see it, not a bunch of plans and weird budgets and vague comments?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mrs. McQueen: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. I would say that we had quite a bit of very positive response to that announcement because it is action driven. It is about taking action on the ground right away to make sure that there will be doubling of monitoring stations in the oil sands area, for one example. The feedback we got from scientists, from industry, from academics was that this was a great announcement, this timely announcement, and let's get on with it. That's exactly what we're doing. We're showing action in environmental protection.

Ms Blakeman: Well, then, back to the same minister: why does this government, this minister persist in the fantasy that anything they do is world leading or world class or even action based when they were dragged kicking and screaming, their little feet pounding on the ground, all the way to the monitoring table by the federal government?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mrs. McQueen: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'll just allude to a conversation with Dr. Schindler with regard to the way we are moving forward so that we would have action here. The first step we did when we announced it was to make sure that we wouldn't lose this spring season. We know how important the monitoring on this spring season is. We had a great conversation with Dr. Schindler and others, and they agree with that. Let's move on with the monitoring this spring. Then let's move on to the next steps of external bodies to govern this. We are taking action today, and we took action on Friday.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for St. Albert, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie.

Wills and Succession Legislation

Mr. Allred: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's very important for Albertans to have a well-prepared estate plan, including a will, to

make sure their wishes are carried out after their death. To the Minister of Justice and Attorney General. I understand new legislation has been proclaimed that changes the rules for certain estate plans. Could the minister please explain what impact this new legislation has on wills and estates in Alberta?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Olson: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker, and I'd like to thank the hon. member for the question. He will recall that this important legislation was actually passed over a year ago, in the fall of 2010, but it was just proclaimed February 1. This legislation modernizes wills and estate law that had not previously been updated going back as far as the 1920s. There are changes. I can't possibly go through all of the changes that would impact Albertans, but there are some changes. Some may affect some Albertans; others may not. My best advice to all Albertans is to talk to their advisers and make a will.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Allred: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. Some of my constituents have concerns that their current estate plans will be affected by a rule that would allow a surviving spouse who takes their matrimonial property from his or her spouse's estate to also inherit from the estate. Could the minister please explain the intentions of this rule?

Mr. Olson: Mr. Speaker, there were many consultations that happened both before the legislation was passed in the fall of 2010 and since. One of the reasons for giving a year before implementing the legislation was so that people in the industry, if I can call it that, could speak to their clients, speak amongst each other, and identify any issues. There was an issue, but there is a very important principle that has been developed in the consultation, which was that the spouse of a deceased should be no worse off when their spouse dies than if they were divorced. We are having another look at that issue.

Mr. Allred: Well, thank you for that explanation.

Given that this inheritance issue can affect the estate plans of some Albertans, could the minister tell us what he is doing to resolve this issue?

Mr. Olson: Mr. Speaker, I was aware and am aware of the concerns that had been expressed, particularly with respect to the transition. When we proclaimed the legislation as of February 1, we specifically did not proclaim the part that dealt with the amendment to the Matrimonial Property Act. I have asked my department to engage in further discussions with experts in the area, people who are the front-line practitioners, so that we can reach an agreement as to how best to implement the new legislation.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Creek.

Skilled Labour Shortage

Mr. Bhardwaj: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. During my meetings with many business owners in my constituency of Edmonton-Ellerslie excellent feedback was received regarding what we're doing well and what we need to work on. One of the major concerns that was expressed to me had to do with the labour shortage that Alberta will be facing in the near future. My questions are to the Minister of Human Services. Given that

Alberta's population is continuing to age at an increasing rate, what is the government doing to help attract and retain quality, skilled workers to our province?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Hancock: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. It is indeed a concern. I mean, we have the benefit, as we look around the world and see what's happening in many other places and the unemployment circumstances there, that we have an economy that's growing. Indeed, it's a great problem to have. We do need more people. We need more people because we have 19,000 people every year retiring as the baby boomers get older. I wasn't anticipating that you would be one of those, Mr. Speaker. I anticipate that you will go on to long, more enjoyable practices for the good of Albertans.

But we need people, so we need to engage aboriginal people, mature workers, women in nontraditional occupations, persons with disabilities, youth, and we need programs . . .

2:40

The Speaker: The hon. member, please.

Mr. Bhardwaj: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Attracting these workers to our province is one thing, but a number of my constituents have expressed concerns that a number of these workers are coming to our province and then leaving soon after. What additional programs are in place to make sure they reside in Alberta and become permanent residents here?

Mr. Hancock: Well, Mr. Speaker, there are two aspects to that. One is that we do need to work with social agencies in our communities to help immigrant workers particularly, people coming from other parts of the world who perhaps need help with English as a second language, so that they can have the language of work but also so that they can settle into the community, have access to the schools, and be comfortable in the community. We need to work with them on those issues. We also, of course, have temporary foreign workers, and we need to make sure that those temporary foreign workers also fit well into the world of work and the communities in which they live.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Bhardwaj: No more questions.

The Speaker: Hon. members, that concludes the question-and-answer period for today. Nineteen members were recognized; 106 questions and responses were given. We're moving along quite well, so we'll take a 30-second break before we continue the Routine.

Members' Statements

(continued)

Provincial Fiscal Policy

Mr. Hehr: What has been lost in the conversation regarding the Alberta Liberal platform is that we will probably balance the budget. Let's think about this for a second, not think about left or right but simply what is best for today and for tomorrow.

Unless you're totally going to dismiss the role of government, there are expenditures that need to take place: roads, schools, universities, police, ambulance, hospitals, long-term care facilities, and the hiring of people to work in these endeavours. Money to pay for these services comes from income tax, fossil fuel, and

gambling revenues. Currently these essential services cost some \$40 billion a year: \$12 billion from taxes, \$2 billion from gambling, \$10 billion or so from fossil fuels, and the rest are user fees and federal transfers and for the last four years by using the sustainability fund, which is now all but used. Take away resource revenues, gambling, and now the sustainability fund; it is clear we have a structural deficit.

Since 1985 the Alberta government has spent over \$200 billion in fossil fuel revenues. Despite this largesse at different times Alberta has faced cycles of cuts to services and spending of epic proportions. See Ralph Bucks. Furthermore, we have not saved a dime in our heritage trust fund, a fund that was set up to recognize that using all of our fossil fuel revenues to pay today's bills would be like a landowner selling off pieces of the family farm to go on vacation.

In our plan we show a way to provide essential services and a way of saving for the future, all this without increasing the taxes of 90 per cent of Albertans. This is a responsible position. Even if you believe in a tax advantage, there's no need for a tax holiday. We will still be the lowest taxed jurisdiction in Canada. If we carry on with business as usual, our citizens will be shortchanged, and future generations will be put at a disadvantage. Accordingly, I'm hopeful that tomorrow's budget will address a more fair and reasonable taxation policy in order that Albertans can have a real conversation about what our future should look like before the election, not after.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Leduc-Beaumont-Devon.

Black History Month

Mr. Rogers: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm very pleased to rise today in celebration of Black History Month 2012. Every year since Canada's Parliament passed an act in 1995 to recognize these celebrations, Canadians from coast to coast to coast have taken pause to reflect on the many contributions of black Canadians from the dawn of our history to modern times. I've been asked many times: why the need to celebrate black history? My response: black history is really just Canadian history with a little colour.

Mr. Speaker, we have much to celebrate from those who settled on our east coast, whether they were Maroons from my homeland of Jamaica in the 1600s or came via the Underground Railroad, fleeing slavery in the southern U.S. A large group came to Alberta at the turn of the 20th century and formed famous settlements such as Amber Valley, Campsie, in your constituency, Mr. Speaker, Wildwood, and Breton, west of my home in Leduc.

Mr. Speaker, the descendants of these pioneers were not only great farmers and ranchers and ball players. They became great political leaders like Lincoln Alexander, the former Lieutenant Governor of Ontario, and Willie O'Ree, the first black player in the NHL, long before Grant Fuhr and Georges Laraque. We have been blessed with great artists like Oscar Peterson; medical greats like renowned cancer specialist Dr. Tony Fields of Alberta Health Services; humanitarians like Dr. Fil Fraser, a chair of the Alberta Human Rights Commission and also a well-known author and broadcaster; and the list goes on and on.

As the first serving member of our community to sit in this esteemed Assembly, Mr. Speaker, it gives me great pride along with the Member for Calgary-North West, the second such member, to encourage all Albertans to join us and use the many events planned over the next month to learn more about the many contributions made by black Canadians. I'd like to congratulate all the volunteers who put these celebrations together.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Fort McMurray-Wood Buffalo.

Cabinet Tour

Mr. Boutilier: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. A couple of weeks ago the Alberta government went on a cabinet tour at taxpayers' expense supposedly to listen to Albertans, yet it was heavily criticized by Albertans, by the media, and even by the former Treasury Board president, now the independent Member for Vermilion-Lloydminster, as a charade. It's so refreshing to hear Albertans who call a spade a shovel.

That being said, I witnessed 18 cabinet ministers come to my hometown of Fort McMurray, the oil sands capital of the world, in case they hadn't heard. In fact, they didn't travel highway 63. All 18 cabinet ministers flew in, unlike the families. We travel the highway. They should try travelling it sometime.

I thank all the organizers of the Golden Years Society, who set up a meeting with ministers to talk about a long-term care centre that was promised four years ago but has not yet broken ground.

The Minister of Health and Wellness, the Minister of Seniors, and the Minister of Infrastructure, the Member for Athabasca-Redwater, were all there. Interestingly, they heard from Mr. Dave McNeilly. He ended the meeting as an 80-year-old resident who is very well respected. He built our community for over 40 years, and he's a former school principal. Interestingly, he told the ministers that he was one of the first six citizens who formed the Conservative Party back in 1968 with Peter Lougheed. But he remarked 40 years later that this government and these ministers are acting just like that government then. They were no longer listening. The question he asked was: why are you no longer listening? It can be quite simple. Listen to us, the grassroots Albertans, and you will be rewarded. He believes that because you're not listening, you will be punished in the next provincial election.

Sheldon Kennedy

Mr. Groeneveld: Mr. Speaker, today I'd like to recognize an outstanding Albertan and a constituent of Highwood, Mr. Sheldon Kennedy. Sheldon's NHL career spanned eight years, including two seasons with the Calgary Flames. It was during his time in Calgary that Sheldon made the courageous decision to charge his major junior hockey league coach with sexual assault for the abuse he suffered over a five-year period while a teenager under his care.

Mr. Kennedy's story has resonated throughout the world, bringing much-needed attention to the problem of sexual abuse of young athletes. Being a victim himself, Sheldon has done a tremendous job of raising awareness for the past 15 years. Through his cross-Canada in-line skating fundraiser, autobiography, and through Respect Group Inc., the company he cofounded, Sheldon has become a spokesman for many abuse survivors.

He has continued tirelessly with his efforts and recently presented his ideas to both the Canadian government in Ottawa and a U.S. subcommittee in Washington, DC. Sheldon has urged governments and sports groups to make training mandatory for anyone working with children and hopes that actions taken in Canada towards this can be a model for other countries to follow.

It takes a lot of courage to speak so openly about this subject and his experience, and it's humbling to witness someone take such a profound experience and transform it into the positive and empowering message Sheldon continues to share with all of us.

2:50

I would like to thank and commend Sheldon for the difference he has made and for shining the light on a very dark and serious subject. Today he remains a dedicated volunteer for community fundraisers in support of all youth sports, charities, schools, hospitals, wherever he is needed. Sheldon Kennedy, Highwood and indeed all of Alberta are proud to call you ours.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

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

Helmets to Hardhats Program

Mr. Elniski: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise today to applaud Alberta's new partnership with the national helmets to hardhats program. This nonprofit program connects Canadian Forces members with quality career training and employment opportunities in the construction industry. Alberta, Edmonton in particular, is home to many veterans and military personnel making the transition from active duty to civilian life.

Approximately 5,200 men and women on active service, disabled, or in the reserves leave the military each year in Canada. These soldiers are well trained and well prepared for a rewarding career in construction after their military service. Mr. Speaker, taking advantage of these skills will not only show support for the veterans in this province but provide a co-ordinated approach to ensuring that opportunities exist in the private sector.

Alberta has long been a leader in recognizing military certificates of achievement as the equivalent of trade certificates in 10 trades related to the construction, transportation, and hospitality sectors. Helmets to hardhats opportunities are not limited to on-site construction jobs or apprenticeships. Openings in administration, engineering, human resources, and other skills are part of the program.

Mr. Speaker, I believe we have a responsibility to serve our soldiers as they have served our country. Programs such as helmets to hardhats help us live up to this responsibility.

Thank you.

Presenting Petitions

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Strathmore-Brooks.

Mr. Doerksen: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I have a petition signed by many individuals from the constituency of Strathmore-Brooks. The petition reads:

We, the undersigned residents of Alberta, petition the Legislative Assembly to: urge the Government of Alberta to commit to having Highway #1 continue to pass through the Town of Strathmore, following its present route, and to abandon all plans to have Highway #1 by-pass the Town of Strathmore.

Thank you very much.

Tabling Returns and Reports

The Speaker: Hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre, do you have one for the hon. Leader of the Official Opposition?

Ms Blakeman: I do, and I have several for myself.

The Speaker: Go ahead.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I'm tabling on behalf of the Leader of the Official Opposition a document that he and the rest of us consider truly bold and visionary and which

would improve the lives of Albertans, the 2012 Alberta Liberal platform. I will table that for your entertainment and education.

Further, I have several tablings from constituents. The first is from Barry Cattapan, who is asking the question again: will the Premier stick to her promise and raise the AISH money, and when would that be happening? That's from Barry.

The second tabling is from a constituent, Anna Koop. She is a computer science graduate and is very concerned over the cuts to the University of Alberta and the effect that has on the quality of education.

My third tabling is not from a constituent; it is from a frequent correspondent. She is writing about why Spray Lakes Sawmills has been given permission to clear-cut in the Castle when that is supposed to be a protected area and goes on to talk about the effect on the bears, which are black and grizzly bears.

My next tabling is a wonderful document called Poverty Costs: An Economic Case for a Preventative Poverty Reduction Strategy in Alberta. This document was launched either last week or Monday – I'm sorry; I can't remember – and was put together by both the Vibrant Communities Calgary, which is the city of Calgary, and Action to End Poverty in Alberta, which is a provincial organization. My thanks to Joe Ceci and the rest of the advisory council, writers, and researchers for this document. Very useful and valuable for us.

My final tabling, Mr. Speaker, is another document that has come from a great deal of community consultation, and this was produced and released in the city of Edmonton last week. It is the report of the Community Sustainability Task Force dated February 2012. The members of this task force included Michael Phair, Teresa Spinelli, Councillor Batty, Barbara Fung, Nancy MacDonald, Tegan Martin-Drysdale, Simon O'Byrne, Jana O'Connor, Trustee Cindy Olsen, Trustee Catherine Ripley, Christopher Smith, Rosalind Smith, Michael Splinter, Brian Staples, David Veitch, and Peter Wong. It's a very wide group of people in the city, the school boards, and the community, and I thank them very much for their work. It's how to rebuild the centre of Edmonton.

Thank you.

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

Mr. Chase: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I have two sets of tablings. The first comes from a lady by the name of Marilyn Marks, who has been an advocate for grandparents' rights and grandchildren's rights. Marilyn has created a website, which is www.albertagrandparents.ca, and has an e-mail address, albertagrandparents@shaw.ca. In working with Marilyn over the years, I've brought forward the motion on a unified family court and tried to better the lives of both grandparents and their grandchildren.

My second tabling, Mr. Speaker, consists of e-mails and four letters from the following individuals who are seeking the preservation of the Castle wilderness, many of whom have personally visited the Castle and all of whom believe that clear-cutting will damage the ecology, watershed, wildlife, and natural species and must be prohibited at all costs. These particular messages come from Jim Pissot, Hilah and Norman Simmons, Eileen Kosior, Bev Mazurick, Adam Storms, Marion Wright, Judy Huntley, Jeff Grossman, Brad Jones, Brian Horejsi, Derek Thompson, Madeline Wilson, Richard Burke, Ross McLean, John Groeneveld, Dorothy Dickson, Pam York, Daphne Smith, and Nicole Baker. They're the first of a series that I'll be tabling.

The Speaker: Hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona, do you

have one on behalf of the hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands-Norwood?

Ms Notley: Yes. Thank you, Mr. Speaker. On behalf of the Member for Edmonton-Highlands-Norwood I'd like to table the appropriate number of copies of a petition signed by at this point 1,200 Albertans. The petition reads: "We, the undersigned residents of Alberta, petition the Legislative Assembly of Alberta to take immediate action to regulate electricity prices, recognizing that electricity is an essential service."

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Government House Leader.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. In anticipation of Government Motions later in the afternoon but for the benefit of members I wanted to table a calendar relative to the anticipated budget main estimates schedule, which identifies where the various committees would meet and which committees are dealing with which budgets.

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

Ms Blakeman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm sorry; I made a mistake. I omitted the participation of the province of Alberta in the Elevate report of the Community Sustainability Task Force. My apologies to the Minister of Human Services, who participated in funding this project.

The Speaker: Hon. members, Standing Order 7(7) says, "At 3 p.m. the items in the ordinary daily routine will be deemed to be concluded and the Speaker shall notify the Assembly." We have only one item left in here which may or may not be pertinent to the cause. If somebody would request to waive that, we would then be able to go to the next section, Tablings to the Clerk.

Hon. Members: Agreed.

Tablings to the Clerk

The Clerk: I wish to advise the House that the following documents were deposited with the office of the Clerk. On behalf of the hon. Mr. Lukaszuk, Minister of Education, a memorandum dated December 22, 2011, from the hon. Mr. Lukaszuk, Minister of Education, to the hon. Mr. Kowalski, Speaker of the Legislative Assembly, providing information on how each school jurisdiction used its portion of the additional \$107 million in funding and a letter dated December 20, 2011, from the hon. Mr. Lukaszuk, Minister of Education, to Mr. Anderson, the hon. Member for Airdrie-Chestermere, responding to a question raised during Oral Question Period on December 6, 2011, regarding the selection of appropriate instructional resources in Alberta schools.

3:00

Orders of the Day

Government Motions

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

The Speaker: This motion is not debatable.

[Government Motion 2 carried]

3. Mr. Hancock moved:
Be it resolved that the Legislative Assembly resolve into Committee of Supply, when called, to consider supply to be granted to Her Majesty.

The Speaker: Once again this motion is not debatable.

[Government Motion 3 carried]

Consideration of Main Estimates

6. Mr. Hancock moved:
Be it resolved that the following procedures apply for the consideration of the 2012-2013 main estimates.
- (1) When they are laid before the Assembly, the main estimates stand referred to Committee of Supply and the policy field committees as outlined in the attached schedule.
 - (2) Standing Order 59.01(4) shall apply to consideration of the main estimates in policy field committees and in Committee of Supply except that after the time allocated to the third party in suborder (4)(c),
 - (a) for the next 20 minutes the members of the fourth party and the minister or the member of Executive Council acting on the minister's behalf may speak, and
 - (b) for the next 20 minutes the members of any other party represented in the Assembly or any independent members and the minister or the member of Executive Council acting on the minister's behalf may speak.
 - (3) Standing Order 59.01(5) and (6) shall apply with any necessary modifications to the consideration of main estimates in Committee of Supply.
 - (4) Each department's estimates shall receive a minimum of three hours' consideration except for the estimates of Executive Council, which shall receive a minimum of two hours' consideration.
 - (5) When a department's estimates are considered by Committee of Supply, the committee's consideration shall continue until it is complete notwithstanding standing orders 3(1) and 4.
 - (6) A policy field committee shall commence its consideration of a department's estimates at 6:30 p.m. or, if the Assembly has adjourned later than 6 p.m., one half-hour after the Assembly adjourns for the day.
 - (7) After the Committee of Supply has concluded its consideration of a department's estimates, the committee rises and reports progress without question put. All votes on a department's estimates in Committee of Supply stand deferred until the date scheduled for the vote on the main estimates.
 - (8) The Committee of Supply shall vote on the main estimates on the evening of March 13, 2012, commencing at 7:30 p.m.
 - (9) Standing orders 59.01(1), (2), and (3), 59.03(3) and (4), and 60(1) shall not apply to the consideration of the 2012-2013 main estimates.

Schedule, 2012-2013 Main Estimates

February 9: Budget Address.

February 14, evening: Justice and Attorney General, Public Health and Safety PFC; Intergovernmental, International and Aboriginal Relations, Energy PFC.

February 15, evening: Municipal Affairs, Community Development PFC; Service Alberta, Finance PFC.
February 21, afternoon: Finance, Committee of Supply.
February 21, evening: Sustainable Resource Development, Energy PFC; Seniors, Public Health and Safety PFC.
February 22, afternoon: Executive Council, Committee of Supply.
February 22, evening: Energy, Energy PFC; Culture and Community Services, Community Development PFC.
March 5, evening: Solicitor General and Public Security, Public Health and Safety PFC; Tourism, Parks and Recreation, Community Development PFC.
March 6, afternoon: Education, Committee of Supply.
March 6, evening: Infrastructure, Finance PFC; Advanced Education and Technology, Education PFC.
March 7, afternoon: Health and Wellness, Committee of Supply.
March 7, evening: Environment and Water, Energy PFC; Treasury Board and Enterprise, Finance PFC.
March 12, evening: Agriculture and Rural Development, Energy PFC; Transportation, Finance PFC.
March 13, afternoon: Human Services, Committee of Supply.
March 13, evening: main estimates votes, Committee of Supply.

Mr. Hancock: Mr. Speaker, I would move Government Motion 6, which deals with the consideration of the main estimates, in the manner in which it is printed in the Order Paper.

The Speaker: This motion is debatable. The hon. Official Opposition House Leader.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I do have considerable difficulties with where we have arrived for our budget debates at this point in time. Having served for I think this is now my 16th budget, I've been through a number of permutations of how these are considered. I think people in here are pretty well aware that I obey the rules. I actually embrace the rules. I think they're a way of us getting business done in this House, and for the most part – well, actually always – I obey them. If I don't like them, you're going hear me talk about it, and here we are. I'm going to talk about it.

At this point I seriously considered not participating in the budget debates this year because I have found that the process has reached a point where it's just not useful in the amount of information that we are able to pull out of the ministers, the amount of time that we have to actually have a back-and-forth debate. It's not a meaningful process anymore, and that grieves me. I want this process to work. I want my constituents to be able to read the *Hansard* and understand what went on. But right from the way the budget documents are presented nowadays – honestly, there is one line for Alberta Health Services for a \$17 billion expenditure. One line. No breakdown, no listing of services, no listing of programs, no division anywhere down from that. How are any of us supposed to try and debate that?

That's not only me, but it's members of your own caucus. I agree absolutely with the Minister of Finance that it is akin to something that comes out of the back end of a horse. I absolutely agree. He's putting that very well on my behalf. Thank you for that.

I hear in the throne speech that the Premier would like to revisit the entire way we do this, and I hope that is true. I hope that we do get a revamped way of doing this that is more useful to members

of the opposition, members of the media, and members of all parties that are in this House, because I have to say that where we're at now is so close to useless that I am really quite frustrated with it.

What we have before us now are a number of sort of restatements of the way we work through the budget debates in the policy field committees and the agreements about how much time different parties get to talk about it. I, in fact, negotiated some of this, but it really is a negotiation of diminishing returns, at the point where the Official Opposition has one hour – and half of that is allocated back to the minister – to try and debate a budget. No matter how large or how small or how controversial or how many people are affected by a budget, you get one hour, and you're getting approximately half of that. When you have ministers who are literally trained to not give you any kind of meaningful answer, it really just does become a silly game. I think that's a terrible thing to be saying about a budget process in a province as wealthy as Alberta with as much possibility and opportunity as Alberta.

Government Motion 6, as I said, lays out how much time everybody gets to speak. Please, you know, people that are following along at home, pick this up and read it. Go online and look at what this actually says. Really, members of the other opposition parties get 20 minutes to talk about any given ministry. Twenty minutes. Oh, yeah, there's a bit of time at the end, and anybody can go for it, but that's when all of the backbenchers like to go for it, too. So we're all on a long list, trying to get in a few questions and, even more importantly, some concrete, meaningful answers. Not to be blown off, not to be trivialized, not to have my intelligence demeaned but to actually get some answers would be nice.

You know what? Some ministers are actually really quite good at it, and there is a really good exchange. Some are not, and there's no way to call them to account. There's no way to make them come back and give you something after the fact. For most of the budgets that we have to vote on at the end of this process we will not have received the answers to our questions that were promised to us at the time. So if I was waiting to hear why a given minister made a certain choice and that depends on whether or not I support that ministry's budget and I don't even get the answer until four weeks after I've had to vote on this, how is that a meaningful exchange? How is that a good debate, good transparency, good accountability of what the government is putting in front of us? It's just not.

You know, we've got different changes in times for things now. We start these at 6:30, after we have finished doing legislative debate until 6. If you're trying to prepare for any of this, you'd better well do it fast. Of course, the government has an advantage on us there, and that's just our tough luck. They've got three shifts they can run during this time; we've got one. So we're likely to be on schedule in the afternoon, on duty, and then also have to pound our way over to the Annex and leap into our seat and start debating a different ministry.

Will I support what is now going on? You know, I have acknowledged that I have been part of the debate on this, but I have to stand up and say that I just cannot support this anymore. This is not meaningful. This has been perverted beyond the sense of a meaningful budget debate, and it does not allow in many cases now for even – we used to have budget debates, and people would come and sit in the galleries and listen. I had dozens of seniors come for a Seniors' debate once. Well, these debates: there are only a couple of them that take place in the afternoon, in daylight, in sunlight, in this Assembly, where it is possible for people to come and listen.

Now, if they want to come at night, they can go to the Annex and try and get their way through security there and try and find the right room and squish themselves into a seat at the back. There's no additional opportunity for them to get any kind of electronic assistance if they need to be able to read something or closed captioning or anything like that. It's just unpleasant. As a result, now we don't have anybody that comes to listen to those debates.

I just have to put this on the record. This process is not working, and I can't support it. Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Glenmore on this motion.

3:10

Mr. Hinman: Yes. I would like to reinforce what the hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre has just said. I haven't been here quite as long as she has, but I think in six or seven budgets it's become more and more disappointing, first of all, in the information that we're given. It's line items. As stewards of the taxpayers and how that money is being spent, there's just no information there on what the breakdown is and how this is being spent.

I find it quite amusing that the government is going to go through its own personal assessed-based budgeting. It's just comical to me to hear them say that. You know, what have they been doing for the last 40 years?

The process that's set up, the amount of time that is allocated to the different members: it's just almost meaningless to take the time to prepare, to ask questions. When you're not the Official Opposition, you even have less time. Then the ministers, again, take up half of that time just pontificating in an almost laughable state on why you're even questioning anything that they have in their budget.

The process is not one that puts the interests of Albertans first. I would've thought that with this Premier and her idea of new budgeting to get better value for tax dollars – I don't think there are better eyes than to be more open with the books and to show the expanded items and how they're broken down and where they're being spent and the contracts that are out there. We could actually go through the contracts that are out there. None of those things, Mr. Speaker, are available to us as opposition members.

Again, the biggest problem is that the time to debate these different ministerial budgets is very, very short. The Premier today got up and said that, you know, she's going to debate this budget and pass it, then go forward, when, in fact, there are enough holes in this budget that you could drive semi trucks with cash through there and not know where they're spending it or how it's actually being spent.

Some Hon. Members: You haven't even seen it yet.

Mr. Hinman: If past budgets are any indication of future budgets, we don't need to see it. We listen to the Finance minister saying that we haven't seen it yet. I wonder whether he's seen it.

It's even more comical that they went out in February on a tour to say, "Oh, what do Albertans want in our budget?" when it was already printed. I mean, they're talking about going through the budget and no unjustified increases. How can you know whether something is justified or not when all you have is a one-line item saying, you know: procurement for health equipment, \$1.2 billion? It's just ridiculous, Mr. Speaker.

So I, too, have to stand and reinforce what has been said by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre and say that it's very disap-

pointing, the amount of time that is allocated to discussing the budget, but even more disappointing is what little information we actually have.

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

Ms Notley: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I, too, am pleased to rise and outline concerns that have been similarly raised by the two previous speakers. I'm sure I've said previously in debate about the experience that I enjoyed being fairly closely involved in the legislative process in other jurisdictions. I recall working very closely with ministers in the province of B.C., who were compelled to subject themselves and their ministries to estimates debate until such time as the opposition was finished asking questions. I know. It's a shocking idea.

In comparison, when I came here and discovered that we would be discussing \$15 billion in three hours, I was really quite shocked. And I will say that having only been here since 2008, I never was part of this discussion. I've never actually thought it was particularly a functional process, and I continue to believe that.

This particular schedule, however, is even more offensive than what we've had to deal with over the course of my tenure here. When I first got elected, we would have one ministry a day, which in our caucus of two would allow us one day to prepare when you weren't also debating legislation and one day, then, to participate. Then about two years into it or a year into it we decided that we were going to have two ministries a day, which, obviously, for our small caucus meant that we were engaging in estimates debate and a thorough though very frantic review of the budget documents and background documents and annual reports and previous debates and media information and consulting with stakeholders and all that stuff every day because there were two of us. Now we have three ministries on a day.

Quite frankly, Mr. Speaker, regardless of whether we're talking about the NDP caucus, which currently only has two members, the Wildrose caucus that has four, or the Liberal caucus with their eight, the fact of the matter is that this structure is a bullying structure. It is a structure that bullies the opposition into a process that is meant to look ever so slightly like it resembles a proper budgeting debate, an opportunity for members of the public to speak to their representatives and engage in significantly important decisions for the province of Alberta and the people of this province. But it's not that anymore, not with this particular structure. The change to three ministries a day makes, quite honestly, a farce out of the process, and under no circumstances could we ever vote for this schedule.

Now, in addition, I've also raised with the House leader, as he knows, that notwithstanding attempts in the past to ensure that members of the opposition who have critic areas in more than one ministry do not have their critic areas double-booked, obviously, when you're trying to fit three ministries a day into the schedule, it is not possible to avoid double-booking. In my case for at least two ministries that I am responsible for as a critic, the debate occurs at the same time, Mr. Speaker. The Ministry of Sustainable Resource Development and the Ministry of Seniors occur at the same time, and I'm the critic for both areas.

These are not minor ministries. These are ministries that have significant implications for the people of this province. The Ministry of Sustainable Resource Development is responsible for the land-use framework. While this government has done really nothing but meet and issue press releases on that particular area for a long time, the fact of the matter is that were they ever to do something on it, it would have profound implications for people

throughout this province. The Ministry of Seniors is one of the areas that represents the biggest single failure of this government over the course of the last four years. It represents a daily reminder of a broken election promise from 2008. The money that is spent through this ministry is very important to a critically involved and engaged group of Albertans. As the NDP critic for both of those ministries, I really am, of course, quite insulted by the fact that we are unable to adjust it so that I'm not double-booked.

We hear a lot about, "Oh, well, this minister has an engagement in his riding, so we can't have him that day, so it's going to have to be a different day" and whatever the case may be. But at the end of the day, Mr. Speaker, the reality is that when you are scheduling three ministries on the same day, there are invariably going to be conflicts like that. That's why we shouldn't be scheduling three ministries on the same day.

That's why that whole process, as I said at the outset, is a clear example of bullying tactics on the part of a government that has become so enraptured with the size of its own majority that it has lost touch with the importance of the work that is done in this Legislature and the amount of work that is done by members of the opposition in this Legislature on behalf of all Albertans, whether we represent them as elected representatives or not. Our parliamentary democracy is not a representative democracy. It relies upon a robust opposition role on a daily basis regardless of what constituency you're from and what group of people you represent. This process negates that role and shows a profound disrespect, frankly, for this forum within which that role is supposed to be played out.

I cannot support this schedule, and I think that if this schedule is any evidence of the new administration's belief in transparency and democracy and citizen participation, then it is clear evidence that things have not only not changed, but they are in fact deteriorating for the worse. So it's a very unfortunate day that we have to address this motion. I'm sure the government will use its majority to pass it, but I think that it's a sad day for Albertans who are concerned about participating in a meaningful way in these kinds of important decisions.

Thank you.

3:20

The Speaker: Hon. members, Standing Order 29(2)(a) is available, which affords five minutes for questions and comments. Would anyone like to participate under that segment?

Are there additional speakers on this motion?

Shall I call on the hon. Government House Leader to close debate? Government House Leader.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I won't be long, but I do want to indicate that, far from bullying, this process is quite consistent with what is in the standing orders, which allows for debate of estimates to be referred to the policy field committees, not more than two to meet at the same time. That is what's happening.

What this really does is bring 75 per cent of the public spending back into Committee of Supply in the House, to be done in the afternoon in the full light of day. It was mentioned by one of the members of the opposition in speaking that this is somehow not being done in the light of day. Seventy-five per cent of the estimates in five departments in Committee of Supply in the afternoon: that makes it available to everyone who wants to come and be in the galleries or whatever. The committee rooms that we have are available for the public to come. Nothing is hidden there. It is a perfectly valid and appropriate process to have 75 per cent

of the estimates in the House, and then some of the other estimate departments, which are smaller in nature, go into the policy field committees as provided for in the standing orders.

This motion doesn't really change that much. It just allows for the same process to be used in Committee of Supply as is used in the policy field committees, sets the date for the vote, and sets the schedule. That's quite an appropriate process notwithstanding the protestations of the members opposite.

What the members opposite are really saying is that they don't have enough members to cover all the topics that come before the House at any given time, and that's probably true. You know, it is difficult. All members in the House have to pick the topics that they want to debate on because no parliamentary democracy, no Legislature in the world operates on the basis that every one of its members speaks to every one of the topics on the table at a time. Can you imagine the federal House of Commons, with I think it's – what? – 304 members now, having every member speak on every topic?

The Speaker: That debate is now concluded.

[Government Motion 6 carried]

Evening Sitings

8. Mr. Hancock moved:

Be it resolved that pursuant to Standing Order 4(1) the Assembly shall meet in the evening on the following dates:

- (a) on February 13, 2012, for consideration of the 2011-12 supplementary supply estimates, No. 2, to be followed by consideration of government business;
- (b) on March 13, 2012, following the vote on the 2012-13 main estimates and the report from Committee of Supply, for consideration of government business; and
- (c) commencing March 14, 2012, every Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday for the remainder of the 2012 spring sitting unless on motion by the Government House Leader made before 6 p.m., which may be made orally and without notice, the Assembly is adjourned to the following sitting day.

The Speaker: Hon. members, under Standing Order 4(1) this motion is not debatable, so I'll call the question.

[Government Motion 8 carried]

Committee Membership Changes

9. Mr. Hancock moved:

Be it resolved that the following changes to

- (a) the Standing Committee on Public Health and Safety be approved: that Mr. Rodney replace Mr. Ouellette;
- (b) the Standing Committee on Energy be approved: that Mr. Ouellette replace Mr. Rodney.

The Speaker: Hon. members, this motion is debatable if someone would like to participate.

Okay. I will call the question.

[Government Motion 9 carried]

Consideration of His Honour the Lieutenant Governor's Speech

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

To His Honour the Honourable Colonel (Retired) Donald S. Ethell, OC, OMM, AOE, MSC, CD, LLD, the Lieutenant Governor of the Province of Alberta:

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

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-North Hill.

Mr. Fawcett: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I'm truly honoured to rise today to move acceptance of the Speech from the Throne given by His Honour the Lieutenant Governor. It is a privilege to do this on behalf of my constituents in Calgary-North Hill, which I have had the honour of serving, my neighbours, for the last four years.

I would like to begin by thanking the Lieutenant Governor for both his wonderful words and his commitment to this great province. I would also like to thank him for formally beginning this Fifth Session of the 27th Legislature.

Mr. Speaker, His Honour's distinguished career as both a member of the Canadian armed forces and as a military adviser and as a volunteer with humanitarian causes should be looked upon with the utmost respect by all members of this Legislature and of all Albertans. I also commend his dedication to continue serving the people of Alberta.

The Lieutenant Governor stated that he arrived in this province in the early '50s as a young soldier and that he has observed firsthand how far we have come as a province. His experience and insights are a testament to a long tradition of hard work and perseverance seen in Alberta, characteristics that have helped this province become a world leader in industry, research, and the production of natural resources.

I would like to extend thanks and gratitude also to our hon. Premier. The past year has been an incredibly demanding year for her, and she has served in the office of Premier with integrity, fierce dedication, and unwavering loyalty to the people of Alberta. Under her guidance Alberta continues to be a place with strong leadership, innovative solutions, and unlimited opportunity.

Alberta not only continues to weather the lingering economic downturn better than any jurisdiction in Canada and North America, but it also remains a prosperous place to do business. I ask any member of this Legislature or any Albertan: where else would you rather be than right here right now in Alberta? This is our province, and this is our time to shine, our time to secure the quality of life and prosperity of today for future generations, to which every human being on this planet aspires.

While opportunities for this great province are plentiful, this government recognizes that building a land of opportunity for all comes with many challenges. As His Honour the Honourable the Lieutenant Governor stated in the throne speech yesterday, "Albertans expect better and demand excellence." The hon. Premier has continued to listen and respond to what is most important to Albertans, focusing on the core building blocks of a great society, things such as education, health care, and maintaining a strong economy.

This government recognizes that generations of Albertans have worked hard to create the many advantages that we enjoy today, and today we are obliged to do the same for future generations of Albertans, Mr. Speaker. However, this government also recognizes that we face many difficulties in a modern society that requires innovative solutions, because exponential change is the only constant that we have today. Decisions that we make toward the continued prosperity of this province require a resilient and

dedicated vision, a vision with a clear purpose which has a healthy, educated, and prosperous populace at its core. Together this government will ensure that our choices will be deliberate and will help improve our quality of life and secure our future prosperity.

Mr. Speaker, you as well as many in this Legislature would know that I was ecstatic to hear the Lieutenant Governor state this government's commitment to establishing a long-term fiscal framework for our province. This is something that I've long been advocating since being elected to represent the people of Calgary-North Hill. This starts with the Premier's groundbreaking commitment to results-based budgeting as introduced by her as the first bill of this legislative session. Efficiency and responsibility are themes that I often hear at the doors in my constituency, and I am sure they are echoed right across this province. This bill will challenge the automatic growth of spending by assigning funds where they are needed. It will require a zero-based budgeting process to ensure good value for taxpayers' dollars. Every three years each government department and program will come under close scrutiny as to the need, outcome achievement, and efficiency of its existence.

3:30

Mr. Speaker, myself and a number of my hon. colleagues in this Legislature have long advocated for such a robust and institutional review of government programs and spending. As a result of the leadership from this Premier we are now going to make significant progress and achievement in this area. As someone who has significant professional experience in program evaluations and as the parliamentary assistant for Treasury Board and Enterprise I look forward to the potential impact of this on future generations of Albertans because it will allow us to allocate money in a disciplined and intelligent manner while continuing to move the quality of life enjoyed by all Albertans forward.

Mr. Speaker, I also want to touch base on the other aspects of establishing a long-term fiscal framework for this province that were highlighted by His Honour yesterday. He indicated that this government will review the Alberta heritage savings trust fund, the sustainability fund, capital spending and infrastructure projects, gaming revenue, and income taxes. I fully support this type of dialogue and contemplation. As the hon. Lieutenant Governor said yesterday, "Long-established ways are being called into question, and comfortable assumptions are being examined anew."

The future prosperity and quality of life of this province will depend on this type of thinking. It will ensure that Alberta will remain in its position of having the strongest fiscal position and the most competitive tax structure in all of North America. As a result, Alberta will continue to be a beacon for investment and for those seeking opportunity, fortifying our already robust economy for future generations. A strong economy leads to an improved quality of life and a greater investment in health care and education, which in turn foster further progress and prosperity. Albertans understand that this is the foundation of our success and so does this government, Mr. Speaker.

Education is another pillar to the foundation of our success. As the Lieutenant Governor mentioned, "The nature of work and progress is changing, and as technology advances, the demand for highly skilled, educated workers will increase." Mr. Speaker, my constituency of Calgary-North Hill is home to many young professionals and their families that recognize the importance of a quality education.

Calgary has become one of the major epicentres of technology and business across North America, and it is imperative that Albertans are equipped with the necessary tools and skills to

thrive in the global knowledge economy. This means exposing all of our youth from a young age to positive learning environments that incite curiosity and that they have a thirst for knowledge. Our K to 12 education system is widely recognized as one of the best in the world. I support this Premier in raising the bar in this area.

Ironically, Mr. Speaker, raising the bar in public education was a slogan that I used in my campaign for election to the public school board about seven years ago, in my first foray into elected public service. I believed then and I'm even more convinced today that education is the great equalizer of opportunity in our society. We must not waver from trying to improve and build upon success in this area. The future prosperity and progress of this province depends on it. The quality of life of future Albertans depends on it. I am thankful that the hon. Premier shares the same passion and vision in this area as I do.

As an active member of the community through coaching baseball and football, I also appreciate the importance of encouraging youth to be active at a young age. The physical and mental benefits from such activities are so important to the well-being and quality of life of all individuals. However, as people continue to live longer, access to primary care becomes more and more essential. I'm excited, Mr. Speaker, about the way our government is moving forward on health care. By allowing front-line staff to handle more duties and responsibilities of health care professionals such as nurse practitioners, this government has taken steps to improve efficiency in the health care system.

Moreover, the expansion of community-based care through the introduction of family care clinics staffed by multidisciplinary teams further demonstrates the commitment of this province towards providing the most efficient and accessible health care system possible. Albertans expect a health care system that responds to the needs of their community and that maximizes the use of resources available, and these values are understood by our Premier.

This understanding is also true when it comes to Alberta's energy strategy. The role that the energy industry plays is vital to our collective prosperity and the livelihoods of many families in my constituency and in our province. If done right, the advantages of our natural resources can secure an unparalleled quality of life and secure prosperity for multiple generations of Albertans.

I have no doubt that this government and our Premier will stand up for the interests of our province when it comes to natural resource development, and that starts with recognizing the need for Alberta to diversify its customer base and not to be too reliant on the United States for our energy exports. I agree with the Lieutenant Governor that we must access global markets with respect to our energy resources in order to achieve our greatest returns on those resources. I also agree with him that all Albertans share a deep love and respect for the environment. Our government must not forget that Albertans understand that in this province what is economic is environmental and what is environmental is economic.

Moving forward with an environmental monitoring plan that is credible, transparent, and science based in concert with the federal government is a step in the right direction to ensure that Alberta continues to have the social licence with Albertans and with the rest of the world to develop our resources. This is all part of a nation-building exercise that is being led by our Premier, Mr. Speaker, a process where all Canadians will see and realize the tremendous economic benefits of our vast natural resources, which are demanded right across the world. With allies and like-minded governments in B.C. and Saskatchewan and Ottawa and with the west leading the country in economic and population growth, our Premier recognizes the opportunity that is on our horizon, and she

is ready to lead and to seize the opportunities that come along with this for all Albertans.

In closing, Mr. Speaker, I would again like to thank His Honour the Lieutenant Governor for his inspiring words and his dedicated public service. I also again would like to thank the hon. Premier for her leadership and vision. As I go door to door talking to my constituents in Calgary-North Hill, I sense an optimism that is so strong, so prideful. Albertans have confidence in their government, they have confidence in their fellow Albertans, but most importantly they have confidence in themselves. This reflects the leadership style and grace that this Premier has shown in her short but successful time in office to date. I believe that under her guidance and with the dedication and spirit of the people of Alberta we are about to embark on what will be a truly special and remarkable time in the history of this province.

Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It's been an honour to be able to comment on His Honour's Speech from the Throne yesterday.

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

Mr. Rodney: Well, thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. In this my second term as MLA for Calgary-Lougheed it is with great respect and appreciation that I rise today to second the motion to accept the speech from the throne. Yesterday's speech was extremely significant. It marks a sea change for Alberta, a bright, new era under the guidance of our new Premier, who I am personally convinced will prove over time to be a great leader and visionary, one who will leave a lasting impact on Alberta as she reshapes it with all of us for the 21st century.

As such, I feel incredibly fortunate to have been invited to second this remarkable Speech from the Throne and speak about the vision that our leader and this government have for our great province. The throne speech presents a clear outline of what our government will do to ensure that Albertans can reach their full potential. As parents of two young boys my wife and I chose to live in this extraordinary province for this very reason, and it's also just one of the reasons why we choose to stay.

3:40

As our Premier has often stated, "Alberta is opportunity," but we have not reached this state of affairs by accident. Our leaders and our governments have not been afraid to be bold and make bold decisions using a plan based on the expectations of Albertans. We've done this in the past, and with this leader and this government we will stay true to that tradition and make our future brighter than it's ever been. Alberta's entrepreneurs received confirmation of this yesterday when it was announced that businesses have a government that will help them adapt and build a province that present and future generations will be proud of.

We all know that Alberta is the most economically free jurisdiction in North America, and this government will keep us in first place. But we cannot continue without strong fiscal discipline, so it was good to hear our Lieutenant Governor announce our government's stance on smart spending, improved competitiveness, and predictable three-year funding cycles for education, advanced education, and municipalities. Mr. Speaker, having spoken with stakeholders for many years now, I know that this is exactly what they have been asking for. I also know that they're very interested in our new budgetary review process, which includes a results-based approach, one that will allow for a thorough examination of how public spending is achieving outcomes for Albertans on a rotating three-year cycle.

Having had the honour of working on Treasury Board, I know that our government treats Albertans' money with the same care and respect that they do, spending wisely on services Albertans count on for an outstanding quality of life. That's exactly what we were reminded of yesterday. But that means little unless we continue to give every Albertan the opportunity to benefit from cutting-edge education, from kindergarten through to postsecondary, so that everyone can achieve their full potential. And, Mr. Speaker, we will. It was very encouraging to hear that in yesterday's speech.

However, Mr. Speaker, the speech also went much further. It portrayed our province as what it is, a leader in helping to solve many of the world's challenges in energy, water, food, health, and improving our quality of life. Proof of that came just days ago when we announced an ongoing partnership between our government and the government of Canada in enhancing the monitoring of water, air, land, and biodiversity in the oil sands.

The speech also focused on an issue that is always at the forefront of Albertans' minds, and that of course is health care. During our recent cabinet tour I was encouraged to hear that Albertans are excited about the success of our primary care networks. Yesterday's throne speech promised to build on this with the plan – and I repeat the word "plan" – to expand community-based care through the introduction of family care clinics staffed by multidisciplinary teams of health care professionals. Patients in need of medical attention will be able to get it quickly and easily at publicly funded clinics close to home. As parliamentary assistant for Health and Wellness I am looking forward to joining our minister, our Premier, and our colleagues in making family care clinics a reality.

There was even more concrete evidence of this with the announcement that our government will begin the implementation of three pilot projects this spring. Now, Mr. Speaker, I can tell you that Albertans are extremely pleased about this, and I'm not referring only to doctors, nurses, and support staff with whom I've spoken but also to patients of all ages all around the province.

Speaking of which, I know that our seniors were delighted to hear that our government will provide them with the supports and services and care that they need to remain healthy and happy and productive. This includes measures to help them stay in the peaceful security of their own homes, surrounded by the warmth of family for as long as possible.

Now, Mr. Speaker, it's no surprise that many people are also very concerned about issues like property rights. Albertans want the freedom to run their own lives, and they want to take charge of their own destinies, so I trust that they were pleased with yesterday's promise to strengthen their property rights using what we learned in public consultations. Our government will use Albertans' contributions to make common-sense decisions on this issue.

Mr. Speaker, I have also learned that Albertans across the province are applauding the assurances that our government will co-operate closely and openly with Ottawa, building on our strong relationship with the federal government, that they will proudly tell our Albertan story, and that they will promote Albertans' visions and actions on the world stage.

There is no question that Albertans have been extremely successful in the past, but if we're to continue to prosper, our government knows that we cannot take any of this for granted, and that is why I was so pleased to hear our Lieutenant Governor refer to the many innovative ways that our government is investing in tomorrow, including strengthening our postsecondary sector and developing new strategies to attract talent from across the country and around the world.

But, as you know, Mr. Speaker, it all starts at home, so I was very heartened to hear that this government will continue to strengthen its ties with Métis and First Nations communities. As my constituents in Calgary-Lougheed have attested to many times when I've visited them at their doors, they know that our lives are often inextricably linked together, and I expect that our hon. colleagues from around Alberta have had similar realizations in their communities. I am eager to continue efforts to find common ground with our neighbours in Calgary-Lougheed as well as with other Métis and First Nations communities across Alberta.

Mr. Speaker, our initiatives will certainly help to ensure that Alberta will continue to thrive in the future, but they have also been developed to help create an important balance between a vibrant economy, strong communities, and a healthy environment for generations to come. In his speech yesterday the Honourable the Lieutenant Governor shared with Albertans the vision that this government has for our future, and that vision spoke to the family man in me, it spoke to the educator and entrepreneur in me, and it spoke to a lifelong interest that I've had in healthy living. For these reasons and many more I'm looking forward to playing a part in realizing our vision, and I'm gratified that Albertans are feeling the same way as well.

Now, as I conclude, Mr. Speaker, I'll share just a short personal story relating the Speech from the Throne to my high school social studies teacher, who taught me that government, when done well, is one of the greatest agents of positive social change available to human beings and that when we've gained enough experience and expertise, we owe it to ourselves and our fellow citizens to give back. I believe that he'd be pleased to know that I am convinced it is an incredible honour and opportunity and obligation to be a member of this honourable Assembly with you and all of our colleagues. With humility, I dare say that my teacher would be very proud of yesterday's Speech from the Throne, which outlined our province's promising future, including the understanding that our Premier and our government are focusing our resources in areas that will help all Albertans to achieve their full potential.

As our Lieutenant Governor stated,

Alberta can be proud of rich natural resources, North America's most competitive business environment, and a vibrant technology and innovation sector that helps push human achievement to unparalleled heights . . . It is Albertans who will always remain the central focus of this government.

It will help all Albertans reach their full potential, setting the stage for future generations to enjoy even greater success.

With that, I thank you and all of our colleagues, Mr. Speaker.

Dr. Sherman: Mr. Speaker, I would like to thank His Honour the Lieutenant Governor for his service to our province and our nation. As the Leader of Her Majesty's Loyal Opposition it's an honour for me to respond to the Speech from the Throne for this Fifth Session of the 27th Legislature.

Mr. Speaker, as I give my response to yesterday's Speech from the Throne, I'm going to be very honest. Much of what I'm going to say today will not be welcomed by those members of this House who serve in the current government, but I feel it is of vital importance to speak the truth about the problems we face in Alberta and how the current government has failed to deal with them, so in advance I say: sorry if the truth I speak today is going to bruise their egos.

3:50

Now, I want to start my response to the Speech from the Throne by recognizing the positive aspect of it. I say "aspect" in the singular very deliberately. After sitting through yesterday's very dull and unimaginative speech and after reading it very carefully, I could

find only one good thing to say about it, and here it is. Finally, this government admits that there is a revenue problem. You know what they say: even a stopped clock tells the correct time twice a day. So the current government was bound to get at least one thing right.

This aspect of the speech was good, and I congratulate the Premier on admitting there is a revenue problem. Now I encourage her to take the truly Liberal strategy of progressive taxes to fix it. I encourage the Premier to follow the lead of the Official Opposition and to introduce the fair tax system we unveiled on Monday, which sees no increases to the rates paid by 90 per cent of Albertans but would raise income taxes on larger corporations and those with taxable incomes of more than \$100,000 a year. This is just one of many bold and visionary measures we announced on Monday which have our province buzzing.

[Mr. Zwozdesky in the chair]

The Premier hints at tax change, and I hope she will follow our lead by increasing the rate on larger corporations from 10 to 12 per cent and by leaving small- and medium-sized businesses alone. I also hope that she will follow our lead and only increase tax rates on the top 10 per cent of Albertans because, heaven knows, the 90 per cent, who don't earn six-figure taxable incomes, are being squeezed enough already by this current government.

There is one area where our current government squeezes everyone equally. Seniors, those living on AISH, small-, medium-, and large-sized businesses, families: all Albertans are feeling the squeeze when it comes to power bills. The throne speech didn't mention electricity deregulation once, and it's easy to see why. It's been an abject failure. It is time for smart changes to the system which will cut Albertans' power bills and protect us from profiteering power generators and transmitters. This government should follow our lead and increase the powers and resources of the Market Surveillance Administrator so we can have open, efficient, and competitive marketplaces. Follow our lead and create new rules allowing utilities to save on generation and pass those savings on to Albertans. Follow our lead and get rid of those laughable fines which actually make it profitable for power companies to distort the market. It's time to bring in penalties that match the magnitude of the offence. Follow our lead on this.

Another of the many ways Albertans are being squeezed is through school fees. School fees are nothing but a tax on families, pure and simple. It is one of the most regressive taxes imaginable. Now, I can understand taxing cigarettes. I'm a doctor, after all, so I see the value in that. But taxing education? Why tax education as though it's a pack of smokes? It just doesn't make sense. We believe education should be properly funded instead and that school fees should be eliminated. It seems a lot of Albertans agree with us, and I encourage the current government to follow our lead.

This government should also stop squeezing postsecondary students. Follow our lead and create endowments out of our growing resource revenue so that by 2025 postsecondary tuition will be free. As a first step follow our lead by capping and lowering tuition for undergraduate students by \$250 immediately.

Mr. Speaker, it's not just our people who are being squeezed by the government. Our cities, towns, neighbourhoods need a new deal. We call on the government to follow our lead by delivering new funding through the establishment of a municipal heritage fund, which would begin providing and creating stable, sustainable funding for local governments and creating long-term infrastructure solutions.

Follow our lead and draft city charters for Edmonton and Calgary so that they will have the powers they need to tackle their own unique challenges. Follow our lead and directly fund neighbourhood associations across the province with 25 per cent of the municipal heritage fund's earnings, which will enable citizens to turn their neighbourhood's priorities into reality. This government would be well advised to follow our lead and reinstate community lottery boards. This would put an end to politicians using this money to throw perks around. Follow our lead and get politicians out of the process so that spending priorities reflect the needs of communities.

Perhaps most disturbing of all is the fact that our seniors are being squeezed by government. Right now in Alberta, the wealthiest province in Canada, many seniors are having to ask themselves: can I afford to have a bath today? They have to ask this question because of this government's shameful record of underfunding home care. Our seniors, who only get one paragraph in the Speech from the Throne, built this province, but the current government won't provide the funding needed to keep senior families together and to keep these families in their homes. This government should follow our lead and double the funding of home care so that this stops happening.

This government should follow our lead and increase the supply of nonprofit community-based lodges and nonprofit long-term care beds, too. Follow our lead by increasing the quality of long-term care, requiring on-site registered nurses, and by enacting guarantees of service to ensure a proper level of care. For heaven's sake, please follow our lead and embrace the principle that senior couples should not be split up because of health or financial needs.

Mr. Speaker, our health care system is also being squeezed by the current government. It is interesting that in five paragraphs on health care it talks twice about publicly funded health care but not once about publicly delivered health care. Is privatization being considered? This current government would do better to follow our lead instead and fix our public health care system.

I just discussed the neglect of our seniors, and it is this neglect that is impacting the health care system overall. We need more long-term care beds so that seniors are not languishing in hospital beds, which in turn leads to cancellation of surgeries and congested emergency rooms. This leads to our paramedics spending too much of their time waiting with patients for a bed to come open and not enough time getting back out on the road to answer the next 911 call for help. Follow our lead and fix this problem. Follow our lead and guarantee surgery and emergency department wait times. Follow our lead and get every Albertan a family doctor and a wellness team.

4:00

Mr. Speaker, as I mentioned earlier, yesterday's throne speech was a very dull, unimaginative speech. With all the problems facing our province, Albertans have the right to expect a throne speech with vision and thoughtful proposals. Instead, all the current government could manage to offer was a tedious, hour-long drone of clichés, platitudes, and stale slogans. The reason for this is really quite simple. This current government is old, tired, and out of ideas. It is also very many years removed from the time it was a force for solutions. It is now simply the source of our problems. This is subliminally acknowledged near the end of the throne speech through lines like, "It will revitalize publicly funded health care services to increase access and suit an aging population with diverse needs." Who brought our health care system to such a state of disarray and dysfunction that it needs to be revitalized in the first place? This current government.

Another line. "It will revamp Alberta's education system so all graduates can hit the ground running and contribute more effectively than ever." Who brought our education system to such a sorry state that we have the highest high school dropout rate in the country? This current government.

Here's another revealing line. "History has shown us that short-term focus can result in long-term problems." Indeed. The past 20 years under this government prove this to be absolutely true. Once again, even a stopped clock tells the correct time twice a day. The line that is followed by this is: "Your government will address the root causes of problems rather than just respond to symptoms. Albertans expect better and demand excellence."

Now the current government has returned to getting things wrong. This government is the root cause of the problems in Alberta. Albertans do indeed expect better and demand excellence, and this is why the members opposite ought to be very, very, very worried. The current government is squeezing families through school fees. They are squeezing those who don't earn six-figure taxable incomes. They are squeezing our cities, towns, neighbourhoods. They are squeezing our health care system. Worst of all, they are squeezing our seniors. Our seniors. From womb to tomb this government is the root cause of the problem.

Mr. Speaker, the current government no longer is a force for good in this province. No longer. And through the evasive jargon of the throne speech one truth manages to shine through: it's time for this government to go.

Thank you.

The Acting Speaker: Thank you, hon. member.

Standing Order 29(2)(a) is available for anyone who wishes to question or comment on the speech just given. The hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands-Norwood.

Mr. Mason: Thank you. I would like to ask the hon. Leader of the Official Opposition when exactly it was that the government lost its way.

Dr. Sherman: This government lost its way yesterday, the day before, the day before that. It lost its way in the '90s. This government has lost the moral authority to govern this province.

The Acting Speaker: Anyone else under 29(2)(a)?

Seeing no one else, I would ask the hon. Member for Calgary-Glenmore to please proceed with his comments on the Speech from the Throne.

Mr. Hinman: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. I am grateful for the opportunity to rise today and offer a few of my thoughts on the government's Speech from the Throne. First, I'd like to congratulate the Lieutenant Governor on his delivery of the speech yesterday. I would also like to join my colleagues in this House in expressing my gratitude and sense of celebration, after 60 years of service, to Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II.

I had a grandmother, who has now gone on, that was a great supporter of the monarchy. She loved Queen Elizabeth, and we often talked about her. We had the privilege when I was very young to have Lieutenant Governor Grant MacEwan to a private dinner. That was quite a thrill when I was young. He talked about such books as *John Ware's Cow Country* and other exciting things. I appreciate the Lieutenant Governors that we've had in the past and the current one and the service that they do here for Alberta.

I was hoping that under the new Premier this government would articulate a vision and resonate with Albertans. Instead, we got a speech that lacked vision entirely and did little to address the

rising concerns of Albertans in this province. The first piece of legislation in this session does nothing to guarantee that this government will address the bloated size of government and end their record of out-of-control spending.

In the past months, where this government has spent \$70,000 on lavish getaways to Jasper park and pre-election cabinet tours, it's obvious that this government doesn't have a record of and doesn't understand or realize the importance of prioritizing the hard-earned tax dollars from Albertans. Under this government's new fiscal framework for results-based budgeting – and I think that that's comical. I think that the result of their budgeting has been deficit after deficit, and all that is going to show is more results of poor planning, poor prioritizing. The fact exists: no guarantee of eliminating any government waste.

The government says that it's planning to secure our economic future with smart spending. Well, what has it done in the past? Is it saying that this cabinet and all of them that are here – there's nobody new in this House from four years ago. We've had one member resign, that is no longer here, and they seemed to be able to kick him as he left as if he was the only one who spoke. I do realize that they have trained tongues and only speak for him other than the brief opportunity during a leadership race where all of a sudden new ideas or sharp tongues come out criticizing the government on where it has been. How can they possibly as a group start to talk about smart spending, Mr. Speaker, when they are the ones that have been spending for the last four years? It's just totally hypocritical.

To go on, this government has no credible record to boast anything about spending other than how well they can spend other people's money. There is \$2 billion that will be spent, and much has been spent, on unproven carbon capture technology that will do nothing to improve the environment in our province or our economic situation.

In 2008 Alberta was plunged into a recession, and what was the first thing that this cabinet, this group of people, brought? It was that they thought they should get a 34 per cent pay raise. These are the individuals, Mr. Speaker. That was not smart spending, yet they continue on and want to be the advocates and say these things when everybody sees that they're hypocritical.

Does smart spending include the million-dollar severance packages for retiring MLAs? I'm curious to know. The hon. Member for Lethbridge-East asked for pay reviews some time ago. Now, they're finally doing it at this point, but again I'm just very concerned about what the outcome is going to be on that and how it's going to be manipulated. It's disappointing.

4:10

It's clear that this government is looking to run on its record of smart spending. Albertans have a lot to worry about. This Premier and the members of her cabinet are addicted to their old spending habits, and they have no commitments to put an end to their spending ways. We are now preparing to enter the fifth year of deficit budgets as we have seen the size of government grow and the quality of our government services decline. Is this what the Premier is calling sound finances? That's another cliché that she used in the throne speech: sound finances. There's nothing sound about it.

We have watched other countries around the globe go into decline because of this thinking. It's simply mind boggling for this government to suggest otherwise. I will pull that out, I guess, from the speech because it was one of the things I found somewhat concerning that they brought up. It talked about: "While these are trying times, other nations' difficulties do serve to remind us of how fortunate we are to live in . . . Alberta." Why are they trying

times for other nations? It's because of the massive deficits that their governments ran year after year after year, not able to pay it back in trying times. Yet this government, I am quite confident, tomorrow will run into its fifth year of deficit spending.

Perhaps the biggest concern and where the Wildrose differs the most from the others in this House is that we would totally argue – the Leader of the Official Opposition pointed out that the only point he thought was good was this one – that the government has recognized that they have a revenue problem. We believe there is nothing further from the truth. What we have is record revenue, and we're not able to balance the budget with record revenue.

In the last five years we've received \$40 billion plus of resource revenue. That averages over \$8 billion a year, yet they declare that this is too volatile a revenue. The biggest reason it's so volatile is because of the credit crunch that the world hit and the fact that these guys went after them to raise their royalties. So these individuals and companies and entrepreneurs, which they declare they want to attract, left the province for better investment areas. Not a good record.

It's incredible that this government is saying that after a year where they took in record resource revenues, Albertans are not giving enough to the government. They are now suggesting it's time to take more out of the paycheques of Albertans. They are now suggesting that Alberta families are not paying their fair share. It sounds like the results of their budgeting is not working well, especially not for Albertans.

I was also interested to hear that the Premier is planning to increase savings for our heritage fund. We, of course, welcome the move after years of government sucking our funds dry, but I don't think that's what is really the intent of the throne speech, where she talks about that they're going to have a complete review of all of these areas. "This will include reviews of the Alberta heritage savings trust and sustainability funds, capital and infrastructure projects, gaming revenue, our operating budget, and income taxes along with reviews of existing programs." It's interesting that they pontificate that they're going to have results-based budgeting. What has been the result of your past budgeting? It has been a disaster for Albertans.

This government cannot save. Even with record revenues they've failed to save. The last three years all of our funds have been diminishing. To say that they're going to increase savings is comical. How, when they increase spending and they're running a deficit? You can't save when you're running a deficit.

The only strategy this Premier seems to be interested in is contemplating to punish Albertans with higher taxes, declaring loudly that they are providing great services and that they know how to spend Albertans' money better than Albertans do. Everything this government is doing is looking more and more like higher taxes are down the way. The question is: is she going to run record deficits for the next Premier to have to deal with because they refuse to balance the budget? This is the question that many Albertans are concerned with.

Once again, in the throne speech in other areas they talk about property rights. It is insulting to Albertans for this government to suggest that they have been listening to and standing up for landowners with their task force. Unfortunately, this government has claimed that it has been listening for over the past three years, and nothing meaningful has been changed. What was the point in sending out another task force of cabinet members, those who have spoken against Keith Wilson and landowners all across this province, and saying that there is nothing to be concerned about in bills 19, 24, 36, or 50? If, in fact, they were listening, they would repeal these bills. This is just one more concern for Albertans that with this throne speech she is saying: "Trust us. We're going to

listen. But then we'll just reimplement them after an election." Everything has been put on hold for whether it's two months or three months, and then all of a sudden it's going to kick back in and we'll reinstate or say that, yeah, everything is fine, nothing needs to be changed, which is what Albertans have been hearing from the Premier and previous Premier on property rights.

What's the point of continuing to say that they're going to listen to Albertans if the government really isn't going to do anything about it? They had the opportunity last fall. They have the opportunity this spring to do something about it, and that's repeal those bills. These laws have asked landowners to have their land devalued without being fairly compensated and have made it nearly impossible for many to make investments in their land with any confidence. It continues to be a black mark on our province with its impact on business, communities, and democratic rights as free citizens.

The current legislation that is on the table still centralizes power in the hands of cabinet and takes the decision-making process on things like new transmission lines out of the hands of experts, where it really should be. Even worse, it commits all Albertans to higher transmission costs on their power bills. They've failed to act. They've only continued to delay. Albertans need to be reassured before the next election that it won't be full speed ahead on these new transmission lines, and the only way to assure them is to repeal this legislation and return that decision-making to the AUC, the Alberta Utilities Commission.

This government announced that they want to give the health authority council a more active voice. This government doesn't understand that it's not just about giving people a voice, especially when you're deaf. We have seen what happens with health professionals who try to have their voice heard. Dr. Magliocco was bullied out of this province. Again, we have this hypocrisy, declaring they want to attract individuals from around the world. "Your government will attract the world's top talent to Alberta to contribute to a research agenda that will position this province on the international stage."

They haven't attracted top talent, Mr. Speaker; they've driven it out of the province. They speak out and say, "Allow us to practise," and they say, "No, you do it our way, or it's the highway to Florida or to Harvard or some other area" because they're not listening to them. They've chased out our health professionals, and they've chased out many oil and gas entrepreneurs by going after them and wanting to increase their taxes. It's very concerning.

I also find it interesting that this government – again, they love to reiterate and reiterate, over and over again, that they're going to do something when they've done nothing. I found it surprising also to see the government boast about creating a new northern Alberta development strategy.

This Premier seems fixated on strategize and strategy. Yes, well, what have you been doing for the last four years? Why didn't you strategize a little bit? You were all in cabinet. You all had the papers in front of you. You could discuss it, and you failed to strategize it. Mr. Speaker, is that because their tongues and their brains were disconnected until there was a new leadership, and we have a short time period for six months when their tongues are connected to their thinking equipment, and they're allowed to speak out? Then, again, it severed, and now all of a sudden it's one voice, one thought, one way, or the highway. This isn't in the interests of Albertans.

It's interesting, though, this northern development that they talk about. There's already lots of time being spent with that. We have the Radke report. We have Responsible Actions. We have the oil sands secretariat. This government has failed to act on any of

these, Mr. Speaker. So it is clear that this government has no plans to do business in any new way.

The Speech from the Throne showed a government that has no plans to put an end to their out-of-control spending that this government is accustomed to, and we are continuing to fall into a black hole. Worse yet, they are now asking Albertans to pay for their irresponsible spending with the spectre of raising taxes. This government, Mr. Speaker, is addicted to OPM, other peoples' money. They don't know how to handle their own, and now they want to spend Albertans'.

It is my hope that this government will come clear with its tax-and-spend agenda and let all Albertans know what they plan on doing, whether it's balancing the budget or going forward. They say that they're not going to have any cuts, that they're going to have result-based budgeting. What that means, Mr. Speaker, is that when they've looked, they have failed to find anything to cut, and now they're going to go forward and they're going to make other people, other Albertans, pay for their poor budgeting and inability to prioritize correctly.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

4:20

The Acting Speaker: Thank you.

Hon. members, 29(2)(a) is now available should anyone wish to question or comment on the previous speakers. The hon. Member for Calgary-Mountain View.

Dr. Swann: Thanks, Mr. Speaker. Well, I listened with interest to the member and would be very appreciative of some of his comments about where, in fact, his party would find those economies that would not rely on the instability of a resource revenue and where he would plan to cut the services that we have currently.

Mr. Hinman: That's excellent. Again, we have in the last three years been putting it out. We've asked them to cut the \$2 billion for carbon tax. We've told them . . .

Mr. Liepert: It's not \$2 billion.

Mr. Hinman: Oh – what? – is \$500 million now going to other areas? That's what they've put away and they've put in there.

Their GreenTRIP, again, isn't focused: \$2 billion that isn't focused on real, result-based priorities. It's more on buying votes in different regions. They spent \$300 million to refurbish the MLA buildings. They gave \$300 million – what would I say? – to industry to bring ethanol production when we could have natural gas or propane-powered vehicles that are even cleaner. They have many corporate subsidies that are going out there that we don't need. Perhaps the one area that they forget the most is the bloated, top-heavy management that this province has developed over the years and, again, the plump, superplump money that they pay to their consultants that they bring in and then fire. There are many areas where they could and they should.

I firmly believe that their future expenditures will be an extension of their past expenditures. They're top heavy. They don't focus the money on front-line workers like our teachers, our health care professions. They focus it on management and other areas that are not at this time a priority. They continue to look at opulent buildings. They overbuild buildings. They don't have the staff to even fill them, whether it's the south hospital. They've failed to do a good job on ring roads and acquiring and processing there. Again, the other one is that their accelerated capital spending on infrastructure isn't sustainable.

What we're going to do is that we're going to hit another fall-off to where we're going to devastate industry, because they're not going to continue spending that \$6 billion or \$7 billion and will have to come back to a more sustainable \$4 billion or \$5 billion. We're going to have a major contraction in that industry, which is going to cause a ripple effect that's not good.

There are many areas where they should have, they've failed to, and going forward they're going to continue to fail to. It's interesting. In their result-based financing they say that they're going to start scrutinizing every department. Well, what have they done for the last four years? Again, what their result-based financing has shown is that there are no cuts to be made. The Premier says that there is nothing to cut, there is no waste, yet somehow going forward they're going to manage it.

It's very, very concerning to Albertans that they are spending money foolishly. They're not even prioritizing their infrastructure projects. It's more a political slush fund, where they build different, whether it's a – I won't even get into how they manipulate, but it's very disappointing the way they manipulate the money for infrastructure.

The Acting Speaker: Thank you.

The hon. Member for Calgary-Mountain View, under 29(2)(a) to continue.

Dr. Swann: Well, the hon. member mentioned corporate subsidies. I'm wondering if he could identify some specific areas where he feels the corporate subsidies are inappropriate, specifically oil companies.

Mr. Hinman: Yes. Well, it's interesting. The one that we were quite alarmed with was the \$300 million loan for Precision. They said that that was good because we're getting a good rate of return there. Again, that wasn't the government; it was AIMCo. The biggest one is the subsidies, massive, for carbon sequestration – it's an unproven science – that they're giving to some of the world's biggest companies. They're pushing that ahead. Again, the ethanol one is one where they put out \$300 million. The Alberta investment company, again, is putting money – I can't remember how much went to the company in Vancouver. I've forgotten that one off the top of my head.

There are a number of them, and I'd be happy to share with the member a lot of the corporate subsidies that they continue to push out and say, "Oh, isn't this a wonderful idea. We should be doing the carbon capture," or other various areas, the ethanol that continues.

The Acting Speaker: Thank you.

Anyone else under 29(2)(a)?

If not, we'll proceed with Edmonton-Highlands-Norwood, followed by either Red Deer-North or Calgary-Varsity.

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It's an honour to rise and respond to the Lieutenant Governor's speech, which I had read with interest. The Speech from the Throne is supposed to be a road map for the government. It's supposed to be an expression of the government's direction, its plans. It's a look forward into what the government would like to do, and anyone who read that speech or heard it being read would be left wondering where we're going. There are many reviews that are planned. There are many strategies that are going to be made. There are many generalities in this speech about things that I think most everybody would agree on. More support for postsecondary education, strengthening the health system, and protecting the environment are all things we can all agree on. What you would

expect from a throne speech, Mr. Speaker, is, in fact, something with some more specifics, more meat on the bones, if you will, and we did not see that in this speech.

[The Speaker in the chair]

Mr. Speaker, Alberta is a wonderful place to live. It's a wonderful place to do business, to raise a family, and it deserves a plan and a government that's worthy of the people who live here. It's a province whose foundation of its economy is energy, yet there's scarce here that would indicate where we're going to go in terms of the energy industries in our province. The oil sands are a critical part of our economy and our economic future, not just for this province but for the country as well, but there's no clear outline of what's involved in the Premier's national energy strategy.

I think a national energy strategy is in principle a good thing, particularly if it's led by Alberta and not by Ottawa. A strategy has certain things, Mr. Speaker. It has plans, rationalizations for the plans. It has objectives. A national energy strategy should talk about how we're going to enjoy energy self-sufficiency in the country, how we're going to diversify our energy industry, how we're going to build renewable energy, how we're going to use natural gas, how we're going to make sure that we have affordable energy that has a minimum impact on the environment, all of those things you would expect in a strategy. But like the Prime Minister – and I don't really have much else in common with him – I am confused about what this Premier means by a national energy strategy. That's because at this stage it seems little more than a ploy to convince other provinces, specifically British Columbia, to support pipelines. That's not a national energy strategy; that is a camouflage for a specific economic objective.

I think the Speech from the Throne, had it been written by an NDP government, would have talked about the role of natural gas, would have talked about electricity, would have talked about self-sufficiency for the country as a whole, would have talked about future development of jobs, and would have talked about protecting the environment. It would have included all of those things, but this PC government doesn't seem to think that those things are important.

Mr. Speaker, the oil sands are not only critical to our country's economy, but they are becoming increasingly an international target, and there are real risks to our ability to continue to develop them. Most of those risks are things that the NDP has been warning the government about for years: that it is time to take international concern about the environment, including the tailings ponds and downstream water pollution and emissions, seriously. The government has so far refused to do that. The government prefers to spend a few million dollars on advertising campaigns in the United States, trying to paper over the very real environmental problems that we have failed to address. So I think that that's the first place to start.

4:30

Now, we have been pressing, environmental groups have been pressing, and scientists have been pressing for meaningful water quality monitoring. Finally the government has admitted that for years it lied to Albertans about the state of water quality monitoring in the oil sands, and they've put in place something that might actually do the job. But let's not forget the history. This government denied this for years and years and years, and it took pressure from citizens, it took pressure from the NDP, from the labour movement, from environmental organizations to force them to finally admit the truth.

Mr. Speaker, bitumen is a key resource. Unlike the previous Premier, who promised four or five years ago to eliminate or reduce the export of unprocessed bitumen to the United States as well as all of the jobs and investment that went down the pipeline with it, the government has never done so and is now openly supporting two pipeline projects that would export unprocessed bitumen and create jobs in Texas and in China.

Mr. Speaker, let's not forget there were a number of major upgrading plants approved for the heartland area that were going ahead, billion-dollar projects that would have created jobs and drawn investment to our province, that have been shelved or even cancelled because it's cheaper for the oil companies to pipe bitumen down the Keystone pipeline and renovate existing old refineries on the Gulf coast. We have lost that investment, we have lost those jobs, we've lost that value-added because this government has refused to act to protect the jobs of us and our children and our grandchildren. This government doesn't care about jobs from the energy industry. They care about profits for the energy industry.

Mr. Speaker, also, I want to address the question of electricity because this is a serious problem. It's been broken since 1995, and now the chickens are coming home to roost for this government. There is incredible instability in the price of electricity in this province. It's affecting businesses, it's affecting farms, it's affecting the public sector, and it's affecting homeowners. Power prices now are the highest they have ever been. They are double – at least, my own bill is double what it was just 12 months ago, and the government has no plan. Deregulation is the problem. Deregulation broke the system, and unless we regulate prices in the electricity market, no amount of market reform as proposed by some other parties is going to fix the problem.

Mr. Speaker, this government has a problem with its finances, and we are now in a third consecutive deficit. We'll see tomorrow whether it's going to be four or not. But the question is: where did this deficit come from when we are the richest province in the country? We have access to revenue sources that no one else has, yet we're in a deficit.

Well, I remember when Stockwell Day, the Progressive Conservative Treasurer, introduced the flat tax. Now, that primarily benefited people with the highest incomes in this province, people over \$200,000 a year. They had the biggest savings on their taxes. It cost the province billions of dollars. Then when Steve West was the Progressive Conservative finance minister of this province, he announced that they were going to cut the corporate tax – and this is on profitable corporations – from 16 per cent down to 8 per cent. They have sequentially reduced rates. It's now around 10 per cent. It's about a 60 per cent cut in corporate taxes. That cost the treasury billions and billions of dollars. And, of course, they backed away on royalties with the very modest changes that were brought in under the previous Premier.

They have created a massive loss of revenue, all directed at the wealthiest in our province, all directed at the most profitable corporations. That's who they benefited. That's who they gave the massive handouts to. Now we don't have enough money for our seniors' housing. We don't have enough money for education. We don't have enough money for our health care system, and front-line staff are bearing the brunt.

Now the government is going to look for other places to privatize. The Premier has promised in her campaign to become leader of the Progressive Conservative Party that in the first six months they would look in every area of government with a view to finding things that could be privatized. Now we have introduced Bill 1, which is zero-based budgeting, and zero-based

budgeting is, in fact, a key implementation method for privatization and contracting out.

With respect to health the government is still going down the wrong path when it comes to long-term care. It is still looking for private-public partnerships, which involve subsidizations of the private sector and do not protect our seniors from being gouged and being squeezed in order to receive the care they need. I recently spoke with a large number of front-line health care workers in private nursing homes, and the conditions have not improved. The staff shortages are severe, and the patients, the seniors who live there, are given completely inadequate care. Mr. Speaker, what's going on in our seniors' homes in this province is a disgrace.

This government's approach of private delivery will not solve the problem. Of course, the lack of long-term care means that people are put by their doctors into acute-care beds, and then they're not available when they're needed by emergency room patients, so everything backs up out of the emergency room into the waiting room. Mr. Speaker, Albertans have had enough of health care delivered in waiting rooms. They want to have first-rate health facilities. They want them publicly delivered, not just publicly funded. This government plays games with words, and what they mean is using public, taxpayers' money to subsidize their private-industry friends.

Mr. Speaker, with respect to education, having met with a number of school boards, it's very clear that unstable funding is a serious problem. Even though the government negotiated a long-term deal with teachers a few years ago, it did not provide sufficient funds for the school boards to pay for that. Particularly, there were no additional funds for the other people who work in education who are not teachers and expect the same kinds of increases.

Mr. Speaker, the government's commitment to accessibility is belied by the high tuition fees at our universities, high fees at colleges and technical institutions, and by allowing postsecondary institutions to charge noninstructional fees, which are just a fraud to get around the tuition fee cap. Of course, the instructional fees that are charged in our primary and secondary schools are very, very damaging to the accessibility that should be for everyone in our educational system.

Mr. Speaker, the government talks in the throne speech about working closely and openly with the federal government. While this government would like to pretend to be progressive when it's speaking to progressively minded voters, it is, in fact, deeply wedded to a very, very conservative federal government. I have asked the Premier in question periods previously about the government's position relative to Kyoto. The withdrawal of Canada from Kyoto, supported by the government of Alberta, is a disgrace. The crime bill will put thousands and thousands of Albertans in jail unnecessarily and produce massive costs – massive costs – to the provincial government. Both Ontario and Quebec have refused to pay those costs.

4:40

The Speaker: Hon. members, Standing Order 29(2)(a) is available. The hon. Member for St. Albert.

Mr. Allred: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I was quite interested in the comments of the hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands-Norwood with regard to the recent spike in the cost of electricity, which I understand was caused by some unscheduled shutdowns.

I guess I would like to ask the hon. member if he tracks his electricity costs on an annual basis. For instance, I recently looked at my annual electricity costs for the last 12 years. I noticed that in

2002 and 2003 they were quite high, but they've continually gone down, and they're slowly rising. Until this past year they were still several hundred dollars less than they were back in 2002 and 2003.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. One of the problems with the system is extremely unstable electricity prices, but as for the member's suggestion that they are slowly rising when they've set a brand new record for the highest prices in Alberta history, that is not rising slowly.

Mr. Speaker, I want to also address a question of whether or not this provincial government is going to support the decision of the federal government with respect to pensions and taking away the social security.

In terms of the environment this government has made cut after cut after cut to enforcement. In terms of culture they have made cut after cut. It's clear, in conclusion, Mr. Speaker, that this government has not got a record of supporting either the environment or supporting arts. It's not planning the economy for the future of the province. It's not building a future economy. It's not protecting our social services, particularly health care and education. I don't believe that the House should be supporting a Speech from the Throne that is not only vague but which simply is a precursor to the repetition of the same mistakes, errors, and bad judgment that have dogged this government's decision-making for the past 10 or 15 years.

Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Allred: Mr. Speaker, just a follow-up. Yes, perhaps the price of electricity has reached a record high in the last month due to the spikes that I've mentioned, but similarly strawberries occasionally reach record highs. Gasoline goes up and down. Everything is volatile in price situations, so I really don't see the relevance of the comment that for one month it was that high.

The Speaker: The hon. member, if you wish.

Mr. Mason: Mr. Speaker, strawberries, while very nice, are not an essential service; electricity is. I believe we need an electricity system where we have regular, clear prices, where you don't have to go and sign up on some contract that's going to get you into trouble down the road, where you don't have to learn how to hedge. You just pay a minimum bill that covers the cost of the generation and a guaranteed rate of return. You turn on the lights, you have reliable energy, and you don't have monthly surprises on your power bill.

What we've got in this province is an electricity system that is completely broken, and the hon. member has not addressed the question of manipulation of power prices by power companies. TransAlta was recently caught selling electricity into the B.C. market while there was a shortage in Alberta, causing a spike in prices, and they profited as well as all of the other power companies profited. They were caught, but the other power companies made a lot of extra money, millions of dollars. They didn't have to pay that back. It comes out of the pockets of consumers.

As for these temporary outages, who knows if those things were unavoidable? What I do know is that many of the coal-fired power plants are now reaching the end of their lives, and there is no new generation that is being brought on in order to accommodate. That will create chronic structural shortages in electricity. If you think prices are high now, just wait until that happens.

The Speaker: Additional questions or participants?

Then I'll call on the hon. Member for Calgary-Varsity.

Mr. Chase: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I anticipated your call. Yesterday's Speech from the Throne was the most drearily disappointing of my seven years and counting in the Alberta Legislature as the twice-elected representative for Calgary-Varsity. Presumably, it was penned to reflect the priorities of the most recently selected leader of the Progressive Conservative governing party of Alberta, whose currently untested personal popularity outstrips that of her long-governing party. Rather than looking ahead, the speech looked nostalgically back through the rear-view mirror at the long-since-departed glory days of a brand new government under the energetic, innovative leadership of Peter Lougheed.

A failed attempt was made to equate those early, popularly supported, just-out-of-the-chute halcyon days of Tory governance of this province to our current provincial situation, 41 long years later. While our newly selected Premier shares some of the qualities that made Peter electorally attractive to Albertans, including, "relatively speaking," youthfulness, a postsecondary education, and a personal drive, Peter Lougheed literally and figuratively quarterbacked a team that was new to the field and was anxious to prove after 38 years of Social Credit rule that they had the energy and desire to reflect what was in the best interests of Albertans.

Despite the best intentions and the majority of yet-to-be-fulfilled campaign promises that initially attracted a sufficient number of Albertans to allow our recently selected Premier to narrowly defeat the Tory establishment old boys' choice, the porridge or gruel that is attempting to reinvent itself has sat on the shelf for 41 years. No amount of sugar or added spices is going to make the lumps go down more easily. Despite the best attempts of the royal writers of the Public Affairs Bureau to raise our yet to be battle-tested, forged-in-election-fires Premier to the level of saint or ancient mythological hero status, she remains a mere mortal with Herculean baggage to carry. Atlas, by comparison, had it easy.

While some of the older boys and girls, myself included, will soon be taking our final political bows, a significant number of the government players remain the same. The stage and the backdrops that Peter Lougheed once built, like our schools and hospitals, are suffering from age and neglect. A sense of entitlement has replaced the desire to serve in the public's best interest. That the me's are crying out more loudly than the we's can be seen in the obscene raises the former Premier and the current Premier as the then Minister of Justice awarded themselves.

Although token lip service was paid in the throne speech to the educational needs of our First Nations and Métis children, half of which fail to complete high school in three years, if ever, no clear plans were offered to suggest how improvements in educational engagement would occur. Nonrenewable resource rich but governance poor Alberta has among the highest high school dropout rates in Canada. Therefore, it comes as no surprise that Alberta has the lowest postsecondary participation rate in our country. Although the 2003 Learning Commission recommended funding full-day optional kindergarten and half-day optional junior kindergarten, this throne speech nine years later failed to commit this government to either early intervention or education. This government continues to place greater emphasis on nonrenewable resources than it does on education or innovation. Regardless of the problem or question education is the answer.

Our most important resources are people. This government's record of supporting and protecting Alberta's most vulnerable, including children, the disabled, and seniors, is shameful. In the past 10 years 60 children have been killed while in government

care, with hundreds more injured. The majority of these children were First Nations. While finally permitting the Alberta children's advocate to report directly to the Assembly is a small but welcome first step, it in itself won't keep children safe.

Alberta has the highest rate of domestic abuse in Canada. Twice as many women are turned away from shelters than provided even temporary housing.

The province's record in protecting seniors and the disabled, like that of children in its care, is far from exemplary. In 2004 Jennie Nelson, a senior in long-term care, was scalded to death. In 2005 Auditor General Fred Dunn wrote a scathing report on the conditions in long-term care centres throughout Alberta. Eight years later a significant number of Dunn's recommendations have not been implemented. In 2006 the judge-led fatality inquiry into Jennie Nelson's scalding death recommended that, at a bare minimum, antiscalding devices should be installed in all care facilities.

Had the government acted on the recommendations, 35-year-old David Holmes would still be alive today. David, who had previously been burned within this facility, was forced to wait for over two and a half hours before emergency services was contacted. One thousand care facilities are still waiting for antiscalding devices to be finally installed.

4:50

No mention was made in the throne speech of either providing the training or a decent wage for front-line caregivers and contracted agencies where high staff turnover compromises care of our most vulnerable. In the throne speech no mention was made that would contradict the Premier's campaign commitment to lift the cap on long-term care residence fees, which effectively turns vulnerable seniors into commodities, sold to the lowest private, for-profit building bidder.

Also absent from the throne speech was the commitment that our current selected Premier, then a leadership candidate, made to hold a public inquiry into health care. Without this inquiry medical service providers will not be protected by whistle-blower legislation and will therefore be prevented from effectively advocating both for themselves or their patients.

The throne speech was more notable for what it didn't contain than what it did. No reference was made to a fixed election date, which contradicts another of the Premier's "fingers firmly crossed" election promises. While winks and nods have been exchanged about the possibility of raising monthly AISH payments by \$400 and clawbacks of \$400 for those able to work, no commitment has yet been made.

As part of the nostalgia flashback the importance of agriculture was reaffirmed. Reference was made to Stephen Harper's recent dissolution of the Canadian Wheat Board as though this was something the majority of western farmers in general and Alberta farmers in particular supported, which is not the case. Heavy-handed governance which disregards individual rights is becoming a common theme of both our federal and provincial governments. Although the practice of agriculture was celebrated in the throne speech, the same cannot be said for recognizing the importance of paid farm workers in Alberta, who continue to be denied workers' compensation or protection through Occupational Health and Safety.

The emphasis placed in this throne speech was on resource extraction rather than on sustainability. Simply adding on water as part of the environment ministry's title is meaningless without conservation action, which has been notably absent in Alberta until, as the hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre noted, the province was dragged kicking and screaming by the federal government to at least meet its minimal standards.

Finally the peer-reviewed, science-based studies of Dr. David Schindler have been accepted. Whether his recommendations are implemented in an effective and timely manner was not confirmed within the throne speech. Water and well-being, whether of plants, animals, or human beings, go hand in hand. However, water continues to play second fiddle to extraction, whether renewable or nonrenewable.

The province has yet to chart the location and capacity of our aquifers. Sustainable Resource Development, which is an oxymoron in Alberta, permits clear-cutting, euphemistically referred to as block-cutting, in our primary eastern slopes watershed. Fence posts and stumps trump water, species, and noninvasive recreational opportunities. Special place designation in the Castle means nothing as the government has permitted Spray Lakes to cumulatively clear-cut one-half of the forested areas of the Castle-Crown, which was once actually protected by the federal government as part of Waterton national park.

SRD has used a variety of excuses to attempt to justify the unjustifiable. Previously the excuse for nonsustainable clear-cutting was to prevent the spread of pine beetles. Now that the beetle threat has been reduced in both the Castle and Bragg Creek, the new excuse is fire suppression. Rather than selective logging or controlled burns, which have proven effective, clear-cut logging causes many more problems than it solves, including erosion, habitat loss, summer and fall season dry tinder, droughts, and spring flooding.

The Alberta Conservative Party has by its actions or lack thereof lost the right to attach the term "progressive" to its title. If Albertans take the opportunity to compare the throne speech to the recently released Liberal policy documents, they will be able to judge which party or parties are truly progressive.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: Hon. members, Standing Order 29(2)(a) is available.

Additional speakers?

The hon. Government House Leader.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. At this time I would move that we adjourn debate.

[Motion to adjourn debate carried]

Government Bills and Orders Second Reading

Bill 1 Results-based Budgeting Act

The Speaker: The hon. Deputy Premier and President of the Treasury Board and Enterprise on behalf of the hon. Premier.

Mr. Horner: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It is indeed my pleasure to rise and move second reading of Bill 1, the Results-based Budgeting Act, and to have the opportunity to spend a few minutes to talk about the bill.

It will also be my pleasure as President of the Treasury Board, Mr. Speaker, to help lead the review of programs and services and results-based budgeting that are prescribed by this legislation, hopefully, once it's passed. This legislation is about Albertans identifying the outcomes they want their government to achieve in priority areas that they have identified. It's about ensuring that we are delivering the right services in the right way and at the right time to deliver the outcomes that Albertans are asking us to deliver, and it's about achieving a new level of fiscal discipline where funds will be allocated only where they are shown to

improve the lives of Albertans. As our Premier has said, it is about delivering services better and smarter.

Over the last several months we've been speaking with Albertans. The Finance minister and I convened a series of roundtable discussions, an online survey which received thousands of responses, and we received written submissions on the budget. The Minister of Education led consultations on the Education Act. In fact, the Premier and I and a few other of my colleagues listened to Albertans from one corner of this province to the other over the summer during our leadership race.

Albertans have clearly told us that they want the government to deliver results in a number of priority areas: health care, education, growing our economy, providing supports for seniors and vulnerable Albertans, and investing in our communities. Mr. Speaker, that is exactly what Bill 1 proposes to do. Through consultation and review this government intends to align its programs and services to the outcomes that Albertans expect their government to pursue.

Hon. members during question period alluded in their comments to: well, why haven't they been doing this over the last four years? This will be a framework where Albertans will be able to tell their government, "This is the priority that we have," and either we're delivering it appropriately or we're not, and this is what we need to do. Through this bill that framework will be there to ensure that Albertans have that opportunity. Once the desired outcomes are established, the Treasury Board will provide for a review process that will ensure that the programs and services being delivered by the government of Alberta are actually contributing to the outcomes that Albertans have asked us to deliver.

In the private sector, thanks to market forces, in order for a company to survive, it has to be able to adapt and continually adjust its offerings to ensure that it's offering a product that its customers value. If a company's product is not aligned with the expectations of its clients, that business will quickly find itself struggling to remain afloat. Therefore, like any private business would, it's important to ensure that the programs and services offered by the government of Alberta are relevant to today's Albertans.

Too often in the past we've allowed programs and services to continue to exist in one manner for the simple reason that they've always existed. This has led to some government programs and services remaining static despite significant evolutions in the clientele that they serve. If through the course of a review we find a program that is no longer effective in achieving the desired outcome, resources from that program or service should be reallocated to another program or service that will contribute to the achievement of the desired outcomes.

Mr. Speaker, I know that critics of this legislation have suggested that this is an effort that's all about outsourcing programs, cutting social programs, and eliminating government jobs. As usual, the truth of the matter is the exact opposite. In reviewing this legislation, I see great synergy between program and service reviews and the Premier's mandate to me to lead a public service renewal.

Albertans are blessed to be served by a passionate and dedicated group of public servants. Mr. Speaker, in talking to members of our public service both last summer and during our cabinet tours, one thing has become crystal clear, and that is that public servants want to be contributing to programs that are effective in achieving outcomes and improving the quality of life for all Albertans. Public servants in Alberta are proud, and so they should be, of the job that they do every day in assisting vulnerable Albertans, keeping our highways safe, educating our children, or assisting a

small business that's just starting to grow. Mr. Speaker, through program review we will enable the public service to better connect to the needs of Albertans. Our front-line staff will be an invaluable resource as we go through this process.

5:00

We will also be bringing in outside experts to ensure that as reviews are being done, they are being done correctly. This will not be just a case of navel-gazing but a robust review that is challenged and validated by Albertans and third-party experts. In my opinion, this is one of the most valuable and unique aspects of this legislation. Too often previous attempts at program review became fragmented and limited in scope and, therefore, limited in result. Only a comprehensive approach can lead to transformational change.

Given the sheer magnitude of the programs and services this government delivers, this is not going to be an easy undertaking. To do it right, we will need to take the time to do it carefully, thoughtfully, and thoroughly. Careful consideration needs to be given to the timing of each review, and consideration needs to be given to ensuring that after each review the necessary and appropriate changes are made and implemented to align the program or service to the desired outcome. Approximately one-third of the government programs will be reviewed each year for the next three years. Once a program review is completed, we'll build a budget for that program from the ground up, investing funds as businesses do, only on those programs that deliver the results we want.

Some might ask: is that the best way to demonstrate fiscal restraint? To those I say: yes. It's important that the government treat taxpayer dollars with the same respect and consideration that Albertans do. Albertans apply a great deal of due diligence in determining how to spend their hard-earned money, and it's incumbent upon the government of Alberta to exercise a similar level of consideration.

Through this legislation, Mr. Speaker, we are committed to ensuring that every dollar we invest on behalf of Albertans is invested in programming and services that are contributing to the expectations that Albertans have. This legislation will clearly link our budget and policy decisions to the outcomes that we want to achieve, the outcomes that Albertans have identified.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

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

Mr. Chase: Thank you. This may come as a surprise, but I really hope results-based budgeting works because the results of the budgets that we previously have received have not worked. There has been a push and a pull, the lean years versus the so-called fat years. As previously mentioned by another responder to the throne speech, Premiers have used the funds as their own personal cache, c-a-c-h-e as well as c-a-s-h, Ralph bucks being an example.

This government has previously failed in creating the types of efficiencies it's proposing to create now. For example, there was an organization referred to with the acronym RAGE, restructuring and government efficiency. You may not remember that ministry as, thankfully, it was very short lived. RAGE and results restructuring: there's a scary familiarity to those terms.

This government on a regular basis, at least for the seven years and counting, as I mentioned, that I've been involved, has frequently resorted to sup supply to bail itself out, and sup supply has frequently been in the \$1 billion to \$2 billion range. That's obviously not been results-based budgeting, where you have this

line of credit that you can dip into or you can go to the taxpayer bailed-out branch of the bank – what's our credit union here in Alberta? – the ATB, to bail it out or to provide loans. Now, I don't believe in feast and famine, and therefore I am hopeful that a more results-based approach is going to prove the charm.

We had a very strong Auditor General in the form of Fred Dunn. In his accounting Fred had pointed out a number of the shortcomings in various ministries and departments, and through his recommendations, had they been adopted, we could have literally saved billions of dollars. For example, Fred pointed out the inappropriate nature of tracking our resource revenues, our royalties. He pointed out that because there is a single individual at the switch doing the accounting, there was the potential of a billion dollars of resource revenue being left on the table. He also had concerns about the fact that industry supplied all the information from which the royalty rates were then assessed. That certainly wasn't a results-based practice.

When the government talks about either zero-based budgeting or results-based budgeting, I can't help but think of the analogy of someone who's suddenly found religion. Possibly it's someone who was addicted to smoking, and now they lecture all the friends they used to hang out with in front of the hospital or the bar about the evil weed. The proof, of course, Mr. Speaker, will be in the pudding. I won't be around to taste that pudding, in terms of being around in the Legislature, but my family, my grandchildren, that I'm looking forward to spending time with in the very near future, will be affected by this new budgeting approach.

The hon. Minister of Education is chewing and chuckling. But he also, I think, is concerned because he has family members, and I'm sure he wishes them well. He's in charge of a ministry currently that has a significant number, hundreds of thousands, of students whose futures depend on stable funding, which, hopefully, this resource-based budgeting, Bill 1, will provide.

Mr. Speaker, having been a member of the opposition for the past seven years tends to put a person into the doubting Thomas category of disciples. Yet this is one area where I would wish the government success, just as I would have liked to have seen the successful completion and implementation of the land-use framework. The budget is the key underlying factor that determines the well-being of individuals. We need to have a strong economy, but we need to have one that is sustainable. For far too long this government has been reliant on globally set, nonrenewable commodity prices. Possibly with this results-based budgeting they will be able to recognize the importance of having stable sources of funding.

Now, we've talked in our Liberal campaign policy of the need for a return to at least some form of progressive tax structure. We've pointed out that we believe that people who earn over \$100,000 should have their tax rate upped to 12 per cent. We've pointed out that people who earn between \$100,000 and \$250,000 should have their tax rate upped by approximately 5 per cent, and we'd like to see the equivalent of a 7 per cent increase in those earning over \$250,000. Taxes, while they are considered by most individuals to be painful, are the only way of guaranteeing that programs, education, health care, social assistance can be sustainably funded.

Alberta has for far too long taken for granted our resource riches. We have benefited in the good years from the price of a barrel of oil. We've benefited previously from our gas prices though right now, with the speed to get everything out of the ground, fracked or otherwise, we've pushed down the value of the gas market. There seems to be this hell-bent desire to get every

piece of bitumen out of the oil sands and shipped out of this country for refining as fast as possible.

5:10

What's the result? If the Keystone goes forward, if the Gateway goes forward, we'll be then, not in the case of China but in the case of the States, bringing back the refined product, as has been the case down in Chicago. We give them our raw product, and they refine it and sell it back to us at a considerably higher price. Hopefully, with this results-based Bill 1 proposal we'll start looking at actually doing what the hon. Deputy Premier suggested. He suggested that we should not be exporting beef on the hoof, but we should be exporting beef in the box. Likewise, we should be exporting finished products rather than raw products.

Currently, Mr. Speaker, I have concerns about Canada's relationship with the EU and the various trading agreements that are being formed. I am concerned that water may find itself as a commodity on an international market. I'm afraid that we may not have the protection, the sovereignty over our own resources. I don't see, because of the thinness of Bill 1, how those results of losing a significant portion of our sovereignty or our economy can be prevented in results-based budgeting.

Mr. Speaker, I am planning to tread this stage, at least the Alberta stage, for some time longer, and I want to enjoy with my grandchildren the fruits of our combined labours. If the government, as I say, has finally found results-based religion and it allows us to sustainably move from one year's budget to the next and the next without continually being bailed out either by the sustainability fund or drawing the heritage fund down to zero, then it's going to be a great success.

Mr. Speaker, as is the case with your retirement, I wish this government well.

The Speaker: Anybody else? The hon. Member for Calgary-Buffalo.

Mr. Hehr: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's a pleasure to get up and speak to Bill 1, the Results-based Budgeting Act. I was looking over this act. It doesn't take that particularly long to read. It's two pages long. Essentially, the long and short of it is that we will review government programs and see whether they're doing the job that they were supposed to do. Although the Deputy Premier stole my punchline, it does beg the comment that if we weren't doing that already, that's been a bit of a problem. Okay?

The way I look at this act, results-based budgeting: sure, it seems like something that should have been happening all along. Whether it actually does anything or not, well, I'm not so sure. I know the devil in the detail will be results-based budgeting. I'm sure you go through it and say: well, how many people are on AISH? Do people need to be on AISH? Well, obviously, the answer is yes. How much of this – do you start building budgets from scratch again and reviewing them? Well, I'm not so sure about that. It seems to be one of those exercises in trying to look like you're doing something without actually doing something. I'll get back to my first point. If it wasn't actually being done in the first place, it begs the question: why the heck wasn't it being done in the first place?

You have sort of, at least with me, a circle as to where in fact this is going and what in fact it's doing. But, I guess, on a positive note, if it does provide some clarity to what I can say have been the ups and downs in our budgeting process, the ups and downs in the nature of our spending habits in good times and bad times, and the unpredictability of funding in our public services, well, then that is a good thing. If that allows us to get on a basis where we recognize the purposes of predictable and sustainable funding as

well as predictable and sustainable revenue sources, I believe that this act will possibly have some good measure.

If we look at this act coupled with some of the rhetoric that came out of the throne speech and looking back at the history of this great province, we are living in an economy that has times of very high revenue and times of very low revenue. This may in fact make it more challenging for governments to react. They're submitted to public pressure from time to time. When the coffers are full, spend more; when the coffers are down, well, spend less. In terms of actually running a society for the long run, doing things in this manner may in fact be in inverse relationship to each other. They should actually be done at the opposite ends. When the economy is down, that's when you need a little more funding. When the economy is up, that's probably when you need a little less. That's what Keynesian economics is, what you have to do to provide your citizens with decent services at all times throughout the existence of that society.

Like I mentioned earlier in my member's statement, unless you're going to totally dismiss the role of government, there is a place for hospitals, a place for schools, a place for teachers, a place for nurses, a place for police officers and those essential services that need to be provided in a society that maintains some sort of decency, maintains some sort of structure, and maintains some sort of organization. These services, in good times and bad, will cost money. Whether they're costs or simply investments in a civil society, well, those can be debated, but I think, in the main, they're costs of a civil society, of a reasonable approach to organizing and structuring the way Alberta moves ahead and goes forward.

On that note, I hope that, coupled with the Results-based Budgeting Act, we are looking at a results-based budgeting approach that allows for both predictable and sustainable funding as well as saving for the future. If you look at how we have run our oil and gas resources, since 1985 we have spent approximately 200-plus billion dollars in petroleum resources on what I would call average public services. If you look at it, our health care system is performing at around the seventh best of all the provinces. We have the fewest university spaces per capita, we have some of the fewest police officers on the streets, we have a low graduating rate from high school, and the list goes on and on. A strong argument can be made that our public services have not benefited from this great wealth we have brought into the provincial coffers.

If you look at things that have contributed to that, well, no doubt the introduction of the flat tax has obviously robbed the public purse of some benefit. I think estimates are that it could have raised \$2 billion to \$3 billion more since 2000. In the main, that could have gone into the heritage trust fund and supported other options. I hope we're looking seriously at getting rid of the flat tax system. In any system that believes in equality of opportunity, there have to be contributions from the taxpayer. Even economists like Adam Smith, who are generally looked at as so-called right-wing economists that recognize the market, also recognize the fact that those who have done better in a society owe a greater share to the public purse.

5:20

That is shared by virtually all economists and, in fact, leads to a sense of equality of opportunity. Whether you're a rich person or a poor person, you're going to get an opportunity to build your life and compete. Simply put, those things that need to be funded are public education and public health care to ensure that equality of opportunity exists. To ensure that that exists, there has to be predictable and sustainable funding, and to get predictable and

sustainable funding, you need some measure of contribution from your society. So it's all rolled up into one.

If this Results-based Budgeting Act looks at both the revenue side as well as the expenditure side, I am hopeful that this, too, may bring a new morning to Alberta, to use a phrase from Ronald Reagan, who probably would have been very happy with results-based budgeting. I always liked that election slogan. Let's hope that results-based budgeting will provide some of these things.

Hopefully, in the budget tomorrow we will hear of the Premier's plan on how to raise revenue, and I will applaud her tomorrow if that happens as I believe that now is the time to have the discussion. I think Albertans are open to seeing what that would look like. In my view, it would probably do this government no harm, and it would probably do the people of Alberta in the long run a lot of good.

Those are my comments, Mr. Speaker. I know you will have many tributes here over the course of the next little while, but I, too, would like to say that I've enjoyed being under your tutelage in this House and under your guise. It has been fun, and I thank you for your service to this great province. I'll probably say that again from time to time, so don't let it go to your head. There we go.

The Speaker: You're very kind, but you cannot escape the responsibility of Standing Order 29(2)(a), which is now all available to all members.

The hon. Member for Calgary-Mountain View under 29(2)(a).

Dr. Swann: Yes. Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. I was inspired by my colleague's comments. I guess one of the areas that I see most vulnerable in results-based budgeting is one he alluded to, certainly, the people with chronic disability, who at the present time are required to do an inordinate amount of reassessment, re-evaluation, form-filling, sometimes delays in it being approved. That's one aspect of what results-based management can cause, undue suffering and uncertainty and in some cases delays in their very benefits.

The other area that seems to me to be very vulnerable is: how do we measure prevention? How do we measure the fact that as a result of what we've been doing, people did not end up in emergency departments, did not end up in criminal activity, did not end up as addicts, did not end up draining other aspects of services because they were getting results but that those results happened to be unmeasurable by our current form of measuring? Does this mean that there's a real danger to some of those areas where we fundamentally know that over a decade perhaps we are going to see declines in the need for human services – for counselling, for addiction services – but they will not be measured in this particular format within one year of actually changing something or leaving it the same?

Two uncertainties there that I hope the hon. member can comment on.

The Speaker: If you wish, hon. Member for Calgary-Buffalo.

Mr. Hehr: Well, just speaking from personal experience as a person with a disability, when I had my disability, I was 21. I had graduated from high school, was going to university, was playing hockey, but I know darn well that during that first year to two after I'd become disabled, the form-filling, the organization, the trying to get on to various government services programs would have been difficult for me if not darn near impossible going through the trauma that I'd just been through. I recognize that there are many people in our society who are overwhelmed by that process. Okay? You see it quite a bit in my office in Calgary-

Buffalo, where you have some of our marginalized citizens who are having difficulty getting through the minefield of social services or Alberta Works or the like. You see that quite a bit. You see people whom you're not quite sure how this happened to and whether something could be done.

I think you see that in AISH, too. One of my concerns with AISH, if we're going to increase the benefits, is: is this government just not going to then recognize the people who are supposed to actually be able to get on the program? I'm hoping that that doesn't happen.

But you're correct. In any budgeting process governments can limit who gets on a program, who receives the benefit, and the like. I'm not so sure whether results-based budgeting will add to the or not, so I don't know if I can comment fully on it.

The second part of your question was on . . .

Dr. Swann: Prevention.

Mr. Hehr: Prevention. Well, in any government you look at, I think you'll see some of the language changing out there. You saw that in the report by Vibrant Communities Calgary yesterday. They're trying to lead governments into looking at some of that harm reduction capacity and that social justice capacity and what actually costs the system and/or, I believe, in the nonprofit world the amount of sort of vibrancy you're creating with a program, not necessarily as a cost.

I think that mindset has almost come about in the last five or six years out of some of those communities. I actually was hopeful that I saw some of that language come out in the throne speech. I'm hoping there is along that side of the House some identity that costs are actually sometimes investments and the like. I'm optimistic that this bill may actually do that. I think it's more window dressing than anything. I think government departments should have been doing this all along, but if it creates a little bit of focus, well, that can't be a bad thing.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Fort McMurray-Wood Buffalo.

Mr. Boutilier: Yes. Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Indeed, it's a pleasure to speak relative to this Bill 1. When I first read the bill, I must admit I read it in astonishment. The first question that, in fact, people in my community were asking me was: "Well, what have they been doing for the last couple of years? Haven't they been doing this?" I find it very interesting because I think it's a very good question that Albertans have been asking. What have you been doing? I pause for a moment, and I ask everyone to reflect on: what has this government been doing if they haven't been doing zero-based budgeting, result-based budgeting?

It is my understanding, in fact, that that is what is supposed to have been going on as a, quote, unquote, Conservative government. [interjections] I'm glad to see the front bench has finally woken up.

That being the case, I find it really quite amazing that Bill 1 is something that they basically are admitting they have never done before. That is what is amazing to me: to be considered a Conservative government, but it's like it's something new. I heard the Treasury Board president just the other day talking about the Speech from the Throne as if this is just something totally new, that this is like a new idea, that it's like a newborn child, that we've got to protect it and give it a chance. In reality, Albertans are looking in astonishment: well, what has this government been doing?

Most governments in Canada, in fact, are doing this right now. Here this government is – I'm glad to see the Government House

Leader is listening intently, unlike the Minister of Education. Perhaps he could learn to be a good listener rather than yapping. Okay?

I would like to say that most governments in Canada, including our federal government, already do this. The question is that the Alberta Conservative government is now making it sound like it's a new idea.

5:30

Now, for someone who has taught for nine, 10 years in a postsecondary institution, I have found this really quite remarkable that finally this government, it appears, is getting with the 21st century even though governments and organizations and families have been doing this for years. The question I have to ask is simply this. Have ministers not been following what has been going on in this direction? I have from the Treasury Board president the fact that he's indicated that we've been doing reviews and program reviews, so this is a contradiction in terms. It's a contradiction in terms because I sat on Treasury Board, and in actual fact during that time . . . [interjection] I'm glad to see the Minister of Education is finally paying attention. That's good as a student to pay attention because he can learn something here.

This, quite simply, is about the fact . . . [interjections]

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Fort McMurray-Wood Buffalo has the floor, and I'm quite enjoying this debate this afternoon, so I wish all would speak through me so that I could be right up to date.

Mr. Boutilier: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. To reiterate, under zero-based budgeting, something that governments have been employing for years – by the way, I want to share through the chair to the government that municipalities have been doing results-based budgeting. They've been doing zero-based budgeting for years, and finally the President of the Treasury Board, is making it sound, with the Premier, like this is something new. This is nothing new. This is what Alberta families have been practising. They have been living within their means. They don't spend more than they take in. For the government to make it sound in the Speech from the Throne that this is under Bill 1, the Results-based Budgeting Act, of the Premier, let me share with you the fact that many members in here I know have of course practised in both secondary and in an educational field in postsecondary, that this is something that has been taught years ago.

One really has to ask the question: were ministers of the Crown not following what was, in fact, something that was in place for years? I am trying to understand. To the Minister of Finance: I am trying to understand why they have not been following what is proposed by the Premier to be the new Bill 1, because if that is the case, then I think every minister perhaps should give back their salary for failure to do their job pertaining to results based on how much you take in and how much you take out. For the life of me, Bill 1 strikes me as more of almost: is this Halloween? Because it can't be true that you actually are suggesting that this is a new idea. It is not a new idea.

When I ran for mayor of Fort McMurray in 1992, we were talking about results-based decision-making and budgeting. Fast-forward now 20 years later, and here the government, a conservative government, is now for the first time making it look like no minister ever knew about it. I have to really begin to ask the question. Since I sat on Treasury Board, I heard it in the past. It was my assumption that ministers who sat on Treasury Board

were actually doing their job. Now it's very clear that they were not doing their job because that was the clear direction of the then minister of Treasury Board at the time.

Mr. Speaker, I am actually dumbfounded by what appears to be something new and is something that has been discussed in Treasury Board over the years. Clearly, it's an indication that ministers were not following it. In other words, they were just feeding lip service to the President of Treasury Board. Now the new President of Treasury Board appears to be making it sound like it's a new idea, so everything that he must have said in Treasury Board clearly – and the Minister of Human Services, I have to say, was a member of Treasury Board when I sat on Treasury Board. I have to ask him. I remember you talking at the time about results based. I remember you talking about balancing budgets and zero-based budgeting, and for the life of me I am surprised how something like this could get through a government process such as Bill 1. It makes no sense, s-e-n-s-e and c-e-n-t-s. I'll say that slowly again for you if you would like. It makes no sense. It does not make any sense to Albertans. Bill 1, the Results-based Budgeting Act, in my view, is something that is a facade.

It has to be to the Minister of Finance an admission of the fact that ministers were not doing their job in following what the direction was over the last couple of years. I think a question that each minister has to ask as they look at themselves in the mirror would be: why haven't they been honouring their position and serving Albertans better by doing the job they were supposed to have done?

This bill rates right up there with the bill when they wanted to form a committee to study Asia Pacific. I love the Asia Pacific. I know the countries. We've visited the countries, my wife and I, in many instances. But let me tell you that you don't have to form a committee to be able to understand Asia Pacific. I could send over a globe, or I could send over an inflatable balloon that you blow up as a globe, and you could find out where Asia Pacific is.

Maybe what I need to do now is send over generally accepted accounting principles when it comes to zero-based budgeting, when it comes to results-based budgeting. This is a message to the government. Your Bill 1, Results-based Budgeting Act, put forward by the Premier – let me let you in on a little secret – is what Albertans have been doing for the many, many years. Finally, in the 21st century you're looking like it's Groundhog Day 2 and you didn't know what happened on Groundhog Day 1.

Well, I would only ask you to really think about this. Should this bill continue on, it really is laughable. I mean, I know the Premier has only been a minister of the Crown for three years. Perhaps she did not sit on Treasury Board before, and she doesn't understand budgeting. I don't know. But to allow this to go on? Wasn't any minister able to tell the Premier that this makes no sense, it's going to make us look bad, it's going to make the government look bad, it's going to make it look like we haven't been doing our jobs as ministers for the last three years? I know the Minister of Finance sat in that position, and he was on Treasury Board and sat in cabinet for the last three years. So the question would have to be: what was going on when all of this was happening?

Now, I know the Minister of Finance really didn't want to be the Minister of Finance pertaining to Bill 1. I know he would have preferred to stay as the Minister of Energy because it's a good springboard after politics. But the reality of it is, I understand, that the purported fiscal hawk on that side, the then Minister of Finance, essentially said: I don't want to leave. And guess what? The member from Bragg Creek finally basically said . . .

Mr. Anderson: Rocky View.

Mr. Boutilier: Foothills-Rocky View. Yeah. He actually said that. When the Premier called him pertaining to the bill, he said: "I don't want to be the Minister of Finance anymore. I want to be the Minister of Energy so that after I get my job, I can have a good springboard." The Minister of Finance knows and I know that in actual fact the Member for Foothills-Rocky View didn't want to be the Minister of Finance, so they gave it to the former Minister of Energy, who didn't want to be the Minister of Finance. Ultimately, it's like a calamity show over there, as if zero-based budgeting is just starting today. Perhaps the Minister of Human Services is not aware of the fact that the Minister of Finance did not want to be the Minister of Finance. I see the Treasury Board president is here.

Mr. Speaker, on Bill 1, Results-based Budgeting Act, I have to ask the President of the Treasury Board: what has he been doing, sleeping in cabinet for the last three years, when, in fact, direction was given by the previous Treasury Board president that you're supposed to be doing a program review? This is embarrassing. This is an admission that the government has been failing in the Treasury Board because ministers were not doing their job. As the former minister of advanced education why weren't you doing your job? You know why? Because you weren't listening to Albertans.

I'm glad to see that the Treasury Board president is here today and that he's paying attention to me. You can learn a lot. Why? Because I am speaking on behalf of Albertans. And as a person who teaches at the University of Alberta, you can really learn a lot. [interjections]

5:40

The Speaker: Hon. Member for Fort McMurray-Wood Buffalo, you still have the floor.

Mr. Boutilier: Yeah. Thank you. Regardless of being interrupted by the Treasury Board president, the Minister of Education, I'm pleased to say that I'm glad to see that the actual Treasury Board president is listening. The question I'll be asking will be: why have you been slipping? Are you going to return your 30 per cent salary increase? Because you haven't been doing your job as you sat on Treasury Board. You obviously haven't been doing your job, and this is an admission. You didn't even have the courage to tell the Premier under Bill 1 that all of us as ministers are supposed to have been doing this for the last three years. Really, I guess, we're learning what ministers have been doing or, in fact, have not been doing.

I see the Minister of Finance. His lip is up, so that means that I'm really getting to him right about now. I'm glad to see that he's listening to what I am saying, because Bill 1 really is a waste of a bill. It's something that every organization, Alberta families have been exercising for years. Finally, now, it's an admission that ministers of the Crown over the last couple of years have not been following the direction of the former Treasury Board president. Clearly, this really is an insult to Albertans.

Bill 1, in my judgment, as I look at the actual completion of a review of programs or services: my goodness, what have you been doing for the last three years? The Minister of Human Service has indicated: oh well, Mr. President of Treasury Board, I'm reviewing my programs all the time. It appears that he hasn't been. The Minister of Finance, who was Minister of Education, who was minister of health – that was absolutely a wrecking ball – said he was reviewing. Mr. Speaker, clearly, he hasn't been reviewing because it looks like this is just a new idea.

Then, by the way, there are the reports. "The President of Treasury Board and Enterprise shall, no later than October 1 of

each year . . .” My question is: what have these members of Treasury Board been doing over the last two years? I can only say that they haven’t been doing their job, and clearly they should just give back the 30 per cent increase that they gave to themselves. They were interested in doing that, but when it came to actually looking at the results and actually doing what Alberta families are doing, they didn’t do it.

Bill 1 is an admission that you haven’t been doing your job, ladies and gentlemen on the front bench, over the last two years. And that, in fact, is actually disappointing because even a basic level of competence would be able to do that, because we as Albertans believe that budgeting is important.

The Speaker: Hon. member, the time has lapsed.

Standing Order 29(2)(a) is available. The hon. Member for Calgary-Varsity on 29(2)(a).

Mr. Chase: Oui, M. le Président. Pensez-vous que le projet de loi 1 est seulement une diversion, une politique, une proposition du jour au lieu d’une vraie méthode qui pourrait réussir?

Mr. Boutilier: C’est une bonne question. On parle l’anglais pour le bénéfice de l’Assemblée.

Mr. Speaker, it is clear to the members on this side that in terms of la question posée, the question that you posed, it is one that is – I know they do not have a written translation, but would you like a translation of the question that was asked? Well, the member of Treasury Board would not like to have the translation. I don’t know if he’s insulting the people in St. Paul who are French people or Plamondon. I’m not so sure.

Having said that, Mr. Speaker, I can only say this: this government has not been able to grasp a very basic principle, the principle of budgeting like all other families in Alberta, like other businesses in Alberta. It’s like it’s a revelation to them. That’s why this is an admission that this government has lost its way.

The Speaker: Others on 29(2)(a)? The hon. Member for Airdrie-Chestermere.

Mr. Anderson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I’d just like to ask the hon. Member for Fort McMurray-Wood Buffalo: do you have any thoughts on why we would need to pass an act such as Bill 1, the flagship legislation of this Premier, that essentially says that we need to make sure we’re getting results from the budget? I always thought legislation had a purpose, that you were trying to do something that required the seal of approval, the authority of Legislature. I mean, obviously, we have a Finance minister, we have a cabinet, we have a Treasury Board. Clearly, we have ministries and ministers of those ministries, and they can go through their budgets and make sure that they’re getting value for money. They always say that they’re doing that.

At every debate on the budget that I’ve ever been to, they’ve said that they’ve been doing this exact thing that they’re now legislating. It appears to me that this is just showmanship and nothing more than that, so I’m wondering why we would pass a bill to legislate what they can do right now.

Mr. Boutilier: Well, that’s exactly, Mr. Speaker, what Albertans and Alberta families are asking. I think the deeper, inside baseball question is that you have a Minister of Finance who doesn’t want to be the Minister of Finance; he preferred to be the Minister of Energy. But when the Premier called him – and by the way I have this from a good, authoritative source – he said: I don’t want to be the Minister of Finance; I want to stay in Energy. But the problem was that the member who was the Minister of Energy, in actual

fact – guess what? He wanted to be the Minister of Energy so he could have a springboard after politics.

So you have a Minister of Finance who doesn’t want to be the Minister of Finance. On his advice to the Premier, he probably said: I can’t think of anything because Finance is not my bag, so I might as well go ahead and come up with something that, really, every minister was supposed to have done in the past.

The Speaker: Any additional questions? Are there additional speakers on this bill?

The hon. Member for Airdrie-Chestermere to participate in the debate on second reading.

Mr. Anderson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It’s my pleasure to stand in second reading of Bill 1, the Results-based Budgeting Act. I’m still waiting for that magic day when Bill 1 will actually mean something in this Legislature, when they’ll actually bring something forward with substance, when there will be some kind of light that will go on and they’ll actually bring a piece of legislation to start it off that will really move this province in the right direction on various issues, whether it be the way we handle our health care system or the way to improve our democracy. There are so many things in the democratic process that could be improved that would make for a great Bill 1, whether it’s mandatory free votes by making sure that votes of nonconfidence are not attached to every vote of the Legislature so that we could have free votes in this Legislature without the government failing.

Perhaps we could pass a bill – and maybe the Minister of Education could take note of this; he seems pretty talkative right now – that would make sure that we have a transparent list, posted publicly, of the communities that need schools in the order and the priority that they’re going to be given schools. That would allow the public to have faith that how schools are funded is not based on politics but rather on some objective funding formula based on student population and the like.

There are a hundred examples of things that would really make a great Bill 1, that would be substantive and would improve democracy, education, health care, and many different things. Yet here we are again, like Groundhog Day, talking about a Bill 1 that essentially is just a press release. That’s about the worth of it because it does absolutely nothing to better the lives of Albertans.

5:50

Results-based budgeting is something that I would hope – I would hope – every ministry would be doing right now and would have been doing for the last 40 years. It’s shocking to me. I mean, you just read through the act:

The Treasury Board shall provide for a comprehensive review of the programs and services provided by the Government and its agencies.

Well, I know for a fact that while I was over there, there was an attempt to do that by the former Treasury Board president. So, okay, they obviously don’t need authority to do that.

(2) The review must be conducted in the manner and in accordance with a schedule as directed by the Treasury Board and must include an assessment as to whether the programs and services provided by the Government and its agencies meet their intended objectives and whether they are being delivered in an efficient and effective manner.

Well, again, the Treasury Board, I’m assuming, was already doing that. We have three-year business plans that we go through in Public Accounts and so forth. I thought the government was already doing that, and then we would assess whether they actually were meeting their objectives in Public Accounts and in estimates and in other things that we go through.

(3) For the purpose of conducting a review under this Act, in addition to members of the public service, external experts may be engaged as the Treasury Board considers necessary.

Well, clearly, right now the Treasury Board is able to bring in anybody they want. There's a long history of very lucrative contracts and bringing in experts that this government has done in order to do things like this, with mixed results.

And then it says,

(4) Albertans will have the opportunity to participate in the review.

As the current Treasury Board president always said, "I guess that's what the cabinet tour was for," you know, to go around and talk to Albertans.

I'm looking at this whole first section, the main part of this bill, and I'm noticing that there's nothing in here that they can't do right now or that they shouldn't have already been doing over the last four years.

We go on to results-based budgeting, the next paragraph, section 2, and it says:

2 On completion of a review of a program or service, a results-based budget process must be used as an approach for the next budget planning cycle for that program or service.

What on earth were they doing before this if they weren't already doing this?

On completion of a review of a program or service, a results-based budget process must be used.

I'm at a loss as to what they were doing if they weren't already doing this. We need legislation to legislate that they do the jobs that I would assume they were doing but apparently they weren't? I mean, you can see why people would get a little bit cynical about the usefulness of this bill and of the hours in the Legislature to pass a press release.

The reason we're speaking to this even though we find it so worthless, in case you are wondering at home, is because we're tired of silly legislation like this being brought forward and getting all this time and attention when it doesn't do anything. Meanwhile, we don't have fixed election dates. We don't have voter recall. We don't have free votes. We don't have a transparent infrastructure list so that everybody knows in what order they're getting their infrastructure and their schools and their hospitals and so forth. We don't have any of that. Next Legislature, regardless of who's in the government or what it looks like, let's make sure that Bill 1 is actually something that we can show to Albertans and be proud of and actually achieve an objective that needs legislative consent to occur. This certainly is not one of them.

I would ask, as well: why would the Premier back away from what it was before? When she announced a couple weeks ago that she was going in this direction, she told one of the newspapers that there would be zero-based budgeting. Well, zero-based budgeting is not the same as results-based budgeting, clearly. The Premier has said that it's not the same thing. She's backed away from it. It's not zero-based budgeting. Zero-based budgeting is very different from whatever results-based budgeting is. I'm assuming that every Legislature on the planet does results-based budgeting. I would hope so. I think they do. It's a good bet that every single one would say: we do results-based budgeting.

Mr. Boutilier: Every province in Canada.

Mr. Anderson: Well, certainly every province in Canada but also every Legislature in the world in the new Westminster system.

Mr. Chase: Except Greece.

Mr. Anderson: Yeah. That's right.

The point is that if they're already doing that, why do we need this law? Again, if Bill 1 was zero-based budgeting, I would say that in that case, well, perhaps then it's worth a Bill 1. I don't think you need legislation to do zero-based budgeting. I think it's just something you can do, that you can just announce and do as a cabinet. You don't need legislation to give you authority to do it.

Zero-based budgeting, of course, means that for every single ministry every single year or maybe every two years or three years, whatever you decide to do, their budget starts out at zero. It means you have to justify as a minister and as a ministry every single expense that is made, you know, from what hospitals you're building or upkeeping and all that sort of thing to the wages that you're paying out to your bureaucrats or to front-line workers, et cetera. You have to justify all of that every year to make sure these are actually programs and expenses that mean something.

Of course, most of those expenses, I would hope, are meaningful and would continue on. For example, paying nurses or teachers would be important to keeping going with, obviously. But there are always some programs in government that are not useful, that are unneeded, duplicative, redundant, silly, don't achieve the results that people are looking for, are overfinanced, underfinanced, et cetera, et cetera. When you have zero-based budgeting, those are the programs that you seek to eliminate. If you can't justify them in that year, then they can't be justified and you have to get rid of them.

The way it goes on in government is that when you have a lot of outdated programs – and useless, redundant programs continue on long after they're needed, long after they've been effective. Some are proven completely ineffective, and we could list a long list of ineffective programs that have occurred although we don't have time for that because I only have about a minute left.

The point is that you say to the bureaucracy: "Look. You go look at every single program you have because you're not getting money for any program unless you can justify it." That's zero-based budgeting. It's a good fiscal conservative principle, and it's one that we would support this government in doing if they were willing to do it. It looked like they were going to do that, which is straight right out of the Wildrose policy book and has been there for the last two years. It would be something that, obviously, we would support. Instead, they changed it from zero-based budgeting to results-based budgeting. I mean, you could drive a tractor through what that means. Who knows what that even means?

The point, Mr. Speaker, is that it's important, when we come in here to this Legislature and debate bills, that they're bills that actually do something, that they're needed, that we need legislative consent, legislative authority, and that's why we're here passing it, that it's not something that essentially is a glorified press release for this new Premier of Alberta, who is becoming legendary for the fact that she says a lot that doesn't mean a whole lot. It's very silly. Whether it's fixed election dates or whatever, she says one thing; she does another. She said she wanted zero-based budgeting. Now we've got results-based budgeting. You know, if I was the former Treasury Board president or any former minister, I would be offended by the fact that they were questioning that I wasn't already doing results-based budgeting.

Just give me one thing that's different now, that we need legislative authority to do, and maybe I can support this bill. Until I get that from the members opposite, you know, it's going to be very difficult for me to support this bill going forward.

The Speaker: I'm sorry, hon. member, but the House stands adjourned until tomorrow afternoon at 1:30.

[The Assembly adjourned at 6 p.m. to Thursday at 1:30 p.m.]

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Managing Editor
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1001 Legislature Annex
9718 – 107 St.
EDMONTON, AB T5K 1E4
Telephone: 780.427.1875



Province of Alberta

The 27th Legislature
Fifth Session

Alberta Hansard

Thursday, February 9, 2012

Issue 3

The Honourable Kenneth R. Kowalski, Speaker

Legislative Assembly of Alberta The 27th Legislature

Fifth Session

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Groeneveld, George, Highwood (PC)
Hancock, Hon. Dave, QC, Edmonton-Whitemud (PC),
Government House Leader
Hayden, Hon. Jack, Drumheller-Stettler (PC)
Hehr, Kent, Calgary-Buffalo (AL)
Hinman, Paul, Calgary-Glenmore (W),
Wildrose Opposition Deputy Leader
Horne, Hon. Fred, Edmonton-Rutherford (PC),
Deputy Government House Leader
Horner, Hon. Doug, Spruce Grove-Sturgeon-St. Albert (PC)
Jablonski, Mary Anne, Red Deer-North (PC)
Jacobs, Broyce, Cardston-Taber-Warner (PC)
Johnson, Hon. Jeff, Athabasca-Redwater (PC)
Johnston, Art, Calgary-Hays (PC)
Kang, Darshan S., Calgary-McCall (AL),
Official Opposition Whip
Klimchuk, Hon. Heather, Edmonton-Glenora (PC)
Knight, Mel, Grande Prairie-Smoky (PC)
Leskiw, Genia, Bonnyville-Cold Lake (PC)
Liepert, Hon. Ron, Calgary-West (PC)
Lindsay, Fred, Stony Plain (PC)
Lukaszuk, Hon. Thomas A., Edmonton-Castle Downs (PC)
Lund, Ty, Rocky Mountain House (PC)
MacDonald, Hugh, Edmonton-Gold Bar (AL)
Marz, Richard, Olds-Didsbury-Three Hills (PC)
Mason, Brian, Edmonton-Highlands-Norwood (ND),
Leader of the ND Opposition
McFarland, Barry, Little Bow (PC)
McQueen, Hon. Diana, Drayton Valley-Calmar (PC)
Mitzel, Len, Cypress-Medicine Hat (PC)
Morton, Hon. F.L., Foothills-Rocky View (PC)
Notley, Rachel, Edmonton-Strathcona (ND),
ND Opposition House Leader
Oberle, Hon. Frank, Peace River (PC)
Olson, Hon. Verlyn, QC, Wetaskiwin-Camrose (PC),
Deputy Government House Leader
Ouellette, Luke, Innisfail-Sylvan Lake (PC)
Pastoor, Bridget Brennan, Lethbridge-East (PC)
Prins, Ray, Lacombe-Ponoka (PC)
Quest, Dave, Strathcona (PC)
Redford, Hon. Alison M., QC, Calgary-Elbow (PC),
Premier
Renner, Rob, Medicine Hat (PC)
Rodney, Dave, Calgary-Lougheed (PC)
Rogers, George, Leduc-Beaumont-Devon (PC)
Sandhu, Peter, Edmonton-Manning (PC)
Sarich, Janice, Edmonton-Decore (PC)
Sherman, Dr. Raj, Edmonton-Meadowlark (AL),
Leader of the Official Opposition
Snelgrove, Lloyd, Vermilion-Lloydminster (Ind)
Stelmach, Ed, Fort Saskatchewan-Vegreville (PC)
Swann, Dr. David, Calgary-Mountain View (AL)
Taft, Dr. Kevin, Edmonton-Riverview (AL),
Official Opposition Deputy Whip
Tarchuk, Janis, Banff-Cochrane (PC)
Taylor, Dave, Calgary-Currie (AB)
VanderBurg, Hon. George, Whitecourt-Ste. Anne (PC)
Vandermeer, Tony, Edmonton-Beverly-Clareview (PC)
Weadick, Hon. Greg, Lethbridge-West (PC),
Deputy Government House Leader
Webber, Len, Calgary-Foothills (PC)
Woo-Paw, Teresa, Calgary-Mackay (PC)
Xiao, David H., Edmonton-McClung (PC)

Party standings:

Progressive Conservative: 67 Alberta Liberal: 8 Wildrose: 4 New Democrat: 2 Alberta: 1 Independent: 1

Officers and Officials of the Legislative Assembly

W.J. David McNeil, Clerk	Stephanie LeBlanc, Parliamentary Counsel & Legal Research Officer	Chris Caughell, Assistant Sergeant-at-Arms
Robert H. Reynolds, QC, Law Clerk/ Director of Interparliamentary Relations	Philip Massolin, Committee Research Co-ordinator	Gordon H. Munk, Assistant Sergeant-at-Arms Liz Sim, Managing Editor of <i>Alberta Hansard</i>
Shannon Dean, Senior Parliamentary Counsel/Director of House Services	Brian G. Hodgson, Sergeant-at-Arms	

Executive Council

Alison Redford	Premier, President of Executive Council, Chair of Agenda and Priorities Committee
Doug Horner	Deputy Premier, President of Treasury Board and Enterprise
Dave Hancock	Minister of Human Services
Ted Morton	Minister of Energy
Verlyn Olson	Minister of Justice and Attorney General
Fred Horne	Minister of Health and Wellness
Ron Liepert	Minister of Finance
Thomas Lukaszuk	Minister of Education, Political Minister for Edmonton
Diana McQueen	Minister of Environment and Water
Jonathan Denis	Solicitor General and Minister of Public Security
Cal Dallas	Minister of Intergovernmental, International and Aboriginal Relations, Political Minister for Central Alberta
Evan Berger	Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, Political Minister for Southern Alberta
Frank Oberle	Minister of Sustainable Resource Development
George VanderBurg	Minister of Seniors
Ray Danyluk	Minister of Transportation
Jeff Johnson	Minister of Infrastructure, Political Minister for Northern Alberta
Doug Griffiths	Minister of Municipal Affairs
Greg Weadick	Minister of Advanced Education and Technology
Jack Hayden	Minister of Tourism, Parks and Recreation
Heather Klimchuk	Minister of Culture and Community Services
Manmeet Singh Bhullar	Minister of Service Alberta, Political Minister for Calgary

Parliamentary Assistants

Naresh Bhardwaj	Health and Wellness
Alana DeLong	Seniors
Arno Doerksen	Human Services
Kyle Fawcett	Treasury Board and Enterprise
Art Johnston	Executive Council
Barry McFarland	Agriculture and Rural Development
Len Mitzel	Transportation
Dave Rodney	Health and Wellness
David Xiao	Energy

STANDING AND SPECIAL COMMITTEES OF THE LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY OF ALBERTA

Standing Committee on the Alberta Heritage Savings Trust Fund

Chair: Ms Tarchuk
Deputy Chair: Mr. Elniski

Anderson
DeLong
Groeneveld
Johnston
MacDonald
Quest
Taft

Standing Committee on Community Development

Chair: Mrs. Jablonski
Deputy Chair: Mr. Chase

Amery
Blakeman
Boutilier
Calahasen
Goudreau
Groeneveld
Lindsay
Snelgrove
Taylor
Vandermeer

Standing Committee on Education

Chair: Ms Pastoor
Deputy Chair: Mr. Hehr

Anderson
Benito
Brown
Cao
Chase
Leskiw
Marz
Notley
Sarich
Tarchuk

Standing Committee on Energy

Chair: Mrs. Ady
Deputy Chair: Ms Blakeman

Hehr
Hinman
Jacobs
Johnston
Lund
Mason
McFarland
Ouellette
Webber
Xiao

Standing Committee on Finance

Chair: Mr. Renner
Deputy Chair: Mr. Kang

Allred
Anderson
Drysdale
Fawcett
Knight
Mitzel
Prins
Sandhu
Taft
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Standing Committee on Legislative Offices

Chair: Mr. Blackett
Deputy Chair: Mr. Lund

Blakeman
Brown
Evans
Hinman
Lindsay
MacDonald
Marz
Notley
Ouellette
Quest

Special Standing Committee on Members' Services

Chair: Mr. Kowalski
Deputy Chair: Mr. Campbell

Amery
Anderson
Elniski
Evans
Hehr
Knight
Leskiw
MacDonald
Mason
Rogers

Standing Committee on Private Bills

Chair: Dr. Brown
Deputy Chair: Ms Woo-Paw

Allred Kang
Benito Knight
Boutilier Lindsay
Calahasen McFarland
Doerksen Sandhu
Drysdale Sarich
Evans Snelgrove
Groeneveld Swann
Hinman Xiao
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Standing Committee on Privileges and Elections, Standing Orders and Printing

Chair: Mr. Prins
Deputy Chair: Mr. Snelgrove

Amery Mitzel
Boutilier Notley
Calahasen Pastoor
DeLong Quest
Doerksen Stelmach
Forsyth Swann
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McFarland

Standing Committee on Public Accounts

Chair: Mr. MacDonald
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Allred Kang
Benito Mason
Calahasen Rodney
Chase Sandhu
Elniski Vandermeer
Fawcett Woo-Paw
Forsyth Xiao
Groeneveld

Standing Committee on Public Health and Safety

Chair: Mrs. Fritz
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Bhardwaj
Blakett
DeLong
Doerksen
Forsyth
Notley
Rodney
Rogers
Swann
Woo-Paw

Legislative Assembly of Alberta

1:30 p.m.

Thursday, February 9, 2012

[The Speaker in the chair]

Prayers

The Speaker: Good afternoon.

Let us pray. As we conclude for this week our work in this Assembly, we renew our energies with thanks so that we may continue our work with the people in the constituencies we represent. Amen.

Please be seated.

Introduction of Guests

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

Mr. Cao: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. It gives me great pleasure to introduce to you and through you to all the members of the Assembly a group of students from Forest Lawn high school. Fifty students are accompanied by teachers Tina Merali and Ron Lee and teacher helper Shirley Buchanan. Forest Lawn is a banner school in Calgary, rich in diversity and accomplishments, with students eager to learn and succeed in the land of Alberta. They are hosted by myself and the hon. members for Calgary-East, Calgary-Montrose, and Calgary-Mackay.

Many Governor General's award recipients, doctors, and other professionals can proudly name Forest Lawn as their high school. In fact, the son and the daughter of the hon. Member for Calgary-East proudly graduated from Forest Lawn high school and are now a lawyer and a banker.

I would ask all the students to rise and receive the traditional welcome from the Legislative Assembly.

The Speaker: Hon. members, we have a very long list for introductions today, so brevity would be very much appreciated.

The hon. Minister of Justice and Attorney General.

Mr. Olson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure to rise today to introduce to you and through you to all members of the Assembly two very special guests from Camrose, Camrose city manager Damian Herle and former mayor of Camrose Norm Mayer. Damian actually was a policeman first and served for 26 years in Camrose prior to 2003. He then became active in the city administration and is now city manager. He's lived in Camrose for over 33 years with his wife, Glenda, and their two children.

Norm Mayer is a very close friend. He served three terms as an alderman in Camrose in the '70s and '80s and then became mayor and was mayor for 15 years. The really significant thing about Norm – and he's a person that works harder than anybody I know – is that he didn't miss a meeting in something like 22 years of service on city council. With his impressive work in public service he's also been very involved in the community. He is also married and a proud husband, father, and grandfather.

Both of these gentlemen have made significant contributions to the community, and I'd like them to be recognized. I hope they're here. If they are, would they please rise.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Finance.

Mr. Liepert: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It gives me tremendous pleasure today to introduce six very special people, my wife of 40 years, Linda – I'm not quite sure how she's

managed, but she has – my daughter, Kylee, and her friend Taylor Marshall; my son, Cody; my sister Judy and her husband, Lynn Toth. They're here not only for the budget address, but none have ever been to question period, and I have warned them it could be a life-altering experience. I will ask them to stand and be recognized by the Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Seniors.

Mr. VanderBurg: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's a great honour for me to introduce to you two constituents of mine. Donna Karlzen is a friend, a constituent, a supporter, and also the mother of my scheduling assistant, Amanda. She's an active volunteer in the constituency, and she's patiently waiting for a son-in-law and grandchildren. I think all of us are looking forward to Amanda having a boyfriend someday before she starts that, though.

With her is Eric Karlzen, and he's been a resident of Whitecourt-St. Anne for 76 years. He sets a wonderful example for seniors in Alberta. This man is the go-to guy in Evansburg. He is always involved in work that needs to be done. He's a great volunteer, a great Albertan.

I introduce them to all of you, and I'd ask them to please stand and be recognized by this Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Transportation.

Mr. Danyluk: Well, thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It is indeed an honour for me to introduce to you and through you to members of this Assembly two very valuable members of my constituency. Not only are they valuable members of my constituency; they are dedicated and committed to the communities in which they serve. They are entrepreneurs and supporters of their communities not only as businessmen but also as reeve of the county of Smoky Lake, Mr. Dareld Cholak, and as councillor, Mr. Ron Bobocel. If I could ask the Assembly to please recognize their efforts.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Sustainable Resource Development.

Mr. Oberle: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's indeed an honour to rise today and introduce to you and through you to all members of this House my wife and companion of 28 years. It was a few years before that, but that's another story. I could imagine that it would maybe be possible to do this job without the support of a spouse, but I can't imagine why one would want to. Debbie, please rise and accept the traditional warm welcome.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Tourism, Parks and Recreation.

Mr. Hayden: Well, thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It's an honour for me today to introduce to you and through you five individuals that are here to join us for the budget. First of all, Michelle Tetreault and Darwin Durmie. Darwin, of course, has served as president of the Public Works Association for North America this past year and is an amazing contributing member, as is Michelle, to volunteer efforts throughout Alberta and in the local community. Darwin is originally from Drumheller, so his roots go right back to my constituency.

Also with us today are Joe Gendre and James Nibourg, councillors from the county of Stettler who have come today to join us for the budget. They've also brought with them James' son Isaac to get a taste of democracy at this level in Alberta and to enjoy this process.

I'd ask them all to please rise and be recognized by all of my colleagues.

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

Mr. Johnston: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It is my pleasure to introduce to you and through you to all members of this Assembly a constituent, Mr. Bryan Walton. Bryan is also the chief executive officer of Alberta Cattle Feeders' Association. He is with his son-in-law Phil Bourgeois today. Phil resides in Okotoks. I'd like you to please join me in giving my guests the traditional warm welcome of this Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-North Hill.

Mr. Fawcett: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It's my honour today to introduce to you and through you to all members of the Legislature a constituent of mine, Tammy Maloney. She's a strong advocate for social entrepreneurship in Alberta. After obtaining her master's degree, an MBA with a focus in entrepreneurship, overseas in Europe, she returned to Calgary to start her own social entrepreneur agency called SEACHange, which is focused on providing meaningful employment opportunities that serve as a bridge to the mainstream economy for people currently dependent on social services to meet their needs.

Also with her is Izabela Galazka, who is here today after surviving her teens on the streets and in the youth homeless system in Calgary. Izabela has reached stability in her life thanks to the hard work and relentless determination from organizations such as the Alex Youth Health Centre and social programs such as AISH. Her hope is that her employment at SEACHange will help her transition away from AISH to a life of financial independence and self-reliance.

Mr. Speaker, I would ask both of these individuals to rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of the Assembly.

1:40

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Strathcona.

Mr. Quest: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It gives me great pleasure to introduce to you and through you to all members of this Assembly she who survived growing up with me, my wonderful sister Sharon van Doesburg and her husband, Rob. They're accompanied by their daughter Gemma and their son Sam, former Edmontonians now living in Castlegar, B.C., and visiting here today. They're seated in the public gallery. I'd ask them to rise and receive the warm welcome of this Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Bonnyville-Cold Lake.

Mrs. Leskiw: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I would like to introduce to you and through you to members of this Assembly four municipal leaders from my constituency of Bonnyville-Cold Lake. It is such a pleasure to have these constituents here today for the delivery of Budget 2012. They are not only fabulous people but great Albertans, and I am blessed to be working with them. Please rise as I say your name: His Worship Larry Lofstrand, mayor of the village of Glendon; His Worship Craig Copeland, mayor of the city of Cold Lake; Lorna Storoschuk, deputy mayor of the town of Bonnyville; Mike Krywiak, councillor for the municipal district of Bonnyville and also a former teaching colleague of mine. Please give them the warm welcome of this Assembly.

Thank you.

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

Mr. Prins: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It's really an honour for me to introduce to you and through you to all members of the Assembly and all Albertans some very good friends. Dennis

and Linda Hueppelsheuser live just west of Blackfalds. My wife, Pauline, is with them as well. I've known Dennis and Linda since 1971, when I worked for Dennis in the fields. He had about 3,000 acres of farming. I worked with him in the fields, and Pauline worked for Linda in the house, doing domestic work. That's when I got to know Pauline quite well. I knew that she was a good cook and could do wonderful things, so after some time I married her. Dennis and Linda have been very active members of their community. They've been active members of the Flying Farmers. I think Linda was a president of Flying Farmers for some time. Dennis actually worked in this building 50 years ago for the ministry of agriculture, so he's been around this place a few times, but that was in 1961 and 1962. They are seated in the members' gallery. I'd ask them to rise and receive the warm welcome of this Assembly.

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

Dr. Swann: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It gives me great pleasure to introduce to you and through you to the Legislature two great Albertans, Eric Musekamp and Darlene Dunlop, founders of the Farmworkers Union of Alberta, an organization dedicated to fulfilling the premise that farm workers are persons within the great dominion of Canada. In the tradition of the Famous Five, who achieved equality for women, they continue to give their lifeblood to provide for the equal treatment of farm workers as every other person in the dominion of Canada, even Alberta. Would they rise and receive the warm welcome of the Assembly.

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

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Today I'm pleased to introduce to you and through you to this Assembly our guest, Mandy Melynk. Mandy grew up in the small farming community of Waskatenau and today makes a living as a small farmer selling beef, pork, and poultry. She served for three years as the youth VP of the National Farmers Union and is a founding member of the Coalition for a Nuclear Free Alberta as well as Our Water Is Not for Sale. We are proud to have her as our candidate in the constituency of Athabasca-Sturgeon-Redwater. I would now like to ask Mandy to rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of this Assembly.

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

Ms Notley: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Today I'm pleased to introduce to you and through you to this Assembly my guest, Lorna Watkins-Zimmer. Lorna owns and operates a small business in downtown Red Deer and served on city council for 15 years. She was born in the U.K. and immigrated to Canada at an early age and graduated from the U of C with a bachelor of education. We're extremely proud and excited to have her as our candidate in Red Deer-South. I hope that she's here. I would ask that she now rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of this Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Strathmore-Brooks.

Mr. Doerksen: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's indeed an honour and privilege for me to introduce four people to you today. They are seated in your gallery. First of all, my very able and capable constituency assistant, Emma Ronan. Emma, if you'd stand. Emma is sporting a new engagement ring. Congratulations, Emma. You'll have to look at it. It's a pretty fancy ring.

I'd also like to introduce some good friends of ours, David and Cheryl Andrews. If they'd stand. They are strong supporters of mine in my constituency. Cheryl is retired from a very successful teaching career. Dave, in addition to being a very successful farmer and rancher in the area, is past chairman of the Alberta Beef Producers and of the Canadian Cattlemen's Association and president in the past and currently the chairman of the Canadian Cattlemen Market Development Council.

Joining them today is my friend and partner in life, my spouse, my wife, Wanda. I also could not imagine doing this job without her support. We will anticipate celebrating 29 years of marriage next Sunday.

I'd ask you to all join me in giving them a warm welcome.

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

Mr. Chase: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I would like to introduce to you and through you to all members of the Assembly four members of the Ainsworth family. If they could please stand – Emily is already up – mother, Alison; son, Nathan; a daughter, Emily; and Emily's super service dog, Levi, who is much better behaved than I am. Please welcome them.

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

Mr. Elniski: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I have two introductions this afternoon. I am pleased to introduce to you and through you to all members of this Assembly two key members of the Edmonton-Calder community. I'll introduce each of them, and then I'll ask them to rise in unison. The first is Ms Rochelle Marshall. Rochelle is a well-known and very competent political insider who has worked with me on many campaigns and who has an uncanny ability to interpret and examine cold data. Accompanying her today is Mr. Kevin Taron, the CFO of the Edmonton-Calder constituency association but a man whose real claim to fame is his ability and his passion for door-knocking. They're seated in the public gallery, and I'd ask them now to rise to receive the traditional greeting of the Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Environment and Water.

Mrs. McQueen: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's a privilege for me to rise today and introduce three special guests that are here today, the first from Drayton Valley, the chair of St. Thomas Aquinas school division and past president of ACSTA, my good friend Sandra Bannard. From the town of Devon we have two outstanding municipal leaders joining us here today, Mayor Anita Fisher and Councillor Dan Woodcock. Let's please give them the warm welcome of this Assembly.

Oral Question Period

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

Electricity Prices

Dr. Sherman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Yesterday the Premier claimed deregulated electricity prices ensure "that industry is going to be able to afford to keep operating." Well, when prices spiked last month to over 90 cents a kilowatt hour, companies like AltaSteel and Whitecourt's Alberta Newsprint Company shut down production because they said, quote, it is completely uneconomical, unquote, to continue operating. To the Premier: why does this

government insist on continuing this ideological crusade despite such overwhelming evidence against electricity deregulation?

Ms Redford: We have certainly had the privilege of visiting some of those business enterprises that the hon. member is speaking about. It was very informative for me to be able to spend time with them. You know, any business needs to make decisions with respect to input costs. One of the things that they showed me was that there are times when there is variation in electrical prices, and because of that, they'll sometimes slow down operations, and there are certain points in time when they will decide for a short period of time to stop production. But, Mr. Speaker, this was explained to me completely as part of what they even now consider to be normal operations. It is certainly not the ideal, but it is something that goes on on a regular basis.

1:50

The Speaker: The hon. leader.

Dr. Sherman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Given that these are the same input costs that are passed down to the consumer and the same input costs that lead to job losses, I asked if the Premier would give Albertans a break in the skyrocketing power bills. The Premier said, "We will do what this caucus and cabinet cares about." Wow. Would the Premier care to tell us if this government has any plan to bring down utility rates and give hard-working Albertans a break?

The Speaker: The hon. the minister.

Dr. Morton: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm not exactly sure where the Leader of the Opposition is going with this. Perhaps he'd like to go to Hydro-Québec or Hydro Ontario, which, for the information of caucus, have run up \$62 billion and \$36 billion, respectively, in debt. Consumers there are paying not just for electricity but for the debt of past governments. Here in Alberta you pay for electricity once. We pay once, and that's it.

The Speaker: The hon. leader.

Dr. Sherman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. That question was to the Premier. I didn't realize the Minister of Energy was the Premier.

Given that the Minister of Energy said that TransAlta's \$370,000 fine for manipulating prices shows that "the system does work," can the Premier please explain who this system is working for: Albertans, who got gouged an extra \$5.5 million on their power bills, or the big company, who got a slap on the wrist?

Dr. Morton: Mr. Speaker, I'm happy to answer the same question for two days in a row. Just as these irregularities occurred, they were detected in real time. It shows the system is working. A decision went to the appropriate committee, and TransAlta was fined for that transaction.

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

Accommodation and Health Care for Seniors

Dr. Sherman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Let's try this again. Yesterday the Premier flatly denied any privatization of seniors' care yet in the same breath talked about new options and, quote, creative work with respect to accommodations, unquote. This government is subsidizing private corporations, who then turn around and gouge our seniors for basic services like a walk, a bath, or even a trip to the washroom. Can the Premier tell us why

this government is subsidizing private corporations instead of funding the public delivery of quality care for seniors? Come on, Premier.

Ms Redford: Mr. Speaker, this government provides public health care to seniors that allows seniors to live in dignity. We are also going to ensure that all Alberta seniors have appropriate accommodation that allows them to live with dignity and respect and that they have choice. I expect that over the next two months we are going to hear many allegations of circumstances with respect to accommodation arrangements that simply aren't the case, and every single time that it happens, we will correct the facts.

Dr. Sherman: Mr. Speaker, given that on my trip around Alberta, from Medicine Hat to Bonnyville, there are senior couples who are being forced to get separated, I don't know if that's the dignity the Premier refers to.

The Premier in her maiden speech said, "Allowing private industry to meet seniors' needs will create more jobs in many different sectors and steady growth for our economy." How can the Premier deny that all this government is doing is turning our seniors into ATMs for their private-sector buddies?

Ms Redford: Mr. Speaker, the comments that I made in that speech I stand by. We are not a government that believes that the only way to provide accommodation services to seniors is for us as the government to build the facility and staff it completely. We believe that Albertans want choice. We have been told that Alberta seniors want choice, and we are going to give them that choice.

The Speaker: The hon. leader.

Dr. Sherman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Given that under the Premier's scheme high-income seniors get better health care than low-income seniors or middle-income seniors, how can the Premier say that this arrangement is anything but a two-tiered health care system for a select few?

Ms Redford: Mr. Speaker, I fundamentally disagree with the hon. member's first assertion. We have a public health care system in this province. Every Albertan is entitled to and receives the same health care services, whether they are a senior or not and no matter what their income. I will tell you that this government is committed to that and will ensure that that continues to be the case.

The Speaker: Third Official Opposition main question. The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

Castle-Crown Wilderness Area

Ms Blakeman: Thanks very much, Mr. Speaker. This government's version of protection for a designated special place like the Castle-Crown is to allow commercial logging to create fence posts. Its version of protecting threatened species like the grizzly and black bear is to allow logging equipment to crush these hibernating bears and their newborn cubs and destroy their habitat. Bottom line: this government is allowing a situation where a designated special place and the lives and habitats of bears are being destroyed. To the Premier: why does the Castle-Crown have to provide the trees for fence posts? Why this particular area, which is a special place?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Oberle: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. To begin with, the exaggeration in the preamble of that was nothing short of outrageous. The fact of the matter is that there is no logging in any park in Alberta. There will not be any logging in parks. The area that the member refers to is not in fact a park; it's a very carefully managed area. That's the mission of my department, that we balance sound environmentally responsible development with the needs of wildlife, watershed, all the environmental considerations.

Ms Blakeman: Back to the Premier: why did the government sign a contract agreeing to provide maps of wildlife den locations when it was clear that with only one staff person for the whole of the south Rockies it was impossible to fulfill this commitment? Why would you do that?

Mr. Oberle: Mr. Speaker, the government has wildlife experts. The company engages wildlife experts. The fact of the matter is that often in cases these dens or important wildlife features aren't known until somebody is actually walking around the site. I don't see anything wrong with our biologists working with company executives or field personnel to try and do the best job possible to identify these sites. We have fully taken into consideration the needs of bears and other wildlife species in this.

Ms Blakeman: I'm sorry he doesn't know his own agreements. To the minister: why does SRD stipulate special considerations for winter bear dens through numerous sections of – I'll say it slowly – Spray Lake Sawmills and C05, operating ground rules, signed in January of 2011, and call for the protection of bear dens when the department and minister know they don't have the staff, the data, or the money?

Mr. Oberle: Whoa. Mr. Speaker, apparently she didn't hear the last answer. Let me tell you something. Every single inch of our province is important wildlife habitat for something, and we consider it when we develop our landscape in a sustainable, responsible manner.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Fort McMurray-Wood Buffalo.

Provincial Fiscal Framework

Mr. Boutilier: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. In the 1993 federal election PC leader Kim Campbell uttered the now infamous words: an election is not a time to discuss serious issues. Yesterday the Finance minister had a Kim Campbell moment of his own when he told reporters that being honest with Albertans on what taxes the Premier will raise is "not something you're going to do in the space of a few weeks prior to [a provincial] election." To the Premier: do you agree with your Finance minister that Albertans should be kept in the dark as to which taxes you plan to raise if you are re-elected?

Mr. Liepert: Mr. Speaker, I think it's important, first of all, that we correct what this hon. member said in his preamble. What I said was that we do not have the time prior to an election to engage in a thorough conversation with Albertans about what a fiscal framework should look like. I'm sorry that he has a hearing problem, but those are the facts.

Mr. Boutilier: Mr. Speaker, again, the Premier must be afraid to answer the question to her. Why are you afraid to tell Albertans what you plan to do about taxes? Do you plan to raise them or not?

Ms Redford: Mr. Speaker, I think that today is such an important day for Alberta. First of all, I'm glad that the minister had an opportunity to correct the hon. member with respect to his comments. The reason for that is that Albertans know that a two-, three-week, two-month period is not enough time to fully address a fiscal framework. That is why we alluded to the fact that this discussion must begin in the throne speech on Tuesday. And it will continue. It will continue for some time because it matters to Albertans. Today at 3:15 we are going to see a fiscal plan that Albertans will be proud of, and at that time Albertans will know who they can trust.

2:00

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Boutilier: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and thank you to the Premier for answering. I'm not talking about the budget; I'm talking about after the election. My question to the Premier is this. Will you be honest with Albertans and be truthful and open and transparent that you will not raise their taxes?

Ms Redford: I am honest with Albertans every day, Mr. Speaker. This budget today will set a plan for Alberta that will make it very clear to Albertans where we are going in one year, two years, and three years. Today at 3:15 Albertans will have confidence in what their future will be.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands-Norwood, followed by the hon. Member for Calgary-Mountain View.

Health Services for North Edmonton

Mr. Mason: Thanks very much, Mr. Speaker. The north side of Edmonton is very short of physicians and other health care professionals. It has many needs that other parts of the province don't necessarily have. I want to ask the health minister why the East Edmonton health centre has still not been funded – it's only \$9 million – and why this government is ignoring the health care needs of the people who live on the north side of Edmonton.

Mr. Horne: Well, Mr. Speaker, this government is certainly not ignoring the needs of any Albertan in any part of the province. With respect to the East Edmonton health centre, as the hon. member knows, planning and implementation have been under way for some time to fully open the centre. There are a very large number of people with no attachment to primary health care that live in that area. I am satisfied that these plans are moving very quickly.

I think if the hon. member chooses to stay tuned at 3:15 this afternoon, he may hear some other news that encourages him with respect to advancements in this area.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I have certainly been working very hard with the citizens of my constituency to force this government to open that, and if that is meant to be a hint that it's going to be in the budget, then I'm going to take a lot of credit for the fact that I forced this government to open it.

At the same time, we still have real, serious problems with the emergency room at the Royal Alex. It's not meeting its goals. The people on the north side of Edmonton are not having their health care needs met by this government. When are you going to make sure that . . .

The Speaker: The hon. minister. [interjection] The hon. minister, please.

Mr. Horne: Well, Mr. Speaker, far be it from me to suggest that any hon. member of this House should take hints prematurely. What I was talking about was access to primary health care, and I know this hon. member is aware of the challenges in that regard. If he has paid attention to the work we have done through primary care networks and now family care clinics, he will see that we are talking about much more than the bricks and mortar in anyone's constituency; we are talking about the ability of those teams to reach out and work with communities to improve health in the long term.

Thank you.

Mr. Mason: Mr. Speaker, given that I don't understand what the minister is talking about, whether it's primary care or whether it's opening the Northeast health centre, I want to ask him to make sure that the necessary services – that is, access to physicians, to dentists, and to other health care professionals – and action to bring down wait times at the Royal Alex ER are in fact going to be done by this government because so far people have suffered for years because of your inaction.

Mr. Horne: Mr. Speaker, I'll certainly agree with the hon. member on his first point in terms of knowing what we're talking about. Once again, what we are talking about here is access to primary health care. I certainly don't hesitate to give the hon. member credit for raising concerns about access in that part of the city. We have a number of initiatives under way to reduce waiting times in emergency departments. The first step is to make sure people have a place to go to, and they have a place to go to now in the form of the East Edmonton health centre.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Mountain View, followed by the hon. Member for Little Bow.

Farm Worker Exemptions from Labour Legislation

Dr. Swann: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. In her leadership bid the Premier indicated South African President Nelson Mandela as a mentor. In the same *Herald* article she said, "the family farm clause is being used as a loophole" and promised to close it if she was elected Premier. Yet in her letter of January 23 this year she said, I quote: in cases where the employer does not have WCB, the farm worker and family can sue the employer for compensation for work-related injuries. End quote. To the Premier: as a lawyer and QC why doesn't the Premier acknowledge that it is grossly unfair to expect a vulnerable, injured farm worker to sue their employer?

[Several members rose]

Ms Redford: Apparently, we were all ready to answer the question, Mr. Speaker.

You know, what we know is that right now in Alberta the law with respect to these issues is quite unclear. There is no doubt that there are circumstances where there has to be support for a family farm. There are also circumstances where we have to ensure that workers are protected. I think that the circumstances in many of these situations are not clear, and there does need to be work done with respect to this. This government has begun to do that work, and we will conclude that work in good time.

Dr. Swann: This government has been avoiding this issue, denying this issue for 20 years. Committee after committee has said that this isn't worth changing.

Given that widow Lorna Chandler from Black Diamond has been fighting in the national court for some compensation for five years for the death of her husband in a farm-related accident, why will you not do the right thing and ensure that farm workers are covered by WCB?

Mr. Hancock: Well, Mr. Speaker, my ministry is responsible for the WCB and for occupational health and safety standards, and we've been looking very closely at issues with respect to occupational health and safety, not just in industry and business in residential areas around the province but also on farms. The minister of agriculture approximately a year ago had a committee established to take a look in depth at the issues with respect to farms. It is complicated with respect to farms because they're family-owned operations. Families in the past have not asked for workers' compensation protection, but one of the things I do know from what I've looked at so far is that accident rates on farms are lower than actually . . .

The Speaker: The hon. member, please. [interjection] The hon. member, please.

Dr. Swann: Mr. Speaker, it's time for this government to stop looking and start acting. Unbelievable: favouring multinational agribusiness over basic rights of farm workers.

Mandela is a world champion human rights lawyer. How can this Premier, a QC and human rights advocate herself, allow discriminatory practices to continue that violate the Canadian Constitution and the Alberta bill of human rights?

Ms Redford: Mr. Speaker, the hon. member is making conclusions that are actually not appropriate because some of these matters are before the court.

Also, what I will tell you is that, as the minister has said, these issues are starting to be considered. We are seeing action on this. This is not a government that's avoiding these issues, but I will tell you there are an awful lot of people that own farms in this province who are not multinational corporations, and they need to be protected as well.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Little Bow, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

Electricity Prices

(continued)

Mr. McFarland: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Many of my constituents in Little Bow have recently received their power bills for January 2012 indicating a 30 per cent plus increase over the previous month of December. Compared to the same period last year, the increases are hard to understand when one considers the relatively mild winter that we've just had. To the Minister of Finance: when individual consumption is down, why has the kilowatt cost of power gone from 6.864 cents in December '10 to 13.178 cents per kilowatt . . .

The Speaker: The hon. minister. [interjection] The hon. minister, please.

Dr. Morton: Mr. Speaker, as I explained yesterday, there were three large generating plants that were out during the month of December. I would point out to Albertans that in the month of

December they could have paid 8 cents a kilowatt hour if they'd been on a fixed-rate contract. Albertans have the choice. You can have the regulated rate option, which goes up and down month by month, or you can fix in. In the month of December the fixed-rate contracts were in the 8- to 9-cent range.

2:10

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. McFarland: Thanks, Mr. Speaker. A supplementary question. Why haven't these companies at least done their scheduled maintenance during the low-cost downtime, primarily in summer, rather than having these problems in the winter months?

Dr. Morton: Mr. Speaker, I want to reassure the MLA from Little Bow and Albertans that the Alberta Electric System Operator does require that maintenance be regularly scheduled in the off-seasons, which are spring and fall. But things happen. Unplanned breakdowns and unexpected outages happen. That's what happened in November, December.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. McFarland: Thanks, Mr. Speaker. Then my final question. Why can't some of the Balancing Pool monies be used to prebuy some of the blocks of energy and reapply it to the residential and small-business community rather than a minor, minor rebate that comes through, that appears to be just the interest on that money?

Dr. Morton: Mr. Speaker, the money in the Balancing Pool is not guaranteed. It sits there to cover other expenses as they occur. These include expenses like site reclamation costs and power purchase agreements. It would not be sound fiscal management to use the Balancing Pool for purposes other than what it's set up for.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre, followed by the hon. Member for Red Deer-North.

Poverty Reduction

Ms Blakeman: Thanks very much, Mr. Speaker. For some reason this government strongly resists embracing and implementing a poverty reduction plan. The line from the minister is that the department has more and better programs than anywhere else. Oh, no. This government does not, not with the level of poverty that we have in a province with \$100-a-barrel oil. To the Minister of Human Services: when did the government get so flush that they could afford to ignore the annual expenditure of \$7 billion to \$9 billion that could be implemented by adopting an integrated poverty reduction strategy?

Mr. Hancock: Mr. Speaker, the hon. member has clearly misinterpreted what I've been saying on this. We're not at all suggesting that we should ignore the expense to our society and the impact on individuals that results from poverty. Quite the contrary. Our Premier has indicated that people are our most important resource. This government cares about people. I have been mandated to deal with the social policy framework, which will deal precisely with that issue. The poverty reduction strategy is one part of that. The homelessness strategy, which has proved so effective, is a pretty good model, and we are progressing on that as we speak.

Ms Blakeman: Actually, the municipalities are progressing on that. You guys aren't doing very much at all.

Why does the government persist in saying that their services are great? Go read your own press. Is the minister satisfied with 73,000 children living in poverty? What's best or first class about that?

Mr. Hancock: Mr. Speaker, in this province we need to care about each and every one of our children. We need to plan for the success of each and every child in this province. If we want to break the poverty cycle, we have to focus on how we can make sure that every child can come to school ready to learn, that an education system helps every child achieve their potential. That's the goal of this government. That's why we're doing a comprehensive social policy framework, and that's why we'll be reviewing each and every one of the programs we have to make sure that it's achieving those results.

Ms Blakeman: Sorry. No school hunger program. Nothing.

Given that Albertans living in poverty are falling further behind the low-income cut-off than other provinces, can the minister tell us: what is this government's resistance to improving their circumstances? Clearly, those best programs are not doing it. Why can't we have an integrated poverty reduction strategy?

Mr. Hancock: The hon. member is clearly not paying attention. We're working on that integrated strategy with respect to a social policy framework that works to the success of every Albertan. If there are programs that we have now that are not working, I invite that hon. member to step forward as we review those programs to make sure that we have the programs and we use the money that we have in this province to achieve the results that Albertans want, and that's success for every child.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Red Deer-North, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview.

Urgent Care Services

Mrs. Jablonski: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My questions are to the Minister of Health and Wellness. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention approximately 40 per cent of visits to hospital emergency rooms are non-urgent or semi-urgent problems more appropriate for urgent care. An urgent care centre in a central Alberta rural community could help alleviate some of the wait times in the emergency room at the Red Deer regional hospital. Can the minister tell us what the difference is between services provided in an emergency room and services provided at an urgent care centre?

Mr. Horne: Well, Mr. Speaker, the difference is the following. Urgent care centres provide same-day or evening treatment for non life-threatening health issues such as broken bones and cuts and infections. Emergency rooms are intended to provide services to address life-threatening issues.

The hon. member is right. In many cases urgent care centres can save emergency department resources when they are available in the community.

Mrs. Jablonski: Also to the Minister of Health and Wellness: given that we know emergency services cannot be available in every community and Alberta's rural communities are looking for options to have their health concerns addressed on a timely basis, what other options do they have?

Mr. Horne: Well, Mr. Speaker, certainly a number of rural communities are asking for urgent care centres to be added to the

range of health care services available in their community. They can play an important role, as I said earlier, but I think first of all we need to look at the primary health care resources that are actually available in the community because, as we've said many times in this House, it is that availability of the primary health care provider – be it a doctor, a nurse practitioner, or another member of the team, that team-based attachment – that is able to offer Albertans access to the services they need most often.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mrs. Jablonski: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. To the same minister: given that the MLA for Innisfail-Sylvan Lake has met with constituents that have concerns about their need for urgent care services in their community, how is the minister addressing these concerns?

Mr. Horne: Well, Mr. Speaker, the hon. member for that constituency has in fact communicated with me about the needs expressed by his constituents. He and I will be meeting in the next couple of weeks with the mayor and members of council from that community. I hope to discuss with them their interest in an urgent care centre, but I also want to take the opportunity to look at what other health care services are available in that community and whether some of those services might meet the needs that are identified.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Creek.

Childhood Hunger

Dr. Taft: Thanks, Mr. Speaker. We all know this government has 70,000 taxpayer dollars for a caucus retreat to a luxury hotel in Jasper, and we also all know that it constantly refuses to fund programs to feed the thousands of little children who sit in school hungry every day in Alberta through no fault of their own. That \$70,000 could have funded a much-needed meal program at a school where Alberta's children are at a high risk of hunger. To the Minister of Education: why does this government tolerate thousands of hungry schoolchildren in Alberta?

Mr. Lukaszuk: Mr. Speaker, first of all, the numbers that the member is quoting at the outset of his question are preposterous, and he will soon find out that the numbers are not reflected in truth. There are no poor children; there are poor families from which these children come. Our Minister of Human Services, as you know, has a very wide program of services that is available to children and families in need. As a matter of fact, I do speak with teachers very often, and I do realize that from time to time children do come to school . . .

The Speaker: The hon. member, please.

Dr. Taft: Mr. Speaker, I think it's preposterous for this minister to say that there are no poor children or no hungry children in Alberta. That's just ridiculous. Why won't this government establish a zero-tolerance policy for childhood hunger in Alberta?

Mr. Lukaszuk: Well, Mr. Speaker, you have just seen a prime example of what that member will do with the truth. I never said that there are no children that are not hungry or children that are not poor. I'm saying that these children come from poor families, and the Ministry of Human Services has a whole network of programs designed to support families that are in need. As a matter of fact, the minister just a few minutes ago indicated that

we do have a poverty reduction strategy that leads Albertans towards education, towards employment, and there is assistance that is provided to Albertans who need . . .

The Speaker: The hon. member, please.

Dr. Taft: Well, then, let's test this minister's knowledge, Mr. Speaker. Can the minister name the program in his department or anywhere in his government that provides dedicated funding to address hunger issues for schoolchildren who are at high risk of hunger? What's the name of that program, and how much does it give?

2:20

Mr. Lukaszuk: As a member of the opposition he should know that. Through the 59 offices throughout the province known as Alberta Works – supports for independence, hon. member, is the name of the program that offers a wide range of financial and other counselling benefits to assist not only the child but also the family of that child, and that system is very well integrated with Education.

Ms Blakeman: Wow. How about hypnotism? That might help.

Mr. Lukaszuk: Obviously, Mr. Speaker, the Member for Edmonton-Centre will not even let me answer that question. I know the answer; they choose not to hear it.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Creek, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona.

Social Assistance Programs

Mr. Zwozdesky: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Recently released census information from Statistics Canada clearly shows that Alberta experienced a very dramatic population increase of 10.8 per cent over the last five years, virtually unprecedented. Clearly, this shows that our province continues to be a real magnet, the most popular place in all of Canada in which to live, work, and raise a family. My questions are for the Minister of Human Services: given that several of these new Albertans are likely to present some form of social assistance need, what are you doing right now to ensure those needs are being adequately met so that we're not left behind in the dark and neither are they?

Mr. Hancock: Well, Mr. Speaker, a very important question. It is exciting that people right across this continent, right around the world realize that Alberta is the best place to live, work, and raise their families, and we need them. We're going to be short 114,000 skilled people in our workforce over the next 10 years because we have 19,000 people a year retiring now that the baby boomers are reaching that age. So it's an important opportunity for us, but one of the things we have to recognize is that those people need to know how to access the services that every Albertan has access to through the programs the Minister of Education was just mentioning.

The Speaker: The hon. member, please.

Mr. Zwozdesky: Thank you. I'd like to ask the same minister: what measurement or what trackings or what metrics do you have in place to ensure that these programs, these services are being administered properly and that the outcomes sought for are being in fact met so that we're not left in the dark again trying to choose?

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I really appreciate the fact that the hon. member mentioned outcomes. Since coming into this ministry, one of the consistent messages that – I've spoken with the 23 per cent of the Alberta civil service that works in this department and helps vulnerable Albertans on a daily basis. What I've said to them is: there are two parameters, the Bible and the Criminal Code. It has to be ethical and moral, and it has to be legal. Within that, rules are for when brains run out. Let's help people get success, and that's what they're trying to do each and every day.

Mr. Zwozdesky: Well, Mr. Speaker, since we're seeing such increased numbers of people coming into our social assistance programs, aboriginal families being among them obviously, I'd like to know whether or not this minister is stepping up to the plate to ensure that adequate dollars are there to fund those increased needs and those new programs.

Mr. Hancock: Mr. Speaker, the hon. member will have to wait, as every other member of the House has to wait, until 3:15 to see the budget and make his own judgment about adequate dollars. There are always pressures for resources. But what I can assure the hon. member is that aboriginal people in this province, whether First Nation, Métis, or Inuit, are citizens of this province and deserve the same respect as every other citizen in this province, and we need to work hard to make sure that they have the same socioeconomic status as every other Albertan.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona, followed by the hon. Member for Calgary-Varsity.

Castle-Crown Wilderness Area (continued)

Ms Notley: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The Castle special place designation was supposed to be, quote, a milestone in the preservation of Alberta's natural heritage for future generations. This description comes from this government itself 14 years ago. Fourteen years later Alberta Conservatives are trampling over the interests of thousands of Albertans in order to clear-cut this milestone of natural heritage. To the Minister of Sustainable Resource Development: why is your government so committed to choosing the interests of industry over those of community, tourism, wildlife, and the environment?

Mr. Oberle: Well, that's an error, Mr. Speaker. My government is interested in balancing the needs of industry with those of the environment and wildlife, and we will do that in a responsible, sustainable way on all of Alberta's landscapes. There was a public land-use decision made with public input into a management plan, harvesting plan, and ongoing public input opportunities. We're always listening.

Ms Notley: Well, given that the North American Commission for Environmental Cooperation identifies the Castle as one of the most biologically significant and threatened areas on the continent and given that clear-cut logging will seriously threaten the future population of grizzly bears as well, why won't the minister stop the attack on this area and end this shameful spectre of government arresting its own citizens for the crime of protecting internationally recognized environmental treasures?

Mr. Oberle: I'll reiterate an earlier point that I made, Mr. Speaker,

and that is that every square inch of this province is an environmental treasure. We provide balanced economic development, and we'll continue to do that. This industry sustains Alberta jobs, Alberta families, Alberta communities. It's done in a responsible way, with wildlife considerations taken well into hand.

Ms Notley: Well, Mr. Speaker, given that citizens participating in the South Saskatchewan regional land-use plan identified the Castle as critical to water supply and the success of tourism in the region and given that numerous polls show that the vast majority of Albertans living in neighbouring towns and cities support the need to save the Castle, why is this minister and his government so committed to ignoring the legitimate public opinion and preference of Albertans on this important issue?

Mr. Oberle: Well, that's fantastic, Mr. Speaker, that the member raises the South Saskatchewan plan because that's under development right now. If indeed there is significant input and pressure to establish protected areas in the Castle or anywhere else within that basin and . . . [interjection]

The member doesn't want to hear the answer, apparently.

If that is a recommendation of the plan, I'll be the first one there waving the flag. That's a decision made by all Albertans, and I'm willing to support it, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: No. I think, hon. minister, the member that you were responding to was listening. It was another member.

The hon. Member for Calgary-Varsity, followed by the hon. Member for West Yellowhead.

Protection of Vulnerable Albertans

Mr. Chase: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. On October 23, 2011, 35-year-old David Holmes, a resident of a Calgary group home, suffered severe burns to 20 per cent of his body while being bathed. Two and a half hours passed before he was taken to hospital, where he underwent plastic surgery numerous times before passing away five weeks later. To the Minister of Seniors. According to the investigation report David Holmes suffered similar injuries three or four years before, at which time bathing protocols were supposed to be developed but were not. Why has it taken yet another tragedy for this government to implement the same kind of changes recommended six years ago with the scalding fatality inquiry?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. VanderBurg: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. From all of us in this Assembly I want to acknowledge the family that went through this tragic incident. It was a difficult time in their lives and a difficult time in the lives of PDD Alberta. I have personally talked to the family. I have personally been very involved in this incident, talked with the PDD chairs in Calgary, and we have put in place procedures that will protect vulnerable Albertans in the future.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Chase: Thank you. Obviously, Mr. Speaker, we're all sorry in a death such as this, especially when it's preventable.

What is the minister doing to remedy what is, after all, the root cause of such tragedies: high staff turnover due to poor training and low wages?

Mr. VanderBurg: Mr. Speaker, I want to say that the procedures in place across the province with PDD regions are very intense.

There's intense training. We're dealing with vulnerable Albertans, and we're dealing with caregivers that care for their clients. They're dedicated, loving, caring people. To suggest that it's money or anything else that has caused this tragic incident is wrong. This was tragic. It was human error.

Mr. Chase: Mr. Speaker, we need to care for the care workers. That was what the question was all about.

When will this government commit to closing the gap between contracted out agency pay and government workers?

Mr. VanderBurg: At 3:15 today, sir.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for West Yellowhead, followed by the hon. Member for Calgary-Glenmore.

Hydraulic Fracturing Practices

Mr. Campbell: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The Canadian Association of Petroleum Producers recently issued hydraulic fracturing operating practices for industry. My question is to the Minister of Energy. What do these practices mean for Albertans?

Dr. Morton: Mr. Speaker, we welcome these recommendations on hydraulic fracturing because we know they acknowledge what we on the government side know, that Alberta's scarcest resource is not oil. It's not gas. It's water. We will ensure that our water is protected by ensuring that we do have the best hydraulic fracturing practices available today.

2:30

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Campbell: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Again to the Minister of Energy: what is being done to deal with the expected growth in the number of hydraulic fracturing operations to ensure the safety of Albertans and our environment?

Dr. Morton: Mr. Speaker, I'm happy to report to the House that over the past 50 years there have been over 165,000 wells that have been fracked in Alberta, and there is not one proven incident of contamination of surface aquifers. We continue to work with the ERCB, the industry, the agricultural community, and environmental groups to ensure that we do have best practices when it comes to hydraulic fracturing.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Campbell: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. To the same minister. A recent poll shows Canadians have concerns about hydraulic fracturing, with some groups calling for a moratorium on the practice. Some provinces, like Quebec, have even halted the process. Does the government have any plans to do the same here in Alberta?

Dr. Morton: Mr. Speaker, absolutely not. As I've just indicated, we have an outstanding environmental record when it comes to hydraulic fracturing, and there's no need for a moratorium. What we do need and what we have is a regulatory regime that keeps up with new technologies and best practices, and we're committed to keeping that.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Glenmore, followed by the hon. Member for Calgary-Mackay.

Provincial Budget

Mr. Hinman: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. This government wants to raise taxes. Yesterday the Finance minister made it perfectly clear that Albertans do not need to know what taxes they'll be paying until after the next election. With record revenues nearing \$40 billion, yet another year of billion-dollar deficits is expected to be announced later today. It's clear that the political zombie of Don Getty's deficit spending is back in the Premier's office. To the Finance minister: does he seriously intend to pass this budget and not tell Albertans who is going to pay for all the wasteful spending until after the next election?

Mr. Liepert: Mr. Speaker, we definitely intend to pass the budget. That's about all I agree with in that particular question. We did consult with Albertans extensively, and it was Albertans who had tremendous input into crafting this budget. I just ask the member to be just a little more patient. In about another hour he'll find out whether or not his bogeyman theory of tax increases is coming to fruition.

Mr. Hinman: This is déjà vu of the superboard, not knowing the changes that are coming that are foundational.

Given that much of the free world, in this government's own words, is going through trying times because of a legacy of borrowing and deficit spending, can the Finance minister please explain to Albertans how billion-dollar deficits during record revenues is smart spending?

Mr. Liepert: Mr. Speaker, I'm going to address the first part of the question, which was around the Alberta Health Services Board. I was doing a little googling yesterday, and I was on the website of the *Airdrie Echo*. Hopefully, I'll get a chance to print off the article, and I'll table it in the House. It was an article by the member of the Legislature for Airdrie-Chestermere, who was glowingly talking about what a good decision that was, so maybe he might want to have a chat with his partner over there.

Mr. Hinman: There are many members whose eyes are being opened and they're shifting, and there will be more Albertans that will be shifting in the next election.

To the Finance minister: seeing how you don't know what smart spending is and given that your current results-based budgeting is clearly not sustainable and jeopardizes the future prosperity of our province, does the Premier truly expect Albertans to trust her and her government with the strategy of spend now and guess who is paying later?

Mr. Liepert: I think I heard the member refer to shifty. If that's what he was referring to, then I think that we know who's shifty in this particular Assembly, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Mackay, followed by the hon. Member for Calgary-McCall.

Online Exploitation of Children

Ms Woo-Paw: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Children everywhere deserve to live in a safe, secure environment, free of fear and certainly free of sexual exploitation. Unfortunately, Internet service providers, known as ISPs, currently retain Internet records for only a very short time, making it very difficult for law enforcement agencies to access those records as they fight to keep children safe from online sexual exploitation. My questions are to

the Solicitor General and Minister of Public Security. What is Alberta's position when it comes to the preservation time of these records?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Denis: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. This member does ask a very good question. Although it is a matter of federal jurisdiction, we would like to see in this province a 90-day retention policy. It often takes a long time to get a warrant against one of these child predators, and I thank the member for that question.

Ms Woo-Paw: As we all know, the Internet crosses geographic boundaries, with online child predators in another province or country causing harm to children and families here in Alberta. Is anything being done in that regard?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Denis: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Again, I just want to advise this member and this House and the people watching today that the Minister of Justice and Attorney General and I a couple of weeks ago attended a federal, provincial, and territorial Justice ministers' meeting in Charlottetown. I had the opportunity to meet with Vic Toews, who is the federal solicitor general, and I'm pleased to advise that he does agree with our proposal, as did every one of the Justice ministers and solicitors general across the entire country.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Ms Woo-Paw: Thank you. To the same minister: what about privacy issues surrounding this data retention?

Mr. Denis: The member again raises an important issue about privacy. Mr. Speaker, when we're dealing with privacy, we always need a privacy impact assessment, but I will leave that up to the federal minister to go and deal with these particular details. I want to make it clear that we are not seeking any additional powers of search and seizure. We think that the current power of getting a warrant through a judge is appropriate, but often police have difficulty obtaining this information just because of the current shorter retention period.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-McCall, followed by the hon. Member for Calgary-Bow.

Twinning of Highway 63

Mr. Kang: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The throne speech points to energy as critical to our prosperity, but highway 63, the road to the land of prosperity, is an unsafe and scary two-lane road on which travelling Albertans are dying in accidents. In fact, this highway is often referred to as Slaughter Alley, the Highway of Death, or Suicide 63, not just in Alberta but across the country. To the Minister of Transportation. Where there's a will, there a way, Minister. Will this minister provide the resources and the leadership necessary to get this deadly highway twinned before 2015 and not just as fast as possible?

Mr. Danyluk: Mr. Speaker, this government has been committed to highway 63 and the twinning of highway 63. We continue to put money into the budget to ensure that that completion takes place as quickly as possible. If the hon. member opposite stays for the budget, he will see exactly what's going to happen.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Kang: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. To the minister again: given that highway 63 carries literally the heaviest and the largest loads ever transported by highway, will this minister help workers and their families by improving road safety and focusing on actually twinning it, not just building overpasses in Fort McMurray?

Mr. Danyluk: Well, Mr. Speaker, we look at the highways, for sure, in Alberta, and we want to make sure that we're working towards the needs of all Albertans. This is about ensuring that we're doing the right work in the right places. We need to build the Stoney Trail. We need to build the Anthony Henday. We need to build highway 63. We also need to build the bridges and the twinning in Fort McMurray. It is about balance.

The Speaker: The hon. member, please.

Mr. Kang: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm talking about twinning this highway by 2015.

To the minister again: given that all of the PC leadership hopefuls said yes to fast-tracking the twinning of highway 63 only six short months ago and given that the Alberta Liberals say yes to fast-tracking the twinning, will the minister finally say yes to saving lives by fast-tracking this vital road to Alberta's prosperity?

Mr. Danyluk: Well, Mr. Speaker, I'm not exactly sure where the hon. member is coming from because it very much sounds like he's saying yes to every highway that's necessary in Alberta without any conscience to budget. We have made a commitment to the Wood Buffalo area and to the oil sands development that highway 63 is a priority for this government, and it will remain a priority.

The Speaker: That concludes the question period, then, for today. Seventeen members were recognized today, with 102 questions and responses.

We are going to continue the Routine with introductions. We still have a very long list to deal with, so patience, please.

Introduction of Guests

(continued)

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-North West.

Mr. Blackett: Thanks, Mr. Speaker. It's an honour to stand and introduce my guests to you and through you to this House: Mr. Glen Furtado and Kelly Yuzdepski. Both are representatives of CIMA, which is a multinational engineering consulting firm. Kelly is the vice-president of transportation here in Alberta, and Glen is the regional manager for transportation in southern Alberta and B.C. Glen is also a friend, a constituent, a neighbour, and also the president of the Tuscany Community Association. Like many thousands of volunteers across our great province he makes sure that we build stronger, safer communities by giving his time selflessly. I'd like to have them both rise and receive the warm welcome of the Assembly.

2:40

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Leduc-Beaumont-Devon.

Mr. Rogers: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It gives me great pleasure to introduce to you and through you two of my constituents, who I hope are still seated in the members' gallery. Jacqueline Biollo is a mother, she's an active community volunteer, she's a two-term

councillor for the town of Beaumont, and she's vice-president of towns for the Alberta Urban Municipalities Association. She's also completing her MBA at this time.

Also in the members' gallery is Mr. Ken Kobly. Mr. Kobly is a former councillor and a four-term mayor for the town of Beaumont. He's currently the executive director of the Alberta Chambers of Commerce.

Mr. Speaker, I'd ask my guests to rise and receive the warm traditional greeting of this Assembly.

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

Mr. Xiao: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I have an introduction to make. I'd like to introduce to you and to the House Mr. Graham Fletcher and Ralph Henderson. I don't know whether they have arrived or not. They are here for the budget. I'd like them to rise and receive the warm welcome.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Medicine Hat.

Mr. Renner: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure to introduce to you and through you to all members of the House a lifelong resident of Medicine Hat. Mr. Darren Hirsch is joining us today. He is a good, strong supporter of his community. As a matter of fact, he's here in his capacity of coach of a ringette team that's competing in the Alberta Winter Games. His career is long and varied. He started out as a social worker working for a social service agency in Medicine Hat. Currently he is working as an account manager with Toronto Dominion Canada Trust. He's also served for a term on Medicine Hat city council. Recently he added one more job to his resumé, from my perspective a very important one and I'm sure for members of the House. He's the newly nominated PC candidate for Medicine Hat in the next provincial election. I wish him all the very best.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Intergovernmental, International and Aboriginal Relations.

Mr. Dallas: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's an honour and a pleasure to introduce to you and through you on behalf of myself and also the hon. Member for Red Deer-North guests that are with us today. In the gallery we have Lawrence Lee, who is the chairman of the Red Deer public school board; Donna Purcell, who is the president of the Alberta Civil Trial Lawyers Association; Tim Creedon, who is the executive director of the Red Deer Chamber of Commerce; and a close personal friend of mine, Allen Evaniew from Brownlee Law. I'd ask my guests to rise and receive the recognition and welcome of the House.

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

Mr. Webber: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's pretty rare that I get a constituent to come visit me, so it's a happy day for me today. I'd like to introduce to you and through you to all members of the Assembly a constituent of mine from Calgary-Foothills who has come here today to watch the proceedings in the House. Ms Robyn Moser is a realtor in Calgary and recently obtained the status of one of the top 1 per cent of realtors in all of Canada. She also reached an impressive pinnacle of obtaining over 1,000 friends on the social media Facebook, so that's pretty impressive, I think. She and her husband, Clint, are good friends of mine, and I ask that Robyn please stand and receive the warm welcome of the Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Health and Wellness.

Mr. Horne: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It's my honour to introduce to you and through you to all members today two guests who will be no stranger to many members of this Assembly, Bob and Roberta Giffin. Many members will know Mr. Giffin is the former chief of staff to Premier Lougheed. Bob and Roberta are important volunteers and advisers to me in my role as MLA for Edmonton-Rutherford. I'd like to ask them both to rise and receive the warm welcome of my colleagues.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Highwood.

Mr. Groeneveld: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Today it gives me great pleasure to introduce to you and through you to this Assembly a constituent of mine from Highwood, Scott Tannas. Tannas, of course, is a well-known name in this Assembly, certainly the MLA for Highwood for many years. He was Deputy Speaker and kept your chair warm for a while, I'm sure, Mr. Speaker. Scott was and is a very successful entrepreneur in Highwood and Alberta and, indeed, western Canada. Scott and his wife were born and raised in High River – at least, I assume his wife was, but Scott was for sure – where he continues to reside with Taryn and their four children. But most importantly maybe, Scott Tannas is a candidate for the Senate whom I certainly support and encourage anyone in this House today to support. Scott, I'd like you to rise and get the usual warm welcome from this Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Deputy Premier.

Mr. Horner: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It is indeed a pleasure and an honour to rise and introduce to you and through you to all members of the House two very close friends of mine who are here to witness what I believe is the future direction for our province. The first is a gentleman by the name of Brad Ferguson, who is the president of Strategy Summit as well as having been very involved with our rural development fund as well as involved with the YPO, the Young Presidents' Organization, and a long list of other volunteer initiatives that he and his family have been involved with for a long, long time. He is also an avid hockey player every Friday morning, which is something I wish I still could do. He's also a very proud dad of a great family.

As well, accompanying him is another close friend of mine, a constituent, Colonel Kevin Weidlich, who has served several tours overseas, including Bosnia and Afghanistan. He has also done a lot of international trade. I've worked with him there. I had the pleasure, Mr. Speaker, to serve with Colonel Weidlich when he was a lowly second lieutenant in the Loyal Edmonton Regiment.

I am extremely pleased that they are both here and that they are in the gallery today to witness what I believe is history for Alberta. I'd ask them to rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of this Legislature.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Tourism, Parks and Recreation.

Mr. Hayden: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's indeed my pleasure to introduce to you and through you Patty Dittrick from my constituency, who is here with us today. Patty is the president of the Public School Boards' Association, and we would have to look far and wide to find anybody more dedicated or passionate in the pursuit of looking after the children of this province. Please, Patty, would you rise and receive the greetings of this Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Infrastructure.

Mr. Johnson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's an honour to rise and introduce to you and through you three friends and constituents I

see up in the members' gallery. Rick Cherniwchan is a good friend who lives out in the Smoky Lake-Waskatenau area and is a councillor with the county of Smoky Lake, and Bob and Mabel Dick are from Athabasca. Bob is a former secretary-treasurer of the school board, and Mabel is an advocate in the community for health care and is really involved in the auxiliary at the hospital there. They're also good friends and advisers. I'd ask them to please rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of the Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Creek.

Mr. Zwozdesky: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It's a great pleasure to introduce a constituent of mine who's here from Edmonton-Mill Creek, Mr. Major Bhullar. He's well known in our community as a very wonderful and generous human being who participates in so many community fundraisers, and for that I'd like to say thank you and welcome him here and have all of you join me in saying thank you to him as well.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Red Deer-North.

Mrs. Jablonski: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Today I have the great privilege of introducing to you and through you to members of this Assembly a very good friend of mine and a very important member of our community, the president of Red Deer College, Joel Ward. Joel is a dynamic leader in our community with a grand vision for our college, and he's a dedicated member as well because he is working very hard to compete with me in a dance competition in honour of the Hospice gala in Red Deer. I would ask Joel to stand and receive the traditional warm welcome of the Assembly.

2:50

The Speaker: Hon. Minister of Education, did you catch my eye?

Mr. Lukaszuk: Obviously I caught your eye. How could I not, Mr. Speaker? [interjections] You ask a question; you get an answer. This is education.

The Speaker: Do proceed with your introduction.

Mr. Lukaszuk: Mr. Speaker, to you and through you it is indeed an honour and a pleasure to introduce two gentlemen who are quite an inspiration to our immigrant community not only in Edmonton but throughout Alberta. One is Mr. Alex Davidoff. Mr. Davidoff through his project is going to enhance the skyline of Edmonton by providing what I would suggest to you are class 1 residential condos in downtown. He is here with us today in the members' gallery. With him is a dear friend and another gentleman of immigrant origin who has become very successful in the business community. If you ever are interested in East Indian food, that is the restaurant to go to. His name is Mr. Raj Saunders. I would ask both of these gentlemen to rise and receive the warm and traditional welcome of our Assembly.

The Speaker: Okay. I'm going to try that again. Hon. Member for Banff-Cochrane, you caught my eye. [interjections]

Ms Tarchuk: Oh, Mr. Speaker, I'm speechless. Thank you very much. I'm really pleased to introduce to you and through you to all members of the Legislature one of Banff-Cochrane's great community leaders, Mr. Ron Casey. He's sitting up in the members' gallery. Ron is currently the mayor of Canmore. He has provided years of good service to our residents. He also happens

to be the recently nominated PC candidate for Banff-Cochrane, so congratulations, Ron. Please stand and receive the warm welcome of the Legislature.

The Speaker: Have I missed anyone?

Mr. Marz: Well, Mr. Speaker, speaking of catching someone's eye, my first wife just caught my eye in the members' gallery. She has been my first wife for 46 years, and if my luck holds out, she'll be my last. I would ask my wife, Jan, to rise and receive the warm welcome.

Members' Statements

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

Alex Youth Health Bus

Mr. Cao: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's known that high-risk youth often neglect their medical needs. Troubled young people often don't have support around them to seek medical services. They may feel like there is no one to trust, or they may not even be aware of the health issue.

At Forest Lawn high school in my constituency of Calgary-Fort our Premier has recently helped launch a medical clinic on wheels dedicated to addressing the needs of youth at risk. The Alex youth health bus works as a mobile, two-room medical clinic staffed by a physician, a nurse, and a community social worker servicing eight Calgary high schools. This is unique and the first of its kind in Canada.

This is the second Alex bus. The first Alex health bus focused on giving medical care and services to the homeless in 2002. The Alex partnership with the Calgary board of education will bring medical attention and education to hundreds of youth who may have otherwise been left behind.

I applaud this initiative from the Alex, an organization which has served Calgary with effective solutions to address the health and social needs of the community for almost 40 years. I'm pleased with the government funding to these good causes, where our tax dollars are effectively used.

I also want to thank our Premier, the Deputy Premier, the Minister of Education, and the Minister of Service Alberta for being at the event in my constituency.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

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

GPS Tracking Devices for Disabled Children

Mr. Chase: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. GPS required. It isn't just 10-year-old Emily who requires a GPS tracking support device due to her autism and a host of other not easily observable developmental disabilities. The Alberta government, when it comes to acting in the best interests of Alberta's children, has lost its way. This government badly needs such a tracking device to find both its own heart and its head. Emily's mother, Alison, has been refused government support on numerous previous occasions, including funding for a service dog, which has provided immeasurable help to children with developmental disabilities and their families attempting to cope with tremendous disruptions in their lives.

Setting aside the heart or ethical argument, Alison has repeatedly, to denying, closed government ears, put forward the logical-head argument. Numerous professionals, including medical doctors, psychologists, educational authorities, and law

enforcement officials, have noted in unanimous agreement how important the GPS device is to ensuring Emily's well-being. However, this penny-wise, pound-foolish government would rather pay out thousands of dollars denying the obvious need for keeping track of Emily through a lengthy and unnecessarily complicated and ridiculously expensive hearing process than fund this absolutely necessary life-saving tracking device.

Central to the successful resolution of this matter is how this government views Alberta's children. Are Emily and the thousands of other developmentally delayed Alberta children worthy of investment, or will the Alberta government continue to write them off as liabilities, damaged goods not worthy of expenditure? Since originally writing this appeal to both the Premier and the Minister of Human Services two weeks ago, I have not received a reply. The hearing into the necessity of a tracking device to protect Emily did not take place as the costs for the expert witnesses to testify on Emily's behalf would have had to be borne at the family's expense.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

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

Cabinet Tour Visit to Edmonton-Calder

Mr. Elniski: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It is interesting, particularly to me, that the most common first name in this Assembly is Doug. There are three of us. Recently our Premier and our cabinet members, including my two namesake colleagues, came together in Edmonton-Calder to listen to the concerns of the folks at the Rosedale seniors' residence. Over 300 seniors, families, and community leaders gathered to talk to our Premier about her values, beliefs, and visions for what Alberta can and should be. Critics, those who know the price of everything and the value of nothing, were brazen to suggest that my constituents did not deserve the attention they received on the cabinet tour. From the luncheon to the question-and-answer session people were engaged and approved of the direction of this province under the stewardship of our Premier and her cabinet.

Our seniors, my seniors, who reside in any of the 10 complexes in Edmonton-Calder, expect to see their representatives. They expect to know the real intentions of the government and see proof of what we are doing. The sky is clearly not falling in Edmonton-Calder, Mr. Speaker. We're opening a 200-bed DAL facility later this month as well as 58 units of subsidized apartments. Construction is also under way for a new life-lease complex, and a new medical clinic in Kensington is advertising for 2,000 patients. That particular facility, in case you're wondering, is in fact on the north side.

This progressive, tangible benefit is a real-life example of this government listening and responding to the needs of Albertans. I would like to express my deep appreciation to our Premier, cabinet ministers, and MLA colleagues who came once again to my constituency. They shared their wisdom, friendship, and, most importantly, their time with the residents of the Rosedale seniors' residence. No one asked, "Why are you not listening?" because very clearly, Mr. Speaker, we are.

Thank you.

The Speaker: Hon. members, Standing Order 7(7) reads: "At 3 p.m. the items in the ordinary daily Routine will be deemed to be concluded and the Speaker shall notify the Assembly."

The hon. Opposition House Leader.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. At this point I would ask the unanimous consent of the House to continue the Routine today, particularly in light of the fact that the private

members' bills that would be debated on Monday have yet to be introduced, and we would need to continue the Routine to allow that to happen. I hope that we will have the support of the House for unanimous consent to continue the Routine.

Thank you.

The Speaker: Hon. members, there's a request to waive Standing Order 7(7). The request is that we waive it, continue the Routine.

[Unanimous consent denied]

The Speaker: Okay. We're now going to have a recess till 3:15 so that we can prepare the Assembly for the Budget Address by the Minister of Finance.

[The Assembly adjourned from 3 p.m. to 3:15 p.m.]

Orders of the Day Transmittal of Estimates

The Speaker: The hon. Deputy Premier and President of Treasury Board and Enterprise.

Mr. Horner: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I have received certain messages from His Honour the Honourable the Lieutenant Governor, which I now transmit to you.

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

The Speaker: Hon. members, the Lieutenant Governor transmits supplementary supply estimates of certain sums required for the service of the province for the fiscal year ending March 31, 2012, and recommends the same to the Legislative Assembly.

The Lieutenant Governor transmits estimates of certain sums required by the offices of the Legislative Assembly for the service of the province for the fiscal year ending March 31, 2013, and recommends the same to the Legislative Assembly.

The Lieutenant Governor transmits estimates of certain sums required by the government for the service of the province for the fiscal year ending March 31, 2013, and recommends the same to the Legislative Assembly.

Please be seated.

The hon. Deputy Premier and President of Treasury Board and Enterprise.

Mr. Horner: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. When a second, or subsequent, set of estimates is to be tabled for a fiscal year, section 8 of the Government Accountability Act requires an update to the fiscal plan. I now wish to table the 2011-12 third-quarter fiscal update, which serves as the amended fiscal plan, and the 2011-12 supplementary supply estimates, No. 2. As I speak to you now, this fiscal update is being made public as required by section 9 of the Government Accountability Act. These supplementary estimates will provide additional spending authority to eight departments of the government and one office of the Legislative Assembly. When passed, the estimates will authorize increases of approximately \$97.6 million in voted expense and \$3.1 million in expense and capital investment. These estimates will also authorize transfers of \$30 million of previously approved capital investment to expense.

Government Motions

4. Mr. Horner moved:
Be it resolved that the message from His Honour the Honourable the Lieutenant Governor, the 2011-12

supplementary supply estimates, No. 2, for the general revenue fund, and all matters connected therewith be referred to Committee of Supply.

The Speaker: Hon. members, this is a debatable motion. Shall I call the question?

Hon. Members: Question.

[Government Motion 4 carried]

5. Mr. Horner moved:
Be it resolved that pursuant to Standing Order 61(2) the number of days that Committee of Supply will be called to consider the 2011-12 supplementary supply estimates, No. 2, for the general revenue fund shall be one day.

The Speaker: This is not a debatable motion, hon. members, so I'll call the question.

[Government Motion 5 carried]

The Speaker: The hon. Deputy Premier and President of Treasury Board and Enterprise.

Mr. Horner: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Pursuant to Government Motion 6, agreed to by the Assembly on February 8, 2012, I wish to table the 2012-13 offices of the Legislative Assembly estimates as well as the 2012-13 government estimates.

In addition, Mr. Speaker, I am tabling the government business plan, titled the Government Strategic Plan, as required by section 7 of the Government Accountability Act and the ministry business plans as required by section 13 of the same act.

Mr. Liepert: Mr. Speaker, I now wish to table the government's Budget 2012 fiscal plan, which contains the consolidated fiscal plan as required under section 4 of the Government Accountability Act and the consolidated capital plan as required under section 7.1 of the same act.

3:20

Budget Address

7. Mr. Liepert moved:
Be it resolved that the Assembly approve in general the business plans and fiscal policies of the government.

Mr. Liepert: Mr. Speaker, it is with a great deal of pleasure and tremendous pride that I rise in the Assembly today to deliver the 2012 Alberta budget. It is somewhat bittersweet, though, because this will be the first and only budget that I'll have the privilege of presenting in the House because like you I've chosen to not stand as a candidate in the next provincial election. So I would like to take this opportunity to thank all of my constituents of Calgary-West for their support over the past seven and a half years, including a couple who are seated in the members' gallery. It has been a great honour to represent these fine, hard-working Albertans, an honour for which I am sincerely grateful.

I also want to extend my best wishes to all of my colleagues on both sides of the House. Whether they are choosing to seek re-election or to follow another path, I wish them all the greatest of success.

In addition to being a personal milestone for me, this is also the last budget, Mr. Speaker, that will be delivered in a session over which you will preside. Let me say what a privilege it's been to serve with you. I'm sure I speak for all fellow members when I say that the Assembly will not be the same without you. [Standing ovation]

Mr. Speaker, I'd also be remiss if I didn't take this moment to recognize two special guests who are in your gallery. There are two former provincial treasurers in this Assembly, the hon. Lou Hyndman and the hon. Jim Dinning. If I could ask both of them if they would stand and be recognized by the House.

This is also the first budget, Mr. Speaker, that will be delivered under the leadership of our new Premier. I'm sure that most Albertans share my view that an awful lot has changed in the past hundred days or so since our Premier was sworn in. As Finance minister I can tell you that one thing that is definitely changing is our approach to government and how we manage Albertans' tax dollars.

One need look no further than the uncertainty that is affecting so many European countries to see that the modern global economy is not well served by old assumptions and old ways of doing things. Even the United States, long regarded as the world's greatest free-market success story, once again is nearing its debt ceiling, which is now more than \$16.4 trillion. That's a number so large that it's difficult to even relate to.

Here in Canada the economic recovery is under way, but it's taking longer than the federal government had anticipated. My federal counterpart is now projecting a balanced budget in 2015-16. While the federal government's balancing act of fiscal prudence should be applauded, the fact of the matter is that under this timetable more than another \$100 billion will be added to the federal debt before the books are balanced. Ontario, Canada's most populous province, is now projecting a balanced budget in 2017-18. Between now and then another \$51 billion will be added to its debt burden.

Now, by comparison, Albertans can take great pride and comfort in our fiscal situation. We, of course, have no debt that is not covered by cash reserves. The losses that our province suffered during the recession have all been regained. Between 2008 and 2009 Alberta lost some 28,000 jobs, but by June of last year all of those jobs had been recovered plus additional new ones created. In fact, in the month of June last year the Alberta economy created more jobs than were created in the entire United States of America.

While unemployment is a major concern in other parts of the world, Alberta leads the nation in the creation of new jobs. Employment growth in Alberta was 3.8 per cent last year, by far the highest rate in the country. In fact, Alberta accounted for about half of all of the new jobs that were created in Canada in 2011. And while employers in other jurisdictions are contemplating layoffs or downsizing, businesses in Alberta are beginning to worry about the availability of skilled workers and potential labour shortages.

Another area that we've seen a positive turnaround in is the energy sector. I'll give you an example. Land lease sales grew by \$1.2 billion in 2009-10 to a forecasted record level of \$3.3 billion this year, and the budget projects that over \$2 billion will be gained in land sales in 2012-13. This points to the tremendous confidence that exists in Alberta's economy.

I must say, however, that our provincial budgeting is not without its challenges. In 2008-09 natural gas revenues were \$5.8 billion. In the upcoming fiscal year it's estimated that natural gas revenues will be \$1.2 billion, or about one-fifth of what they were just four years ago.

Another example is the strong value of the Canadian dollar. In 2012-13 for every 1-cent increase in the exchange rate over the course of 12 months the province will receive \$247 million less in revenue, and our forecast for the upcoming fiscal year is that the dollar will remain almost at par. So for us as Albertans the lesson is clear, but it's also an opportunity. We must put aside the old

ways and equip our province to reach its full potential so we can succeed in the new global economy. We must protect the advantages that Albertans have worked so hard to achieve such as strong public services, low taxes, and no operating debt. We must identify what our priorities are and act boldly and decisively to make the most of our opportunities, and we must invest in our greatest resource, our people.

So it was Albertans themselves that we turned to when we began crafting this budget. Last November the President of Treasury Board and I travelled across the province, meeting with a broad cross-section of Albertans to get their input as to what were the most important things to them. Albertans also participated in this process through an online survey, polling, written submissions, and town hall meetings. What we heard from Albertans across the province was remarkably consistent and could be categorized into three priority areas: investing in families and communities, securing Alberta's economic future, and advancing world-leading resource stewardship.

Members of the Assembly will notice that instead of being organized by department, Budget 2012 is organized along these priorities. We focused on things that we need to do and not which department is doing them. Presenting our budget this way is sharing openly with Albertans what we propose to do and standing accountable for the outcomes that we achieve.

Mr. Speaker, Alberta's economy is forecast to grow by a healthy 3.8 per cent this year, and that's up from 3.5 per cent in 2011. Considering the impact the global economic slowdown is having in other jurisdictions, Albertans are very fortunate indeed to be experiencing such growth. Revenues for the upcoming budget year are forecast at \$40.3 billion, an increase of \$1.8 billion, or about 4.6 per cent, from 2011-12. It is the first time in history that our projected revenues are to exceed \$40 billion.

Now, the good news is that revenues are forecast to keep growing by an average of 10.4 per cent over the following two years, reaching \$49 billion in 2014-15. Increasing revenues are mainly due to higher income tax revenue because of the strength of our economy and higher resource revenues. I need to point out for members of the Assembly, Mr. Speaker, that these higher tax revenues are the result of Albertans and Alberta corporations doing better and thus having higher taxable incomes, and not because of any tax rate increases by the province. In fact, Budget 2012 introduces no new taxes or tax rate increases.

3:30

Mr. Speaker, I also need to note that in the year 2014-15 Alberta will receive an additional billion dollars as a result of equitable health transfers from the federal government. This is an inequity that our province has been attempting to resolve for some time, and we're pleased that the federal government has moved to a health transfer model that is fair to all provinces.

Our government will impose strict fiscal discipline to ensure that its revenues and expenditures are managed responsibly beginning with Bill 1, which was introduced on Tuesday by our Premier, to mandate results-based budgeting and reviews of all government programs and services. Through this budget we will lay the groundwork for three-year funding cycles for municipalities, school boards, and postsecondary institutions. Stable and predictable funding for these priority areas will allow our partners to plan better for the future, provide better service to Albertans, and offer greater accountability to taxpayers. We'll also challenge government to find ways to achieve the outcomes that Albertans want within existing budgets. We'll scrutinize all costs and challenge automatic growth of spending, assigning funds only where they are needed.

We're forecasting a return to a balanced budget in 2013-14, as our Premier committed, with a projected surplus of nearly \$1 billion. Equally important, Mr. Speaker, by 2014-15 we are forecasting a surplus of \$5.2 billion. The return of surplus budgets will bring with it the opportunity to replenish our savings account, the sustainability fund. If we meet our projected surplus in 2014-15, the fund will increase to \$4.8 billion by the end of that fiscal year.

Budget 2012 will see total government spending rise by a modest 3.3 per cent over last year. The increase is due almost entirely to increased spending in Albertans' priority areas of health, education, and social supports for those who need them. This increase is less than population growth plus inflation. We can afford to spend this much, Mr. Speaker, but we will also be disciplined enough to spend no more.

More than 60 per cent of the operating budget has been allocated to families and communities. This is an increase of approximately 5 per cent from last year's budget. Specifically, base funding to Alberta Health Services will increase by 6 per cent as part of our five-year funding commitment to deliver equitable health services across the province. The Department of Human Services will receive \$2.5 billion.

When you dig into these numbers, you see some very real and positive outcomes for Albertans. One is a \$400 increase immediately in maximum monthly payment benefits for AISH clients. Our Premier made a promise to increase the income provided to severely handicapped Albertans, and Budget 2012 honours that commitment. Budget 2012, Mr. Speaker, also honours another commitment. We will be doubling the employment income exemptions for AISH clients, allowing them to keep more of their benefits while earning income.

Budget 2012 also increases income support benefits by an average of 5 per cent. This will help about 34,000 households in which Albertans are either training or looking for work or are unable to work. At the end of the day these funding increases will make a real difference in the lives of some of our most vulnerable citizens.

Government is also investing in health care to provide better access to the health system for all Albertans, no matter where they live. Budget 2012 allocates \$100 million in each of the next three years to help open a new front door to the health system in the form of family care clinics and other measures that support primary care, additions, and mental health programs. This is another promise made by our Premier and another promise kept.

We also have construction continuing this year on the central Alberta cancer centre in Red Deer, with completion expected in the spring of 2013. It will mean that people who used to have to travel to Calgary or Edmonton for radiation treatment will soon be able to get the care they need closer to home, without the added inconvenience and expense at a time when they are already dealing with tremendous challenges.

Likewise, the opening of the new south Calgary health campus this year will make an incredible difference in the lives of Albertans living in our largest city. This will not only impact those living in the south part of our fastest growing city but everyone in the region, as the facility brings new capacity to the health system and takes some of the pressure off of the existing hospitals. Now, we're calling this facility a campus because it will integrate clinical care with education and research. It will also promote wellness and good health and help patients get well in their homes by connecting them with other community services.

While building new and expanded infrastructure is key to enhancing our health care system, so too is operating it. Altogether, Alberta Health Services will receive an additional \$267 million to support new staff and other costs related to running the new

facilities, mainly the south Calgary hospital and the Edmonton clinic south.

This budget, Mr. Speaker, will continue to support programs to help the homeless. This is an area where we've seen tremendous progress. In the first two years of the Housing First program more than 4,800 homeless Albertans have been placed in safe and permanent homes. We expect another 1,800 Albertans to reclaim lives of dignity and independence during the upcoming year.

Budget 2012 continues to support municipalities through the flagship municipal sustainability initiative, more commonly known as MSI, with \$2.8 billion allocated to this program over the next three years. Since this program began in 2007, more than 6,000 capital and operating projects have been accepted in communities all across Alberta.

For our province to continue investing in people, we must diversify our economy and grow our economic pie. This vital work begins in the education system. Budget 2012 increases operating funding for education by 3.4 per cent, to \$6.2 billion. Fourteen new schools will be completed in 2012, and just think of the impact this will have on children and families in some of our fastest growing communities. For some this will be the first time that children have the opportunity to attend a neighbourhood school that is actually in their neighbourhood, Mr. Speaker.

School boards in rapidly growing communities can be assured that their growth is recognized, and boards in remote areas will see that their higher transportation costs are acknowledged. Increases in supports for inclusive education mean that children with extra educational needs will be better supported. Budget 2012, Mr. Speaker, continues last fall's \$107 million funding addition to the education system. This budget also provides an additional 5.1 per cent for student transportation services, as the fuel price contingency program is funded for the full year.

3:40

I want to move on to postsecondary education because Budget 2012 invests heavily in postsecondary education. This is an area where the government has made significant investments in past years. Three major projects are expected to be completed in 2012-13: the University of Alberta's agricultural facilities in Kinsella and St. Albert, SAIT's trades and technology complex, and the phase 2 expansion of Bow Valley College. These facilities, Mr. Speaker, will train thousands of students and provide space for state-of-the-art research to occur.

Now, we're seeing the benefits from previous investments in postsecondary institutions. In the five years between 2005 and 2010 total registered apprentices in Alberta grew by 36 per cent, to more than 63,000. In fact, even though Alberta has only 11 per cent of the country's workforce, we train and hire more than 20 per cent of the country's apprentices.

Our province is a leader both in creating jobs and in training skilled workers to fill them. Budget 2012 will increase operating funding to Alberta's postsecondary institutions by 2 per cent, but it will also increase support for scientific research through an expanded tax credit and boost funding for prion and water research by \$9 million to help find answers to some of the world's most pressing problems.

Securing Alberta's economic future also means investing in infrastructure that enables growth and enhances our quality of life. Over the next three years this government will invest \$16.5 billion in capital infrastructure. Now, while this is a modest decrease of about 7 per cent from the last fiscal year, Alberta still spends some 38 per cent more per capita on crucial infrastructure than any other province, Mr. Speaker, with the exception this year of Newfoundland and Labrador.

For the next three years we'll see the start of construction of the new Royal Alberta Museum. We'll see continued progress on the Edmonton and Calgary ring roads. We'll work on a number of hospitals, regional health centres, and health facilities from Grande Prairie to High Prairie, from Sherwood Park to Medicine Hat, from Bow Island to Edson, and many points in between.

Now, these are all things we're doing within our own province, but in the new global economy Alberta must look far beyond its borders. We must increase our presence and our access to markets in some of the world's fastest growing economies, particularly in Asia. The urgency of this work and the risk involved when relying on a single market was underscored last month when the Keystone XL pipeline project was delayed yet again.

Budget 2012 provides support to make Alberta a preferred global supplier of not only energy but agriculture, forest products, and services. This budget invests about a billion dollars in Agriculture and Rural Development, reflecting our government's continued commitment to building and maintaining our largest renewable industry. These dollars will also ensure that we remain competitive both domestically and globally. This investment includes \$133 million for industry development, food safety, and research. Budget 2012 also supports initiatives to make Alberta a global supplier of forest products and promotes projects that turn forest waste into renewable energy.

Mr. Speaker, Alberta is becoming an increasingly visible player on the world stage and will take on an even greater role as we gain better market access for our products. We will build our nation's role as a global energy leader through the development of a Canadian energy strategy. We do this knowing that taking these steps will put our energy production practices and environmental stewardship under even greater scrutiny, but we're not afraid of such scrutiny. We welcome it along with the opportunity to advance the world-leading resource stewardship that was developed and is practised right here in Alberta.

But saying that, we also recognize that we must continually improve our environmental performance and monitoring in a way that is credible, comprehensive, and transparent. Budget 2012 will increase funding for environmental monitoring related to oil sands development in the oil sands region. It also allocates \$540 million in GreenTRIP funding to advance Alberta's leadership in reducing greenhouse gas emissions associated with transportation. This funding also helps make public transit more accessible and better connects Albertans.

Mr. Speaker, our government was able to make these investments because of the actions we took over the years to put Alberta on a sound financial footing. Our province worked hard to pay off its accumulated debt and build up the sustainability fund to use in difficult times. So when the recession struck and other jurisdictions were borrowing money to finance economic stimulus programs, Alberta was able to maintain its programs without cutbacks, without raising taxes, and without piling on new debt for operations. While other provinces were going deeper and deeper into debt, Alberta was embarking on one of the largest infrastructure programs in our province's history. Not only did this initiative ensure that 160,000 Albertans were able to keep working and supporting their families, but we also now have the most efficient systems of roads and highways, the most modern schools for our children, the most advanced health facilities, and the best libraries and cultural facilities for all our citizens. This is a lasting legacy for future generations of Albertans.

I'd just like to take a moment, Mr. Speaker, and say that when it comes to modern infrastructure, Albertans can thank our former

Premier, the Member for Fort Saskatchewan-Vegreville, for his leadership. I know all Albertans recognize and appreciate what has taken place in this province over the past half decade.

Mr. Speaker, the approach our province took was the right one for the times. But as the saying goes, the times are a-changin'. Now we need to consider whether our approach needs to change also and whether the fiscal framework we have now is the right one for the future.

During her leadership campaign our Premier raised some important questions, questions we also heard from Albertans in our budget consultations and during the recent cabinet tour, questions like: are we using the best revenue mix to fund the programs that we need? Are we making the wisest spending decisions? Should we be saving more or saving differently? These are questions we need to consider as a province, recognizing that Alberta has unique challenges when it comes to budgeting.

Our province is blessed with abundant natural resources, and in good times those resources translate into abundant revenues. There have been years when Alberta surpluses have been greater than the entire operating budget of some Canadian provinces, but there have also been other years where resource revenues are lower, and we have difficult decisions to make. Now Albertans are telling us that some things, like health and education, are too important to ride the rollercoaster of volatile resource revenues. They're asking if we can do better, and I say today: we can.

We need to take a look at our fiscal framework. We need to take a look at where and how we collect revenues, where and how we spend, and where and how we save. These are the foundations of our fiscal framework. As His Honour said when he delivered the Speech from the Throne two days ago, we need to change this foundation to put our province on a solid footing for the future. So over the next year our government will open the discussion with Albertans on how best to do this. Over the coming years we'll lead a shift towards a new fiscal framework that will serve Albertans better.

Now, the first challenge will be building a more predictable, sustainable revenue base to support ongoing programs. For too long we've used our resource revenues to pay for our day-to-day expenses. These revenues rise and fall with global economic fluctuations, fluctuations that we cannot predict and we sure can't control. It's not wise to rely on such a volatile revenue base to pay for essential services that we need and use every day, nor is it fair to our children and grandchildren to spend our whole inheritance of natural resource revenues, because it also belongs to them.

3:50

I believe Albertans understand that we can't continue to rely on energy revenues in the same way in the future that we have in the past. They know that we must progressively become less reliant on these revenues to fund ongoing programs, and they also know that as Albertans we enjoy the lowest overall tax regime among all the provinces with a personal tax rate of 10 per cent and the highest personal exemptions in the country. What this does is keep more money in Albertans' pockets.

When you compare Alberta to other provinces, Albertans pay at least \$11 billion less annually in personal and corporate tax, and that will continue to be the case. Alberta will maintain the lowest overall corporate and small-business tax burden in Canada, and Budget 2012 makes no changes to Alberta's tax structure or rates. We will continue to have, Mr. Speaker, the lowest fuel tax, no payroll tax, no capital tax, and, yes, no sales tax.

As we move away from volatile resource revenues to fund ongoing programs and move toward a more sustainable revenue base, we know that a discussion on taxes must lie in Alberta's

future. This discussion will involve all Albertans and all sectors of the Alberta economy, and it will be based on the premise that while the tax system may change, one thing that must not change is Alberta's tax advantage. Alberta's low tax regime is one of the things that sets our province apart, and it gives us a competitive edge that must be preserved.

Mr. Speaker, in conclusion, putting a budget together is about more than dollars and cents. It's about ensuring that government is supporting the outcomes that Albertans want to achieve for themselves and their families. It's about investing in people and in the things that are important to Albertans such as health, education, jobs, services for seniors and the vulnerable, infrastructure, and our children's future. It's about protecting the advantages Albertans have worked so hard to build, not only first-rate services and modern infrastructure but also a clean balance sheet and low taxes. It's about keeping the commitments our Premier and our government have made. Budget 2012 does all of those things.

It invests in Alberta's priorities, our people, while returning to a balanced budget next year without raising taxes. This budget also signals important work that we must do to move Alberta towards a new fiscal framework, one that will increase stability and predictability in government revenues and bring spending under more scrutiny and greater discipline than ever before.

With Alberta's economy heating up and the province poised to return to surpluses, this is the time to ensure that government is providing the right services in the most efficient way possible while putting our long-term revenues and savings strategies on sounder footing. This is the budget which is the start of what we want to accomplish in the coming three years and what we will strive to achieve over the next 10 years. The steps that we take today will bring us closer to our goals.

Mr. Speaker, I said at the outset of my remarks that presenting this budget was a milestone for me, and indeed it is. I believe it's also a milestone for our province as we take those first steps to building a new fiscal foundation, one that protects our hard-won advantages while arming Alberta for success in the new global economy and helping us reach our full potential.

Our government worked very hard to build this budget based on what we've heard from Albertans. I believe it's the right budget for Alberta today. It is a responsible budget. Presenting it to this Assembly, Mr. Speaker, has been an honour and a privilege, and I look forward to debating it in the coming days.

Thank you so much, Mr. Speaker.

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

Ms Blakeman: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Thank you to the Minister of Finance for presenting the budget. We shall miss him. The Official Opposition and other opposition parties are very much looking forward to the debate. On behalf of the Leader of the Official Opposition I would beg leave to adjourn the debate.

[Motion to adjourn debate carried]

The Speaker: The hon. Government House Leader.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I, too, would like to congratulate the hon. Minister of Finance on a wonderful budget, and I would move that the Assembly do now adjourn until 1:30 p.m. on February 13.

[Motion carried; the Assembly adjourned at 3:55 p.m. to Monday at 1:30 p.m.]

Bill Status Report for the 27th Legislature - 5th Session (2012)

Activity to February 09, 2012

The Bill sponsor's name is in brackets following the Bill title. If it is a money Bill, (\$) will appear between the title and the sponsor's name. Numbers following each Reading refer to Hansard pages where the text of debates is found; dates for each Reading are in brackets following the page numbers. Bills numbered 200 or higher are Private Members' Public Bills. Bills with lower numbers are Government Bills. Bills numbered Pr1, etc., are Private Bills.

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1 Results-based Budgeting Act (Redford)

First Reading -- 4 (Feb. 7 aft., passed)

Second Reading -- 31-38 (Feb. 8 aft., adjourned)

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Province of Alberta

The 27th Legislature
Fifth Session

Alberta Hansard

Monday afternoon, February 13, 2012

Issue 4

The Honourable Kenneth R. Kowalski, Speaker

Legislative Assembly of Alberta
The 27th Legislature

Fifth Session

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Legislative Assembly of Alberta

1:30 p.m.

Monday, February 13, 2012

[The Speaker in the chair]

Prayers

The Speaker: Good afternoon. Welcome back.

Let us pray. At the beginning of this week we ask for renewed strength in the awareness of our duty and privilege as members of the Legislature. We ask for the protection of this Assembly and also the province we are elected to serve. Amen.

Hon. members and ladies and gentlemen, we will now deal with the singing of our national anthem. I'm going to call on Mr. Paul Lorieau, who is in the Speaker's gallery, to lead us, and I would ask that all participate in the language of their choice.

Hon. Members:

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

The Speaker: Please be seated.

Introduction of Guests

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Environment and Water.

Mrs. McQueen: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's a privilege for me to rise today to introduce to you and through you a group of outstanding, hard-working, and dedicated staff members from our Department of Environment and Water. Today we have over 20 public service employees from Alberta Environment and Water offices across our province. I'm sure that my colleagues feel the same when I thank you all for joining us and for the outstanding work you do each and every day for Albertans. They're in the members' gallery. I would ask them to please rise and receive the acknowledgement of this Assembly.

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

Mr. Prins: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's a huge honour for me to introduce to you and through you to all members today a large group of people from the Terrace Ridge school in Lacombe. There are 47 visitors, 37 bright young students in grade 6 and a number of teachers and parent helpers that have come along with them. The teachers are Mrs. Pat Jenkins, Mrs. Billie Lafleche, Mr. Brent Buchanan, and Mrs. Letha Maddox, and the parent helpers are Mr. Randy Hofer, Mr. Geoffrey Thomson, Mr. Brent Bailey, Mrs. Lisa Mydonick, Mrs. Sandy Toepfer, and Mrs. Maureen Cruickshank. These bright young students have been in the Legislature this morning and this afternoon and have toured around. I hope that they've enjoyed their visit, of course. I want to thank the large number of parents and helpers for taking this time to show interest in their students' education and also in our democracy at work here. I would ask them to rise and receive the warm welcome of the Assembly. I believe they're in the public gallery.

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

Mr. Marz: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's a great deal of pleasure for me today to introduce to you and through you a young man that's very special to me. He's my oldest grandson, Ethan Marz, from the Terrace Ridge school in Lacombe. He's been chosen today to represent his class in the mock parliament as the Premier. My advice to him today: I don't know what policies he's going to be introducing later on, but hopefully they're good, sound, Conservative policies. If he would rise in the public gallery and receive the warm welcome of the Assembly.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Human Services.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It gives me great pleasure today to rise on behalf of my colleague from Edmonton-Rutherford to introduce to you and through you to all members of this Assembly a group of students and their teacher and accompanying parent from St. Stanislaus school in the constituency of Edmonton-Rutherford. They are attending the School at the Legislature this week, and they're seated in the members' gallery. Accompanying the 18 students is their teacher Jennifer Steedsman and parent volunteer Angela Armstrong. I'd ask that the students, teacher, and parent from St. Stanislaus school please rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of the Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Intergovernmental, International and Aboriginal Relations.

Mr. Dallas: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. Today it is my great pleasure to introduce to you and through you several political science students from King's University College in Edmonton. They are led by their professor Dr. Michael DeMoor and are part of a bright, enthusiastic class of aspiring politicians. The students visiting today are Josh Culling, Simon Meijers, Terri McCausland, Elvis Moturi, and Lenn Wheatley. These students are here to tour the Legislature Building and observe the members in the House as they learn more about our political traditions and processes in our province. The guests are seated in the members' gallery. I'd ask them to please rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of the Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development.

Mr. Berger: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's a great pleasure to rise today and introduce to you and through you to all members of the Assembly a very successful and talented young Albertan, Amanda Hughes from Calmar. Amanda was chosen from 123 of the province's top 4-H members to receive the Alberta 4-H program's most prestigious award, the Premier's award. Amanda is currently in her 12th year as a member of the Calmar Heart of the Country 4-H Club and has held executive positions such as president, secretary, treasurer, and club reporter. She is currently a third-year education student at the University of Alberta and is still very active in her 4-H career, earning top honours at the provincial 4-H Horse Classic in 2010, and has attended international events as a representative of Alberta 4-H. Her exceptional talents have earned her this great honour. During this year she will represent youth and 4-H at various events around the province. Amanda is visiting us today and meeting with the Premier and her local MLA, the hon. Member for Drayton Valley-Calmar.

Mr. Speaker, Amanda is seated in the members' gallery with her parents, Michael and Tracy, and her sisters, Holly and Lauren. I would ask them all to rise and receive the warm welcome of the Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Municipal Affairs.

Mr. Griffiths: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's a pleasure for me to rise today in the House to introduce to you and through you to members of this Assembly Mr. Cliff Chapman, who is seated in your gallery. I met Cliff in Lougheed at Oktoberfest. He's one of the most remarkable Albertans I've encountered in my life. He worked as a roughneck in the oil and gas fields in Viking and Sundre and all over western Alberta. He was employed as a locomotive fireman, shovelling coal on steam locomotives in Hanna in the early 1950s. He continued to work on the railway and worked at virtually every terminal west of Hanna all the way to Vancouver before finally, after being qualified as a locomotive engineer, he changed to a career with the Edmonton Police Service in 1960. He had 29 years of service as a sworn member of the Edmonton Police Service, then retired and rejoined as a civilian member. He has over 50 years of dedicated service with the Edmonton Police Service, which is a record I think we would be hard-pressed to find duplicated in pretty much any police service in this country.

He also is no stranger to this House as he worked as a security member in the Legislative Assembly for nine years during the 1990s. Lastly, the only thing he really wanted me to point out was that he is married to the best Peruvian cook in the world. Mr. Speaker, I'd ask him to rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of this Assembly.

1:40

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

Ms Blakeman: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I am extremely honoured to rise today and introduce to you and through you to all members of the Assembly a number of members of the Alberta Funeral Service Association. They are seated today in the public gallery, and they have come to hear the response from the government to a series of questions that I'm going to put forward on their behalf. Joining us today are Mitch Thomson, the president of the Alberta Funeral Service Association; Sheila Van Alstyne, the vice-president of AFSA; Gary Lynn, a funeral director and board member from Edmonton; Gerry Connelly, a funeral business owner and member of AFSA from Edmonton; Jerry Smolyk, a funeral business owner and member of AFSA from Edmonton; and Deanna Schroeder, the executive administrator of the Alberta Funeral Service Association. Please join me in welcoming these wonderful members who contribute so much to our province. Thank you for coming.

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

Mr. Chase: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased to introduce to you and through you to all members Len Skowronski, leader of the Alberta Social Credit Party. Len and the Sacred picketers outside are here today because they are very concerned about the billions of dollars Albertans are losing in added value from our oil sands by exporting bitumen instead of synthetic crude oil. They hope to encourage the government to legislate a policy that would require all bitumen produced from our oil sands to be upgraded to synthetic crude oil in Alberta. Please stand, Len, and receive the greetings of the Assembly.

Thank you.

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

Mr. Mason: Thanks very much, Mr. Speaker. Today I'm very pleased to introduce to you and through you to this Assembly my

guests from the Alberta Union of Provincial Employees and their Committee on Political Action. AUPE is Alberta's largest union and represents nearly 80,000 hard-working Albertans. The Alberta NDP is proud to stand with AUPE members in protecting and improving public services that benefit all Albertans. I would now like to ask my guests to rise as I call their names and to remain standing and receive the traditional warm welcome of the Assembly: Glen Scott, Kendra Ness, Christina Sefton, Bill Piggott, Gerald Forbes, Rod Auramenko, Henry Wakoluk, Heather Stocking, and Andrew Hanon.

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

Mrs. Sarich: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's an honour and a privilege for me to rise today to introduce to you and through you to all Members of the Legislative Assembly eight guests here in recognition of the silver jubilee of Glengarry elementary school's Arabic bilingual program. I've visited with the administration, teachers, staff, and students at this school on numerous occasions, and the learning environment is filled with tremendous commitment and strong, unwavering support for student success.

My guests from the school are seated in the members' gallery, and I would ask them to please rise as I mention their names: Randy Billey, principal of Glengarry elementary school; Hassan Seifeddine, assistant principal, Glengarry elementary school; Taher Shayeb, teacher for grades 5 and 6; Houda Trabelsi, school council chair; Mazina Chamseddine, school council member; and two grade 6 students from the school who will be the next generation of leaders, for sure. They include Rana Habbab and Ibrahim Keshta. I also have with us this afternoon Yazan Haymour, president of the Canadian Arab Friendship Association.

Mr. Speaker, these representatives joining us today demonstrate the foundational support and collaboration that is central to the successful longevity of Glengarry school's Arabic bilingual program. I would now ask that they receive the traditional warm welcome of the Assembly.

Thank you.

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

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It's a pleasure to rise and introduce to you and through you to all hon. Members of the Legislative Assembly a gentleman who is a resident of northeast Edmonton, Wayne Sorenson. Wayne worked for the transportation and utilities department for 29 and a half years with the provincial government. During that time he was employed as a structural draftsman, chief draftsman, and also an occupational health and safety officer. His duties included drafting the design of bridges, overpasses, and highways as well as contract preparation for the tendering process. As an occupational health and safety officer he was involved in the development and delivery of training programs and conducted accident investigations, safety audits, and safety inspections, which contributed to the overall accident reduction for the department.

I will be tabling a document on behalf of Mr. Sorenson later on in the Routine. He is very concerned about the Alberta public service pension plans. He's now in the public gallery. I would ask him – he has already risen – to please receive the warm, traditional welcome of this Assembly.

The Speaker: Are there others? The hon. Minister of Energy.

Dr. Morton: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'd like to introduce Mr. Brian Heidecker, who's joining us today. Brian has a distinguished career as a rancher with Drylander Ranch. More recently he has

served as the chairman of the board of governors at the University of Alberta. He's had numerous other public service commitments, and most recently he's been the chairman of the critical transmission infrastructure review committee, that will be delivering its report later this afternoon. Will everyone please welcome Brian.

Members' Statements

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

Glengarry Elementary School Arabic Bilingual Program Silver Jubilee

Mrs. Sarich: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my honour and privilege to rise today in recognition of the silver jubilee of Glengarry elementary school's Arabic bilingual program in Edmonton public schools. Over 25 years ago Glengarry elementary school responded to the needs of their students and community and implemented an innovative Arabic bilingual program. In doing so, Glengarry school became the first to offer Arabic bilingual programming in Canada.

Mr. Speaker, Glengarry school embraces and emulates the Edmonton public school's mission statement by providing students with alternative paths to achieve academic and personal success. The Glengarry school Arabic bilingual program opened with an enrolment of 32 kindergarten and grade 1 students. Today it has grown into a partial immersion program serving 587 Glengarry kindergarten to grade 6 students.

Students receive 35 per cent of their programming in Arabic, including Arabic language arts, health, physical education, art, and music. The remaining 65 per cent of instruction is in English and covers the following subjects: English language arts, mathematics, social studies, science, and computer studies.

Mr. Speaker, no previous knowledge of Arabic is required for children entering the Arabic bilingual program in kindergarten or grade 1. This provides a unique opportunity for children from diverse backgrounds to learn Arabic.

Glengarry school's Arabic bilingual program is strongly supported by a community of children, educators, parents, community, businesses, and organizations. Through the long-standing efforts of a supportive school council, a dynamic relationship with the Canadian Arab Friendship Association, and the continued and expanding support of Edmonton public schools Glengarry school strives for best practices in its interactive approach to teaching and student learning.

Without question, Mr. Speaker, I'd like to commend and congratulate Glengarry elementary school and school community for all their partners and their longevity of success. They have a vision and have established the Arabic bilingual program, and I wish them continued success.

Assalamu Alaikum. Peace be with you.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Oral Question Period

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

Provincial Fiscal Policies

Dr. Sherman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The Premier's fudge-it budget inflates future revenues and blatantly ignores threats to Alberta's economy: the European debt crisis, continuing global economic uncertainty, the rising Canadian dollar, the slowdown in

countries like India and China. Given that the Premier warned about these threats last fall and repeated them in the government's recent fiscal plan, will the Premier tell us why the government is now inflating estimates of real growth in Alberta's GDP, personal income, and corporate profits instead of using the average of private forecasts?

Ms Redford: Mr. Speaker, this is an exciting time for Alberta. You know what? It's not just the government of Alberta that thinks that. It's the Toronto-Dominion Bank. It's the Royal Bank of Canada. It's people that look at these issues every day and decide what the future of our country and the future of our province will be. They are as optimistic about the future of Alberta as we are, and it's unfortunate the opposition doesn't feel the same way.

1:50

Dr. Sherman: Mr. Speaker, we're all optimistic about Alberta for the future. Absolutely. We're just responsible about it. Given that the elephant in the room is a structural deficit that this Premier is afraid to talk about before an election, why not say yes to closing the spending gap with a fair tax that allows us to balance the budget and start saving some of our resource revenue for our kids?

Ms Redford: Mr. Speaker, I will always say yes to exactly what we have now, but I will say no to the hon. member's proposals for tax increases. I will say that today, and I will say it tomorrow.

The Speaker: The hon. leader.

Dr. Sherman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. This is a Premier and a party that has been saying no to the people and continues to say no.

Given that the natural resource revenues are volatile at the best of times and especially volatile in times of international economic instability, can the Premier tell Albertans if it's fundamentally right to blow 100 per cent of our resource heritage fund and stability fund revenue just to pay for the daily bills? Is it right, Premier?

Ms Redford: Mr. Speaker, what's been wonderful in the past 40 years in this province is that we've had a government that's understood the ups and downs of economic change. We actually have a sustainability fund that's in place to deal with exactly the circumstances that we're facing right now. I'm pretty excited, as are Albertans, that we've been able to forecast that this is the last year we'll need to deal with that. We'll still have a balance in the sustainability fund, and that's good fiscal management on behalf of Albertans.

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

Electricity Prices

Dr. Sherman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. What's wonderful is that hard-working Albertans work hard each and every day despite what this government does to them. On Thursday the Minister of Energy's far-from-truthful defence of electricity deregulation cited debt held by publicly owned power companies such as Hydro-Québec. The fact is that Hydro-Québec has assets \$27 billion greater than its debt, and it pays the Quebec government nearly \$2 billion in dividends. That's some debt. How does the Premier plan to discipline the minister for his highly creative response in this House?

Dr. Morton: Mr. Speaker, I think anybody who can do simple math can take the population of Quebec, divide \$32 billion by their population, and figure out how much their beautiful electricity prices are helping them. I'll give you one other example. In Ontario today the government is paying 80 cents a kilowatt hour and selling it for 7 cents. Who makes up the difference? Oh, I think that would be the consumer.

Dr. Sherman: Mr. Speaker, there's no doubt why we have a deficit with oil at a hundred bucks a barrel. This government can't do math.

Given that the facts simply do not support this government's headlong dive into electricity deregulation, does the Premier have an honest answer – an honest answer – as to why this government ignores the fact that deregulation has cost Albertans billions and gives them the highest utility rates in the nation?

Dr. Morton: Mr. Speaker, this is into the second week now of these folks on the other side trying to make short-term political hay at the expense of Alberta consumers. I'm here to tell you today that you can pick up the phone, call 11 different providers, and if you're on the regulated rate option, decrease your costs by 42 per cent. Today. Pick up the phone and do it. We have set options out there to help consumers. They're out here just trying to stir up trouble.

The Speaker: The hon. leader.

Dr. Sherman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Talk about short-term political hay. That's exactly what they're trying to do before an election.

Given that there is no correlation between the low cost of generating electricity in Alberta and the sky-high prices that deregulation has forced upon us, will the Premier just admit that the pricing system for electricity is stacked heavily in favour of producers at the expense of the vulnerable, our seniors, hard-working families, and businesses? Come on, Premier.

Dr. Morton: I will say this very, very slowly for the benefit of the Leader of the Opposition. There are 11 different providers, all of them having a contract at 8 to 9 cents which can be cancelled in a 30- to 45-day period if you don't like it. You pick up the phone today, and you reduce your rates by 42 per cent.

The Speaker: Third Official Opposition main question. The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

Provincially Contracted Funeral Services

Ms Blakeman: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. The funeral directors' association of Alberta has notified the government of their intention to end their contract for funeral services until dignity and respect can be restored for indigent persons, AISH recipients, and children who die in government care. My question is to the Minister of Human Services. How does the minister respond to grieving family members whose child has died while in government care and must be buried in an adult casket because the government will not pay for a child-sized casket? How is that for putting children first?

Mr. Hancock: Well, Mr. Speaker, if that situation happens, people can certainly let me know. I'm not aware of that happening, and I would want every Albertan who's in that circumstance to be treated with dignity. We are in discussions with the Funeral Service Association with respect to a new

contract. We received a notice on January 30 that the existing contract would be terminated. There are normal negotiating processes that are going on. I've instructed the people in my department who are dealing with it that Albertans deserve dignity both in life and in death.

Ms Blakeman: I've clearly hit a nerve, seeing as the government has known about this for years and has done nothing in reacting to them.

To the same minister: why does the government force Jews, Sikhs, Hindus, and others to be embalmed, which is against the tenets of their faith, unless a family member with legal authority can be found fast enough to sign documentation for a cremation? Why would you do this in this diverse Alberta?

Mr. Hancock: Why indeed, Mr. Speaker? Indeed, we shouldn't be doing that. We should be able to offer people the opportunity to bury their loved ones in the manner, style, and custom in which they practise. That would be my and this government's vision going forward.

Ms Blakeman: This is the same government that has refused to speak to these people for years.

Back to the same minister: why does the government squeeze out the last, final humiliation by refusing a small honorarium for religious leaders to say a few words over the grave?

Mr. Hancock: Mr. Speaker, what we're seeing here is the hon. member trying to negotiate a contract on the floor of the Legislature. We're not going to be negotiating the contract on the floor of the Legislature. What we are going to be doing is talking with funeral service providers through their association and directly to try and negotiate a new contract which helps families in their time of loss deal with their bereavement in dignity. We will be doing that, and I will ensure we'll be doing that.

Provincial Tax Policy

Mr. Anderson: Mr. Speaker, a *National Post* editorial said it best about this Premier's new budget. It read: Alberta introduces its first NDP budget. That's unfair to the NDP. This is the fifth straight budget deficit despite near-record resource revenues. It relies on record revenue increases just to balance the budget, and it mentions a review of taxation levels after the next election so that we can pay for all of this new spending. Premier, yes or no? Will you commit that you will not raise taxes should you be re-elected unless you first tell Albertans what those increases will be before they go to the polls?

Ms Redford: Mr. Speaker, this is now, I think, day five or six of the fearmongering with respect to taxes. I'm proud of the budget that we presented on Thursday. I'm looking forward to debating it in the House. What I've said all along and what my colleagues have said all along is that this is a budget that represents the values, the hopes, and the aspirations of Albertans. As we move ahead, I am fully confident that once we pass this budget, knowing full well that there is a projected surplus, it will be very clear to Albertans what our fiscal plan is for the next two years.

Mr. Anderson: You know what? Albertans are pretty tired of your fulsome discussions, which include closed-door budget consultations and endless meetings with lobbyists and special interest groups. Quit cowering in the corner and answer the question, Premier. Tell us how much you're going to raise taxes to cover your addiction to spending. If you're not going to do it, say

it here and now: in the next four years you're not going to raise taxes no matter what. Say it right now. Put it on the record.

Ms Redford: There have been a lot of things that I've been accused of in my life, but I'll tell you that one of them is never going to be cowering to that party. Mr. Speaker, this is a budget that I know has the confidence of Albertans. It's reflecting what Albertans want for the future. I know what Albertans expect in terms of what government needs to present. We've presented it, Albertans will decide, and I'm looking forward to that discussion.

Mr. Anderson: Still no answer, Mr. Speaker. It's incredible. I've got to give it to the Liberals and NDP: at least they're honest about the fact they're going to raise taxes. But perhaps you know that being honest will lose you the election.

Last question. The Wildrose is willing to sign a no new tax pledge to Albertans that says that we will not support any new tax increases during the next term. Will you also sign this pledge, Premier, or will you waffle and will you avoid and will you deflect talking about your postelection plans to raise taxes on Albertans? Just say you're not going to raise taxes. It's so easy. Just say it.

2:00

Ms Redford: The fact about this budget is that it sets out a fiscal framework with a surplus. I don't know about how they do math, Mr. Speaker, but I don't see why, when you have a surplus, anyone would be contemplating new taxes. I would say that it's quite interesting to look at some of the things that this hon. member is suggesting we do in the next year, which is slow down the construction of the south Calgary hospital, not build 14 new schools, and not build the Fort Saskatchewan community hospital.

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

Electricity Prices (continued)

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Recently Hydro-Québec released its annual report comparing electricity rates in North American cities. Based on prices in March 2011, it appears that the highest electricity rates for residential customers in Canada and amongst the highest rates in North America, comparable only to New York City, are in Edmonton and Calgary. I would like to ask the Premier: why are Albertans being asked to pay the highest electricity prices in the entire country and, in fact, higher than most American cities as well?

Dr. Morton: Mr. Speaker, I'm sure it would shock the leader of the fourth party to learn that people in Quebec calculate average electricity prices in a way that suits the Quebec government. There are two other studies out there, one from outside of Canada, from London, and another one from Manitoba, that show that Alberta is very much in the middle of the pack when you look at electricity prices for nonhydro jurisdictions.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Mason: Thanks very much, Mr. Speaker. Well, the dissembling of this Energy minister continues unabated. Quebec counts everything, including all the middlemen charges, transmission charges, and so on that the Alberta government has imposed. Given that power rates were only 7 cents a kilowatt hour at that time and they're now 15 – the power rates have increased even far, far beyond what they were 10 months ago – what is the Energy minister or the Premier going to do about it?

Dr. Morton: I'm happy to repeat because, obviously, they're having some hearing problems over there. The MLAs on this side of the House have gone out and spoken to their constituents and pointed out that all you have to do is pick up the phone, call one of 11 different providers that have fixed contracts, and you can reduce your electricity costs starting tomorrow by 42 per cent.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Mason: Thanks, Mr. Speaker. This minister is going to give Albertans the runaround. We've set up a phone number so that people can fax their power bills. Given that we've already received power bills from a number of people who faxed them to 780.415.0701 or e-mailed them to NDP@assembly.ab.ca and we're expecting many more, what does this minister have to say to the angry customers who are paying way too much for their power rates?

Dr. Morton: Mr. Speaker, I didn't exactly hear the question, but that sounded more like a campaign speech. For Albertans who are listening I would say that there is a good place to go for information, and that's the Utilities Consumer Advocate website. It lists all of the different companies and all of the different programs where you can reduce your electricity price by 42 per cent by picking up the phone tomorrow.

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

Provincial Budget

Mr. Snelgrove: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I think you would find some irony in the fact that I'm asking a question on the same day as the question on funeral directors.

Mr. Speaker, the government has come up with a new idea; Lord, aren't we all good for new ideas? They've got a new way to do a budget. They're going to be very careful, and they're going to spend money very carefully, wisely, and ensure that Albertans receive value for the money. I think the question that Albertans want to ask the President of the Treasury Board is: what were you doing for the last eight years in government if it wasn't spending Alberta's money wisely?

Mr. Horner: Well, Mr. Speaker, it's obvious that the hon. member has taken some lessons from the hon. members from last week's questions in terms of suggesting that we have not been doing value reviews. In fact, as part of Treasury Board, previously under the hon. member's tutelage, the value reviews that we have been undergoing over the last several years have created over a billion dollars' worth of efficiencies and savings within the government. If the hon. members would actually read the budgets, they would see that.

Mr. Snelgrove: As a matter of fact, the president is exactly correct. Over the last three years it's closer to a billion point five. So my question is: is this business as usual, or have you established some new, magical way to cut money out of the civil service, after you've given them a 7 per cent operational increase, that's going to be more efficient?

Mr. Horner: Well, Mr. Speaker, it's not as short sighted as that. It's essentially taking the value reviews that we've been doing over the past several years – and I stand corrected by the previous President of the Treasury Board: over a billion and a half dollars' worth of value reviews. But what we weren't doing was actually talking to Albertans about what it is they wanted us to deliver and

whether or not we're doing that in an efficient way and then pulling it entirely back and building it from the ground up. I happen to know that the hon. member would have liked to have done that in his tenure.

Mr. Snelgrove: I do apologize, Mr. Speaker; I wasn't able to hear most of the answer. The simple fact is that we think we determined what priority changes there have been in the government, and it's directly related to membership sales. I want to know how they're going to sustain 7 per cent operational spending increases in the current economic environment.

Ms Redford: Mr. Speaker, what has happened in this province in the past six months is that we have a new cabinet and a new government that is going to manage government differently. While there may have been savings in the past years of \$1.5 billion, we are committed to changing the budgeting process to go to a results-based system that truly reflects the value of services that Alberta is delivering. That is what Albertans have told us they want to have. We are going to signal that change, and we are going to deliver on that change.

Education Funding

Mr. Hehr: Mr. Speaker, since the beginning of this school year this province has 450 fewer teaching positions despite increases to our population. Seemingly in denial, this government produced a budget or, more aptly, a fudge-it budget based on pie-in-the-sky numbers and unrealistic targets; case in point, the proposed numbers the Alberta teachers are supposed to agree on in salaries. To the Minister of Education: was this minister checked into the Fantasyland Hotel when he budgeted that teachers will accept a 1 per cent salary increase?

Mr. Lukaszuk: Mr. Speaker, this member is presuming the outcome of a tripartite negotiation that is ongoing and will be going on, I imagine, for a while to come. The fact of the matter is that the Education budget has been increased from \$6.8 billion to \$7.1 billion over the next three years. The Education budget has been increasing an average of 7 per cent per year for the last 10 years. Teachers and the school boards and this government will be negotiating a salary that is reflective of the work that happens in the classroom.

Mr. Hehr: So given that the government has only budgeted a 1 per cent instructional grant for the upcoming school year, again not meeting the 2.5 per cent increase in inflation being projected, my question for the minister is: does he agree that the only thing predictable and sustainable about his budget is cuts to our education program?

Mr. Lukaszuk: Mr. Speaker, I would say that the only thing that's predictable is this member's fearmongering.

As a matter of fact, teachers and students and parents have been asking for a predictable and sustainable budget. They have received one. For the first time in the history of this province teachers and parents know what their budget will be for the next three years. There was an opportunity to negotiate a contract before this budget was drafted; unfortunately, parties did not come to an agreement. The budget had to be tabled, and there are very reasonable numbers based on predictions and trends from throughout . . .

The Speaker: The hon. member, please.

Mr. Hehr: By ignoring the facts, basic economics, and inflation

rates, will this minister admit that this budget will produce a shortfall of teachers, a shortfall of student support, and workplace instability?

Mr. Lukaszuk: I will not say that, but what I will tell you is that this government will continue to be committed to one of the top three education systems in the world, as we are known for. I can tell you, Mr. Speaker, that we will make sure that students in every classroom receive that world-class education. I can tell you further that we will not be negotiating contracts with teachers on the floor of this Legislature because we know that we have partners in education and school boards and teachers and parents and this government that will negotiate a contract. [interjections]

The Speaker: Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, or Thursday there still is a need for civility.

2:10 Student Aid Program

Dr. Brown: Mr. Speaker, the cost of postsecondary education and training in Alberta is causing students to incur huge debt loads that may deter a lot of them from pursuing further education. Meanwhile, students that are long past the age of majority have been denied financial assistance because of their parents' income. All of my questions are for the Minister of Advanced Education and Technology. When will the minister bring relief to those students who are hindered by their finances from achieving their educational goals?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Weadick: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'd like to thank the member for asking that question and also the Member for Calgary-Mackay for actually bringing it up last year in the House. We have been looking at student finances as an issue and an impediment to some students. In fact, the Premier asked us to review this and promised to review this. I'm happy to tell you that today we announced significant changes around student finances that will make access to student loans easier. This is a promise made, a promise kept.

Dr. Brown: What is the minister doing to ensure that potential students who may not be able to rely on their parents or family for assistance have recourse to the student aid program?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Weadick: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. I do appreciate that. The old student loan system was extremely difficult to navigate. It was complex, so we've simplified it. We are now having a flat rate of \$1,500 assumed earnings by a student so that they don't have to try to calculate their part-time earnings, their parents' incomes are not taken into consideration when they apply for student loans, and their RRSP savings are not considered when we're considering student loans. So all students in Alberta should have access to student loans if they're needed.

Dr. Brown: Well, I thank the minister for that. It's very good news. Instead of searching for essential workers from abroad to work in Alberta, what's the minister doing to train and retrain our essential workers who may live and work here in Alberta and want to continue doing so?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Weadick: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. In my mandate

letter from the Premier she's asked me to work very closely with rural, remote, and aboriginal students to try to increase the numbers of students that are attending postsecondary. So we're going to work very closely with all of those groups. We're going to utilize smoother financial application rules to try to entice more students to get involved in postsecondary, and we're going to work closely with Education to streamline that process as students move from high school into the postsecondary system.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Mountain View, followed by the hon. Member for Red Deer-North.

Physician Services Agreement

Dr. Swann: Thanks very much, Mr. Speaker. Physicians in the province have been without a contract since March 31, 2011. In her January letter to members of the Medical Association President Dr. Linda Slocombe explained the importance of the eight-year master agreement in establishing a relationship between Alberta Health, Alberta Health Services, and the physicians as one step "to rebuild trust." To the minister: why did last week's budget leave no room for a renegotiated contract?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Horne: Well, thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Budget 2012 includes provision for physician services and development. It does not include provision for a new agreement for the specific reason that we have not yet reached an agreement.

Dr. Swann: Or is it punishment for not signing a contract yet, Mr. Speaker?

With no commitment to secure funding for primary care networks, only new family care clinics, whatever those are, what is it supposed to mean for the much-needed development of primary care networks? Is this supposed to rebuild trust?

Mr. Horne: Well, Mr. Speaker, fortunately, I am in regular communication with Dr. Slocombe, the president of the Alberta Medical Association, and I can tell you that what neither she nor I would want to happen is to have a negotiation of this agreement on the floor of this House. What we are doing is discussing ways that we can build on the success of primary care networks and many other initiatives that flow out of the previous eight-year agreement. The discussions are productive, they're ongoing, and I'm very optimistic that we'll have an agreement.

Dr. Swann: Well, it's very disappointing, Mr. Speaker, for those on the front lines of primary care networks that this government has made no commitment to primary care network increases.

The new internal hotline for doctors to report intimidation or abuse shows that this government is desperately trying to improve patient care a baby step at a time. Why does the government continue to treat front-line health workers with so little respect?

Mr. Horne: Well, Mr. Speaker, nothing could be further from the truth. The physician hotline that was reported on today in the media is, I think, a very clear demonstration of the commitment of not only this government but Alberta Health Services to supporting physicians and indeed to supporting all health professionals in advocating on behalf of their patients. To suggest that we would entertain a discussion about the detailed negotiations with the AMA on the floor of this House simply speaks to, if I may say, the naïveté of the questioner.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Red Deer-North, followed by the hon. Member for Calgary-McCall.

Expanded Role for Pharmacists

Mrs. Jablonski: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Earlier today the Minister of Health and Wellness made three announcements that will change the way that pharmacy is done in Alberta. Starting July 1 this year, Alberta pharmacists will be reimbursed for renewing prescriptions, government will pay less for generic drugs, and a grant will be offered to pharmacies in small communities to help them adjust to lower generic prices. My question is to the Minister of Health and Wellness. I thought pharmacists could already renew prescriptions in Alberta. What's different about this plan?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Horne: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Well, one of the differences is that pharmacists will now be paid in order to renew prescriptions. As the hon. member may know, previously pharmacists relied solely on dispensing fees. This new initiative recognizes the role of the pharmacist as a full partner in the delivery of primary health care. It compensates pharmacists for the exercise of their professional expertise and their clinical judgment in serving patients with prescription renewals.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mrs. Jablonski: Thank you. Also to the Minister of Health and Wellness: given that pharmacists in my constituency have expressed concerns that reducing generic drug prices will adversely affect their businesses, why is government meddling in the way Alberta pharmacies operate?

Mr. Horne: Well, Mr. Speaker, the government isn't meddling in the business practices of pharmacists. In fact, I'm pleased to report to the House that since 2009 this government has provided over \$75 million in transition support for pharmacists as we developed a new professional compensation model for pharmacists across Alberta.

Today's announcement will open up to a thousand new locations across the province for Albertans to have their prescriptions renewed. I think most pharmacists view this as very good news, Mr. Speaker. We're continuing to work with them on the implementation.

Mrs. Jablonski: Again to the same minister: if lower generic drug prices are nothing to worry about, why set up a safety net for rural pharmacies in the form of the remote pharmacy access grant?

Mr. Horne: Mr. Speaker, as many hon. members will know from their constituencies, many of our rural and remote pharmacies who are operating independently rely very heavily on the traditional income stream through the sale of generic drugs in their particular business. This transition support, which falls, as I said, on the heels of over \$75 million in support over the last three years, will assist pharmacists in the transition to the new compensation model, which focuses on the professional fee for professional health care delivered to Alberta patients.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-McCall, followed by the hon. Member for Calgary-Mackay.

Twinning of Highway 63

Mr. Kang: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I was extremely saddened to

hear about the tragic bus crash involving over 30 people travelling from Edmonton to Fort McMurray last Friday. The crash that occurred on highway 28, which like highway 63 is not twinned, made me think even more about why this government is cutting funding for highways at a time when our population and economy are growing. A large increase in oil and gas mining means more trucks on the road. To the Minister of Transportation: can the minister tell this House why his department is slashing spending on highways by 38 per cent by 2015 when the province is growing and needs more and better highways, not fewer highways?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Danyluk: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. This government has supported transportation and highways with unprecedented investment, in fact a small 38 per cent higher than the average spending of provinces throughout Canada.

Mr. Speaker, I also want to say to you that we are spending money in the right places. In fact, the hon. member needs to know, if he read the budget and looked at it carefully, that we are spending 150-plus million dollars on highway 63.

The Speaker: The hon. member, please.

Mr. Kang: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. We don't build better highways by cutting spending.

To the minister again: given that last Thursday I asked the minister for leadership in fast-tracking the twinning of highway 63 and he refused by saying that it sounded like I would say yes to, quote, any necessary highway in Alberta, unquote, can the minister tell this House why this government will not say yes to funding highways even though they are, by their own admission, necessary?

2:20

Mr. Danyluk: Mr. Speaker, I'm not sure how much more clear I can make it: \$150 million being spent on highway 63. Our commitment has been there to support highway 63, and we are continuing to be committed to highway 63. We have just completed the Athabasca bridge, which is the biggest bridge in Alberta. We have just committed to an interchange that has been completed. We are committed to the twinning that we have done.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Kang: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm talking about twinning highway 63 – we are not talking about underpasses, overpasses, and bridges – and we want to get it done by 2015.

Again to the minister. Let's cut to the chase for the passengers on that bus. Exactly when will the Ministry of Transportation finish twinning highway 63? Give us the exact date.

Mr. Danyluk: Mr. Speaker, from Grassland to Wandering River \$450 million is going to be spent and is continuing to be spent to twin that highway. We have committed to twinning highway 63, and we will continue to commit to twinning that highway. We have finished twinning the highway from Fort McMurray to highway 881, and this is what the municipality of Wood Buffalo is asking for.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Mackay, followed by the hon. Member for Calgary-Fish Creek.

Aboriginal Education

Ms Woo-Paw: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. In December 2010 the Senate Committee on Aboriginal Peoples released the report

Reforming First Nations Education: From Crisis to Hope, and it says that reserve schools operate in isolation without the necessary support and called for a complete overhaul of Canada's First Nations education system. In January the federal government, British Columbia, and First Nations reached an historic education deal to provide First Nations students with access to quality education. One of the key issues is addressing the 20 per cent funding gap. My questions are to the Minister of Education. With the current funding challenges that face students on-reserve . . .

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Lukaszuk: Mr. Speaker, this member highlights a very important subject matter, and the Senate committee is perfectly right. The condition of education for our aboriginal community, particularly on-reserve, is frankly deplorable, and it needs to be addressed. Whatever we have done for the last 150 years has simply not worked. So the province of Alberta is willing to take leadership, and we have already indicated to our colleagues in the federal government that we are willing to lend our expertise in providing world-class education. As a matter of fact, we're willing to come to the table with money to help offset the differential between the federal level of funding and the provincial level of funding.

Ms Woo-Paw: When the federal aboriginal affairs minister signed the agreement in B.C., he said that other reform partnerships are likely. Would the minister inform the House whether such a partnership exists for Alberta, and if yes, what is the status of the partnership?

Mr. Lukaszuk: Well, Mr. Speaker, the province of British Columbia needs to be congratulated for acknowledging the problem and being willing to do something about it. I understand it took some 15 years to bring this agreement about, and it's still not being executed. We know we have the expertise in providing education. We have the means to do so. The federal government has the ability to leverage their relationship with aboriginal communities who are willing to step in and assist the federal government in making sure that all children – they're Alberta children; they're Canadian children – receive the top-notch education that they deserve.

Ms Woo-Paw: What is your ministry's response to the Senate's report, which calls for a First Nations education act to establish legal power for educational authorities that would be accountable to parents and communities?

Mr. Lukaszuk: Mr. Speaker, I respect that recommendation from the point of view that aboriginal communities should have a high degree of determination relative to the curriculum and the means by which the education system is run, just like we do in all communities by way of school boards. But one thing I would like to point out is that we don't need duplication. We have the expertise to deliver world-class education. There is the will on behalf of this government and school boards to contribute. We're willing to offer that instead of actually focusing our time on replicating a system that already exists.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Fish Creek, followed by the hon. Member for Calgary-Varsity.

Accommodation and Health Care for Seniors

Mrs. Forsyth: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My questions today are directed to the Minister of Seniors. Over 1,800 seniors continue to

be stuck in hospitals waiting for long-term care. Under the current continuing care model seniors are paying up to \$4,000 a month just to be in accommodations and extra if they want medications given to them. Will the Seniors minister then make it crystal clear to Albertans who will be paying for services under the newly proposed continuing care model? Will it be the government, or will it be seniors?

Mr. VanderBurg: Well, thank you for that question. The Premier and your government have made it very clear that vulnerable Albertans will be taken care of and will continue to be taken care of. I can tell you that the health services in our continuing care models will be completely paid for by the province of Alberta.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mrs. Forsyth: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Given that for seniors to get more than one shower a week at these continuing care homes they have to pay an extra \$20 and for a bath they have to pay \$50, the seniors would like to challenge the minister to see if he could survive on just one shower a week and would like to know if the minister thinks it's fair for seniors to be nickelled and dimed to pay for more than one shower a week.

Mr. VanderBurg: Well, Mr. Speaker, this is getting pretty personal, and I wouldn't be satisfied with one shower a week. The citizens and the Albertans that I have visited – and I've visited thousands of them over the last number of months in our seniors' homes – are very proud of the services they receive. We have invested millions of dollars, \$600 million over the last 12 years, to create 10,000 spaces. We're proud of it.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mrs. Forsyth: Thank you. Given that just last Wednesday the Premier said in the Assembly, "We in this government have guaranteed that publicly funded health care will be available for all Albertans, including seniors," could the minister then clarify to seniors in this province whether they will be the ones who will be paying for the services, or will it be the government? If they are paying for the services, where do they send their bills to get reimbursed?

Mr. VanderBurg: Mr. Speaker, I will not argue with the Premier. She's absolutely correct, and I stated it earlier. Health services in our seniors' facilities will be paid for by the province of Alberta.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Varsity, followed by the hon. Member for Bonnyville-Cold Lake.

Support for Tourism

Mr. Chase: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Tourism in Alberta is a \$6 billion a year industry. For every dollar invested in tourism, there is an estimated \$10 return. Last spring this government boasted of its efforts to promote our tourism industry despite economic hardships. This Premier's budget, which fails to promote Alberta as a tourism destination, directly impacts not only our economy; it also undermines our global status. To the minister of tourism: how can this minister justify the \$5 billion in cuts to tourism and the escalatingly negative impact it will have on Alberta as a tourism destination?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Hayden: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I have no idea what the hon. member is talking about: \$5 billion in cuts to tourism. In fact, the promotion of tourism in this province is done through Travel Alberta, and that's done through a fee that's collected through the hotel industry. There's a sustainability fund with that organization. In the case of reduced revenues they will top it up with the sustainability fund. We're aggressively promoting Alberta all over the world.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Chase: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. If there was confusion, it was on my part: \$5 million. I may have said billion by mistake.

To the same minister: does the minister understand the terrible impacts these cuts will have on jobs here in Alberta? It is a cut.

Mr. Hayden: Mr. Speaker, there are no cuts to the Tourism, Parks and Recreation budget. It has actually been increased somewhat.

We are aggressively going out to bring more tourists to this province. We are working very hard on the international markets as 7 per cent of our tourists are international tourists, but they're 25 per cent of our revenues. Mr. Speaker, I'm hoping to increase by close to 20 per cent the amount of tourism dollars that are spent in this province over the next three years.

Mr. Chase: Tourism requires investment. It's not happening.

To the same minister: given that a majority of Albertans want greater protection for our parks, why is this government again acting against Alberta's will and cutting more than a million dollars in funding to parks support?

Mr. Hayden: Mr. Speaker, we are expanding our parks system. We're adding new group camping areas. We have 480 provincial parks in this province, more parks than any other province in the country. There is a park within a maximum of an hour's drive of all Albertans. We're very proud of them, and we continue to invest in them.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Bonnyville-Cold Lake, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview.

2:30

Teachers' Salary Negotiations

Mrs. Leskiw: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My first question is to the Minister of Education. The minister has said that he is working to secure a long-term labour deal with teachers. As a former teacher I know the important role that teachers play in this province and the recognition they do deserve. Seeing as the minister wanted a labour deal for the budget and the budget was last week and there is no deal, will the school boards be surprised with the new collective agreement?

Mr. Lukaszuk: Well, Mr. Speaker, a school board could not possibly be surprised because they are at the negotiating table. I hope that they will negotiate in good faith, just like the ATA and the government of Alberta will, to the benefit of the students. We have some of the best outcomes in the world in our classrooms. Our teachers are handsomely compensated, better than anywhere else in Canada, and so they should be because the product, obviously, warrants that. We are still way off from expiry of this particular agreement, so I know that they will all be negotiating in good faith and will find the solution that. . .

The Speaker: The hon. member, please.

Mrs. Leskiw: My final question is to the same minister. If you already proposed a salary settlement without negotiation, what is the point of the negotiating committee continuing to meet?

Mr. Lukaszuk: Well, Mr. Speaker, there was plenty of opportunity to negotiate an agreement before this budget. I was very clear that I would have preferred to know what the agreement was before this budget was put together, but I don't think the ministers of health and seniors and others would want to wait for me with their budgets until teachers negotiate an agreement with school boards and the government. The budget has to go on, life has to go on, and they will have to negotiate within the parameters of this budget.

The Speaker: The hon. member? Fine?

The hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview, followed by the hon. Member for Calgary-Bow.

Postsecondary Education Funding

Dr. Taft: Thanks, Mr. Speaker. Every year Alberta postsecondary institutions fall farther behind financially. Instead of seizing the moment and building a great future, this government seems to be choking it off. With budget squeezes the past three years and effective cuts to operating grants in the next three years, Alberta's postsecondary institutions will yet again fail to keep up with growing enrolment, aging infrastructure, and inflation. To the minister of advanced education: will the minister admit that this government's policies are forcing program cuts upon Alberta's universities for years to come?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Weadick: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm very proud to stand up and talk about this budget and the impact that it's going to have on our postsecondaries. This is a very good-news story, and my presidents, my board chairs, and even my students have come forward and said: this is exactly what we needed. This is about helping to provide stability, long-term funding, and they tell me that this is enough to make sure that they are sustainable into the future and that they can continue to provide the quality of programming that our students want and need.

Dr. Taft: To the same minister: given the constant needs for upgrading, maintaining, and expanding our universities, colleges, and technical institutes, how can this government justify the \$192 million in cuts to postsecondary infrastructure funding?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Weadick: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Over the past six years we've invested \$3 billion in infrastructure on our postsecondaries and \$770 million in repair and maintenance budgets. We're the envy of any province in this country, and our postsecondaries are truly well maintained.

Mr. Speaker, we did have a bump over the past two or three years in maintenance budgets to help with the KIP program, that the feds had put in, to match that. This year we've gone back to the types of infrastructure budgets that we've had in the past, and it will help us to maintain . . .

The Speaker: The hon. member, please.

Dr. Taft: Again to the same minister: given that in the leadership race the Premier promised greater funding for research and development, why was \$4 million cut in research capacity programs in this budget?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Weadick: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. Once again, this is another promise made and a promise kept by our Premier. Within my budget we have increases to all four of the Alberta Innovates corporations. On top of that, we have 9 million new dollars invested in prion research and water research, for which we are the envy of Canada and North America.

Mr. Speaker, this is a good-news budget for research. We are going to continue to move forward with the research agenda that we need to make sure Alberta businesses and Alberta people have what they need.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Bow, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Logging in the Bragg Creek Area

Ms DeLong: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Many of my constituents enjoy using the trails in the forest reserve west of Bragg Creek. They all know about the tragedy of the Slave Lake fire, so they do understand that logging needs to take place in the area to protect Bragg Creek village. Now, their concerns relate to the details of the extent of the logging. If my constituents were unable to attend a consultation in Bragg Creek on January 26, would the Minister of Sustainable Resource Development tell us how they can provide feedback to optimize their future trail experience while still protecting Bragg Creek from forest fires?

Mr. Oberle: Well, Mr. Speaker, it's regrettable, I guess, that some people were unable to attend the public consultation meeting. This is a multiple-use area, and occasionally there are conflicts in land use. If anybody has a use or a value that they see in that landscape and they would like the company to harvest in a different manner or consider that value on the landscape, if they couldn't attend the public meeting, they could contact the company directly, or they could attend one of our offices to express their concern.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Ms DeLong: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. To the same minister: now, if there are trails in the area that need to be rebuilt because of the logging, who will take on this responsibility?

Mr. Oberle: Well, Mr. Speaker, that's precisely why the ministry makes sure that the company does public consultations, to identify conflicts like that and to deal with them up front. It's always better if we can deal with them up front, mitigate the impacts of one user on another user, and then we don't have to get into questions like that.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Ms DeLong: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. To the same minister. I also have constituents who wish to change the whole approach to logging on the eastern slopes. What opportunities are available for them to influence those decisions?

Mr. Oberle: Well, Mr. Speaker, I'd have to have a clearer definition of what you mean by the whole approach to logging. If people are interested in different logging methods and different management practices on the eastern slopes, then there are a myriad of opportunities for them to be involved in the management planning process or the operations planning process, to visit with the company when they do their open houses, to

express their concerns or desires to forest management personnel, to SRD personnel. There's a lot of opportunity to do that. If they're in fact concerned that we should not be logging on the eastern slopes, that's a different conversation, and they should attend the South Saskatchewan regional planning process to express that desire.

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

Revenue from Problem Gambling

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. The government anticipates revenue from Alberta gaming, or the Alberta gaming and liquor control board, of roughly \$1.3 billion this year. Now, in 2011 gross profit from VLTs was \$492 million. To the President of the Treasury Board: what percentage of this VLT revenue comes from the pockets and purses of problem gamblers?

Mr. Horner: Well, Mr. Speaker, I'd have to take that question under advisement for the minister responsible. However, I'm quite confident that those numbers are available and that the minister is working on a number of projects and programs to help those individuals who may have an issue with a gambling-related habit.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm surprised the hon. minister is not up to speed on this given that he's the one that counts the cash.

Given that in 2011 gross profits to the government from slot machines were over \$800 million, what percentage of this slot machine revenue comes from the pockets and purses of people in this province with problem gambling habits?

Mr. Horner: Well, Mr. Speaker, I'm equally surprised that the hon. member is not aware of the division of the different departments. The Minister of Finance has the AGLC under that purview. Again, I will take the question under advisement and ensure that the hon. member gets an adequate response.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I appreciate the minister's response. However, I'm not satisfied with it, so I'm going to go to the Minister of Justice. Why is it necessary to exempt the Alberta Gaming and Liquor Commission from the Lobbyists Act, which is clearly under your observation? I can say that.

Mr. Olson: Mr. Speaker, we have just finished a consultation regarding the Lobbyists Act, and I don't recall there being any comment about that at all as a concern.

The Speaker: Hon. members, that concludes the question-and-answer period for today. Eighteen members were recognized, with 106 questions and responses.

Statement by the Speaker

Questions about the Budget

The Speaker: A fair number of the questions today had to do with the budget, and of course, as all members know, the budget process begins later today, as I recall, and will continue probably to the third week of March. Now, some very specific questions occurred in the question period today. Members should be aware

that estimates will be provided, that time frames will be provided, two or three hours for each of these estimates. I can understand the need for generalized questions with respect to the budget, but if this is going to degenerate into a specific question-and-answer response, then why have the time allocated for a review of the budget at a later date?

As an example, I noticed the schedule that's coming up. I can see that the estimates for the Minister of Justice and Attorney General are tomorrow evening, so all members might want to attend. Ample hours will be provided for that.

2:40

On February 21 the Minister of Finance will be here in the Assembly for probably three hours. I'm sure there'll be ample time for specific questions with respect to that at that time.

Questions were raised as well with the Minister of Tourism, Parks and Recreation. He will be available in this Assembly on the evening of March 5 to basically deal with the specifics of those particular budgets. And I can go on.

Yes, absolutely, questions on the budget I'll accept as totally appropriate in the question period, but if they're going to be online questions and addressed to ministers whose departments have not come up yet, I think there's a better opportunity for us to take a look at that at a later time. So just a little bit of advice with respect to that.

We're now going to return to Member's Statements. I still have six members who wish to give a member's statement. It's now 18 minutes to 3.

Members' Statements

(continued)

The Speaker: We will continue and hear first from the hon. Member for Calgary-Mountain View.

Integration of Community Services with Health Care

Dr. Swann: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. This government continues to talk about delivering and improving mental health services, but it doesn't deliver. A substantial number of individuals and families are reporting a lack of responsiveness, unsafe wait times for help, and inappropriate placement of family members and friends with mental illness, especially coming from the Edmonton region. The Health Facilities Review Committee in Calgary reported as much in December of last year, commenting on the Peter Lougheed's long-standing shortage of beds for psychiatric crisis, with no surge capacity when a crisis happens. This increases risk for patients as well as staff and families, including preventable deaths.

It's time for action. Shortage of community and in-patient services predictably results in emergency room overcrowding and mental health patients in hallways on the ward, sometimes unsafely placed with other types of medical problems throughout the hospital. Wait times most recently reported in Calgary include active treatment wait of six months, a six-month wait for psychiatric assessment, and so on. Young adults and those with chronic conditions or sudden worsening of their illness are increasingly being pushed out of institutional care prematurely and placing themselves at risk as well as risking others. This means harm to themselves, to family and community, and inappropriate incarceration in jails at times, where roughly a third of inmates are known to have mental illness.

Community services must be integrated better with the institution to ensure a safe transition from one to the other and

more successful maintenance of in-patients in the community. As the report Poverty Costs last week indicated, we will pay and our fellow citizens will pay one way or the other by failing to provide sufficient community resources for people with addictions, homelessness, and mental illness. Our hotline has received calls from family members being injured and suffering major mental distress in attempting to get attention from a system that is supposed to relieve them.

Albertans and their long-suffering families continue to seek basic care. Albertans deserve better, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Bonnyville-Cold Lake.

Primco Dene Rewarding Partnerships Award

Mrs. Leskiw: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It is a pleasure to rise today to speak about an incredible company in my constituency of Bonnyville-Cold Lake, Primco Dene. Based in Cold Lake and owned by the Cold Lake First Nations, Primco Dene is a model for First Nations business development in Alberta. On February 10 Primco Dene was presented with a rewarding partnerships award by the hon. Minister of Intergovernmental, International and Aboriginal Relations. The aboriginal rewarding partnerships award, which is presented annually at the Alberta Chamber of Resources awards banquet, recognizes companies and aboriginal partners that demonstrate excellence in innovation, best practices, sustainability, and capacity building.

Mr. Speaker, this government is very proud of its efforts to enhance aboriginal participation in Alberta's diverse economy. One of the ways we do this is by promoting and facilitating economic partnerships among aboriginal businesses, industry, and government. Companies like Primco Dene exemplify how strong business partnerships can yield long-term benefits for aboriginal communities and industry alike. This government is proud to support the Alberta Chamber of Resources in recognizing aboriginal-owned companies like Primco Dene, and we look forward to continuing this valuable partnership in years to come.

I would like to congratulate Primco Dene on this tremendous accomplishment and thank them for the amazing work that they do in my constituency.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Sherwood Park.

Brain Health Symposium 2012

Ms Evans: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Through the Seniors' ministry the office of the public guardian is offering the first annual Brain Health Symposium next week both in Calgary and in Edmonton. In Calgary this symposium is already fully subscribed, which is a good-news story, but in Edmonton we still have placements.

Mr. Speaker, we've learned that people who have a brain injury often have mental health and other health-associated difficulties. The most thrilling thing we're learning through Dr. Norman Doidge's book, *The Brain That Changes Itself*, is that the neuroplasticity of the brain allows us to have a brain that can change in function as we age. It lends new hope that people who have a brain injury might yet recover.

There are others that are local people that are going to be part of this symposium: Suzette Brémault-Phillips, Dr. Catherine Phillips, and Dr. Peter Wass. Many of you will know him from FASD fame. He's done much in terms of research of brain-injured people. They will be speaking as part of it. It's affiliated with the

Alzheimer Society and Alberta Health Services. We expect guests from the Northwest Territories and other places.

Mr. Speaker, the most exciting thing, I think, that will materially happen with this symposium is that people for the first time will get together and talk about what can be done with brain injuries. We've backed away from that as a society at times, but it's time and it's very topical to look after those that have brain injuries. The office of the public guardian, who usually does that job, is now championing the advocacy and education for people that need it.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Nose Hill.

Queen Elizabeth II Diamond Jubilee

Dr. Brown: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. This year is the Diamond Jubilee of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II, which marks her 60 years as monarch and head of state of the United Kingdom and Canada and several other Commonwealth nations. Upon her coronation at the age of 27 our young Queen promised to follow the example of her parents in dedicating her life, whether it be short or long, to serve the people of her realms, including Canada. We are indeed thankful that her life and her service have been long and fruitful. She has made some 30 visits to our country, strengthening the bonds of loyalty and affection which Canadians feel for her.

At her coronation Her Majesty stated:

Parliamentary institutions, with their free speech and respect for the rights of minorities, and the inspiration of a broad tolerance in thought and expression – all this we conceive to be a precious part of our way of life and outlook.

As a constitutional monarchy Canada's system of governance has evolved peacefully, without violence or revolution, to become a shining example of a free and democratic state to the rest of the world. Indeed, our parliamentary government and Constitution, inherited from the United Kingdom, with the Queen as head of state have served us well as a nation bound together by respect for human rights, including the right to freely choose those who govern us and make our laws. As Albertans we are proud of this form of government here in our provincial Legislature with the Queen as head of state as embodied in her representative, our Lieutenant Governor. On her Diamond Jubilee I know I speak for all hon. members when I say that we are thankful for Her Majesty's 60 years of service to Canada and Canadians. God save our noble and gracious Queen.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Stony Plain.

2012 Alberta Winter Games

Mr. Lindsay: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. This past weekend we welcomed more than 2,800 young Albertans, their parents, and supporters in my constituency of Stony Plain and Parkland county and in our neighbouring community of Spruce Grove. We were thrilled to host 20 great events during the 2012 Alberta Winter Games. The results are in, and Calgary won the Alberta Cup with the most overall points. The Sunny South won the Minister's Cup for the most improved performance, and the Parkland zone, stretching from Rocky Mountain House to Coronation, won the spirit of sport award.

2:50

The young athletes who participated in these games are the future of sport in our province. With continued perseverance many

of them will move on to become national competitors or even to the next Olympics. They are an inspiration. They inspire us to do our best, to put the team first, to respect our competition, and to have fun. These young people also inspire Albertans of all ages to get more active. As a government we are proud to support these games through the Alberta Sport, Recreation, Parks and Wildlife Foundation.

Mr. Speaker, I also want to thank the volunteers and organizers for their hard work and dedication to amateur sports and competition. They created a memorable experience for anyone and everyone involved. With the approach of summer we now look forward to the start of the 2012 Alberta Summer Games in Lethbridge this July.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Central Alberta Ronald McDonald House

Mrs. Jablonski: Mr. Speaker, when a child is very ill, the only thing they want is to be near their mom and dad. It has been said that the greatest gift that you can give a sick child is their family. After three years of hard work and fundraising, Red Deer and central Alberta were recently invited to an open house to come and see the newest Ronald McDonald House in Canada.

Thanks to the efforts of a group of very dedicated people in Red Deer and central Alberta \$12 million was raised to build Alberta's third Ronald McDonald House, the 13th in Canada. This is a remarkable community accomplishment that involved large corporations, small businesses, many organizations, and many individuals. Donations ranged from the million dollars given by Mary Bea Quinn, donated on behalf of her late husband, Bernard, to the \$18,000 raised through hot dog sales by Jenaya Moore and Caitlyn Richardson, two young students of Poplar Ridge school.

The members of the dedicated Capital Campaign committee include four generations of the Radford family – Lyn and Reg Radford, Marg Imeson, Erin and Chris Buckland, Jamie and Geordin Flett, Ashley and David Brant, and Andrew Radford – as well as Kathy Bontje, Mike Chorlton, Dale Devereaux, Marty Vellner, Tracy Graf, Melanie Warren, Cathy Fowler, Greg Shannon, Tera Lee Flaman, Andy Cuthbertson, Tom and Margaret Towers, and Connie Sutter.

The families of the very sick children who will be very grateful for their home away from home may not ever get the chance to meet the members of this dedicated committee or those who worked so hard to give them this gift of love, but every time a child's face lights up because they see their family or because they enter the Magic Room at Ronald McDonald House, it will be because so many people worked so hard to make sure they could receive the gift of their families.

The central Alberta Ronald McDonald House is a magnificent gift of love. I can't think of a better gift or a better legacy for those who made this home possible. Thank you to all the volunteers, donors, and sponsors who gave the greatest gift possible to the sick children of central Alberta and their families.

Presenting Petitions

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Highwood.

Mr. Groeneveld: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Today I rise to present a petition signed by over 3,700 Albertans predominantly from around the Little Bow, Highwood, and Livingstone-Macleod constituencies urging the government "to Not Approve" – and I repeat to not approve – "any application from BFI Canada/Prairie

Sky Resource Centre to Alberta Environment or the Municipal District of Foothills No. 31 for the proposed Prairie Sky Resource Centre." Clearly, all Albertans do not want to see prime agricultural land used for garbage waste landfills.

Introduction of Bills

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

Bill 201

Alberta Bill of Rights (Property Rights Protection) Amendment Act, 2012

Mr. Hinman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I request leave to introduce Bill 201, the Alberta Bill of Rights (Property Rights Protection) Amendment Act, 2012.

Property rights are essential to guarantee every citizen the right to liberty and the pursuit of happiness without the interference of government. It is paramount whenever we talk about good government that preserving and protecting property rights is one of the cornerstones of a prosperous society and a fully functioning democracy. Bill 201, Alberta Bill of Rights (Property Rights Protection) Amendment Act, 2012, seeks to preserve the original spirit in which the Bill of Rights was written and to guarantee landowners the right to a timely and fair compensation through the courts.

[Motion carried; Bill 201 read a first time]

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

Bill 203

Tobacco Reduction (Protection of Children in Vehicles) Amendment Act, 2012

Dr. Sherman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I request leave to introduce Bill 203, the Tobacco Reduction (Protection of Children in Vehicles) Amendment Act, 2012.

Mr. Speaker, it is our moral duty as a society to protect our vulnerable and our weak, especially our children. This act would amend the Tobacco Reduction Act by prohibiting smoking in cars when children are present. As an ER physician I can tell you that over the last 19, 20 years that I've been practising, many times I've seen young children six months, 12 months, 18 months old suffocating, and their parents smoke. They drive them to the hospital with severe asthma attacks, and they've been smoking on the way to the hospital.

The health risks of second-hand smoke for young children: there's extensive evidence that it damages their lung lining and it hurts their immunity. With respect to role modelling – I'll tell you, Mr. Speaker, that if you want to save on health care, let's make sure we have healthy children and make sure that they don't start smoking. When parents are smoking in front of their children, especially in cars, our children are smoking from day 1, at birth, and that's got to stop.

This measure would make smoking in cars with anyone under the age of 18 punishable by a maximum fine of \$1,000. It's an important preventative health step, the wisdom of which certain municipalities in this province and certain provinces in this country have already implemented.

I feel it's time Albertans take leadership in this issue to protect our children and the most vulnerable in our society.

Thank you.

[Motion carried; Bill 203 read a first time]

Tabling Returns and Reports

The Speaker: Okay. Can we go pretty quickly now? I don't want to run up against the 3 o'clock thing.

The hon. Member for Edmonton-Calder.

Mr. Elniski: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure to rise pursuant to section 15(2) of the Alberta Heritage Savings Trust Fund Act with the appropriate number of copies of the interim financial report for the fund for the nine months ended December 31, 2011. Copies have already been distributed to the members.

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

Ms Blakeman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I have more, but I'll just give you one today, and that is the letter from the Alberta Funeral Service Association president, Mitch Thompson. The letter he directed to me outlines the problems that the association has with the current contract for provision of services under children's services, Seniors, AISH, and Human Services. So that's a copy of the letter to me.

Thank you.

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

Ms Notley: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'd like to table the appropriate number of copies of several electricity bills Albertans have sent to the NDP opposition showing significantly increased and growing electricity costs.

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

Mr. Chase: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm tabling e-mails and three letters from the following individuals who are concerned about the proposed logging in the West Bragg Creek area, all of whom believe clear-cutting will damage an essential watershed and recreation area that thousands of Calgarians use to promote health and fitness and be detrimental to wildlife and natural species: Jerrel Wilkens, Masten Brolsma, Diane Schon, Jason Curtis, John Wong, Lorraine Lau, Corine and Stefan Frick, Elena Rhodes, Ferdl and Heather Taxbock, Donna Fallon, Lynn Whittingham, Maurice Gaucher, David Neame, Theo and Carol van Besouw, Marie-Andrée Ménard, Jennifer Wright, and Ryan Chambers.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: Hon. members, Standing Order 7(7) says that "at 3 p.m. the items in the ordinary daily routine will be deemed to be concluded and the Speaker shall notify the Assembly."

Mr. Chase: May I please ask you to ask all members to extend the time period to complete the business at hand?

The Speaker: I can certainly do that, and it will require unanimous consent.

[Unanimous consent granted]

The Speaker: Okay. The hon. Leader of the Official Opposition under Tabling Returns and Reports.

3:00

Dr. Sherman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and thank you to all the hon. members. I have four tablings. One is from Campaign for a Smoke-Free Alberta, Protecting Youth from Exposure to Tobacco Smoke in Vehicles, and I have five copies.

The second tabling is a graph of youth smoking rates among Albertans aged 12 to 19 that shows that our smoking rates had

initially decreased from 12 per cent to 11 per cent and are up to 14 per cent.

I have two other tablings pertaining to our utility bills. One is an excellent article written by Catherine Griwkowsky from the *Edmonton Sun*. It's labelled Power Bills... Canada's Energy Powerhouse Has Highest Electricity [Bills] in the Country.

Finally, I also have five copies of an annual report from 2010 from Hydro-Québec showing how Quebec has gotten no power or utility bills and has returned billions to the government of Quebec so they can provide essential services to the people.

Thank you.

The Speaker: Are there additional tablings?

The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you. I have two tablings today. The first is a letter dated November 30, 2011, from Wayne Sorenson, board member, Alberta Society for Pension Reform. This letter is addressed to the hon. Premier of Alberta. Certainly, this letter gives significant detail on the problems with the public service pension as indicated from a deal that goes back quite some time.

My second tabling is a response that Mr. Wayne Sorenson received not from the hon. Premier but from the Minister of Finance. This is dated February 1, 2012. I would encourage all hon. members of the Assembly to read both letters and familiarize themselves with this issue if they have not already done so.

Thank you.

Tablings to the Clerk

The Clerk: I wish to advise the House that the following documents were deposited with the office of the Clerk. On behalf of the hon. Mr. Horne, Minister of Health and Wellness, responses to written questions 3, 4, and 5, asked for by Dr. Swann on April 11, 2011; responses to written questions 16, 17, and 18, asked for by Dr. Swann on May 9, 2011.

On behalf of the hon. Mrs. McQueen, Minister of Environment and Water, pursuant to the Environmental Protection and Enhancement Act the Ministry of Environment and Water environmental protection security fund annual report, April 1, 2010, to March 31, 2011.

On behalf of the hon. Mr. Lukaszuk, Minister of Education, report dated January 27, 2012, entitled Alberta Education, Our Children, Our Future: Getting it Right, Final Report on Public Engagement, prepared by KPMG.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Airdrie-Chestermere on a purported point of order, please.

Point of Order Imputing Motives

Mr. Anderson: Yes, Mr. Speaker. I'm looking at Standing Order 23(h), (i), and (j). The Premier imputed false and unavowed motives to another member, among other things, when she said, referring to the Wildrose alternative budget, that we would cut the money in the budget for the building of new schools, 14 new schools as she referred to it, in the budget. If we look at the budget, what is said specifically is that the Wildrose caucus would invest [\$4.1] billion in new infrastructure (a per capita amount significantly higher than BC, Ontario, and Saskatchewan). These capital dollars would be focused primarily on the building of high priority road projects such as the Calgary and Edmonton ring roads, twinning Highway 63, long-term care facilities for seniors, and urgently needed schools

in our province and so forth. And it goes on and on and on.

Further on in our alternative budget it specifically notes that we would spend a portion of the increase of \$854 million in operational spending that we propose on hiring roughly 1,425 new teachers, teaching assistants, and support staff for students with special needs, for a total of \$114 million. Not only do we have in our budget that we would build those schools, every school that has been announced, but we would indeed have the money to staff those schools. Obviously, we did ask to cut the \$2 billion carbon capture and storage and other wasteful spending, but clearly the Premier was incorrect in that statement, and I ask her to be more informed next time.

The Speaker: The hon. Government House Leader.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Well, obviously, 23(h), (i), and (j) doesn't apply because that refers to a member, and the party is not a member. The defence that the hon. member has put up, indicating that he was referring to a party document, is clearly an entirely different thing.

However, that being said, it is a very simplistic document that he refers to, trying to balance a budget by cutting spending that is not being made. For example, the \$2 billion carbon capture and storage is not budgeted in one year but budgeted over a number of years, as the hon. member ought to know. It's the same with many of the other capital projects that are budgeted over a series of years, some of which could be I suppose delayed over a longer period of time if they wanted to, which they're advocating. That would not be a cost saving but would be an additional cost to Albertans to do it in that way, but they've ignored that in their simplistic analysis of the budget.

It's interesting because the hon. member, you know, last year and this year is talking about balancing the budget by failing to complete the essential infrastructure that Albertans need as we move forward but has no compulsion at all about then calling, as I recall last year at least, ministers responsible and asking when the infrastructure in his constituency will be completed on a timely basis.

Mr. Speaker, there's no point of order. It's simply the hon. member trying to play politics with the numbers and not appreciating the fact when people point that out.

The Speaker: Hon. members, I think the most pertinent information that's really required here has to do with the book *House of Commons Procedure and Practice*, second edition, page 634, which basically points out that points of order should not be used to continue debate on an issue.

Again, it's the continuation, basically, of the little suggestion that I made earlier that we're going to be into debate on the budget now for probably five weeks, and if the question period becomes part of that debate other than policy questions and if there are specific questions, then we're going to probably have these points of order every day. There's really not much need for that when you can have the points of order in the committee if you wish. You'll have three hours to play with it. But if the purpose of question period is to basically keep the government accountable and to basically seek information, then there should be questions of that particular nature.

Orders of the Day

The Speaker: The Government House Leader.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. We find ourselves in the unusual situation where we do not have private members' bills on

the table available for discussion at the moment, so I would ask for the consent of the House to proceed immediately to private members' motions, which would normally be considered at 5 o'clock.

Mr. Anderson: A point of clarification on the motion. Is there any way that under 77 of the standing orders I can request unanimous consent to proceed directly to private members' bills, starting with Bill 201?

The Speaker: Certainly, if I had caught your eye first, that probably would have happened, but the Government House Leader seemed to rise first, basically with respect to that motion. The request that we have here is because of what happened the other day, with the two bills not being introduced. I suspect that the request the hon. Member for Airdrie-Chestermere would want to make is for the House to give unanimous consent to allow second reading on private member's Bill 201. We have another motion that says that Motions Other than Government Motions, scheduled for 5 o'clock this afternoon, be advanced to 3 o'clock, which is now the time, and we deal with this now, not knowing what the outcome will be.

This is a kind of conundrum. This has not happened in a long time with respect to this matter. I do believe, though, that having caught my eye first, I must basically go with what it appeared to be, recognizing fully what request would come from the hon. Member for Airdrie-Chestermere. Now, in the event that the request being made by the Government House Leader is defeated, then we could go to the second one.

3:10

Hon. Government House Leader, if I understand, your request is that we move now to Motions Other than Government Motions. In other words, I would recognize the hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre to proceed with her motion. We would go for one hour, and I take it that that means we would then adjourn until 7:30 tonight. I'm not leading anybody here. I'm just trying to make sure we have this.

[Unanimous consent denied]

The Speaker: I'll recognize the request coming from the hon. Member for Airdrie-Chestermere. The hon. Member for Airdrie-Chestermere has requested that, in fact, the Assembly go to second reading of private member's Bill 201. This requires unanimous consent. Hon. Member for Airdrie-Chestermere, proceed with your request, please.

Mr. Anderson: Mr. Speaker, I rise under rule 77 of the standing orders, asking that the House give unanimous consent to proceed to private members' business, starting with Bill 201.

[Unanimous consent denied]

[The Assembly adjourned from 3:12 p.m. to 5 p.m.]

Motions Other than Government Motions

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre

Income Tax Rate

501. Ms Blakeman moved:

Be it resolved that the Legislative Assembly urge the government to introduce legislation that will replace the flat-rate income tax in favour of a progressive income tax whereby tax rates increase according to income.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker, for the opportunity to rise to a trumpet fanfare from somebody's computer coming on and speak to the motion that I have proposed. This is a motion other than a government motion. For those of you following along, that's done by any member of the House except for cabinet. We put these in a long time ago.

What I really wanted to do with this motion was start a conversation in this House. I've been interested in this issue for quite some time, and I think I was actually even raising it back when I was still on the Public Accounts Committee to those many years ago. I really think that this conversation has three parts to it. One is the current mix of revenue, how and where the government gets money and sort of what that ratio is. The second part is our nonrenewable resource revenue which we are blessed to have in this province, the questions about how we use it, whether we spend it now, spend it today, or we spend it in the future, save it for something in the future. Finally, I think the third piece of this puzzle is the taxation rate itself.

I note that last year the then Provincial Treasurer was very frank in admitting that we had \$11 billion of tax room that we could have been collecting from people before we matched the B.C. rate. Eleven billion dollars is a lot of income tax room. A lot. When we look at the deficits that the government is currently carrying – and I'm not going to be bothered with whether this is a technical deficit or a real deficit or an imaginary deficit – clearly, the amount that was brought in compared to the amount that was budgeted, there's a difference. I think that we really need to consider that.

We certainly have people that are asking for additional services. Frankly, nobody wants to pay more money if they don't have to, but when you really get into the conversation with Albertans as I do on a regular basis with my constituents, they're quite open about saying that, yeah, they'd rather have the service, thank you very much.

The most recent one I had was that for a \$60 increase in people's property tax, the city could be running one of those little snowplows down every single residential street, so you would never have to shovel the front of your street again. People were ecstatic. They wanted to know where they could pay that 60 bucks to get the snow cleared from the front of their house. People were clearly willing to pay additional taxes to get services that they viewed as valuable. Now you get into the discussion of: what do people think is valuable? There are a lot of those different discussions, particularly right now in my constituency where we have a long discussion about whether the arena is valuable and whether there should be tax money, provincial money, civic money, going into that. That's another whole discussion that I'm just not going to get into in my 10 minutes.

What I am seeing more and more of is the experts saying that this province really needs to think about this. When I look at different groups like the Shaping Alberta's Future, which was a government-requested report, that comes forward saying that, "You guys have got to look at this stuff," and we've got the likes of Jack Mintz and Peter Lougheed saying this and then we've got the Parkland Institute saying it and in North America we have very wealthy people like Warren Buffett saying it, I go, "Well, this might be time for something." So that whole discussion of where government gets revenue from: how much do they charge individual taxpayers versus corporations versus how much we take out of nonrenewable resource revenue?

Currently, just if anybody needs a little refresher, the budget that was brought forward in 2011 was expecting \$7.5 billion in personal income tax, \$3.4 billion in corporate, and the education property tax was expected to bring in \$1.6 billion. So we've got a

subtotal there of \$12.5 billion. You add in the sin taxes – gambling, tobacco, alcohol – and you've got another \$2 billion. Licences and fees for various things from hunting licences to campground fees and that sort of thing: \$4.4 billion. Interest – thank you, AIMCo – at \$1.9 billion. Now you're up to \$20.8 billion. Where's the rest of the money? Well, the rest of the money, \$8 billion of it, came from royalties that came out of the ground yesterday, and the federal government contributed \$5.2 billion by way of transfer payments for various agreements that they have with the provincial government.

I had a chart here, but I'm sure you've all seen the numbers. Twenty-three per cent of the revenue that this province spends comes from nonrenewable resource revenue. I think that's an issue that we need to look at because I don't think it's sustainable. I think that mixed in with all of this is a conversation about intergenerational debt, or spending our children's inheritance is another way of talking about that.

So this is all part of a larger mix, but in order to get that conversation going, I thought I'd be a little provocative and put it out there, specifically talking about an increase in the flat rate of income tax that we pay. I personally would like to push this far enough that we went back to a completely progressive form of taxation, but I recognize at this point that you can't do that overnight any more than we hope the federal government will not, you know, impose their changes to the old age security overnight. There has to be a phase-in period.

Indeed, the Alberta Liberal Party has brought forward as part of its platform a proposal in which the tax rate for those with a taxable income over \$100,000 would be an increased rate of 13 per cent, those with more than \$150,000 of taxable income would go to 15 per cent, and those over \$200,000 of taxable income would go to 17 per cent – so that's towards a progressive taxation system – but everybody else would still be at that 10 per cent flat tax. As we ran the numbers on that, we went: you know what? That still means that 90 per cent of the people in the province would be paying a 10 per cent rate, and just those high-income earners would be paying higher.

I'm going to try to bring this whole ball of wax back together for you. We've got a situation where increasingly people are telling us that we should not be spending our nonrenewable resource revenue as part of our daily operating money. One of those examples was a farmer who sells off, acre by acre, the family farm to buy groceries and to go to Blockbuster and for various other parts of their lives. You're right. That's not what you would do as a prudent person. We are expected to be the prudent people in Alberta in this House. So I encourage you to think of those possibilities that we could be discussing and moving forward on if we contemplated a progressive income tax.

I think we should go further there and look at what we're doing with our corporate taxes as well, which would allow us to not have 23 per cent of our budget being paid for by nonrenewable resource revenue. I think that revenue should be saved. It's not ours. It's everybody's, including future generations.

I think that's the Norway question. Clearly, we don't compare very well when we look at what Norway has done. They just took every single penny, and they put it into their fund, and then they passed a law that they could not dip into that and use the money for any investments inside of Norway. They can invest in things outside of Norway. Thus, you can expect them investing in Alberta – I think they already do – but not in their own country. So they couldn't manipulate what was going on in their own country. That fund, as we know, is just so far beyond ours, it's embarrassing to compare it at this point, while the heritage trust savings fund has diminished.

So to give ourselves time, let's look at taxes in the whole mix of things. Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: The hon. Solicitor General and Minister of Public Security, followed by the hon. Member for Calgary-Varsity and any other members who want to attract my attention.

Mr. Denis: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased to rise on Motion 501. I thank the Member for Edmonton-Centre for bringing this up. I just want to preface my comments that I'm not really feeling well today, so I'll have to spare the rest of you from my usual rapid-fire speech.

5:10

The member started a conversation; we're going to continue this conversation. The purpose of this motion she talked about is to replace the current single rate of income tax in favour of what she calls progressive income tax, which would see taxes rise along with income. This is an important debate.

One thing I do want to correct, Mr. Speaker, is that the current taxation structure is, in fact, a progressive system. It is with one rate as she points out – that is correct – but at the same time the manner in which this rate is applied is in a progressive manner because of the rather generous exemptions at the lower end.

I'll give you an example. Based on last year's exemptions someone who earns just under \$19,000 ends up paying 1.1 per cent, someone who earns \$47,000 pays 6.4 per cent, and someone who earns \$117,000 pays 8.5 per cent. Thank you to the Canadian Taxpayers Federation for those figures.

Of the nearly 2.7 million Albertans who file income taxes I was astonished, Mr. Speaker, that only 63 per cent actually pay any provincial income tax at all. That means 37 per cent of tax filers pay zero per cent income tax. That's right. One in 3 individuals don't have to pay income tax on their earnings. The system protects the families and individuals with lower incomes and provides citizens of this province with a simple tax system and also doesn't provide a disincentive for those who decide to put more time into their work.

Interestingly enough, if you look at the dollar take as well, Mr. Speaker, the bottom 50 per cent of income earners in this province only pay 3 per cent of the total take of the single rate of tax, the middle 40 per cent pay 40 per cent, and the top 10 per cent pay 57 per cent of the total take on this tax. I would respectfully submit to all members of this Assembly that those who earn more already pay more.

This has also created a very business-friendly environment. I would submit that Albertans benefit from one of the most competitive taxation systems in North America. This is something we can be proud of. This is due to low personal income, corporate, and fuel taxes coupled with no capital payroll and sales taxes. In fact, if our province had a system comparable to the next lowest province, as the member pointed out, Albertans and Alberta businesses would pay at least \$11 billion – that's billion with a "b", Mr. Speaker – more in taxes each year. I think that this room is a good thing. It's not a reason that we should be able to tax more. It provides this province with a clear and distinct competitive advantage.

Our ability to keep taxes low for all Albertans while maintaining first-class services and programs has been one of our biggest competitive edges. It is a primary reason, Mr. Speaker, why so many people have chosen to flock to Alberta in search of better economic prospects, and I have to say that I'm one of those individuals. In fact, the population of Alberta grew by 10 per cent over the past five to six years. That's almost half a million people

that have moved here since then. Obviously, something is going right when it comes to our economic policies.

This government respects the trust Albertans have that their government will spend their hard-earned money wisely and prudently. We also must ask ourselves: what's the primary engine of our economy? Is it the government, or is it the private sector? I respectfully submit that it is the latter. We are firmly committed to examining our entire fiscal framework with the goal of guaranteeing that tax dollars are spent in the most efficient way possible, providing the most amount of benefit to every Albertan.

This motion concerns implementing a different progressive tax system, and it's prudent that we all understand what that system entails. Most economists define a progressive tax system as one where the lower incomes pay a smaller share and those who earn more end up paying more. I've indicated that that is what this one already offers.

The income tax rate previously was tied to the portion of taxes collected by the federal government. Prior to 1999 it was set at 44 per cent of federal tax collection from an individual. Although the rate itself happened to be a single rate for all, due to the fact that the federal government has a progressive tax system with many different rates, we were tied to the feds, and we had very little control over this. So the fact that we actually delinked our taxation system was a positive move back then. I know other provinces, including Saskatchewan, have also done that.

In 1999 the provincial government announced that it would be moving to the single rate of tax. I think the economic success story that is Alberta speaks to the benefits of this policy. I would submit that changing the current system might affect the number of individuals who choose to migrate from other jurisdictions to Alberta, making it difficult for businesses to attract and retain employees.

Mr. Speaker, if you don't believe me, look no further than to Enterprise Saskatchewan, who in 2009 proposed going to a similar single rate of tax because of – what? – competition from Alberta. In other words, this could possibly impact the Alberta advantage.

One must also keep in mind that the tax system that this motion proposes would affect those earners that already provide the most tax revenue for the province. Additionally, the vast majority of Albertans are supportive of keeping taxes as low as possible without affecting services.

Now, Mr. Speaker, this government does not support additionally taxing middle-class families. We are providing excellent services with our current revenue. It is difficult to know what the opposition, I have to say with respect, is getting at. One minute they talk about how we're spending too much money, and now they talk about how they want to increase taxes. I would ask the question, Mr. Speaker, but first of all, I want to assume a fact that's not in evidence. Let's presume that this would result in a higher aggregate take of taxes. I'm not willing to give him that point because any second-year economics student who has taken Laffer economics knows that if you raise the tax too much, you drive out capital, you drive out investment, you drive out people, and you end up having a lower take. We don't know where exactly that point is, but let's just say that that's where it is.

Where would they spend this extra money? Mr. Speaker, the Leader of the Official Opposition has talked about raising taxes as much as 70 per cent. It is only the opposition in this House that is talking about raising taxes. What would they want to do? Would they want to give more free tuition to everyone? I think it's far better to target our resources to those who are in need like the minister of advanced education has announced today as opposed to going and affecting everyone and basically taxing everyone out of this province.

I do not believe that this is the right decision for our province to take. I think, in fact, that instead of questioning this, we should be thanking our former Treasurer, Stockwell Day, for his incredible success on this file. I will be voting against this motion, and I encourage all others to do the same.

I also want to mention to all members of this Assembly that if anybody here feels that we are undertaxed, if they do, the government accepts donations. Every government accepts donations. They can donate some of their own money in and of themselves. They can go and lead by example.

Now, Mr. Speaker, the last thing I wanted to mention was that the Member for Edmonton-Centre talked about Norway, and that is a topic worth discussion because that is an oil-producing state as well. One thing to remember about Norway is that it's a country; it's not a province. We send billions of our tax dollars to other provinces, which we're happy to do, but we have to recognize that Alberta is a province, not a nation. The second thing. I didn't have the time to look up Norway's tax rates, but I do know that Norway has a significantly higher value-added tax and a significantly higher income tax. Is that the type of society that we want to live in? I'd rather focus upon equality of opportunity than outcome.

People keep coming here. This system works, Mr. Speaker. I think that we should be very proud of the taxation structure that we have.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Varsity, followed by the hon. Member for Calgary-North Hill, then the hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona.

Mr. Chase: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. You and hon. members of this House might question what reception you would get when you ring the doorbell and say: "Hi, my name is . . . Vote for me, and I'll raise your taxes." You might think that the welcome mat would be drawn very quickly into the residence, or there might be a trap door that dropped you down into a dungeonlike circumstance.

What we are suggesting with Motion 501 on the Liberal Party tax policy is being transparent and being accountable, living on today's wages and bounty as opposed to a buy now, pay later scheme. Now, this proposal affects approximately 10 per cent of Albertans, and they're the 10 per cent of Albertans who are fortunate enough to on an individual basis be earning more than \$100,000 a year. We're all in that particular category of being in the 100,000-plus dollars circumstance as Members of this Legislative Assembly. Whether John Major decides to reduce that amount or raise it remains to be seen, Mr. Speaker, but you and I will not be participants in that discussion.

What we have proposed is a raising of the flat-tax rate for those earning over \$100,000 by 3 per cent. For those who earn in the category of \$150,000 to \$200,000, we're talking about a raise, an increase in tax of 5 per cent. For those earning over \$200,000, who are doing very well in Alberta, we've proposed to increase their rate by 7 per cent. As the hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre noted, even with these proposed increases to approximately 10 per cent of the better-off members of Alberta society, our taxes would be considerably lower than any other provincial jurisdiction.

5:20

Now, the hon. Solicitor General talked about the motivation that brings people to Alberta. For that motivation to be sustainable and for us to be able to keep the people that move here, we have to get past the gold rush mentality. We have to get off the roller coaster of nonrenewable energy prices set by a world market or set rather

exclusively by our southern partner. We are affected by a lower price for our product based on a glut of that product down in Chicago and down in Texas, where the proposal is to ship more of our raw bitumen rather than our refined product.

If we want to be able to control our own destinies not only now but into the future, in that future when we have drawn out every single sellable drop of oil and when we have decided that the speed at which we're extracting gas needs to be slowed down because we have such a surplus of it that the value of that product is tremendously diminished from what it was eight years ago, only at that point possibly, if the government continues in the direction it's headed, will we come to realize that we've blown the best opportunity that anyplace in the world had by not saving.

Now, what is part of Motion 501 is the notion that we should be setting aside a significantly larger portion of our nonrenewable resource revenue for the future. The hon. Solicitor General suggested that you can't compare the province of Alberta to the country of Norway, and he also indicated how much higher the taxes were in Norway. What he didn't mention – I don't think it was by neglect; he just simply didn't mention it – is the higher standard of living in Norway and that higher standard of living projected into years and years of guaranteed support for not only the grandchildren of today but successive grandchildren of the future.

We are basically individuals that are at the smorgasbord table stuffing down our meals as though there were no end in sight. This is a kind of nonconservative approach of getting those resources out of the ground as quickly as you can. Don't worry about refining them. Don't worry about value-added. Just sell them off as quickly as you can, and while you're selling them off, don't worry about the methodology you've chosen to get those resources to other areas. Simply, whether it's federal government or provincial government, ramrod your desires regardless of what the effects are. Take those resources out. Don't worry about the possibility of expanded tailings ponds. Don't worry about the fact that your resources will have greater value in the future when there is scarcity. Full speed ahead and, you know, as the expression goes, damn the torpedoes.

This living for the moment is very much like the fable of the ant and the grasshopper. Our Conservative government is fiddling. It has got no preparation for the winter. It has got no preparation for the time when science and technology comes up with alternatives to fuel-based energy. It's going to be a very dark time in Alberta. That time in terms of when we run out of not only conventional oil but synthetic alternatives is not as far off as some of the people in this parliament see. It's possible that the Solicitor General may still be alive to see those dark days when we have absolutely exploited every last bit of natural resource and there is no backup.

Contrast Peter Lougheed with every successive Premier of Alberta that we've seen since. His advice was taken at the time. He was innovative. He developed the notion of the investment worthiness of our oil sands. Peter Lougheed has been saying: "What have you done to my heritage trust fund? I put forward a good idea. I put forward a savings account. Why do you keep drawing from it?"

Another idea that was less, I guess, mercurial or less debatable that the Liberals put forward that this government actually accepted was the idea of a stability fund or a sustainability fund. We go back two years ago, and we had \$17 billion in that sustainability fund. Check your balance now, Conservative members. We're somewhere around \$3 billion. What happens if that rosy projection that we received in the name of a budget speech on Thursday doesn't come true? What if the prices of our nonrenewable resources are affected by a global market? What if

European circumstances draw down the debt to such an extent that there is a further collapse of our economic market? The U.S. is very slowly coming out of a very deep depression, but it's got a long way to go.

Something else that has a long way to go: it may seem like only 1,700 kilometres to the coast, to Kitimat, but the reality is that no matter how fast Stephen Harper tries to speed up the proposed Gateway discussions, there is a great deal of opposition. Unless we call out the troops and run roughshod, we've got a problem.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Nose Hill, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona, and then the hon. Member for Calgary-Bow.

The hon. Member for Calgary-Nose Hill.

Dr. Brown: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The hon. member has certainly raised an interesting proposition in that motion, one option that might be considered were the government to find it necessary to raise money to provide for its essential services. However, in the present situation that's certainly not the case. It's not even within the foreseeable future since we do have a sustainability fund and we've saved for the eventuality of low resource revenues and we're even projecting very significant surpluses in the very near future. The hon. member is implying that the current tax structure is not working for Albertans and that this so-called progressive tax rate would be a better way to go and a better way of taxing Albertans.

The hon. member's proposition, however, I think has some holes in it. Like my honourable friend the Solicitor General has said, there's a large amount of proportionality already built into our system, and that is because of the fact that we have these things called personal exemptions. Before you ever get taxed, you're allowed to deduct a certain amount of your income, and that recognizes the fact that people have certain living requirements, that they need a certain amount of income to live by.

Alberta is really already on a blended proportional tax regime in that respect because of the fact that we have a 10 per cent tax only on that taxable portion of income. In 1999, when the Treasurer at that time announced the provincial government was going to be converting to a flat-tax rate of 11 per cent, we were already tied to a de facto progressive rate before that time because we tied it to the percentage of the federal tax structure. In 2001 our flat tax was reduced even further to 10 per cent, which it now stands at.

5:30

It brings up the idea and the concept and the issue of: what's a fair share for people of different earning levels to pay? I would suggest that if you look at the performance of our economy here in Alberta, according to the latest statistical data we have grown by nearly 100,000 people in a single year. From 2010 up to December of 2011 almost 100,000 people have come into Alberta. They came here seeking better opportunities, and they're also benefiting from the Alberta advantage. They voted with their feet, and they voted for our economic system. They voted for our tax system, which has now the lowest overall taxes in the country.

We have average weekly earnings that are growing at a rate of almost 5 per cent every year. In other places they are remaining stagnant. We have the highest wages in the country, which are around 20 per cent above the national average. Mr. Speaker, because a flat tax rate is a percentage of taxable income, the proportion of income tax paid on that taxable income is the same for each and every Albertan even if they have more than the personal exemption. As the hon. Solicitor General stated and as I

started off with, the practical result is a degree of progressiveness already infused into the system.

Mr. Speaker, almost 2.7 million Albertans file a personal income tax return. Of those, 1.9 million pay federal income tax while only about 1.7 million, or about 63 per cent, pay provincial income tax. That means about 37 per cent of Albertans don't pay a single dime of provincial income tax, and I would submit that, in fact, the personal exemption, which is presently indexed and which goes up every year, is a far more important factor to those individuals in Alberta who are in the low-income category. It's a far more important factor to them than it is converting to some sort of a progressive tax system, and I believe that's an illustration of the fact that the flat tax is serving us very, very well. We have already provided for those Albertans which are in the low-income categories. We have something that is already very progressive.

One other final comment, Mr. Speaker, I would add. If you look at the way taxes are paid in Alberta, of those who do pay – as I said, approximately 63 per cent are paying income tax – the top 10 per cent of earners are contributing about 57 per cent of the income revenue generated in the province, so they're already paying more. They pay more for every dollar that they earn.

Mr. Speaker, in concluding, I think that the flat tax as it is now structured, with a basic personal exemption, is at the very core of Albertans' values. We're pioneers. We're entrepreneurs. We're self-starters. We value entrepreneurship, we value hard work, and we want people to be rewarded for that hard work. I believe that the tax structure that we have presently in place, with the 10 per cent flat tax, is fair, equitable, and consistent with what this government proposes. It's conservative values at its core.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona, followed by the hon. Member for Calgary-Bow, then the hon. Member for Calgary-North West.

Ms Notley: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I am pleased to be able to rise to speak in favour of this motion. I am a proud member of what I believe was really the only caucus at the time this government embarked upon this unfortunate path a decade ago towards the introduction of a flat tax, the NDP, to completely reject any form of flattening of our tax structure. I was looking back through history, and at the time we were, in fact, the only caucus to do that because we believe that progressive taxation is the way you ensure fair contribution to the political and the collective benefit of our province and our community.

As anyone, to use the words of the Solicitor General, who's taken a most basic economics course will tell you, a flat tax is, in fact, a regressive tax. It's a regressive tax because what you do is that you're looking at disposable income, and by looking at disposable income, you see that with the introduction of a flat tax low-income and medium-income Albertans pay more.

What happened when the flat tax was introduced here in Alberta in January of 2001? Well, basically, it is true that a fairly generous exemption was put in place, so low-low-income Albertans did not pay tax, and that was fine, but middle-income Albertans received no benefit from the introduction of the flat tax. No benefit. They continued to have to pay exactly what they'd been paying before, and that was the case for people earning up to \$60,000 a year, which in 2000 encapsulated the majority of middle-income Albertans at the time. Those who earned between \$60,000 and \$100,000 a year – and this again was in the year 2000 – saw a 1.14 per cent drop in their taxes. Those who earned over \$100,000 a year saw a 2.76 per cent drop in their taxes. Clearly, the more you

made, the more this government delivered for you. The wealthier you were, the more this government did for you.

Well, let's just ask ourselves. Maybe that was a fair comment. Maybe we need to give more to the rich because they're just going to be so much wiser with their money than the government would be. So let's give more to the rich, and everything will work out better for everyone even though the vast majority of middle-income earners paid the same or more than they did before.

Well, what did that bring about for us? It brought about for us this ongoing roller coaster of provincial financial management that attaches us to the revenue stream that comes from the oil and gas industry, which is very unpredictable. It involves a tremendous amount of political gamesmanship on the part of the members of this government, and over the long haul it also involves some incredibly irresponsible planning and policy decisions.

What kinds of things does that middle-income family, that family that in the year 2000 was earning between \$30,000 and \$60,000 a year, gain from it? Well, they gained increased school fees. They gained the delisting of a number of health care services. They gained huge cuts to our environmental regime and, thus, to the overall value of our collective environmental enjoyment. They saw cuts to special-needs funding for special-needs kids. They saw a gargantuan, unprecedented increase in university tuition. They saw a growing and unaddressed crisis with respect to how we care for our seniors. We have in long-term care a shortage of probably about 1,500 to 2,000 beds, and when we look at seniors' care overall, we're probably looking at about a 30,000-bed shortage. That's what we saw. We see a growing infrastructure deficit. We see schools which are falling apart around us, with the government trying to close community schools as a result of that.

Perhaps even more importantly than all of this, Mr. Speaker, we see an absence of savings. We see the failure to plan for when we have to make that economic transition in this province. The fact that we have, you know, whatever it is right now, a few billion in the sustainability fund and \$12 billion, \$13 billion, \$14 billion, \$15 billion in the heritage trust fund: that is shameful when you compare the amount of resource generation in this province to what happens in other jurisdictions. It is absolutely shameful. We are without question the richest jurisdiction in the world, yet we have nothing, almost nothing to show for it.

We cannot plan. We cannot say to our kids or our grandkids: we're leaving you with the best. Almost definitely we are going to be saying to our kids and our grandkids, "We're leaving you with a leaky roof and a bunch of poisoned ponds and poor air quality," and "Oh, by the way, we're coming to live in your basement because we have no long-term care spots." That's what we're doing for our kids and for our grandkids, and we're doing that so we can have a flat tax and ensure that the rich get more money than they would otherwise.

Economists know that when you're looking at disposable income, when you get to the very wealthy, there is a law of diminishing returns. When you get past a certain level, the very wealthy don't invest in their community. They don't invest in their local economy. They buy shares in international corporations. They buy things outside of their local economy. The fact of the matter is that the wealthier people get, the less likely that money stays in their local economy. Yet that's what this government has decided they want to do. It's not wise. It's not a long-term solution.

5:40

The other thing, of course, that the NDP is very keen on is ensuring that we actually look at the corporate tax structure in this province. Ironically in some ways, the Member for Edmonton-

Riverview has compiled a very intelligent argument around why we need to reconsider the structure of our corporate tax regime in this province. I say ironic because, unfortunately, his caucus voted to reduce that corporate tax on three separate occasions over the course of this decade. It's good that at this point there seems to be an understanding that over the long haul this is not the way we can run our province.

We need to ensure that we collect enough revenue to be able to invest fairly in the kinds of things that matter to regular Albertans and their families. We cannot be constantly saying to them: "Oh, well, you know, the goose that laid the golden egg" – I think that is one person's phrase – "is not laying this week. You guys need to stuff those other 20 kids into that classroom because we've decided not to hire any more teachers." You know, you'd think I'm exaggerating, but we've seen that kind of chaos in the education system over just the last two years with the now-you-see-it, now-you-don't political funding regime that this government has adopted with respect to our education system.

I've seen my kids' class sizes go from 18 to 31, back down to 18. I've seen teachers come and teachers go because from year to year these guys can't get it together to tell school boards how much money they're going to give them. If they do tell them, they tell them way too late, and they've created more chaos. That kind of funding might be acceptable for an economy that is in crisis, for a regime that is in crisis, that is brand new, that has no idea how to run the government, but for a group of people that have been here for 40 years, who are sitting on the most resources of any jurisdiction in the world, it's shameful. It's shameful.

What we need to do is develop a structure, a tax regime, that will ensure that everybody pays their fair share.

The other thing that the NDP would do, in addition to considering the concept of progressive taxation, would be to ensure that we actually review the issue of the royalty regime. This government got really nervous and scared when the oil industry found themselves a new political party that threatened these guys, and they backed down on what most experts will agree was the right direction, but Albertans are still waiting for them to act on what most experts agree is the right direction.

If we do that and if we have a realistic tax structure, one that ensures that regular Albertans still pay a reasonable amount but that those who are the most wealthy start paying their fair share, then I think we can move forward in a way that is responsible and ultimately visionary, which is what Albertans deserve, because we have enough here that we should be able to be visionary. It's time, I believe, that we start acting in that way.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Bow, followed by the hon. Member for Calgary-North West.

Ms DeLong: Well, thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I did want to rise, mainly to talk about taxes. The only reason we are talking about taxes today is because the opposition wants to raise taxes, which is so very strange, so very, very strange.

You know, there were some very, very intelligent moves made by the Conservative Party many, many years ago, and these moves are now resulting in the future growth of our income. The first one was that the government of the day decided that for this useless stuff up north called oil sands, this totally useless stuff up there that was leaking into the river, we would try to figure out how to make this profitable, and that's what we did. We went out and we invested in research and got the oil companies involved, and we actually came up with ways of turning this useless goo that was polluting the environment into something that could fuel people's

cars and send planes all around the world and could power our industry and could bring income into the government of Alberta that could be used by all the people of Alberta. Well, this has been paying off, and it has been giving jobs to people, and we've been able to bring jobs to people from all over Canada into Alberta because of this move that was made way back then.

Then the next thing that they did was that they decided: "Okay. We want this thing to get going. We want people to be able to get going on these big, expensive projects." So we said: "Okay. Well, we'll only charge a 1 per cent royalty until it gets paid off. Then we're going to ramp that royalty right up." That's what we did. What's happening is that all of these investments are now starting to produce energy and produce money for us. Not only that, but a lot of these projects are now starting to get paid off. As soon as they start getting paid off, our royalties skyrocket.

These were decisions that were made long ago, and that is why we are projecting a surplus in the near future. It's not because of our estimates of what the price of oil is. I mean, the estimates that we're coming up with for the price of oil are extremely conservative. What is ramping up our income is that projects are actually starting to produce oil, and they are starting to pay out, so our income goes way, way up. Why would anybody want to start increasing taxes? Why? It just makes no sense to us. If you really understand how this industry is set up, you would understand that there is absolutely no reason to be able to talk about increasing taxes. I just wanted to make that point.

Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-North West.

Mr. Blackett: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's a privilege for me to rise today in this Assembly to speak to Motion 501, brought forward by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre. The motion urges the government to do away with our flat-rate income tax and to introduce a progressive income tax that would increase with one's income.

As we all know, Albertans enjoyed our flat-rate tax and hence a low-tax system for roughly a decade now. Over 10 years ago our province took a bold step forward in favour of a lower tax rate for all Albertans. This government believes in offering a competitive and stimulating economic environment, and our own income tax policy is directly related to that principle.

Mr. Speaker, I talk to many people in my constituency on a daily basis, and I just want to say that I have not talked to one single solitary person in four years that has asked us to change our tax rate. The government is fiscally responsible and will continue to provide a sophisticated level of services and programs for Albertans at our current rate of taxation and, I dare say, a level of services and programs that are the envy of anyone in not only Canada but in North America and most of the English-speaking world. Albertans expect and receive first-class services and programs. The truth of the matter is that they do not wish to pay more income tax, nor do they need to.

The economic success of Alberta has been firmly rooted in prudent policies that benefit all Albertans. As I said before, in 2012 employment growth is set to increase by another 3.8 per cent. Alberta's single tax rate system helps the province to attract and retain highly skilled individuals that are necessary to grow the province's economy and thus provide a higher standard of living.

Mr. Speaker, I am an immigrant and one of those people who came to Alberta 11 short years ago. I am one of the 30,000 to 100,000 people that we need to attract to our province in the next few years for the shortage of workers that we have to continue to

grow this economy, that is second to none in North America. We need to have the ability to be able to attract people.

I was one of those people who had a choice. I moved from Ontario. I moved to Quebec. Then I moved to Seattle. Moving from Quebec to Seattle, I saw my income tax rate drop by half. I took home 50 per cent more money after two weeks in Seattle than I did in Quebec, living in Montreal. When I decided to look for a place to locate and to raise my family, I chose Alberta. It was not just some willy-nilly idea. I did my research.

My father, who was a former senior auditor with Revenue Canada, said: "Do your homework. Look at the numbers. They never lie." I looked at the different jurisdictions and compared the statistics. When I moved to Seattle, it was rated number 2 in North America back in 1995. Calgary was rated, I think, number 8, and Edmonton was rated number 15, the best places to live in North America bar none.

5:50

There were reasons. The price of gas was less, what you paid for groceries, your property taxes, what you pay for housing, all those other things. But the other thing that jumped out at me was the tax rate. Because Alberta was moving to a flat tax, it meant that it was going to be the lowest taxed jurisdiction in Canada. That meant that people wanted to go there because, Mr. Speaker, no matter what the opposition believes, we do not enjoy paying more taxes. Albertans do not enjoy paying taxes more than anybody else in Canada does.

In moving to Alberta, like many others I have a chance to put more money in our pockets, to reinvest it in our community, to give more money to charities, to spend more money to help with our education system, to put our kids through school, to give our kids and their families the opportunities that others would only hope for. But we do that because we have that ability because of the foresight of the governments that led before us. They were able to look at a system that was competitive, one that was attractive, and one that was the envy of everybody else, not only in Canada but in North America.

I hear the hon. members from across the way. One is saying that it was a gold-rush mentality, a glut of product in a world-wide situation. Well, the fact of the matter is that in terms of resources, when you're speaking about gas, we are in a global economy. As the hon. Solicitor General had mentioned, we are a province in a country in a global economy, and we have to realize that. We are not the ones who determine what the price of gas is, and they don't determine the price in Texas, but we are part of that. To those who say that it's better to be in Norway, I'd beg to differ. I'd beg you to find somewhere else that's better to live in the world today than Alberta.

It's not an unfortunate path we've gone down; it's one that has been thoughtful. There are 37 per cent of Albertans who don't have to pay tax, as was mentioned before, and those are the lowest socioeconomic strata. That's what a caring and just society does. We're also in a society where we're able to have one of the best educational systems in the English-speaking world. We have one of the best health care systems in Canada.

When I looked at paying a tax rate of 18 per cent in Washington state versus paying a 10 per cent flat tax here plus a federal tax, one of the things that I forgot about the difference between living here and there was that you had publicly funded health care, and you had an education system that was second to none. You couple that with everything else that we have here – the ability to keep a job, to be able to get a job, to be able to go to work, be able to support your family in the fashion that we'd all like to do – and I

believe we have to continue on the course that has so rightly been directed for the last 40 years and the last 10 years.

I do not support this motion.

The Speaker: Hon. members, Standing Order 8(3) provides for up to five minutes for the sponsor of a motion other than a government motion to close the debate. I'd now invite the hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre to close debate on Motion 501.

Ms Blakeman: Thanks very much, Mr. Speaker. I was hoping to be engaged by the members opposite, but I'm afraid they rather met my low expectations, and I'm sorry about that.

A number of you made the same mistake and started talking immediately about how the current flat tax has a number of exemptions on the bottom end that would take care of working low-income, low-income, or truly poverty-stricken people, and that's not what I was talking about. I think the point is that in any tax structure the society is going to look for ways to look after those that have very few resources. I take that as a given, and I would expect to see that in any tax structure that was in place. So I don't find it a very compelling argument against having, for example, those with over \$100,000 of taxable income pay a 3 per cent higher rate. The two things do not go together, and I don't find it a compelling reason.

I think there's a larger issue here. If you all want to step back to the 10,000-foot level and look at the fact that that nonrenewable energy is being spent as part of our operating budget every single day in this province, it is already problematic for us. We can't save it. We are using those resources, and they will begin to diminish in our lifetime. We, the people responsible for this, are not taking any steps to try and save that money for the future.

How do we replace the money out of the budget? You're going to have to look at increasing taxes. How difficult is that? Well, my point would be that you look at a fair tax structure, which is going to be taxing those that are making significantly more money, and they pay more taxes.

For all the arguments about people flocking here and migrating here because of our low tax structure, you know what? They come here for jobs. When you are living somewhere else and you don't have a job and you know that you could come to this province and get a job, you come here for a job. I appreciate the research that the Member for Calgary-North West did in choosing a place based

solely on an income tax rate. Okay. That's what was important to him, but everybody else, I think, really comes here for the jobs, not for the tax rate.

The idea that somehow Alberta was built by lone, gun-slinging mavericks is completely wrong. We were built and able to achieve the success that we did in this province through a co-operative movement, through large families, through neighbours helping neighbours, through communities that built together, came together, and pooled resources so that everyone was able to take advantage of that.

That, indeed, is the same reason why we pool taxes, so that we can offer services to those that need them. Not everybody necessarily needs it. They don't need it every day. Maybe they never need it in their life. Nonetheless, the government is expected to provide those services, even things like disaster relief. I'm sure there were some very wealthy people in Medicine Hat that got flooded, and they would expect to be able to come to the government and get some relief as a result of what they had suffered.

I will continue to advocate for a fair tax system. I will continue to advocate that we move the money from the nonrenewable resource revenue into a savings plan. I think that is prudent, and I also think it's responsible for the generations that come after me.

You know what? I don't have kids. I don't have to worry about them. I worry about your kids and your children's children and even beyond that because I feel there is a collective responsibility to the health and the long-term success of everything in this province, and sticking to a regressive tax system in which the middle-income people pay a significantly higher portion of their resources does not seem like a fair structure to me.

I'd hoped for some more interesting ideas to come out of the discussion today, but what I mostly heard was a reiteration of government rhetoric, so that was a bit disappointing. Nonetheless, I'm glad I was able to get it out there for discussion. I still would like to see a larger discussion take place amongst all Albertans along the lines of a citizens' assembly, in which you bring together representatives and let them talk about it.

Thank you very much.

[Motion Other than Government Motion 501 lost]

[The Assembly adjourned at 6 p.m.]

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Province of Alberta

The 27th Legislature
Fifth Session

Alberta Hansard

Monday evening, February 13, 2012

Issue 5e

The Honourable Kenneth R. Kowalski, Speaker

Legislative Assembly of Alberta
The 27th Legislature

Fifth Session

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Zwozdesky, Gene, Edmonton-Mill Creek, Deputy Chair of Committees

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Bhullar, Hon. Manmeet Singh, Calgary-Montrose (PC)	Lund, Ty, Rocky Mountain House (PC)
Blackett, Lindsay, Calgary-North West (PC)	MacDonald, Hugh, Edmonton-Gold Bar (AL)
Blakeman, Laurie, Edmonton-Centre (AL), Official Opposition Deputy Leader, Official Opposition House Leader	Marz, Richard, Olds-Didsbury-Three Hills (PC)
Boutilier, Guy C., Fort McMurray-Wood Buffalo (W)	Mason, Brian, Edmonton-Highlands-Norwood (ND), Leader of the ND Opposition
Brown, Dr. Neil, QC, Calgary-Nose Hill (PC)	McFarland, Barry, Little Bow (PC)
Calahasen, Pearl, Lesser Slave Lake (PC)	McQueen, Hon. Diana, Drayton Valley-Calmar (PC)
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Chase, Harry B., Calgary-Varsity (AL)	Morton, Hon. F.L., Foothills-Rocky View (PC)
Dallas, Hon. Cal, Red Deer-South (PC)	Notley, Rachel, Edmonton-Strathcona (ND), ND Opposition House Leader
Danyluk, Hon. Ray, Lac La Biche-St. Paul (PC)	Oberle, Hon. Frank, Peace River (PC)
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	Woo-Paw, Teresa, Calgary-Mackay (PC)
	Xiao, David H., Edmonton-McClung (PC)

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Progressive Conservative: 67 Alberta Liberal: 8 Wildrose: 4 New Democrat: 2 Alberta: 1 Independent: 1

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Legislative Assembly of Alberta

7:30 p.m.

Monday, February 13, 2012

Committee of Supply

[Mr. Cao in the chair]

The Chair: Hon. members, the chair wishes to call the Committee of Supply to order.

The hon. Deputy Government House Leader.

Supplementary Supply Estimates 2011-12, No. 2 General Revenue Fund

Mr. Denis: Thank you very much. I'm rising on behalf of the hon. Deputy Premier and President of the Treasury Board. Mr. Chairman, I would like to move the 2011-2012 supplementary supply estimates, No.2, for the general revenue fund. The estimates will provide additional spending authority to one office of the Legislature and eight government departments.

When passed, Mr. Chair, the estimates will authorize an increase of \$3.1 million – that's million with an "m" – in voted expense and capital investment to the Legislative Assembly and increases of \$97.6 million in voted expense. The estimates will also authorize, when passed, a transfer of approximately \$30 million from capital investment to expense within the Department of Municipal Affairs.

These estimates are consistent with the third-quarter fiscal updates, which updated the 2011-2012 fiscal plan for all government entities. The estimates will authorize increases for the following: the office of the Chief Electoral Officer and the departments of Human Services; Intergovernmental, International and Aboriginal Relations; Justice; Municipal Affairs; Seniors; SGPS; Tourism, Parks and Recreation; and Transportation. Finally, Mr. Chair, the estimates will authorize a transfer from the capital investment expense within the Department of Municipal Affairs.

The ministers that are responsible for these departments will be pleased to answer any questions from members of the House from either side. Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Deputy Government House Leader.

Before we proceed, I just want to direct the procedure here. We have a speaking time of 10 minutes each or the minister and the other member combined for 20 minutes, with a minimum of three hours of debate.

With that, the chair shall now recognize the Minister of Transportation.

Transportation

Mr. Danyluk: Okay. Thank you very much, Mr. Chair. Transportation requests a supplementary estimate of \$29.4 million in the expense vote. This is the net of two numbers. The first amount is \$80 million, which reflects additional funding provided in the 2011-12 budget for GreenTRIP initiatives, programs to meet eligible project commitments.

Mr. Chair, secondly is \$50.6 million available internally from lower than budgeted spending and other federal-provincial programs within the Transportation 2011-12 budget. This primarily reflects cost savings realized from completed projects in the infrastructure stimulus program and also the building Canada communities component top-up as a result of these federal programs being completed in October 2011.

Mr. Chairman, the \$80 million offset by the \$50.6 million results in a net supplementary estimate of \$29.4 million. I ask all members to support this request for the \$29.4 million estimate.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview.

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

The Chair: Would you like to do 20 minutes together or 10 each?

Dr. Taft: I think that the two of us are co-operative and efficient enough that it won't take anywhere close to 20 minutes, but perhaps we can just treat it as one exchange, like an intelligent conversation between two adults, two charming, well-meaning public servants.

The Chair: Twenty minutes. Go ahead.

Dr. Taft: All right. I'm just really looking for a little bit more detail, mostly, from the minister. I'd like to get on the record that I'm a big supporter of the GreenTRIP program. If I understand this correctly – this is really what I'm looking for some clarification on from the minister – because of \$50 million or so savings elsewhere in the department and then a supplementary amount of \$29 million there will be another \$80 million going into GreenTRIP for this current year. Can the minister just elaborate a bit on where that money is going? The LRT runs through my constituency, and I think this is the way of the future, and I'd like a little more detail. Anything that this money sets up for the future would also be great for the minister to get on the record.

Mr. Danyluk: Mr. Chairman, I mean, I'm very enthused by the hon. member's support for the program because I think it is a very good program, and it is an opportunity to support municipalities such as Edmonton and Calgary.

This is funding that has been applied for. There was an allocated budget for GreenTRIP. This was an opportunity to ensure that municipalities were able to access this funding as soon as possible. You are absolutely right. It's \$80 million that came from \$50.6 million that was offset by the particular programs and an additional \$29.4 million added to that, which I'm asking for today, to give to municipalities. That is for programs that were approved, programs that have been accepted, and programs that had been expended if that helps.

The Chair: Hon. member, continue.

Dr. Taft: Thanks. Let me come at it a little bit differently. By having the \$80 million available now, what are we able to do now that we wouldn't have been able to do otherwise? For example, the LRT expansion in Edmonton to NAIT or some of the lines in Calgary that are getting built: does this connect specifically to any of those? What would not have happened if this \$80 million hadn't been provided? I'm looking for details, Mr. Minister, just because I think it's a good-news story.

Mr. Danyluk: Mr. Chairman, I want to say to you that those programs were applied for, and those programs would have been received when we looked at the '12-13 budgets – right? – as we have. What this did do is provide an opportunity for additional funding this year. It really gave municipalities an opportunity to get some funding for projects that they had already applied for, projects that they had already built. We were able to give them the funding.

I guess what I'm trying to say is that we have a certain budget, which we will debate later – and I'm sure you'll ask some ques-

tions on that – and that budget will be distributed to the municipalities for projects that they have applied for. We're trying to disburse as much as we possibly can. We understand the importance of GreenTRIP to municipalities. This was an opportunity to be able to use some of that funding and use it towards GreenTRIP and support the municipalities as quickly as possible.

Dr. Taft: Okay. That does it for me. Thank you.

Mr. Hehr: This might just be part of my information here. You may just be helping me out on that. It's my understanding that this was a \$2 billion fund set up by the government and that you have divvied up a certain amount of funds. I guess I'd like to know how much you have divvied up and how much would be left in the GreenTRIP program in total and, if you care to share, whether more information is coming out in the future on GreenTRIP. I, too, think it's a valuable program that needs to develop to get cars off the road, to look good in the world community, and all that stuff.

The Chair: The hon. minister.

Mr. Danyluk: Thanks, Mr. Chairman. This is what I consider a carbon reduction program, which is great. Not only is it a carbon reduction program; it assists individuals to be more mobile. The GreenTRIP program, as mentioned, is a \$2 billion program. The essence of that program is \$800 million for Calgary, \$800 million for Edmonton, \$400 million for rural Alberta. What we have looked at in our budgets is seeing, of course, what we can try to deliver, which we have, delivering the programs that municipalities are working on and, I want to say to you, those predominantly being Edmonton and Calgary. Edmonton is maybe further ahead in the application process, and I mean in the delivery of it. When those applications were done, this was an opportunity to ensure that we could deliver more funding to them in a more expedient way. That's what we're trying to do. That's the whole purpose of it.

7:40

Mr. Hehr: Well, I agree. You should try and get these projects up and going as fast as you can. I just wonder if you know, out of the whole \$2 billion that has now been allocated and spent, how much is remaining?

Mr. Danyluk: \$1.2 billion.

Mr. Hehr: Is left?

Mr. Danyluk: No, no. I don't want to say that \$1.2 billion has been expended but has been spoken for, that we're trying to deliver at this time.

If I could say, hon. member, that we see more interest for the \$400 million as municipalities from rural Alberta are looking at different ways that they could utilize that program basically in the same way that large urban centres do. It's a little bit more difficult in rural areas because, of course, of the amount of population that's out there. It does create the opportunity for municipalities to work together to look at what they can do to try to achieve, you know, the same goals.

The Chair: There's no other hon. member wishing to speak on Transportation?

Next we go to the Minister of Justice.

Justice

Mr. Olson: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I'd like to take this opportunity to discuss the supplementary supply estimates required for the 2009 Judicial Compensation Commission. The commission was mandated to make recommendations for changes in compensation for Alberta's Provincial Court judges and masters in chambers covering the period April 1, 2009, to March 31, 2013. Before I go into the details of the recommendations, I would like to briefly review the background of the commission.

The Supreme Court of Canada has imposed a constitutional obligation on all governments to set compensation for judges through an independent, objective, and effective compensation commission process. The compensation commission advises governments about the appropriate level of compensation for judges and other judicial officers. This is to ensure that public confidence in the independence of the judiciary is not undermined.

The commission's report was presented to me on September 12, 2011. The total projected additional cost to the government of the commission's recommendations apart from a full pension recommendation, which was rejected, is \$43.7 million over four years. This amount is broken down as follows, and these are round figures: \$20 million for salary increases, \$22 million for pension cost increases due to proposed salary and pension indexing increases, \$400,000 for professional allowance increases, \$200,000 for administrative stipend increases, and \$800,000 for per diem rate increases. The total request for this fiscal year is \$35.7 million less an existing provision in the budget of \$7.6 million. The significant costs for 2011-12 are due to the JCC approval being retroactive to April 1, 2009. The additional cost for the next fiscal year is \$8 million. The supplementary supply estimate I am requesting today is for \$28.1 million.

This concludes my presentation on the supplementary estimates required to implement the recommendations of the 2009 Judicial Compensation Commission that have been accepted by government. Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

Hon. Member for Calgary-Buffalo, just back and forth?

Mr. Hehr: Oh, yeah. Thank you very much for that question.

I was just seeking some information about – and there was some reference to it in the newspapers – what the details of that compensation package were and, I guess, what we agreed to from 2009 to now and what we have agreed to going forward with the contract with our judicial partners.

Mr. Olson: I'll provide some summary of what this means for individual judges. I believe that's what the hon. member is perhaps asking. From April 1, 2009, to March 31, 2010 – let me go back a step and say that currently a Provincial Court judge makes \$220,000. For April 1, 2009, to March 31, 2010, that would increase from \$220,000 to \$250,000. For April 1, 2010, to March 31, 2011, it would be \$255,000. For April 1, 2011, to March 31, 2012, and for April 1, 2012, to March 31, 2013, it would increase by the percentage amount of the year-over-year increase, if any, in the Alberta consumer price index for the preceding calendar year. There are also stipends for administrative judges, so salary differentials are increased by \$5,000, from \$15,000 to \$20,000, and there is a step up each year. I can give you all of the details if you'd like.

Mr. Hehr: Well, I'd like to follow up with the Alberta consumer price index. I know we signed the last teachers' contract to the Alberta weekly wage index. How does the Alberta consumer price

index work? Is that relative to the rate of inflation? What comprises that statistic, and why was it chosen?

Mr. Olson: I'm going to give the hon. member my best effort to answer that question. Pension indexing and so on has never been one of my strong points.

I do know that there were some submissions made as to how those calculations should be done. Our position was that the Alberta consumer price index is what should be used, and that was more favourable for us, the payer. It was a more favourable measure than the other recommendations that were given.

Mr. Hehr: Are there any estimates currently of what the Alberta consumer price index is supposed to be over the upcoming years?

Mr. Olson: Well, the whole purpose of using a measure like the consumer price index is because we don't know what it's going to be; therefore, you have to have something to tie it to. I think it's reasonable to use something like the Alberta consumer price index because, obviously, that's something that's relevant to Alberta and, I would think, would be a fair measure.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Airdrie-Chestermere.

Mr. Anderson: Thank you, Mr. Chair. Just a quick question, hon. minister. Obviously, one of the points that our party, our caucus has made over and over again is the need to keep wages under control and the need to have that start at the top by example because it gives the Alberta government a better bargaining position when we deal with all negotiations in the public service. So I was a little concerned to see the judges' salary tied to the average weekly wage index. Certainly, over the last several years it seemed like an index that greatly outpaces inflation, the cost of living. I would just like to ask again if you could explain why you didn't tie it to inflation and why you went with the average weekly wage index when I think that's probably something that the government seems to be trying to get away from when it comes to negotiations with other unions, with other public-sector employees.

Mr. Olson: I'm sorry I don't have the report with me, which, by the way, is available online. The report does talk about the various submissions that were made. My recollection of my discussion with my department when we discussed the index in question is that this was a more favourable measure than the other position that was being taken.

I'm sorry I don't have any more detail than that for the hon. member, but I'd be happy to do some more checking on that and get back to him.

7:50

Mr. Anderson: To be clear, in other words, the report that came back with the recommendations didn't give – an inflationary cost adjustment wasn't one of the options that you had to work with, and you had to work with one of the options given. Is that kind of how it worked?

Mr. Olson: Maybe I could just talk a little bit about the commission, how it's constituted and the rules within which we have to work. This is not a traditional type of negotiation. The whole point of there being a commission is that we can't negotiate with the judges. So we appointed a representative, the judges appointed a representative, and then a third representative was appointed. We made submissions, the judiciary made submissions, and there were a few independent submissions. The report that

came back was unanimous. Even our own representative was supporting the recommendation that was made.

The report comes to me, and then I have 120 days to respond. The Supreme Court has set out criteria that we have to follow in terms of a response, and it never can get to the point of a negotiation: "Well, if you would agree to this, then we would consider that." It's basically accept or reject. If you reject, you have to set out the reasons why you would be rejecting. There was one part of the proposal that we did reject in terms of full indexing, but on everything else we didn't feel as though we would be able to win the day if we had to take the next step, which would be an application for judicial review if it went to that. So we essentially followed the recommendation.

Of course, I can say that we, too, would have preferred to have paid less, but the thing that makes it even more substantial is the fact that it's retroactive. I think that probably it had been in 2005 that the Provincial Court judges and masters had had an increase, so now this comes three years into the next cycle. That's the reason for the big ask here today.

Mr. Hehr: I guess I have two questions. I understand the need for public servants to be reasonably paid commensurate with what their counterparts are making across the country. I'm just wondering and for a little more clarification: is the consumer price index the same as the Alberta weekly wage index? Is that what we base this on?

Mr. Olson: No.

Mr. Hehr: No, they're not. Okay.

Did you base the judges' salary on the Alberta weekly wage index or on the consumer price index? I guess that's my first question.

Mr. Olson: I'm just going to look back at my notes. Just bear with me for a second while I find my notes. The Alberta consumer price index.

Maybe I could just offer a few more pieces of information, which the hon. member may be interested in. As of April 1, 2009, Alberta judges ranked seventh in terms of pay. If you include the federal judges, it would be eighth. With this increase they would for a short time be ranked first, and that would be for 2009-10 and '10-11. By the time you get to 2011-12, they would be ranked second behind Ontario judges.

In terms of pension the pension adjustments in this proposal would bring them in line with most other judges in the country. They had been lower ranked in terms of pension.

Mr. Hehr: I guess a follow-up question. You indicated that your salary reviews of masters in chambers and other judges fell behind. Is there a plan in place to do a more regularly patterned negotiation? Is this scheduled by law, or is there some process put in place so that we're not having to go back in time to settle things and have more predictable and sustainable amounts coming out of the treasury going forward?

Mr. Olson: I'd like to thank the hon. member for that question because it's the same question I asked when I became involved in this process. My understanding is that this seems to have been the practice. It's a four-year cycle. A commission is struck, and the resolution comes some time in the cycle. There's nothing I can do until I receive the report of the commission. The commission was struck and went to work. Once they report to us, that triggers a response that comes from government.

I think that's a reasonable question, and it's one that I'm thinking about already. This would cover us until April 1, 2013, so we have a little bit of time to figure it out before the next one comes.

Mr. Hehr: Well, just a suggestion. You know, obviously, you've got some very highly qualified people on this, and possibly you could give some parameters and some outlines of when you'd want the report back. That might behoove them to do their job a little more quickly. I understand that they're on their timelines, but the government needs to know what their costs are going to be, and so do the people. I just offer that as a suggestion. You probably get many suggestions. I know that.

Mr. Anderson: If I could, by way of suggestion I would just say, too, that one of the reasons, I think, that you have – it would make sense that this commission would say that we should adjust it to the average weekly wage index because, for example, that's what everyone in this House technically is supposed to be indexed to. I think it's really important for the government on that side, when the new report comes up from Justice Major and so forth, to take that into consideration because if we could tie the salaries in this House to the rate of inflation, I think that in the next report, when they do this with the judges and other like individuals, they'll probably tie it to that same amount. You could see a committee member saying, "Well, if the MLAs are getting indexed to the average weekly wage index, then surely the judges should, too." So if we could maybe start with an example for ourselves going forward, tie it to the inflation rate, I think it would be good savings for the taxpayer.

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

Ms Notley: Yes. I just had a couple of quick questions, and I apologize if you've already gone over them because I was a little bit late coming in. Is there currently a connection, some kind of link between a deputy minister's salary, between our public servants' salaries and the judges' either one way or the other?

Mr. Olson: Mr. Chair, it's my understanding that this commission looks at what other judges as well as senior civil servants make across the country, but I think one of the principles in terms of judicial compensation is that the judiciary is different and unique. As far as I know, there is no mandate to tie it in any way to that. Although the commission may well have considered those types of things, in fact, I think the principle is that there is a uniqueness to the judiciary and its independence that does set them apart, and they need to be considered separately.

8:00

Ms Notley: I'm just wondering. Please forgive me if this sounds a little bit like I'm sticking a pencil in your eye; I don't mean it to. With the submissions that were made on the part of the government to the commission, was there any consideration of the argument with respect to, for instance, the Alberta earnings index, that, of course, this government had fundamentally rejected for people receiving minimum wage in this province and that we'd clearly decided they were not entitled to have, that kind of indexing formula attached to the minimum wage, and that perhaps when dealing with something that's very much on the other end of the scale, that the same kind of consideration ought to have been put in place? Has the government considered the clear contradiction in those two positions it has taken? Just scanning very quickly online here over this submission that went from the government to the commission, I don't see any mention of that in there.

Mr. Olson: Well, the government representatives made numerous recommendations. In terms of the indexing it was my understanding that, again, there were several options and that the option we have here is one that was more favourable to government than some of the other options that were being considered. I'm sorry. I don't have access to the report right in front of me here, but I'd be happy to have a further discussion with the member about that.

The Chair: Any hon. member? Edmonton-Gold Bar on this subject?

Mr. MacDonald: Yes. On this subject, Mr. Chairman. I've been listening with interest to the exchange between the hon. members on this side of the House and the Minister of Justice. When we look at the \$28 million request that we're debating this evening and we look at the provincial judges' and masters in chambers' pension plan, the expenses for the pension plan for the year ended March 31, 2011, were \$10.1 million and for the year previous to that \$9.3 million. With this new salary rate, or with this latest adjustment, how will this affect the pension plan if at all?

Mr. Olson: In my earlier comments I provided a breakdown which said that the total cost over four years is \$43.7 million for what the implications of this report are and the acceptance of this report. The amount is broken down as \$20 million for salary increases, \$22 million for pension cost increases due to salary and pension indexing increases, and then assorted other costs for things like professional allowances, administrative stipends, and so on. The global amount over four years is \$22 million. The cost for moving on from this year forward is \$8 million, the additional cost.

The Chair: The hon. member.

Mr. MacDonald: Yes. That leads to my next question on the liability that has been created as a result of this adjustment. Now, for the provincial judges and masters in chambers in 2010 there was a liability in the pension plan of \$11 million. I believe it was reduced – it's just a global amount in a schedule in the financial statements – to what is now a \$2 million liability. Will this liability be going down or up in the next couple of years as a result of these adjustments?

Mr. Olson: I'm not sure I understood the question. Again, I can say that it's \$8 million for the next year, which includes salary and pension. Obviously, a portion of that is a pension liability.

Mr. MacDonald: But you don't know as we're debating this what portion of that \$8 million will be used for this pension liability of \$2 million or if there will be an additional liability created as a result of this adjustment?

Mr. Olson: I'm just trying to do the math quickly, and I probably won't do a very good job of it. These will be very, very general numbers. There are approximately 150 judges, but they're not all full-time line judges. There are some part-time judges in there and supernumerary judges and so on. If you multiply that by the \$30,000 raise per year, basically, from \$220,000 to \$250,000, whatever that number is subtracted from \$8 million would be roughly the pension contribution.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you.

The Chair: Any other hon. member on this subject?
The hon. Minister of Municipal Affairs.

Municipal Affairs

Mr. Griffiths: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair. I'm pleased to rise today requesting support for an additional \$18,300,000 for the Alberta Emergency Management Agency disaster recovery at the Slave Lake wildfire, to be offset by \$523,000 in savings from ministry support services, for a total of \$17,777,000 requested.

I'd also like approval for a transfer of capital investment. The details of that are that Municipal Affairs was approved to spend \$30 million in the budget for housing accommodations, interim housing for the Slave Lake wildfire, when, in fact, it was the Alberta Social Housing Corporation that eventually expended the \$30 million to purchase the properties. So it's simply a transfer of a preapproved amount from Municipal Affairs over to Slave Lake.

I'd ask for members to support this request.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

Any hon. member wishing to join the debate? The hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview.

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. It's indeed a pleasure to engage the minister in some discussions on this. I think the government has been widely commended for its response to the Slave Lake disaster, and I think even beyond that, the people of Slave Lake deserve enormous credit for the courage and determination they've shown.

The resources that are going into rebuilding the houses and buildings in Slave Lake: I have a question for the minister on this. You know, I can't pull it off the top of my head, Mr. Chairman, but there are a number of examples over the last century . . .

An Hon. Member: Here are some.

Dr. Taft: Yeah. That's not what I'm looking for. You can raise that.

There are a number of examples in the last century of cities destroyed by fire or earthquake or other disaster rebuilding to a higher standard. [interjections] You know, a couple of people have mentioned Chicago right now – and that's true – and long before that, London was like that, but I was thinking on a much smaller scale. I think there's a town in Norway that was destroyed by a disaster or fire earlier in the 20th century that rebuilt, and there's one in New Zealand. These are smaller centres like Slave Lake.

What I'm setting up here, Mr. Chairman, is this. As terrible as this disaster was, it is also an opportunity to begin with a clean slate, shall we say, in terms of rebuilding a town and its buildings to a higher standard. In particular, I'm interested in energy efficient building because I think there's a lot of, as I say, low-hanging fruit in Alberta just to be plucked, as it were, by investing in better buildings. That's a long set-up. Sorry, Mr. Minister, but really my question is this. Of the \$18,300,000 that's here or other funding that your department has put into building houses and other buildings in Slave Lake, has there been any special emphasis put on pushing the limits on things like energy efficiency or, for that matter, fire protection in these buildings, or are they just being built generally to the standard levels?

8:10

The Chair: The hon. minister.

Mr. Griffiths: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I really appreciate the question, and I want to say thank you to the member for complimenting the citizens of Slave Lake for their efforts in rebuilding. It really was a demonstration of how powerful the human spirit can be when a third of the community burned down so tragically. Thankfully, there was no loss of life, but there was such a loss of

personal possessions and memories. To see the people of Slave Lake and the Tri-Council come together and do the job that they did – I mean, I'm going to take this opportunity to also thank the previous ministers of housing and municipal affairs because I didn't do all of that great work in that circumstance. They did. There's been nothing but incredible co-operation in helping to rebuild that community.

In the budget \$289 million was approved collectively for Slave Lake and the rebuilding enterprise. This isn't asking for more money; this is asking for an advance. This money goes specifically for development of the sites where the interim housing was put. The interim housing, that the Alberta Social Housing Corporation and Municipal Affairs in partnership, thankfully, with Infrastructure, that helped do a lot of the groundwork on the leveling of the land and such, simply goes to put up the trailers, which are good quality housing, but they're still interim housing and temporary housing.

The insurance companies that operate for the houses that burned down are the ones that are responsible for the rebuilding of new, permanent properties for the individuals. I'm not sure that the Tri-Council or the people in the community who would ultimately have responsibility for that are pushing new energy efficiency, but I can tell you that we have seen a couple of examples of people who have taken the opportunity to design a different house. Some of them are incorporating new environmental technologies. Some of them have taken the opportunity to downscale their housing a bit, which also improves the energy efficiency when they're not building grand mansions.

So there have been unique changes. But those changes are being driven, I confess, by the individuals who are rebuilding their properties in negotiations with the insurance companies that are covering the cost for the loss of those properties.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Calgary-Buffero on this subject.

Mr. Hehr: Well, just following up on that, has the ministry maybe looked at this as an opportunity to point out some suggestions as to how to do best practices on redesigning a home in that area? Maybe you've done some proactive measures to look at fire safety or things of that nature.

The Chair: Minister.

Mr. Griffiths: Thank you. I know that the Tri-Council and community members have been discussing issues around fire prevention and safety measures in the home. They've also been discussing it in the context of the community at large because nobody wants to see this happen again. So they've been discussing mitigation of another potential disaster.

It's really the Tri-Council – the First Nations settlement, the county, and the town – that have worked together to help with not just discussions about how to rebuild the homes and what new technologies they could use; they've talked in the context of rebuilding the entire community. I don't want this to come across negatively, but when a third of the community burned to the ground, some members of the community have really taken it upon themselves to look at it as an opportunity to build the community from the ground up, undoing any mistakes that may have developed from ad hoc development. They're really capitalizing on some of those opportunities when it comes to recreational services, the partnerships they have between the municipality and the library and the county, so that they can find economies of scale. We've discussed it, but I'd be reticent for the province to try and push those three councils to come up with a solution that's

good for us. We really want them to come up with a solution that's good for their community going forward.

We have, actually, a couple of people who permanently have been working up there with the Tri-Council to work on how the funds are going to be allocated and what sort of new initiatives could be driven. But the ideas: we're really encouraging the municipalities to generate them.

The Chair: Any other hon. members?

Hon. Minister of Seniors, it's your turn.

Seniors

Mr. VanderBurg: Thank you. There are two very important programs in our ministry, AISH and PDD, and I don't think I have to explain that to the members opposite. Of our \$2.1 billion program Seniors is requesting an additional \$11.3 million for these two vital programs. The amount will be offset by a \$1 million reduction in the capital funding under our affordable supportive living initiative. As you can see, on page 32 there is a clear explanation for the costs: \$5.9 million for the caseload growth for financial assistance for AISH, \$1.6 million for costs related to higher caseload growth and higher health benefits administration for health assistance, and \$3.8 million for higher costs for the persons with developmental disabilities program. It pretty well explains itself.

Thank you.

Mr. Hehr: This might just be more of a comment than a question, but I'll see if the minister would like to respond. It just seems to me that the process we go about in giving AISH raises – I think we did one back in 2008, which was of about \$200. We've now gone through one where we've given a \$400 raise. I commend the minister for doing it, and I commend the Premier for following through on her promise in that regard. But it seems to me a little bit of a system whereby we're always having to go back to the drawing board and assess: what are the people who are in this difficult circumstance entitled to?

It seems to me from a political standpoint as well as, actually, feasibility for these people's lives that if you tied it to an inflation rate – let's just assume that you have a reasonably fair sum of money to have AISH recipients receive. If you compare it across the country, arguments are that it is a fairly fair rate. Of course, you know, you could do more. Of course you could do less. But it is what it is. If you tied it, then, to an inflationary thing, then it just takes the whole equation and takes the political out of it, takes out the necessity of people coming into my office four years from now and saying: "Look, the rate of inflation here has been 5 per cent a year. I'm making 20 per cent less." Then it would sort of keep them in a standard that would be reasonable, seemingly fair given this arbitrary number we've come across, and save the minister and the Premier the political angst of always having to go through with it and me always having people in my office saying: my AISH didn't go up this year.

Mr. VanderBurg: Fair comments, and I wondered why we haven't done it ourselves.

I will tell you that since 2005, if we would have taken your example of 5 per cent a year, it would have been a 35 per cent increase. Instead, we have an 87 per cent increase, the most generous program all across the country.

The predictability issue that you raise is fair, and it's something that I'm going to have some discussion on with my colleagues and with our staff to see if, indeed, there is a better way. But I have to

tell you that with an 87 per cent increase since 2005, using your scenario, they'd be behind the eight ball.

Mr. Hehr: I understand that. We're basing it on whether the first amount was actually fair and reasonable. I'm not saying that that was. I'm saying that this number we're at now is much more fair and reasonable than it was in 2007. I'll grant you that. But on a going-forward basis, it seems that we've arrived at – arguments can be made both ways – a fairly reasonable place, in my view, where we can go. It would take the politics out of it as well as some of the personal angst out of it. Those are my only comments.

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

Ms. Notley: Thank you. I too, of course, am pleased to see the increase in payment to people receiving AISH. I will say that I can't go out into my community without people coming up to me, or previously coming up to me, and saying over and over and over again: "Do you think they're going to really do it? Do you think it will really happen?" I know that it meant a lot to those people because, of course, they were and still are, frankly, living below the poverty line. At the time it was that much more, you know, 87 per cent more, below the poverty line than they are now.

8:20

Just in terms of the comment that the last speaker was making around indexing and having regular increases built into the formula, not in any way to negate a review in the future about whether the base amount is adequate, perhaps you could bring the experience of the judges to the attention of your cabinet colleagues because, of course, we just spoke about how they were very successful at getting a very generous indexation formula applied to their raise. Perhaps we might want to try considering doing the same for recipients of AISH as well as those who are forced to live on the minimum wage. That aside, just a hint for future cabinet discussions.

I note that your increase is not large, but certainly a portion of it arises from a decrease in expenditure in the affordable supportive living initiative program. Now, obviously, we'll talk more about that when we get into full estimates because there's a much bigger decrease in this year's budget, but I'm wondering if you could explain what the source was of the in-year savings thus far to ASLI.

Mr. VanderBurg: First of all, that your constituents came in front of you and said: will they really do it? So did my constituents, and so did hundreds of callers from the time that this issue was raised until last week. Stay tuned. On March 27 the cheques will go out. That's the next question: when will we get this? You know, remind them that if they were getting the maximum benefit of \$1,188 this month, they will get \$1,588 next month, March 27. It's in the works.

I can tell you that, personally, I would have preferred to have spent that million dollars and built some more housing units, but as the program and the bidding process, where people bid into the ASLI program – we had the successful bidders of large projects; you know, 60 units, 80 units, 120 units. It was just the money left over based on the successful amount that we had. I think we had \$67 million or something.

You're right. This upcoming budget: there's \$25 million in it, and I'll defend that portion at a later time. It was just the leftover amount that we had out of that grant. Our choice was to either offset some other increases or find an innovative way to spend a million dollars. My choice was to do this.

Ms Notley: Okay. Well, that's a reasonable explanation.

The increase that you're seeking: I guess a significant portion of it basically amounts to a recalculation of the number of people who are eligible for AISH and the associated health benefits. I note that the same kind of dynamic has occurred most years, that in fact we end up having more eligible applicants than are budgeted for. I'm wondering if you can comment on the formula that's used to predict the number of eligible applicants and whether that can be improved so that we actually approve the correct amount of money when we're first going through the budget rather than having to come back because we've underestimated. I realize it's not a huge number that's been underestimated, but I do see that there appears to be a bit of a pattern year over year. I'm wondering what discussions there have been in that regard.

Mr. VanderBurg: Well, there's no doubt that the caseload increase follows the population increase, and as our population in the province will increase, the caseload will. You can see that the curve that matches our population growth will match the case growth. It's the scenario that we've used from the history of the past years.

Once again, you know, \$559 million was the current estimate for AISH, and we spent \$565 million. Pretty close. It's not half a point. You know, it's pretty small. But the choice that I have is to spend the money, try to help these individuals out, or ignore them until the next budget year, until you approve my budget. To me that's not a choice.

I would rather come here, defend that the caseload was higher than we had predicted, beg you for some more money, and ask for forgiveness because ignoring those people and telling them to wait another six months or until we had the opportunity to be here this evening and get approval is not an option for me. So I'll spend the money; I'll take the heat. It's very small. I would say that seeing the process that our staff use – they're professional. They've used the best estimates they can.

Again, I will say that anything I can do to make sure that the person on the street, the Albertan that needs the help – I'll take the criticism for spending a few extra dollars.

Ms Notley: I was certainly not suggesting that you should be approving all those who were eligible because, obviously, the eligibility criteria should have absolutely no connection at all to what you budgeted. It should simply be who needs it because that's how the program is administered. I was simply inquiring as to whether there were plans afoot to try and tighten up a little bit the estimation, not necessarily suggesting that it's way off or anything but just to tighten it up a bit – that was all – always to ensure that everybody who is eligible receives the funding to which they're entitled.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Mr. MacDonald: Yes. Thank you very much. I, too, would like to note and commend the government and the Premier for their increase in AISH allowances or benefits. Certainly, it was the right thing to do, and it's long overdue.

It's interesting to note that that's a little over a 30 per cent increase, I think, yet we have persons with developmental disabilities getting by with a 5 per cent increase, and we're looking at \$3.8 million for higher costs per case with persons with developmental disabilities in that program in this supplementary supply request.

Something that has been sort of overlooked in all of this is SFI, or social assistance benefits. The average per file or per caseload increase in this budget, Mr. Chairman, I think was around 5 and a

half per cent. Certainly, if we're going to finally do the right thing with the AISH program, I think it's about time that we treat the persons with developmental disabilities program and SFI in the same manner.

Now, that being said, the million dollars that was made available through this supplementary amount is in affordable housing initiatives, I understand. I, too, would prefer to have seen that used for housing initiatives. Hopefully, next year the minister can at some point inform the House that that initiative is fully funded and working well.

However, specifically with AISH, is this going to be an example of giving with one hand? I think the minister said that in March, March 26 or 27, there will be a \$1,588 benefit payable to a client of the program. Am I right and are citizens right in assuming that over 80 per cent, 83 per cent to be precise, of AISH clients cannot supplement their income through a part-time or a modest work program? Can the hon. minister confirm that for me, please?

Also, confirm that now that we're going to increase the payment, we're not going to start taking away benefits through the Blue Cross program for AISH clients. I hope, Mr. Chairman, that this is not the example of giving with one hand and then taking away medical or drug benefits with the other hand. If I could have that assurance and the answer to: am I right in assuming that over 80 per cent of AISH clients cannot, will not, never will be able to supplement their income, but there is between 15 and 17 per cent that are or can expect one of their household to help out in that way?

8:30

Mr. VanderBurg: First of all, I want to correct a couple of things that you've said. PDD clients are on AISH, and they will get a raise as well. That's two different issues that you're talking about. Those that get \$1,188 – that's the maximum cash benefit – will go up to \$1,588.

I think you're right on your figures. It's about 17 per cent of those on AISH that are earning over and above their amount, and that exemption limit for a single person on AISH is \$400 today. Next budget year it will be \$800, so it's doubled. We'll be able to track that to see the employment opportunities that those AISH clients have to earn more.

Again, I'd like to correct you on the assumption that, you know, 80 per cent plus will never work. I think that with the right tools and with the right opportunity they may have some opportunities to work. There are some great service providers and some great agencies in your riding that offer some assistance and some employment training and partner with great local city businesses that allow them to learn some skills and earn some money. So I think that there is more opportunity. We've just got to bring that out.

Again, we're talking supplementary estimates, but looking ahead, there is no intention to decrease any medical benefit because there is a raise in pay. It's simply a raise in pay.

The Chair: The hon. member.

Mr. MacDonald: Yes. To clarify to the hon. minister, I think last year the budget for PDD was \$604 million or \$608 million, somewhere around there, and when you compare the increase to that budget, I'm certain in this year it's 5 per cent. It has nothing to do with whether these individuals are or are not on AISH.

Now, how many of the AISH clients, what percentage or what number, will get the full benefit of \$1,588?

Mr. VanderBurg: I don't have that figure with me tonight, but when we do the budget and talk about that, I'll have it. You're

guaranteed that I'll have it because my staff is listening tonight, and they'll make sure that I'm armed with that.

Mr. MacDonald: Okay. Thank you.

The Chair: Any other hon. member wish to speak?

Mr. Hehr: To just add to the question from my hon. colleague for Edmonton-Gold Bar, I think we often do better for our AISH clients – and take that as a relative comment – than what we have traditionally done on SFI here in Alberta. I believe a report came out a couple of years ago comparing Alberta to the rest of Canada, and we scored highly on our AISH score, but we didn't do that well in supporting people who were out of work or single mothers or people who were on that program. That report highlighted that in other jurisdictions the people are (a) living in more dignity and (b) able to hopefully incorporate themselves back into some sort of measures. Although sometimes for political reasons it's easy for us – we take care of our assured income for the severely handicapped people better than any other province while we ignore the other people because it's an easier political sell. So I'd just ask the minister to consider that.

My actual question in this regard. Oftentimes people come into my office, and they're having a difficult time with organizing their AISH submission. Now, I should know this, but is there a detailed accounting on your website on how to present your AISH claim in that regard, and is there any way to sort of, I guess, ease the administrative burden on the people who are in your department, who then have to say to an individual, "Look, you may very well qualify, but this is nowhere near complete"? I'm sure that takes up a large portion of their time. They have to go back and appeal, and when their appeal isn't right, they have to go back and reapply, then, some other time later. Is there a streamline, for instance, some information out there? Maybe there is. I'm just asking a question.

Mr. VanderBurg: Well, two parts to that. One of the issues that the Minister of Human Services and I are working on is to make sure that the programs we offer Albertans have some reason behind them. Remember, the AISH clients for the most part are not expected to work. Then there's a different class under support that are expected to work. They're in a transition period or a period of time where maybe they've had an injury or a hip replacement, and they need some supports for a small period of time. Usually those that are on AISH, they don't opt in and opt out. They have 46 per cent physical disabilities and 32 per cent mental disabilities, many of them both. You're not opting in and opting out. You know, you're looking for support, and the agencies that provide those 45,000-plus Albertans offer great supports. Like you said, when measured against other provinces: nothing even close in other provinces.

The other point that you raised on the AISH application. I can send you one over. It's pretty easy to follow. There's some steps on the website of how to prepare before you apply, you know, the doctor's certificate and your last financial records. But for the most part an AISH worker is needed to carry them through the application. It's not onerous. It's pretty clear. I've filled it out myself. I went through the process to make sure that I understood, that there wasn't a whole bunch of information. Information between departments can be shared. It's not onerous. It's a very transparent process.

There are appeals, and that's just the nature of the beast. When you have applications, not everybody gets what they want, and there's an appeal process. I know in my community I've heard

about the process from people who have been there, and they found that they've been treated very well and very respectfully.

If you like, I can send you a copy of the application.

Mr. Hehr: Now I'll go find it.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Airdrie-Chestermere.

Mr. Anderson: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I just wanted to put on the record on behalf of the Wildrose caucus our agreement and our support for the government raising the AISH payment \$400 a month. We think that it's certainly a compassionate change that needed to be done. We agree very much with it.

This is a classic example where – I mean, obviously, roughly \$200 million, a little over \$200 million, is a lot of money, but in the grand scheme of things, when you look at the Health budget, when you look at the Education budget and so forth, it actually is a doable piece of money, and it goes a long, long way. It's very direct. It doesn't go through a big bureaucracy. The folks that receive it and their families can decide how to use it best for their needs. We very much think that this was a very good change. It is something that we've included in our alternative budget and is something that we will certainly vote for and support going forward.

8:40

We also like the idea – and it's my understanding, if you could just clarify it for me, Minister – that on a go-forward this will be indexed to the rate of cost of living index. Is that correct? No, it won't. We would suggest that it should be. We think that having it go up every year by the rate of inflation just makes sense. Again, that's a fair amount, and it makes up for, you know, the cost pressures that are going on today. I wonder: are there any plans that you have going forward to index that to inflation? Is that something that in the future, should you be the minister in several months, you're going to be asking your government to continue doing?

Mr. VanderBurg: First of all, thank you for the support, and I look forward to you standing beside me and approving the budget when this whole process is done. That will really confirm that you're all forward and supporting the budget, and I will need that. I'll need that from each and every colleague here, and you're all colleagues. It's all important to Albertans that this raise gets passed and that our budget gets passed.

Like you, I would say that every colleague here has come to me on all sides of the House and asked me to address the same issue that you've addressed, a long-term stable process that Albertans on AISH can count on. I make that commitment to you. I make that commitment to all of my colleagues that 12 months from now this won't be an issue.

Mr. Anderson: Excellent. Just for clarification purposes, we will be supporting that portion of the budget, but I can guarantee you that we will not be supporting the overall budget for different reasons, but not because of that reason. Your AISH payments increase was bang on. So just as a point of clarification.

The Chair: Does any other member wish to speak on supplementary supply for Seniors?

The hon. minister.

Human Services

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Chair. Under the supplementary estimates today we're asking for Human Services the amount of

\$6.989 million. Now, to put that into context, really what we're needing is \$10 million to supplement the child care choices plan increase in child care spaces. We had a program over the last few years to increase to approximately 20,000 new child care spaces, and the program was overwhelmingly successful. We have 22,500 in the child care subsidy caseload for this year, which is 1,900 more than the budget that was in place of 20,600.

So that's essentially it. We need \$10 million to pay for the child care subsidies due to the increased child care load. We were able to surplus this year approximately \$3 million from some other programs. For example, the \$0.6 million increase for the Immigrate to Alberta web portal, \$0.7 million for the Appeals Commission, \$3 million for reductions in programs funded under the labour market agreement, things that we'll have to deal with in due course but for the purpose of supplementary estimates are able to be net off against the \$10 million that we need.

That is essentially the request, together with \$700,000 for the Appeals Commission for the Workers' Compensation Board to reduce the processing time for claims and \$608,000 for the Immigrate to Alberta web portal. Those two are essentially flow-through expenditures, as I understand it.

So the need that we're requesting is the \$6.989 million to pay for the child care subsidies for our wildly successful child care program.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview.

Dr. Taft: Indeed. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I'm just looking for a little clarity from the minister. The \$10 million, as it's written in the statements we have been provided, is to address increased subsidy caseloads within child care subsidy and supports. Does that mean the number of cases has increased, or is more being spent per case?

Mr. Hancock: Two answers, Mr. Chairman. The caseload has increased. I think, as I indicated earlier, it's about 1,900 over what was budgeted. But we also have, as I understand, a program in place to encourage the improvement of credentials and the funding that goes with that. So the money would be on both sides, the increase of the caseload and payment for improving credentials.

The Chair: The hon. member.

Dr. Taft: Yes. That was helpful. I appreciate that.

Just to pursue that, would some of this, then, go to increased salaries for the workers? As their credentials go up, does this give them an incentive to stay in that sector?

Mr. Hancock: Mr. Chairman, that's essentially what the credentials program is, a wage supplement for those who improve their credentials. It's an incentive for people at the lower income levels to improve their credentials and move their income level up.

The Chair: Any others?

Ms Notley: Well, I just wanted to follow along on those questions as a start. I'm wondering if you could advise us specifically. You mentioned there were 1,900 more families accessing the subsidy. Obviously, the amount of subsidy varies by family, depending on their income. What was the total number of families receiving the subsidy right now? Did you say that?

Mr. Hancock: Twenty-two thousand five hundred.

Ms Notley: Okay. That's what I thought. Can you advise, then, how many more staff are receiving the additional payment as a

result of additional training and where it is those staff reside? Is there a geographic pattern there at all?

Mr. Hancock: I don't have those specifics at hand at the moment, but I certainly don't mind getting them if they're available and providing them to the hon. member. I don't know if I have a geographic breakdown, but I would assume that we would be able to. Certainly, we should be able to delineate that, so I can get the hon. member those numbers, but I don't have them right at the moment.

Ms Notley: The other reason I was looking for the number of staff is because it depends on what level of education they're getting and what the overall amount is that they're receiving. It helps us to determine if it's the same people carrying on further or if we've got new people that are getting certified and additional certification going on. That's the information that we're looking for as well as a breakdown between the amount of the \$10 million that's dedicated to the new subsidies versus the portion of the \$10 million that's dedicated to additional staffing costs.

Mr. Hancock: Certainly, Mr. Chairman, I can get that information. I would suspect that with respect to the education side you would find that it was both. As I understand it, we're at an exceedingly high level – and there are voluntary standards in place – of compliance with those standards. I think there's about 5 per cent of people that we're still moving to those standards, so I would suspect that that is part of it. But also part of it would be people improving from where they are to where they could be. I can get you some more definitive information with respect to that.

The Chair: The hon. member.

Ms Notley: Thank you. The final piece that I'd be looking for on that same thing is whether you can advise what the breakdown is between nonprofit and for-profit in terms of where those staff reside.

Mr. Hancock: If it's readily available without spending all of the money to find it, I would be more than happy to provide it.

Ms Notley: I appreciate that we'll talk about this more in the overall discussion of your budget, but given that we do have a profound shortage of child care still in this province, the whole issue of how it's delivered and the best way to increase the number of spaces as well as the accessibility to those spaces does factor in very much to that conversation, so it's relevant.

You'd mentioned, I think – or perhaps it was in my notes – that part of the place where you'd found that \$10 million, the reason you're coming to us for roughly \$7 million, is because there was a \$4.3 million saving from employment. I didn't quite get the details about where those savings came from. I'm wondering if you could provide those.

8:50

The Chair: The hon. minister.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you. Mr. Chairman, \$3 million is the reduction in expenditures for programs funded under the labour market agreement due to a decrease in the number of learners participating in LMA-eligible programs. Federal funding allocated through the LMA that has lapsed may be carried forward into the following year. The request can be made as part of the ministry's 2012-13 first-quarter fiscal update submission.

The long and the short of it is that we have some funding in the labour market agreement program which we are not expending

this year because of not sufficient people applying in that particular category. We will have to account for those monies. We can carry them forward. In other words, they're federal monies, so we have to expend monies in that area, but we can carry those forward into the next year. In the meantime the accounting rules provide that we have to offset that or that we can offset that against the supplementary request, so that's what was done.

The \$1.2 million reduction is related to the targeted initiative for older workers. Due to delays in project approvals by the federal government we are not going to be able to utilize that money in this fiscal year. Again, we'll carry it over to the next fiscal year, but in the meantime the money in the budget, the voted money, can be applied against the child care need.

The Chair: The hon. member.

Ms Notley: Thank you. I'm sorry. I should know this, but can you explain very briefly the labour market agreement? Who are the recipients of the funds in that and under what scenario? These aren't temporary workers, are they? I'm sorry, but I can't recall what that program refers to.

Mr. Hancock: Again I'm going to have to beg the indulgence of the member for me to get the specifics about which particular categories qualify under that particular agreement. We have a number of areas in which we help fund learners or people who want to upgrade their credentials, et cetera. Some of them qualify for federal funding, and those ones would fall under that labour market agreement. Rather than speculate as to which are which off the top of my head, I'll get you that definition.

The Chair: The hon. member.

Ms Notley: Yeah. I'm wondering if these are the additional immigrants that come to Alberta after having been counted in a different province. I'm not sure. Anyway, if you could provide us with that information sooner than later.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar on the subject?

Mr. MacDonald: Yes. Thank you very much. To the Minister of Human Services. The \$700,000 request for the Appeals Commission for Alberta's workers' compensation: is that as a result of an increase in the number of files or the number of appeals that they're hearing, is there an increased workload there, or are there some sorts of salary adjustments being made where this amount as requested is necessary?

The Chair: The hon. minister.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. My understanding is that there are a number of vacant chair positions with the Appeals Commission. As a result there is becoming a need to conduct additional hearings to achieve a reduction in the timelines, so those need to be funded. Now, as I understand it, that's basically a flow through. That's an assessment against the Workers' Compensation Board. There is a revenue item on the other side, but we have to account for the expenditure in our budget, so we need the supplementary supply of that \$700,000 to account for filling those vacant positions so that they can get on with reducing the waiting time with respect to appeals.

The Chair: The hon. member.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you. I have one more question, regarding waiting times. I find it very unusual that in the past, and I haven't plugged in my computer to see if it has been changed, certainly the Appeals Commission – and the hon. minister is the man in charge – has been very reluctant to produce an annual report, as is requested. In my view, they are obligated to do that. I was disappointed in the past to not be able to find that annual report. Maybe things have changed, and maybe they're there now. I would certainly hope that a small portion of this money could be used to make sure that annual reports are produced in a timely fashion and are also accessible to those who are interested in reading them.

Thank you.

The Chair: Hon. Minister, do you wish to comment?

Mr. Hancock: All of these comments will be passed on to the relevant areas, and if there's a requirement for an annual report that hasn't been fulfilled, I'll certainly look into that. You know, the hon. member might understand that there are corners of my ministry that I'm still learning a little bit about. I haven't honestly looked to see what the annual report status for the Appeals Commission of the Workers' Compensation Board is, but I will.

Ms Notley: In the spirit of helpfulness – I was just online – it appears the most recent annual report was 2003.

The Chair: Any other hon. members wish to speak on Human Services?

Seeing none, the chair shall now recognize our Solicitor General and Minister of Public Security.

Solicitor General and Public Security

Mr. Denis: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair. I just want to tell the members opposite that I'm really not feeling well this evening, so if I'm not on my game, I will come back and give you some written responses.

I'm here to request an additional \$1.74 million for SGPS for the 2011-2012 fiscal year. That is .26 per cent of the total budget. Like all of the departments, SGPS has had to find money this year to accommodate the AUPE settlement. Since my ministry is highly human power intensive, we faced a \$5.4 million shortfall. The good news is that after a detailed review of programs and operations we were able to find some short-term savings for two-thirds of this amount. The funding was then allocated to staff compensation to address the AUPE settlement and cost pressures. We are still, Mr. Chair, short \$1.74 million. We need this money to ensure that we're compliant with the global settlement that the overall government agreed to with AUPE. I seek approval, then, of this House for \$1.74 million.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Mr. MacDonald: Yes. Thank you very much. I can certainly sympathize with the hon. Solicitor General and Minister of Public Security, and I hope he's feeling better soon.

I have a question before we make this allocation. Certainly, last year most departments transferred money back into the general revenue fund. There was an amount last year of over \$600 million transferred back into the general revenue fund. How much, if any, was from the Solicitor General and Public Security department?

Mr. Denis: I'll undertake to advise you at a subsequent juncture.

Mr. MacDonald: Thanks.

The Chair: Are there others? The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona.

Ms Notley: Yeah. I see that you're looking for an additional \$1.7 million but that, in fact, you're really looking for about \$3.5 million and that roughly \$1.76 million is being paid for by your ministry through in-year savings. I want to ask you a little bit about those in-year savings. In particular, I want to ask about sheriff services, where it seems that your ministry has saved about a quarter of a million dollars. Yet we had quite a flare-up of concern – I'm not sure when it was, earlier in the year, anyway – about the level of security from sheriffs in the Queen's Bench courtrooms. I believe it was in Edmonton that the issue was raised. Given that at the time, I believe, there was talk about hiring more sheriffs – and I'm assuming they come out of your budget, maybe they come out of the Justice minister's budget – and given that there was talk of the need to hire a significantly greater number of sheriffs, I am wondering how it is that you have in-year savings in this area in your budget at this point.

The Chair: The hon. minister.

Mr. Denis: Thank you, and I thank the member for that question as a fellow member of the Law Society. There are, in fact, four levels of security in the courtroom as it is. Security has been increased substantially over the last five years, at least in my last year of practice of law, anyway.

9:00

Typically, you have your perimeter security. Then what happens is that as you come in, there is airport-style security in most courtrooms, which didn't exist several years ago as well. Then, on top of that, there are also sheriffs that roam the courtroom. In addition, individual judges have a panic button, which many of us do have. I know the Speaker has pointed out to me his panic button in the past. Then, even on top of that, in a matter where there is a significant risk to security for whatever reason, the particular judge or justice can in that case actually go and request additional security as well.

You know, I don't totally agree with respect to the member of the judiciary who raised that particular concern, but I can tell you that it is a priority for us and so much that in this year's budget there are 30 additional sheriffs. Given the state of my health this evening, though, I will undertake to get you some further information on that as you have requested, Member.

The Chair: Any other member wishing to speak?

Mr. Hehr: Just one quick question. I note that the main of this expense is going to correctional services that will be run in correctional centres. Could the minister enlighten me if this expense is for additional security guards or overtime pay given some of the numbers that are currently in our prison systems and the amount of overtime that's happening? Where is this money actually going?

Mr. Denis: Overtime is inevitable in any department, but it's not desired, obviously, because it is time and a half. I do believe that the 30 additional sheriffs as allotted in this year's budget are going to address that. That's a continual concern, I think, that all government departments have. I think it's also a continual concern for private employers. The reason there is time and a half is to discourage people from working the hours that every member in this Chamber does and, rather, to hire additional sheriffs where needed, and that's what we've done, Member.

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

Ms Notley: Okay. Well, just going back on the same issue, I understand why you're coming to us looking for more money, but I'm wondering – notwithstanding your health maybe someone else can give you some advice. I'm not sure. I'm looking for what the explanation is for the \$1.5 million savings in contract policing and policing oversight. I'm also looking at the half-million-dollar savings in commercial vehicle enforcement, and I'm wondering if we can get a bit of an explanation for how that came about.

Mr. Denis: To this member: good questions again. Policing oversight deals with the whole mandate of the department, so that's an efficiency we've found, actually, in the department.

With respect to contract policing I'll get you some information about that as well.

The Chair: Any others?

Seeing none, the chair shall now move on. The hon. Government House Leader on the office of the Chief Electoral Officer.

Office of the Chief Electoral Officer

Mr. Hancock: Well, Mr. Chair, it would be the tradition and practice of the House that we do not challenge the estimates of the legislative officers because they're not here to defend their estimates.

Dr. Taft: Mr. Chair, if I may.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview on the electoral officer supplements.

Dr. Taft: Yes. I understand the tradition of the House as the minister just expressed it, but I just want it to be on the record that I regret as a member of the Assembly not having a proper opportunity to debate the estimates of this particular office of the Legislature or any of the others. So perhaps for future practice we can make some changes.

Thank you.

Mr. Hancock: Mr. Chairman, I'm not about to offend the practices of the House. The Standing Committee on Legislative Offices reviews the budgets, debates the budgets, brings them forward, and the chairman refers to that at the beginning. They shouldn't have been called, and we're not going to offend the practice of the House by defending them.

The Chair: The hon. Minister of Municipal Affairs on behalf of the minister.

Intergovernmental, International and Aboriginal Relations

Mr. Griffiths: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. I will run through this, and I'll endeavour to answer any questions that you may have for the minister. I can answer just about everything, I think, except where he gets his hair cut, and I won't tell you where I get my hair cut.

Mr. MacDonald: The same place as the Human Services minister.

Mr. Griffiths: No, it wasn't the same place. It was faster.

Mr. Chairman, IAR is requesting an additional supplementary estimate of \$2 million for its 2011-2012 budget. It has \$500,000 that has been made available from lower than budgeted expenses, and the request for \$2 million collectively means \$2.5 million

flowing through the department to the First Nations development fund. The \$2 million is actually a flow through from higher than expected casino revenues on-reserve.

So it's simply a flow through of the \$2 million plus the \$500,000 in lower than budgeted expenses flowing through to the First Nations development fund. I ask for members to support this.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Mr. MacDonald: Yes, Mr. Chairman. The \$2 million that is being added to the First Nations development fund and its additional revenue: could the minister please tell the House how that additional revenue was generated? Was it from slot machines? VLTs? Which First Nations casinos had that revenue generation occur?

The Chair: The hon. minister.

Mr. Griffiths: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I'm sorry. I don't have that detailed information. I simply know that for the structure for the lotteries the way it works now in the casinos is distinct on-reserve, and approximately 30 per cent of the funds that come from First Nations casinos flow through to the First Nations development fund. The exact breakdown of whether it was from slots or terminals: I don't have that information. But I know the minister would be happy to provide that if he has that breakdown.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you.

The Chair: On the supplementary supply for Intergovernmental, International and Aboriginal Relations does any other hon. member wish to speak?

The hon. minister.

Tourism, Parks and Recreation

Mr. Hayden: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I'm requesting supplementary estimates of \$1.32 million to cover the expenses in Tourism, Parks and Recreation that were not anticipated in the 2011-12 budget estimates. The request is simply to address the funding pressure from the collective bargaining agreement that was reached with AUPE. The increased compensation and other benefits for employees cannot be funded internally without impacting services provided by the ministry, and without this funding the ministry would have had to reduce current staffing levels and services directly affecting Albertans to cover their funding shortfall.

Thank you.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Mr. MacDonald: Yes, Mr. Chairman. Now, the hon. Minister of Tourism, Parks and Recreation . . . [interjection] Not perks. No, I didn't say perks. Someone here said perks, but it wasn't me, Mr. Minister.

You said that this money is needed, I believe, to facilitate a collective agreement with AUPE. I have to take exception to that unless you can provide additional information. The supplementary estimate here for the minister's office is for \$18,000; the deputy minister's office, \$30,000; strategic corporate services, \$163,000; and communications, \$9,000. Now, certainly, that is well over \$200,000.

The employees in the minister's office, if I am to understand correctly from you the reasons you are requesting this money, certainly wouldn't belong to AUPE. They wouldn't be in any collective agreement. They would be considered management. How can you tell us that all of this request, if I heard you correctly, is as a result of this collective agreement with AUPE, when

this group, if they are to get this money for employee compensation adjustments, is considered management?

9:10

The Chair: The hon. minister.

Mr. Hayden: Thank you, Mr. Chair. That is indeed correct. The AUPE collective agreement benefits that were awarded were awarded also to the non-unionized staff that are not in the management position. So the numbers that you talk about are not management. Those are for the support staffing that is non-unionized. It's a small part of that overall \$1.32 million.

Mr. MacDonald: A small part of that comes to \$220,000, which is, oh, we could say, 8 per cent, 8 and a half per cent, maybe a little better than that. Of the people who are not part of the collective bargaining process, how many individuals are sharing in the \$220,000 employee adjustment compensation?

The Chair: The hon. minister.

Mr. Hayden: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I'd be pleased to get you that information and find out how many of the 800-plus employees are non-unionized.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you.

The Chair: Is there any other hon. member wishing to speak on Tourism, Parks and Recreation? We are still under three hours.

Vote on Supplementary Supply Estimates 2011-12, No. 2 General Revenue Fund

The Chair: The chair shall now call the question after considering the 2011-12 supplementary supply estimates, No. 2, for the general revenue fund for the fiscal year ending March 31, 2012.

Agreed to:

Office of the Chief Electoral Officer	
Expense and Capital Investment	\$3,100,000
Human Services	
Expense	\$6,989,000
Intergovernmental, International and Aboriginal Relations	
Expense	\$2,000,000
Justice	
Expense	\$28,093,000
Municipal Affairs	
Expense	\$17,777,000
Seniors	
Expense	\$10,300,000
Solicitor General and Public Security	
Expense	\$1,740,000
Tourism, Parks and Recreation	
Expense	\$1,320,000
Transportation	
Expense	\$29,418,000
Amount to be transferred	
Municipal Affairs	
Capital Investment	\$30,000,000

The Chair: The hon. Government House Leader.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I move that the Committee of Supply rise and report the supplementary estimates, No. 2.

[Motion carried]

[The Deputy Speaker in the chair]

Mr. Rogers: Mr. Speaker, the Committee of Supply has had under consideration certain resolutions, reports as follows, and requests leave to sit again. The following resolutions relating to the 2011-12 supplementary supply estimates, No. 2, for the general revenue fund for the fiscal year ending March 31, 2012, have been approved.

Office of the Chief Electoral Officer: expense and capital investment, \$3,100,000.

Human Services: expense, \$6,989,000.

Intergovernmental, International and Aboriginal Relations: expense, \$2,000,000.

Justice: expense, \$28,093,000.

Municipal Affairs: expense, \$17,777,000.

Seniors: expense, \$10,300,000.

Solicitor General and Public Security: expense, \$1,740,000.

Tourism, Parks and Recreation: expense, \$1,320,000.

Transportation: expense, \$29,418,000.

The Committee of Supply has also approved the following amount to be transferred.

Municipal Affairs: from capital investment to expense, \$30,000,000.

The Deputy Speaker: Having heard the report from the hon. Member for Leduc-Beaumont-Devon, does the Assembly concur in the report?

Hon. Members: Concur.

The Deputy Speaker: Opposed? So ordered.

Consideration of His Honour the Lieutenant Governor's Speech

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

To His Honour the Honourable Colonel (Retired) Donald S. Ethell, OC, OMM, AOE, MSC, CD, LLD, the Lieutenant Governor of the Province of Alberta:

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

[Adjourned debate February 8: Mr. Hancock]

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

Mr. MacDonald: Yes. Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It was with interest that I sat last Tuesday and heard His Honour deliver the throne speech. It was interesting to sit here a few minutes before the proceedings started. I got to witness the parade, the citizens from throughout the province who came to hear the throne speech. Certainly, it was enjoyable. It was interesting, as I said earlier.

I was outside after, and of course there was a gentleman who came up. I had no idea who he was. He came up to me in the rotunda, and he asked me some questions about the throne speech and the proceedings that occurred in here and the people that were seated on the floor of the Assembly. I was surprised at his take on all of this. He asked me if those that were seated closest to the Premier's chair gave the most amount of money to the Progressive Conservative Party in political donations. Now, I had to stop and think about that. I didn't have an answer for him, but I gave him this advice: ask some of the Progressive Conservative MLAs if

that's how all this works. I don't know. I got busy in conversation, and I didn't hear from him again. Hopefully, I will, and hopefully he got the right answer to his question. Certainly, that was his notion or his idea of how things were arranged.

9:20

Now, the throne speech also had, Mr. Speaker, six reviews. I was disappointed or at least I did not see a commitment to review the property rights legislation. Now, maybe it was there, but I didn't see it.

I was also disappointed to see that this government is not making any effort whatsoever to unplug electricity deregulation. Now, I have been listening to question period since last Tuesday, and it seems to be an issue on everyone's mind but government members'. The current Minister of Energy, the former Minister of Finance, would get very, very nervous whenever he had to present a budget, and I can understand why the hon. member would be nervous, being a fiscal conservative and carrying on with the tradition in this term by this government of significant deficits from one budget to the next.

With electricity deregulation I heard the other day about Quebec, what Quebec does or does not do and how ridiculous it is to suggest that Quebec Hydro's comparisons of our electricity prices to other jurisdictions not only in Canada but in America are wrong. Well, we know, Mr. Speaker, that that's not true. Electricity deregulation: 12 years into this madcap ideological experiment we know what's going on. Prices are going up. We've gone from some of the lowest costs for electricity in North America to some of the highest costs with price spikes.

We know that on January 17 – and we've been fortunate that we've only had one week of really cold weather this winter. During that week we had two energy emergency alerts, one that lasted about an hour and a half and one that lasted about an hour, as I can remember. But the result of these energy emergency alerts was significant on the price. In fact, the price of electricity was over 93 cents a kilowatt hour. This was at peak time, peak demand in the day, between 5 and 6 o'clock. In fact, Mr. Speaker, I think we set a new record, and it was well over 10,400 megawatts.

Mr. Speaker, there could be some ways for the government to deal with this. That certainly was not evident in the throne speech, and I'm very disappointed in this government. It's such a sensitive issue for this government that the Premier is reluctant to answer. She tries to hand it off, and it's a lame performance from the Minister of Energy to try to defend this policy. I know that down in his ideological heart he knows it's the wrong thing, but he has to defend this government as we get closer and closer to an election, and it's getting harder and harder to do.

The hon. Member for Whitecourt-Ste. Anne must be very, very perplexed. He must be very nervous about electricity deregulation after the newsprint plant in Whitecourt – I would assume it's the largest employer in the town – had to cut back production because they couldn't afford the electricity bills. The hon. member is shaking his head that that's wrong. Well, the *Edmonton Journal* must have been wrong when they reported it. He would have had all kinds of opportunities to correct the *Edmonton Journal* if they were wrong, but I haven't seen any correction to that story.

In my own constituency a lot of people who are employed at AltaSteel are residents of Edmonton-Gold Bar. In fact, I believe the hon. Member for Edmonton-Manning would be a former employee of AltaSteel. He must be as concerned as I am about what the cost of electricity does to AltaSteel whenever it spikes in price. They had to close down production and hope and wait for the prices to moderate, which, fortunately, they did. These are the economic consequences of a bad public policy.

Close to 80 per cent of the load, the capacity, in this province is for industrial or commercial purposes. I think it's 83 per cent, and 17 per cent is for residential use. Now, residential users get their bill on a monthly basis. If they're listening, they know that the Minister of Energy is offside on this issue to say that this a roaring success. In fact, it hasn't been. If it was successful, we would have more than 7 per cent generating capacity in reserve for the cold nights such as January 17. We don't have enough reserve capacity. Prices go up. Who wins, the generators or the consumers? The generators. Of course, they do.

Now, I was watching the news this evening, and certainly a former – he possibly still could be – member of the PC Party, a fundraiser for the PC Party, people would say a member of the glitterati of the PC Party, the chairman of this panel that went around the province looking at the transmission system and what we could or shouldn't do, was on the news tonight. I listened with interest. We need those two new transmission projects. We need them now. It doesn't matter which one we build first, but we need them both now. And that's going to add to the electricity consumers' power bills for the next 30 years. Well, that's a real handy way to pass all the costs on to consumers.

There was no mention in the throne speech; there was no apology by this government for overruling the regulatory process eight years ago to pass all these costs on to consumers, where the regulatory authority thought they should be shared 50-50, with generators paying 50 per cent of the transmission upgrades or expansions and the consumers paying that. There was no mention of that.

Certainly, Mr. Speaker, we heard that there's a commitment to getting to a balanced budget. Lots of people on our side of the house, including the hon. Member for Calgary-Buffalo, worked hard to come up with a plan, that was presented the day before the throne speech, to come up with a balanced budget. Taxpayers can't understand how the Progressive Conservatives are having such difficulty with our revenue stream of balancing the budget. This will be the fifth year in a row with a deficit.

I don't know how to explain it, but just in the last half hour we had this suggestion that it's a tradition of this House that when the Chief Electoral Officer is asking for money, we just provide it. I sit on the Standing Committee on Legislative Offices, and I was present when this supplementary funding for the office of the Chief Electoral Officer was requested. We had a robust debate on this. I didn't vote for that \$3.1 million request, and I had good, solid, valid reasons not to. To just watch the government members quietly put their hands up and vote for this \$3.1 million request is a reminder to me and it's certainly a reminder to taxpayers of how easy it is for this outfit and how comfortable it is for this government to run these big deficits year after year after year. To suggest that, you know, we ought to respect the offices of the Legislative Assembly – no one is saying that we shouldn't, but at other times, whenever it has been convenient to attack these legislative offices, well, the government has been really good at that.

9:30

We only have to look at some of the recommendations the former Chief Electoral Officer made. The government disagreed with all those recommendations, and they made their point known publicly in and outside this House. Then some of the reports that were released by the office of the Auditor General in the last number of years, whether they were on mental health, whether they were on our royalty system or any other issue, on our health care system – and there were enough of them on the health care system and Alberta Health Services and the conduct of Alberta

Health Services with public money. Government members had no problem commenting on those.

I will make that point. I appreciate the opportunity to get a chance to speak this evening. It certainly was an interesting throne speech. I wish the Lieutenant Governor and his family all the best. Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

The Deputy Speaker: Standing Order 29(2)(a)? The hon. Minister of Seniors.

Mr. VanderBurg: Thank you for the comments. I just wanted to let you know that you're right. The power issue is a big issue for the northern communities with forest-based plants. Did you also know that those plants have PPAs? They have purchased large bulks, millions of dollars worth of power, and when they have the opportunity to lower their consumption, they sell into the grid at that higher rate. They make that business decision. At times maybe they decide to ramp up production after midnight, or during the peak hours they may slow it down. It goes back and forth both ways.

What I did in my home: my wife and I looked at the opportunity to protect ourselves. We looked through the UCA's list years ago, and I locked in for five years at 7 cents with an EasyMax contract. My mom was alive then. She was a pretty smart businessperson, and she said: I kind of like the ability to lock in my rate and have the assurity that on a fixed income I can protect myself. She did that, too, you know, so I'd like to ask the member if at his household he bought a power contract and locked into the rate.

Mr. MacDonald: Mr. Speaker, that's very, very interesting. It's a good question, and it's a valid question. If anyone in my household wants to gamble, we'll go to a casino. We do not want to gamble on our utility costs. Neither do a lot of people who live in the constituency of Edmonton-Gold Bar. If you look at one of the latest seniors' magazines that was published, the seniors in this province – they may be different than the ones in Whitecourt – do not want to gamble on their electricity bills or their natural gas bills.

Speaking of natural gas bills, of course midway through this experiment on electricity deregulation the cost of natural gas as a fuel source for many of the peaking plants was blamed for the high cost of electricity. Now we see that natural gas costs are low. In fact, historically they're the lowest they have been since deregulation started, and the cost of electricity is still through the roof. So this is not working.

Certainly, when you look at industrial facilities such as the newsprint plant in Whitecourt or AltaSteel in Edmonton or you look at VersaCold, which is an example of a company that freezes large volumes of food, electricity is getting very, very expensive for them regardless of the contract, and many of the managers tell us that they do not want to be fixed to the AESO website to see if they can work or not. Their electricity costs are a problem.

Some of them are considering moving out of this province because of the cost of electricity. For some of those companies 40 per cent of their all-in costs are their power. They cannot afford to stay in places like Calgary to conduct their businesses. They're better off going to Manitoba. Saskatchewan is a very, very good example. It's a smaller province, certainly, but it has basically the same amount if you look at the percentage of coal-fired, natural gas fired, and other forms of electricity generation, and they don't have the price spikes that we do.

To the hon. member. Certainly, it may have been beneficial for his household to get EasyMax for 7 cents per kilowatt, or 7.2 cents

it was, over a five-year period. Other people have felt when we talked to them about that contract that they didn't want to have these bundled services. They didn't want to have natural gas. They didn't want to have electricity. Some people are even suggesting that we have phone and Internet and everything else included in this bundle of services.

What people want is the lowest possible cost for electricity, and they know that electricity is an essential service. It's not a commodity. It's not a commodity like wheat or gold or potatoes, where you can grow it and you can store it until the price goes up.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Airdrie-Chestermere on the throne speech.

Mr. Anderson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure to stand and respond to the throne speech. I'd also like to thank the Lieutenant Governor for giving the speech and wish his family the best in their new position. I know that it's a lot of work and sacrifice, and I would say on behalf of the people from Airdrie-Chestermere a thank you to him. Also, as it is this government's duty to prepare that throne speech and give us something to talk about, I thank them for taking the time to do that.

There are some good things in the throne speech. There are some not so good things in the throne speech. Obviously, as we alluded to earlier, we think that some changes to the way that we treat persons with developmental disabilities, giving increased AISH payments for AISH recipients and so forth, is a very good thing and something to be commended. In a province like ours with the money that we do have, it's long overdue.

There is a strong emphasis on education in the throne speech. That was certainly welcome, and you saw that reflected in the budget, of course, with the emphasis on new school infrastructure, which I think is very key. There are issues around how those infrastructure dollars are handed out that is problematic, but indeed I'm glad to see the emphasis on education.

I would have liked to see a little bit more emphasis on funding for students with special needs in education because I feel that, frankly, for every dollar that we spend on students with special needs in their youth, in their developing years, we will save \$10 down the road. Of course, the value to the students themselves cannot be valued. It's priceless. We have a very good preschool program with regard to students with developmental disabilities, but once you get into the grade level, after you get past kindergarten, it's actually pretty underfunded in a lot of ways.

Ms Notley: Hugely underfunded.

9:40

Mr. Anderson: Hugely underfunded, in fact. That's right. So there are some issues there. If we could try to match the zealotry with which we treat kids with special needs prekindergarten, if we could do that postkindergarten, I think we would have some incredible results.

There are many things, you know, to highlight in this speech. I want to talk more broadly about some of the things that I felt could be improved. I know that the folks in Airdrie-Chestermere, who I represent, are very concerned about these things. They're concerned about the financial direction of this province. We have to understand that, you know, it's very easy for us. We sit in here for a couple of hours earlier, and we approve a supplementary supply bill for hundreds of millions of dollars in new funding. That's part of the government business.

We have to realize that what we do in this House with regard to money is not just affecting us and those today, but it also affects our children for years to come. If you look at what is happening in

Europe and in the United States and around the world, you see the result of governments who have, frankly, sacrificed the rights of liberty of their posterity, of their kids and their grandkids. They've sacrificed that financial freedom and, therefore, their financial liberty because they were too consumed with buying votes in the here and now from their various constituencies. It's a terrible lesson.

Look at the news today. I mean, just google what's going on in Greece with the riots there and the backlash against some of the austerity measures that the Greek government has brought in, which frankly aren't that harsh, certainly not by Canadian standards. Nonetheless, it shows what happens when governments get out of control and they build up this level of entitlement that is so great and becomes such a fabric of their society that when things go wrong, when it comes down to it and they can't pay for all of these entitlements and so forth, the people revolt.

You see what's happening in Greece with the firebombings and the riots and some deaths and so forth. This has been going on and will continue to go on for some time. Our thoughts and prayers are with the Greek people. We hope that they'll be able to work through this problem in a peaceful manner and come out on the other side a stronger country for it. Closer to home you see that in the United States they're not too far behind Greece in that regard. Of course, if they were to collapse to the extent of Greece, we'd all be in a great deal of trouble.

We can't be so blind and so set in our ways or so comfortable because we happen to be sitting on a huge treasure trove of oil and gas that right now, particularly the oil obviously, is worth quite a bit of money. We can't be sitting here and comfortably thinking: oh, well, let's just go along, promise what we need to be popular in the here and now without thinking of the long-term effect of those decisions. That's what I think about. Obviously, it's something that I feel very passionate about.

As we go forward in this House, I'm obviously not too hopeful with regard to what I've seen in this recent budget with regard to this principle. But I would hope that people at some point in the future in this House would be resolute and say, "You know what? We absolutely are no longer going to tolerate running deficits in this province; we're just not going to do it" and that we find a way to make sure that that doesn't happen.

Hopefully, that way doesn't include: let's just raise taxes. If we were spending the average per capita in Canada or if we were spending below the average per capita in Canada and if we were still running deficits, maybe we could start having a discussion about: well, maybe our revenues aren't where they should be. But we're not. We're spending more than any province in the country per capita, certainly a great deal more than any of the larger provinces in the country – Ontario, Quebec, Saskatchewan, B.C., and Manitoba – so that should be a warning. We're not in a position where we need to be spending these huge amounts of money that we're spending and still running a deficit. It is irresponsible, and it's wrong. It's immoral, frankly, because we're using our children's money today for the here and now instead of thinking about the fact that we don't have to pay the bill, that it's them that has to pay the bill. To use the Greek example, guess who gets to pay the bill there? That's why they're mad. It's the rising generation who's just new in the workforce or in the workforce right now. They're the ones that have to pay the bill for all of the freeloading and entitlement that occurred by, well, specifically their parents' generation. That isn't fair, and it's not right.

So when we look at budgets and deficits, it's not just about the numbers; it is an issue of morality and what we leave to our children with regard to a debt. If we don't do our job here, we will quickly go to the path of what we see in Europe, specifically in

Greece, and of course in the United States we see the beginnings of some very troublesome things happening there. That is important, to look at that in that context. I hope that this government as it goes forward will take it upon themselves to remember that principle, that this is about our kids.

If you look at our sustainability fund, it is almost gone. It will almost be gone in the next couple of years. If the price of oil were to go down to even \$75 a barrel, which historically is a very high level, we would be approaching \$5 billion, \$6 billion in deficit this year alone. I mean, we were just at \$75 a couple of months ago, for crying out loud. That's how volatile it is. So to bet the farm on \$100 oil this year and \$106 next year is just incredibly irresponsible, and I hope the government would reconsider that going forward.

Those are the budgetary issues. There are others, too. Obviously, we need to save more, but that's not something too much on the table right now because we can't seem to balance our budget. So we're doing a disservice to our children in that regard, too. But let's at the very least get our books balanced.

Now, of course, it is more about numbers. One of my other huge passions and the reason why I originally ran for the PCs, the Progressive Conservatives, and why I ran to be an MLA and why I'm here with the Wildrose now is a love of education. I am very passionate about the education system and about the education that our children receive. I think it's just so important.

I did have the opportunity to live in a couple of places in the world for a time. I had an opportunity to live for a time in Central America. I had an opportunity to live for a couple of years in Taiwan. I worked on one job where I had the opportunity to see a lot of the Caribbean nations and islands there. Of course, I lived for a while and went to college in the United States, which is where I met my lovely wife, so I got to know the folks in Missouri pretty well, where she's from. Obviously, Canada is where I grew up and where I've lived all but the time I've been away.

I've noticed one thing. There's one common theme. You can tie the progress of society, the success of society almost perfectly to the education that is provided to our children. Those countries that do not have the resources or choose not to spend sufficient resources on their children's education, many of them are bound in poverty. Many of their economies are stumbling. They have huge problems in the Americans' case, specifically in Missouri's case, where my wife is from, where some of the public schools are complete failures. You see violence and all kinds of problems, illiteracy, all kinds of issues that stem from a lack of proper education. So that's something that I feel very passionate about.

9:50

I would hope and what I'd like to see from this government going forward is a commitment to depoliticize education, to completely depoliticize it. I think the way we can do that, first off, is that when we've determined that we're going to be funding new schools – the budget this year I think is \$300 million or \$400 million in new schools. When we make the determination we're going to spend \$300 million, \$400 million, \$500 million, whatever it is, on new schools in a year, what I would suggest and what I know parents would like to see in various communities is a list posted online of the most-needed schools from number one to number 100. They would like to see that list.

They would like to see the criteria that were used to arrive at that list. Perhaps student population levels are a part of that criteria, projected student growth, age of the facility, whatever it is, just some independent formula that our Education minister with the Premier and others could come up with and then apply across the province and come up with your list of one to 100.

Then when there's new money for new schools – say it's \$400 million – the first X amount of schools or \$400 million dollars' worth of schools, those top 14 or 15 or 16, whatever it is, are built. They're first in line. They get done. They move out of the queue, everyone gets bumped up, and the list is adjusted. It would be adjusted year to year, obviously, because populations and census data and everything change.

I really think that taking politics out of which boards and which schools we build is essential, and I'd like to see that.

The Deputy Speaker: Standing Order 29(2)(a) allows for five minutes of comments or questions. The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Mr. MacDonald: Yes. To the hon. Member for Airdrie-Chestermere: could you give us examples, please, of where you would feel that politics were involved in the allocation of funds to construct schools?

Mr. Anderson: Well, there have been several examples. One of the big examples was in 2008. I know this because I've had discussions when I was with the government about what happened when those schools were announced in 2008.

I understand that you don't want to pit community against community. I get that, but it's not about that. That's a political consideration. It should always be about the kids. It should always be about their education and what they need, not what's politically correct to do.

At that time there were school boards, clearly, in the province of Alberta that went down in student population quite significantly, and there were school boards that were going through the roof with regard to student population. Obviously, Airdrie was one of those latter ones, Fort McMurray. Beaumont was another one, Chestermere was another one, and there were others. There were several in Calgary, specifically in the new areas in Calgary, and some areas in Edmonton as well.

What happened was that the government said: "We're going to stick 10 schools in Calgary. We're going to put them in Edmonton. We're going to stick X amount and spread them out in rural Alberta." It was clearly political. It's not that those schools won't be put to good use – they probably will – but the problem is that clearly there were needs that weren't met and should have been met. There are schools – for example, clearly in Rocky View, clearly in Beaumont, clearly in Fort McMurray – that should have been higher up on the priority list than some of the places that actually got them.

Maybe the government disagrees with that, and if they do, then let's do this right next time. Let's start this year. What an opportunity for the new Education minister to really, I think, change the way this has been done for a while. Post that list on the website so everyone can see it. Everyone knows where their community is in the queue, and they know the reasons for that. I don't think you'll see community rise up and complain against community. You might get some of that, but the average Albertan is a very reasonable, educated person. If you post it online and you post the reasons for why the priority is what it is, there'll be a few naysayers, but the vast majority of folks will say, "You know what? That's reasonable. Maybe that community needs a school more than my community because they've got, you know, twice the student population growth that we've had in the past couple of years" or whatever the reasons are. But I think that we sell our kids short when we politicize how schools are handed out in that way. It's not fair, and I hope that the government will change that.

Thanks.

The Deputy Speaker: Hon. Member for Calgary-*Buffalo*, 29(2)(a)? No.

The hon. Member for Calgary-*Buffalo* on the throne speech.

Mr. Hehr: Yeah. Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. It is a pleasure to rise and speak to the throne speech. I'd like to thank the hon. gentleman, Donald Ethell, who gave the speech and who has represented his province with great dignity, honour since his time in the position. I, too, listened with great interest to the throne speech, and some of the things that weren't there were obviously disappointing to me, like trying to deal with our electricity issues in this province, which a great many people are finding are not working for them. I would have liked to have seen a greater commitment to at least some supports for a discussion around mental health. I would have liked to have seen a broader discussion about how we're going to continue to evolve in the health care services.

What I was really actually excited to hear about in the throne speech, the first time we seem to have recognized this in this province, was that there seems to be an admission by this government that they're going to look at revenue streams. I was highly encouraged by that response.

If we look at things as they are here in Canada and Alberta, we have a difficult time balancing our budgets with \$100 dollar oil. There's a reason for that. One of them is that things are more expensive here in Alberta. It costs more to run services given the nature of our economy. It costs a little more to pay our public servants because of the nature of our economy. We're competing against an oil and gas sector that pays its people pretty well, so you can see why this happens.

You can also see the other side of it. I believe it was also mentioned in the throne speech that compared to the next lowest tax jurisdiction in Canada, which is British Columbia, we bring in \$11 billion less in tax revenue, \$11 billion less. Even if you believe in a tax advantage, there's no reason for a tax holiday. In my view, it is really unfair to future generations, given the largesse of our oil resources, what we have done over the last 25 years.

If there's one thing we've proven in the last 25 years, it's that we can spend every last dime of fossil fuel resources that has come into the government treasury: \$200 billion to \$250 billion has come into this government's treasury since 1987, a largesse of epic proportions if you look at other jurisdictions around Canada and other jurisdictions around the world. We have been unable to save one iota of that money and add it to our heritage trust fund.

In my view that is just wrong. I don't think we're entitled here in this House or outside in this province to take this one-time gift from the heavens and spend it all in one generation. Simply put, I think it would be wrong both morally and ethically. We have an obligation to do better here in Alberta and, in my view, save something for future generations from this one-time resource. Hopefully, at the end of the day, when it's all said and done, when all the oil and gas has been exploited, when all the oil sands have been dug out, when all the natural gas has been sold, we have something here in Alberta that is going to sustain us in the long run because right now things are reasonably okay. The Alberta advantage is, simply put, oil and gas, our luck of landing on one of the largest reservoirs known to mankind. Again, I'll go back to my point, that just because we have this money, I don't believe it's morally correct that we should spend all this in one generation. That's why I was highly enthusiastic about this government at least opening up the revenue streams here in Alberta.

10:00

If you look at it, we don't have a sales tax. We don't have a progressive income tax. We don't have a lot of those things that other jurisdictions put into place to ensure that the things their society uses, things like public education, public health care, senior citizens' homes, are paid for by the public that uses them. I think that's a much more reasonable position to take. Why aren't we paying more as we go?

I think it's actually a conservative argument. Why wouldn't you ask the citizens who are currently using the services to pay for those services? Okay? It's our children who are using the public education system. It's us who are using the health care system. It's our seniors who need long-term care facilities. Why isn't it us that pays for those services that we are using? Really, it's a conservative argument, okay? Then we would be able to save some of these fossil fuel resources when we're able to.

Now, we are coming out of a time of economic turmoil, and it has been difficult to balance our budgets. That said, by all accounts we're headed for another boom. But does heading for another boom take away the argument for increasing our revenue streams? I think not. I think we have to go there if we're ever going to get ahead and save something for the future. It's not only the right thing to do today because it allows for governments, your government, to have predictable, sustainable funding.

How can you have predictable and sustainable funding in an oil and gas economy? It is very, very difficult. That's why we've seen since the '80s a shutting off of the public purse when times are bad, a ramping up of government expenditures when they're good, and a ramping down again when times are bad. Really, this is cyclical or countercyclical to when governments should actually be kicking in something to government coffers. We've been unable to do this because (a) it's a political risk always to run deficits, but it's also difficult to counteract these cycles and balances. If we had some contribution by the taxpayer to regular revenue streams, it would be very easy for us to be running balanced budgets here if not surpluses.

In fact, with even the modest tinkering to the tax system that we've done on our side of the House, the Alberta Liberal plan in this upcoming election – even these modest increases to revenue streams would allow us to run a budget surplus this year. Going forward, that would allow us to save more in the future, in my view a much more conservative principle, paying for what you use now and saving for the future.

I think we've got it wrong here when we think it's not conservative to pay as you go. Somehow I think that's got some twisted logic to it that doesn't make sense. Then again, you know, if you think through it clearly, I hope you'll join me in that thinking or at least have the debate with yourself as to what is actually more conservative: paying as you go or spending every last dime of fossil fuel resources to inordinately keep tax revenue as low as possible.

It's a great election strategy, never having to ask your citizens for any contributions to the public purse. Sure, that's easy. But for real leadership, for real betterment of predictable and sustainable funding as well as saving something for future generations, it's the right thing to do. I was encouraged that we at least had that discussion in the budget speech.

Now, it could be my wish upon a wish that we would discuss this before the election, but I won't hold my breath on that as I'm sure the government may not want to be the most honest in this fashion, although they've outlined their plans pretty clearly in the throne speech that at some point in time they are going to raise the revenue stream. That I'm happy about. What I'm not happy about

is that it doesn't appear that we're going to have this discussion right now.

I believe that the average Albertan looks, really, at our revenue stream, does the math, looks at the lack of savings we've had, and asks themselves whether it's the morally correct position. I think the only answer can be that it's not morally correct, that we have to pay as we go, and that we have to try and save something for the future.

There is always the argument here that we have, you know, a hundred years of oils sands left, or maybe two or three hundred years, so there's lots of time to save. But who knows? Who would have known 12 years ago when natural gas prices were at \$12 to \$14 that they would be down to \$2 now? Who could have predicted that? I bet no one in the government departments at that time did. Okay?

How do we know now that the world, which is increasingly looking at carbon, increasingly looking at other ways of harnessing wind, solar, and the like, isn't going to come through? All of the reports I read right now say that the technology isn't available to do that, but who knows? When human ingenuity really puts its mind to it, great things can happen in a 45-year span. We could be out of business in 45 years, and I don't think that's too crazy of me to assert in this room. A 45-year window for the world's scientists and the best and the brightest to work on these projects could mean that we're out of business.

So in my view we need a look at our revenue streams, an increase in those revenue streams but not to spend today. We have to have disciplined spending programs where people are getting the services they need, but we need an aggressive savings plan. Without that, we're simply going to do what we've always done, done it the easy way and spent fossil fuel resources on paying today's bills. It would be like a family farm selling off pieces of the land to pay today's bills. Eventually that farmer runs out of land to sell to pay today's bills, and there's a day of reckoning for that.

So, hey. Hopefully, we'll get serious about this. Hopefully, we'll get on this path, and hopefully we'll be able save something so our future generations can look back and say that we didn't squander it all.

Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

The Deputy Speaker: Standing Order 29(2)(a)?

Seeing none. The hon. Member for West Yellowhead.

Mr. Campbell: I move to adjourn debate.

[Motion to adjourn debate carried]

Government Bills and Orders

Second Reading

Bill 1

Results-based Budgeting Act

[Debate adjourned February 8: Mr. Anderson speaking]

The Deputy Speaker: Hon. Member for Airdrie-Chestermere, you still have two minutes left.

Mr. Anderson: All right. I'll just summarize my argument from last time, and that is that Bill 1 is a waste of this House's time. This is not something that we needed to legislate. Results-based budgeting, as was spoken of earlier today by the former Treasury Board president and Member for Vermilion-Lloydminster, is something that we expect the government is already doing. I hope they would be already doing it. If this was zero-based budgeting,

then maybe there would be something there that we might want to talk about legislating. Although even that, I'm assuming, could be ordered by the Premier and the cabinet.

10:10

This is not anything but a public relations exercise, and it actually sends the wrong message. It says that we haven't really been doing this for the last however many years. Clearly, we would hope that that was not the case. So we would prefer that we not waste time further and that we vote this bill down. We think it's a waste of the House's time.

Thanks.

The Deputy Speaker: Standing Order 29(2)(a)?

Seeing none, any other hon. member wish to speak on the bill? The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar on Bill 1.

Mr. MacDonald: Yes. Thank you very much. I appreciate the opportunity to speak to this bill, Bill 1, the Results-based Budgeting Act. Certainly, when I first heard about this in the lead-up to the start of session – I heard about it in the media – I thought: now, isn't this another example of a public relations exercise by this government, pretending they care, pretending they listen as we get closer and closer to the election. When you look at this bill and you look at the government spin around it, you've got to wonder what they've been doing for the last number of years. There's one taxpayer who would say, "Well, maybe after five years of provincial deficits we need this Results-based Budgeting Act," and the other taxpayer in the coffee shop would say: "What have they been doing? Why is this necessary? What's been going on?"

Well, I would like to point out that if you look at past copies of the annual report of the government of Alberta, you will see where there has been, even in these deficit years, considerable cash transferred from the previous year into the general revenue fund. Now, if we go back to 2007-08, my research indicates there was \$682 million, 2008-09 there was \$928 million, in 2009-10 there was \$2.2 billion, and then last year there was \$619 million, and by last year I mean the year ended March 31, 2011. So there would be a total of \$4.4 billion in these deficit years transferred back in unexpended amounts from various departments to the general revenue fund. So there's something going on there. There are considerable amounts of money that are going unexpended, and they are being returned.

There are any number of reasons why this would be occurring, but of course news like that is kept behind closed doors and the curtains are drawn, hon. minister. So the taxpayers have no explanation as to how this happens. For instance, we did our government Supplementary Supply Estimates (No. 2), and there are countless minutes from Treasury Board meetings that are referenced here, but none of those Treasury Board minutes are made public. At least I can't find them, not in the Leg. Library. They may be somewhere else, but I can't find them. If they were, then the Results-based Budgeting Act wouldn't be needed, wouldn't be necessary. I'm not convinced that it is.

This bill, as we understand it, essentially directs the government to do a program review, a program review of all departments. It's interesting that the term "results-based budgeting process" in this bill is undefined. Now, the Treasury Board is going to have a role to play in this, and I'm pleased with that. Many people don't realize, Mr. Speaker, the important role the Treasury Board plays and the President of the Treasury Board plays whenever we get spending requests from that big spender the current Minister of Finance, that right-wing fiscal hawk. It turns out that the feathers

are not very long; he can't fly very far. I don't know whether they're pinfeathers or they're long ones that make a bird soar.

Anyway, Mr. Speaker, I think the Premier was so concerned about the spending habits of the current Minister of Finance that it was the Premier and the Premier's office that put the directive in that if there's to be any money spent, we're going to change the rules, and the Minister of Finance is going to have to go cap in hand to the President of the Treasury Board before any money is spent. With the history of this minister I can understand why the Premier would be concerned enough to make that directive in the Government Organization Act that came out last October. That was done. That would eliminate the need for this bill.

The Treasury Board is to provide a comprehensive review of the programs and services provided to the government and its agencies, and this is going on now. You can see from the cash transfers that there are program reviews. There were efficiencies in the last number of years noted in the consolidated financial statements. Some years there was \$200 million; other years there was \$220 million in deemed savings. Certainly, I would be interested to hear what the former Finance minister and Treasury Board president, the hon. Member for Vermilion-Lloydminster, would have to say regarding this bill. I don't see why we need this. We certainly need to have openness and transparency in the processes that we currently have. No one is explaining how much money they plan to save using this bill, what programs will be cut.

Certainly, when you look at what's going on, I will point out the corporate internal audit service. Now, this is a very secretive audit service, extremely secretive, because they never seem to produce anything. No one knows what they do, but we do know that their budget goes up and up and up. This year it's estimated to be \$4.1 million. I would challenge any hon. member of this Assembly to produce a report that the corporate internal audit service has done and what was in that report.

We were having a discussion in the researcher's office today on this bill before tonight's debate, and this was brought up. Well, maybe this office is going to work with the Results-based Budgeting Act as proposed. Maybe they're going to do all this work in the Treasury Board. Maybe they're going to advise the deputy ministers. Maybe they're going to advise the minister of what should or should not occur. But then I pointed out to the researcher that, well, you'd better check out who is running this internal audit service. It's the deputy ministers. There are other people on there from the corporate sector, and there are a couple of accountants by profession, but mostly it's deputy ministers and assistant deputy ministers. The leadership role on this is rotated. They decide what's to be looked at and what's not to be looked at. I think that if we were to look at this bill and consider its merits to reduce sort of that conflict of interest, maybe this bill has some good points.

10:20

We had quite a discussion this afternoon on this, and the only conclusion that we could really come to accurately was the fact that we cannot find any examples of the past work of this board. We can see the budget inch up every year. We have a new President of the Treasury Board, and who knows? Maybe before the election all the audits that they have done and the results of those audits are going to be made public.

No one, whether they're from the Wildrose, from the New Democrats, or the Alberta Liberals, will be able to say that this is a very secretive government, that operates behind closed doors with the curtains drawn. Maybe candidates on the stump won't be able to say that. Maybe the hon. Member for Calgary-Buffalo will have to acknowledge finally that, you know, this is a government that's

open and is transparent. But I think he's pretty confident that he's not going to have to say that, and I'm pretty confident that he won't as well because if you look at jurisdictions across not only Canada but North America, after 42 years the door is closed. The curtains are drawn. This government does not want the taxpayers to know what they're up to, what deliberations they have come to, what conclusions they have drawn to spend this year now over \$40 billion of taxpayers' money.

Now, will the Results-based Budgeting Act satisfy taxpayers? I don't think so. It certainly is going to be part of the government's spin. I haven't looked up what the Public Affairs Bureau is going to get this year in the budget, but whenever you add up all the amounts in each department that will total the public relations budget, I would have to say that it would be significant.

There are some items that I have noted in these consolidated financial statements that I hope I have an opportunity to bring up in question period at a later date. I don't think they belong in the discussion here this evening on Bill 1.

Certainly, in conclusion, Mr. Speaker, I would be very suspicious of the government and their motives in promoting this bill. It's not about good public policy. It's about promoting their own interests through this public relations exercise to get them through this election cycle. It's to simply say that, yes, they are going to have another look at how they spend money. Someone within the department, as I pointed out, is already doing that. You just have to look at the balance sheet to see the cash transferred from previous years. There are, fortunately, unexpended amounts that are coming back into the general revenue fund.

I really don't think we need this. I do think we need to have some openness and transparency with these internal audit services that are going on. This bill doesn't make any adjustments or any suggestions to that.

Again, it's about public relations, not good public policy, and I don't think it should be supported, and I don't think it should proceed through the House. Thank you.

The Deputy Speaker: Standing Order 29(2)(a)?

Seeing none, on the bill the hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona.

Ms Notley: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's a pleasure to be able to rise to speak to Bill 1, which, like the throne speech – I'm going to have to disagree with the hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar. I didn't actually find the throne speech very interesting at all. I know you said that many times, and I give a nod to you that you found the throne speech interesting. This bill is like the throne speech in that it purports to say a lot, but it really says very little.

Probably one of the most concerning elements of what it does in terms of saying so little is that it really does not even define very well or very effectively what it's talking about. I mean, we're all used to governments engaging in an increased level of public relations based governance and electioneering-based governance the closer you get to an election, but typically you would expect the communications professionals, who essentially write that piece of legislation and who lead that governance, to do so with more skill than was injected into this particular piece of pre-election governance.

Frankly, Albertans don't care that this was Bill 1, but more to the point they have no idea what Bill 1 is even supposed to do. It's interesting because I'm not entirely sure that the Premier is completely aware of what Bill 1 is supposed to do. You really have a disconnect between her communications folks and their

pollsters and Albertans and the Premier and everybody who should be part of the introduction of this bill.

The reason I think the Premier doesn't really understand what she's talking about – excuse me; I have also been unwell the last couple of weeks, like the Solicitor General – is because when the Premier first announced that this would be her signatory legislation, that this would be what would define her and her new government to Albertans, once, you know, most reporters who were there woke up from the press conference, they went back over their cassettes to figure out what she'd actually said at that point.

Of course, she went back and forth talking about results-based budgeting, which, of course, we see in the act itself, and zero-based budgeting. If you sort of do a bit of research on the use of that terminology, the fact of the matter is that in some cases it's been used interchangeably, in some cases it's been used to distinguish two separate things, and in neither case in the Premier's conversation about this bill has she ever clarified what it is. She's moved back and forth from using zero-based budgeting to talking about results-based budgeting, and I kind of wonder if halfway through the process somebody pointed out to her that zero-based budgeting actually meant something a little bit different than what she originally thought it meant when she, after meeting with her communications folks, came up with what her idea would be for Bill 1.

In any event, I'm not exactly sure how these matters are deliberated. All I know is that there really seemed to be a disconnect between the Premier's office communications people and the election planning committee of the Conservative Party and those who were involved in coming up with this piece of legislation because it really leaves Albertans disinterested and also confused.

But let's just say for the moment that she really is talking about the type of results-based budgeting that's often equated with zero-based budgeting. Quite frankly, Mr. Speaker, that type of practice has not really received a tremendously positive discussion or characterization by people who are in the business of reviewing the merits of this particular strategy. Generally speaking, zero-based budgeting is perceived as being something that is impractical for the superlarge organizations to engage in. It ends up becoming one of those things that generates far more work than it ever saves, and it also creates tremendous uncertainty within departments and also between government and those stakeholders with whom it has a governance or a funding relationship. So it doesn't work in that setting either.

Basically, any kinds of programs that involve outside partnerships and trust- and relationship-building, I guess, with those other partners are typically affected quite negatively by zero-based budgeting. Now, notwithstanding that, of course, you know, there's no question. The Premier, if she's talking about zero-based budgeting – and we don't know if she is or if she isn't because she keeps changing her mind, and the comms people sort of write first and research later. You know, if you're talking about zero-based budgeting, of course, it tends to not only be more expensive and time consuming, but interestingly she's lined herself up with a number of prominent Republicans in the southern states in the United States.

10:30

An Hon. Member: Oh, come on.

Ms Notley: She has. I'm sure that the Member for Airdrie-Chestermere would find that very, very heart-inspiring and maybe might even reconsider his allegiance because, you know, we're

going back to the roots there in terms of those brilliant political and financial managers, the Republicans in the U.S.

Nonetheless, that's where it's being discussed right now, by Republicans throughout the U.S. Frankly, for those of us in Canada who tend to look at a lot of the ideas that come out of the U.S. with some surprise, shall we say, and concern, I don't know that this is a tremendous endorsement for the Premier's plan.

Generally speaking, though, what is more concerning to us with this bill, in the unlikely event that there is actually any substance to this, which, again, is hard to say because getting the Premier to really be clear on what she's doing is like trying to nail Jell-O to a wall, and this is no different – but should this be along the lines of zero-based budgeting, given the fact that if you combine it with her previous statements about her plans to review the degree to which we can start privatizing and contracting out government services just because privatizing and contracting out is always the better way to go, well, then, I think Albertans should be concerned.

It's a very ideologically driven approach, and it's certainly not designed to actually identify what Albertans need. Rather, it's focused on this notion, the starting point shall we say, that if you privatize and contract out and give it to volunteers to do, well, then, we can assume it's going to be done better. And while volunteers may do some of these jobs with as much passion, the fact of the matter is that in many cases they're just simply not equipped to do it as well. That's what we've seen in so many of the support sectors in this province over the course of the last couple of decades.

That is, obviously, a huge concern for us. If there's any substance to this bill, it's probably something that the Premier will rely upon in the future when she comes to the conclusion that she can't carry on the way she is right now. I think that everybody in this House who's not on the government side can agree that the budget brought down by this Premier is not a realistic budget. It's not a sustainable budget. It's not a budget that we can anticipate outlining a clear path for Albertans to vote on for the next two or three years because it's not realistic.

If you take the obvious hyperbole, shall we say, inherent in this budget and you combine it with this pin Jell-O to the wall bill, that may or may not mean something – and certainly it doesn't appeal to most Albertans or seem particularly relevant to them – there is the possibility for there to be some pretty bad news for Albertans down the road in that the government may well use this and the Premier's previously identified plan to review how much more she can contract out to find a way to cut services that Albertans rely upon. So that's a problem.

Instead of having a bill that is focused on looking at our spending in this zero-based way, which most experts agree is not sound public policy, I'd be really interested in having that kind of approach applied to our revenue generation in the oil and gas sector. Now, you might say: "Well, you know what? We actually did that four or five years ago. We had a blue-ribbon panel. We had an Auditor General that told us that we were selling Albertans short constantly, day in and day out." Then after the Auditor General said that, we appointed a blue-ribbon panel, and they agreed and said: "Yeah, we're kind of selling Albertans short day in and day out. We're not collecting enough royalty revenues." So what did we do? Well, we talked about fixing that problem until after the election, when we got scared of the new political environment, and we decided to not only back off fixing the problem but to make things worse.

We probably could use a bit of a results-based assessment of the benefits that Albertans currently receive from our oil, our resource that belongs to the people of this province. That's probably a good

place where this could be used because we know the evidence is out there that we're not doing a very good job on that. It's pure politics – pure politics – nothing less, that has pushed us off doing the right thing in this area. So that might be something substantive.

What this bill is, I'm afraid, is at best nothing and at worst a harbinger of future program cuts and contracting-out plans to come. Because the Premier herself is so unwilling to even use the terminology consistently, I suspect that at this point what we're really probably dealing with is nothing, but it also means that we really have no idea what we can expect down the road.

In terms of leaving Albertans with an impression of what the Premier brings to the province with her new leadership through this bill, I think it's really a profound failure. I think members in this House have talked about it being a bit of a waste of our time to have to debate it, but of course the government decided to make it Bill 1, so we feel we need to.

It really would be helpful if somebody from the government side would clarify and maybe point to some clear definitions of what they are referring to when they use the term "results-based budgeting" since it has been used in so many different contexts in so many different ways. Since this is Bill 1, I think it would be quite reasonable for them to clarify to members of this Legislature what exactly it is they're talking about because, of course, anyone in the industry would tell you that it could mean one of any 10 things. I mean, I appreciate that there's only about, you know, 50 words in this bill, and you would think you'd want people to understand what they say. So I would recommend that that might be something that this government ought to be considering.

In the meantime we will watch to see what's coming forward. I've been quite surprised, actually. I came back to session a week and a half ago, or however long ago it was, expecting to see bold actions, some real leadership, some real statements that were going to reach out to Albertans and say: "We are not the same government that we've been for the last 40 years. We really are new now because that's what we are. We're bold and we're new and we're moderate and we're young and we're progressive and look at us."

I expected a little bit of definition, something to define where this government was going, and I have been really quite surprised at the beige reproduction of tired, old phrases that I've heard over and over and over again in this House over the course of the last four years. I expected more. Almost from the perspective of being an observer of Alberta politics, I expected we'd see more, and I truly am surprised at how meaningless so much of what this government has brought into this session so far is.

The budget is meaningless. Bill 1 is meaningless. The throne speech was not bold; it was simply old. It was regurgitated phrases from previous throne speeches. There was nothing unique in it, and this bill continues in that theme. I don't know if what we're doing is that we're just kind of limping our way towards the election in the hope that, you know, we'll be able to use the momentum of the 40-year position in this Legislature to get through the election and then start making real decisions for which you will not be accountable for another four years. This will be part of that.

The Deputy Speaker: Standing Order 29(2)(a)?

Seeing none, is there any other hon. member who wishes to speak on the bill? The hon. Member for Calgary-Glenmore.

Mr. Hinman: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's a privilege this evening to be able to get up and speak to what I wish was actually a bill of some importance. It's somewhat amazing to me as we see

this 41-year-old, tired, and worn-out government that doesn't have any new and innovative ideas come up with a bill like this called Bill 1, the Results-based Budgeting Act. Everyone that I talked to about this can't believe it and says: well, if they're going to start doing results-based budgeting, what have they been doing for the previous four budgets when they ran deficits?

10:40

I was just looking in my office tonight, Mr. Chair, where I had the *Sun*, and there was the Premier sitting on a pot of red ink. It was the red Stelmach budget, the fourth deficit.

An Hon. Member: Hey, hey.

Mr. Hinman: I thought that he was no longer in the House. Did he not resign? I apologize. Sorry. Someone had told me that he had resigned. [interjections] Well, you guys have so many things happening over there, and it would be the honourable thing to actually do.

Anyway, what we have here is a government that has a major problem with balancing its budget, so they think they need to put up some smoke and mirrors as if Albertans are going to buy this. They're going to say that they're going to start doing results-based budgeting. It's an insult to Albertans because the result of this government's budgeting has been five deficit budgets in a row.

I find it interesting to listen to them talk about the great investments that they're going to make and how wonderful the opportunity that they have going forward, yet the only thing that we see going forward is an escalation of spending that's going to result in us cycling back to the period of 1992, when this government ran into a \$23 billion debt and we had to take some major steps. Probably what's most concerning, Mr. Chair, about this is the fact that the world is different today than it was in '92. Today we see around the world many, many governments that are on the brink of bankruptcy and failure because of this exact type of thinking, that deficit budgets are okay, that it's okay to spend. I mean, they had this idea: we've got to spend during the tough times, but we have to spend even more during the good times. When do we ever balance it?

It's interesting that, when I saw the Premier's brochure that was dropped off at my home in Calgary, it said: one of the things that we want to do is to save more for future Albertans. Well, how does this budget, how does this Bill 1, Results-based Budgeting Act, save anything for Albertans? It doesn't even save us from the embarrassment of having all of the record revenue and having to say that we can't balance our budget yet, but it's okay. Two years from now we're going to have \$6 billion worth of surplus. How many times do we see individuals, companies, and CEOs say, when they're in financial distress, "Two years down the road the pot of gold is there; we just need to make it two years," when they don't have the discipline to balance their budget at that time.

Again, the hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona said that the Premier seems to be confused about what is results-based budgeting or zero-based budgeting. I guess I'd like to talk just a little bit about zero-based budgeting. There are some advantages. I'm a believer in zero-based budgeting, but the disadvantage many say is that it's very time consuming, and you have to go through every year the reasons why you're doing something. Again, showing the results. Why do we need to spend a billion dollars in agriculture again? So you go through the line items, and you say: well, do we need to cover off on this insurance policy, or do we need to put more money into this research? You actually go through this process of asking: should this be continued the next year?

I think that zero-based budgeting is something that should always be in the back of one's mind even if you're not actually doing it, to go through and ask the questions: "Is this the right thing to be spending our money on? Does this fit our criteria? Is this to be prioritized?" Let's face it. There are so many things in the world today. There is always the opportunity to spend more money. But the questions are: how are we going to spend the money that we do have, and are we going to prioritize it right? Zero-based budgeting gives one that opportunity, yet the question is: what has this government been doing? If it isn't zero-based budgeting, it's just incremental budgeting. So all that you really need to do is justify why you need to increase the budget. Perhaps you might say: well, IT has said that we need to upgrade our programming, and that's expensive; therefore, we need to increase our IT, you know, by 25 per cent. We look at the incremental increases with the thought that, well, we wouldn't have spent any money poorly last year, so we'll just look at anything where we need to have the increases. Zero-based budgeting takes us back to that question and having to justify each and every expenditure on an item basis. I believe that Albertans expect that from their government. They want every dollar spent wisely. They want to have a priority list.

I think it's another area where this government insults Albertans. My colleague was talking earlier about schools and whether or not that list should be made public. I'm always amazed when the government members over there say: "Oh, no. That would just be politics. People would be upset and fighting if they actually knew, you know, which schools were at the top of the priority list." Heavens. They act like Albertans don't understand. If a school in Beaumont is at 140 per cent capacity versus one that's at 70 per cent, do we need more there? I still remember that day when they saw children in Beaumont carrying their desks across the road to get to the other classes.

This government has failed on how they're prioritizing their budgeting. They can't even do an incremental one. The government and the Premier have decided that we don't want to go with zero-based budgeting, that what we want is results-based budgeting. That's very generic. It's even more embarrassing, in my opinion, as an Albertan to say that our budget is results based.

When you read through this very short bill – and I must say that brevity is always a bonus – it doesn't say a lot on what those results are going to be. The result of our budgeting is going to ensure that we don't have over a 10 per cent deficit. We're not going to expand. I mean, it doesn't even explain what results the government is looking for other than to say that next year – next year – we're going to go through everything. Well, if there was anything to go through since last October when they took over – they went through the budget. Yet they come forward and say: we can't make any cuts.

This Premier has said many times that there will be zero cuts. We don't need to cut, yet we need to expand. We need to increase our spending, and we need to increase government. Just operational alone: a 6.9 per cent increase in operations. This is an area in the alternative budget that we put out that said: no, we'll cap it at 2.5 per cent. I believe that that was a \$1.6 billion savings by just reducing the operating.

Those are the types of things that results-based budgeting should reflect. We need to be able to see: what are going to be the results of cutting back in this area? What are the results of reducing the management and moving \$800 million from management to front-line workers? What are the results, you know, if we go through an attrition program for the next four years and remove those top-end managers? What are the results if we actually build 3,000 beds for our seniors so that they can get out of the hospitals and into long-term care as opposed to

keeping them in the hospitals and clogging up 50 per cent of our acute-care beds?

The government never talks about those things. They pontificate about it. They don't show the results. And if they had the results, one would surely think that they would be astute enough to realize, you know, that if we refocus our money, if we refocus these dollars on front-line teachers, on seniors' caregivers, on police officers and doctors and nurses and in equipment for diagnosing medical conditions, what would be the results? If we were to increase the amount of operating time for doctors so that they could get in and do the cataracts, do the hips, do the knees, what would be the results?

I just truly think that this government didn't even stumble upon it when they put results-based budgeting in their Bill 1 to think, you know: could our results be any better? Could we balance the budget this year? It's been clear that the result of their thinking is that, no, there's nothing to do any better. This is as good as it can be. This is what we want to do, go to Albertans and say: "You know, a \$3.1 billion cash deficit for the fifth year in a row, totalling close to \$16 billion, is the result of this government's thinking on how to balance the books." It's very disappointing, and it's very concerning. One has to ask: where are we going to be six months from now?

10:50

We need to do better, Mr. Speaker. This government needs to do better. If they don't, the results are going to be that we're going to have to make drastic cuts in areas that we don't want to. Those core services in our health care, in our education, in our policing, and the necessary infrastructure are going to be compromised in a few short years because this government insists on using a sustainability fund for unsustainable spending. It's not in the best interests of Albertans. It seems like their only interest is to say, "Well, if we spend enough money, people will vote for us, so we need a budget that gives to all so that no one can criticize it." But the fiscal conservative Albertans are criticizing this. They say that this isn't acceptable. They still remember the drastic cuts that were needed to be taken in order to get out of debt. For this Premier and cabinet to say that we're not in debt: well, they're running a deficit. The money that they spend is short \$3.1 billion, I believe, of the revenue that they're taking in. That's the result of this budget which this government just brought down last week. It's not in our best interest.

We have an opportunity here to make some changes in the next 20 days or so and say: "You know what? Let's make some cuts. Let's look at those areas that aren't cost-effective." Why are we subsidizing industries? Why are we putting \$2 billion into carbon capture and sequestration? What are the results of that? A shortage of hospital beds, a shortage of nurses, a shortage of teachers, a shortage of teaching assistants, a shortage of operations: hips, knees, cataracts. The results are that we are not addressing those things with a much higher priority whereas we're focusing on – I don't know – the cotton candy, the fluff, the sugary things, hoping that if it's sweet enough, they'll be able to get a majority government and come booming back and then say: "Let's talk about taxes. We have a problem here. The results of our overspending now have us in a position where taxes need to go up. Why didn't we think of that?"

I'm amazed that they want to bring in this Bill 1, Results-based Budgeting Act, yet they have so much referral to after this next election we'll need to have a discussion because the revenue is too volatile, coming from our resources, to be able to be dependent on it, so we'll need to talk about how we're going to shore up the revenue. They seem to say that more stable funding – we have record revenue, and they're not able to . . . [interjection] What's that?

They have record revenue, yet they have an even higher record of spending. They want to say that, you know, this is best for Alberta, that they're investing in the future, investing in people. I would say it's just the opposite. What they're doing is they're going to be taxing future generations. They're going to put them in a situation where they will not be able to recover from this.

The world, when you look out there, is in a very precarious situation right now. It'll be interesting here in the next few days to see what happens in Greece, whether they sign on to an austerity program and agree that they can't keep spending that much or whether they break away from the euro and have their own currency again. Then we'll see the repercussions of that, the devaluation that will go forward in order to monetize their debt out.

The Deputy Speaker: Standing Order 29(2)(a) allows for five minutes of comments or questions.

Any other hon. member wishing to speak on the bill?

Seeing none, the chair shall now call the question on the bill.

[Motion carried; Bill 1 read a second time]

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Government House Leader.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Given the hour and given that Valentine's Day is fast approaching, I would move that we adjourn until 1:30 p.m. tomorrow.

[Motion carried; the House adjourned at 10:56 p.m. to Tuesday at 1:30 p.m.]

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Province of Alberta

The 27th Legislature
Fifth Session

Alberta Hansard

Tuesday, February 14, 2012

Issue 5a

The Honourable Kenneth R. Kowalski, Speaker

Legislative Assembly of Alberta
The 27th Legislature

Fifth Session

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MacDonald
Mason
Rogers

Standing Committee on Private Bills

Chair: Dr. Brown
Deputy Chair: Ms Woo-Paw

Allred Kang
Benito Knight
Boutilier Lindsay
Calahasen McFarland
Doerksen Sandhu
Drysdale Sarich
Evans Snelgrove
Groeneveld Swann
Hinman Xiao
Jacobs

Standing Committee on Privileges and Elections, Standing Orders and Printing

Chair: Mr. Prins
Deputy Chair: Mr. Snelgrove

Amery Mitzel
Boutilier Notley
Calahasen Pastoor
DeLong Quest
Doerksen Stelmach
Forsyth Swann
Jacobs Tarchuk
Knight Taylor
Leskiw Zwozdesky
McFarland

Standing Committee on Public Accounts

Chair: Mr. MacDonald
Deputy Chair: Mr. Goudreau

Allred Kang
Benito Mason
Calahasen Rodney
Chase Sandhu
Elniski Vandermeer
Fawcett Woo-Paw
Forsyth Xiao
Groeneveld

Standing Committee on Public Health and Safety

Chair: Mrs. Fritz
Deputy Chair: Dr. Taft

Bhardwaj
Blakett
DeLong
Doerksen
Forsyth
Notley
Rodney
Rogers
Swann
Woo-Paw

Legislative Assembly of Alberta

1:30 p.m.

Tuesday, February 14, 2012

[The Speaker in the chair]

Prayers

The Speaker: Welcome.

Let us pray. Grant us daily awareness of the precious gift of life which has been given to us. As Members of this Legislative Assembly we dedicate our lives anew to the service of our province and our country. Amen.

To all of you: happy, happy Valentine's.

Introduction of Visitors

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Lethbridge-East.

Ms Pastoor: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. On behalf of myself and my colleague the Member for Lethbridge-West it is my pleasure to introduce to you and through you to this Assembly three persons who are in your gallery. Dr. Tracy Edwards is president of the Lethbridge College. Under her leadership the college has made tremendous strides into the future. One example is the training of the wind turbine technicians who work all over the world. The college is now very comprehensive and goes well beyond the old name of Lethbridge community college. Mr. Randy Jespersion is the very dedicated chair of our board of governors, and another hard-working friend of Lethbridge College who really needs no introduction to this House is Mr. David Coutts. Please rise and receive the greetings of this Assembly.

Introduction of Guests

The Speaker: The hon. the Premier.

Ms Redford: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's a pleasure to rise today, being an MLA from Calgary, to tell you that we have some very special visitors in the gallery that I'd like to introduce through you to everyone in his House, and that's 104 students from the Calgary Science School in my constituency. That's an awful lot of students, so some are here now, and some will be here later. They're here with their teachers, Candice Shaw, Jason Publack, Rick Fawcett, and Carolyn Armstrong; and also a number of parent helpers, Stuart McPhail, Kim Siemens, Adelina Banks, Bernadine Martin, Paul Langille, Pat Lipovski, Lorelee Higgins, Denise Ronsky, and a good friend of mine, Mr. Scott Blasken. I'd like everyone here to give them a rousing introduction and welcome. Thank you so much for being here.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Human Services.

Mr. Hancock: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure to introduce to you as well today visitors to our Legislature, some special visitors from Victory Christian school located in my constituency of Edmonton-Whitemud. They're a group of 13 grade 9 students accompanied by their teacher, Jonathan Tomalty. I met with them earlier, and we had a question-and-answer session. I can assure you that they're a bright young group of students. They're learning a lot about the parliamentary system. They will be joining us in the public gallery, and I'd ask the members to give them a warm welcome.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Infrastructure.

Mr. Johnson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's a privilege to rise and introduce to you and through you a group of hard-working staff from Infrastructure's properties division. These staff do a terrific job each and every day helping to manage government buildings all over the province. I see that they're up in the public gallery behind us: Alana Krakowski, Stephanie Hassard, Stacey Mah, Kelly Lemke, Max Amodio, Wayne Widuk, Sherry Shagidevich, Jacques Requier, Norene Tchir, and Fred Nyanzi. I'd ask these folks to please rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of the Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Education

Mr. Lukaszuk: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I must beg your indulgence. I have a large list of guests today in the Legislature, and they are here to witness our tabling of Bill 2, the new Alberta Education Act. These are all Alberta's partners in education. If I may start with Jacquie Hansen, president of the Alberta School Boards Association, also accompanied by Cheryl Smith, vice-president, and David Anderson, executive director, who are here representing all of the school boards in the province of Alberta.

The Alberta Teachers' Association is represented by Carol Henderson, the president. I am so glad to know that Ms Henderson is here with us. Welcome. She is accompanied by Dennis Theobald, associate executive secretary of the Alberta Teachers' Association, representing all of the teachers doing the fine work in our province. From our Alberta School Councils' Association, representing all of the parents in the province of Alberta, is Marilyn Sheptycki, president, accompanied by Michele Mulder, executive director. Welcome.

The Public School Boards' Association of Alberta, representing, obviously, all of the public schools, is represented by Patty Dittrick, president, and Mary Lynne Campbell, executive director. The Alberta Catholic School Trustees' Association is represented today by Mr. Tony Sykora, president, and also Stefan Michniewski, executive director. The Association of Alberta Public Charter Schools is represented today by Mr. Jim Rigby, co vice-president, and Lee Lucente, past co vice-president. Welcome. The Fédération des conseils scolaires francophones de l'Alberta is represented by Gérard Lavigne. Welcome as well.

The College of Alberta School Superintendents, representing all of the administrators in our province, is represented by Roger Nippard, president, and Barry Litun, past president. Also with us today, Mr. Speaker, is the Association of Independent Schools and Colleges in Alberta represented by David Eifert, vice-president, and Duane Plantinga, executive director. Also with us are education staff representing all of the support staff such as teaching assistants and others in our schools, represented by Wilma Ellenburgh, president of CEP local 52-A Edmonton Catholic Support Staff Association, and Danny Burrell, school support staff employee liaison officer. Welcome as well.

Mr. Speaker, representing our students is the minister's advisory council, comprised of Ariana Cahn, Gabrielle Fournell, Emily Marriot, Kelly Thompson, Joshua Au-Yeung, Fatima Hawa, Brittany Lissinna, Bethany Froese, Breanne Fulawka, Julie Carter, and representing Alberta Education staff, Kelley Beitel.

I would be remiss, Mr. Speaker, if I didn't introduce one more partner in education, very important to me personally— and he just happens to be in the gallery today as well — my grade 8 social studies teacher, Mr. Chuck Grelli, who must think that this is rather surreal if he remembers me from school days. I'd like him to rise as well.

Welcome to you all.

The Speaker: Nobody beyond grade 8, Minister? [laughter]
The hon. Member for Bonnyville-Cold Lake.

Mrs. Leskiw: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's a pleasure to rise today to introduce to you and through you to all members of the Assembly a close personal friend of mine, Mr. Kevin Pizzey. Kevin has taught school in Sylvan Lake for 23 years and is currently the president of Chinook's ATA local 17, comprised of approximately 700 teachers. Over the years Kevin and I have worked on a number of projects together to further the interest of public education in Alberta. We would mention Motion 503. Kevin has also been an active member of the PC Party for over 10 years and is well known by many in this Assembly. I would like him to rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of this Assembly.

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

Mr. Rodney: Well, thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It is a pleasure to introduce Barb Noble, who is very active in her community and is the manager of the Edmonton office of the Heart and Stroke Foundation. Last year alone the Heart and Stroke Foundation invested close to \$60 million in research, which funded almost 1,500 researchers across Canada. Since 1956 the total is more than \$1.2 billion. I will share more on the foundation in my member's statement today, but in the meantime I invite all of our colleagues to join us in welcoming Barb to the Legislature today.

Thank you.

1:40

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

Mr. Bhardwaj: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I have two introductions. It's a pleasure to rise today to introduce to you and through you Dr. Ansar Qureshi. Dr. Qureshi has been working in Alberta as an environmental microbiologist for the past 25 years, with a focus on public health. Dr. Qureshi has an impressive resumé, including serving as a past director of the Capital region health board, past president of the Pakistan-Canada Association as well as serving on a number of community and public boards. Dr. Qureshi has also recently taken on the role of president of the soon to be formed Edmonton-South West PC association. He is very proud of having two boys and one girl. At this time I'd ask my guest to please rise and receive the traditional warm welcome.

For my second introduction, Mr. Speaker, also in attendance is Naida Meghji, the child development manager at the Joan Ivany Allen Gray Child Development Centre. She has over 16 years of experience in child care and is continually striving for excellence in child development. If her name sounds familiar, it may be because of her family's connection to Platinum Investments, a major player in the EIA's expansion Marriott hotel. Her work with children and being a mom to two sons keeps her very, very busy. At this time I'd ask my guest to please rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of the Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods.

Mr. Benito: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's a very special afternoon for the constituency of Edmonton-Mill Woods. It is my pleasure to rise and introduce to you and through you Mr. Sohail Quadri, the newly nominated and official PC Party candidate in the next provincial election for my constituency of Edmonton-Mill Woods. The Edmonton-Mill Woods PC Association has spoken, and through the unanimous vote held last January 31 we now have an

official PC Party candidate for this great part of southeast Edmonton. I would now ask Mr. Quadri, who is seated in the public gallery, to rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of the Assembly.

Mr. Speaker, my second introduction is also a member of the Edmonton-Mill Woods PC Association. I would ask Mr. Farooq Jutt, who is seated in the public gallery, to rise and receive the warm welcome of the Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Fish Creek.

Mrs. Forsyth: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure to introduce to you and through you Peter Menzies and Marc Patrone. Peter is currently the CRTC representative for Alberta and is someone who I've known for a very long time. Previously he has been an editor and publisher for the *Calgary Herald* and even before that was a member of the Legislative Assembly press gallery. Marc is currently the national commissioner for the CRTC, following his career as an experienced broadcast journalist who worked nationally with CTV and internationally with CNN and ESPN. With all of the things these men have been through, I consider it quite the honour that they would actually spend the afternoon in here watching us. I'd like them to rise and receive the warm welcome of the Assembly.

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

Mr. Mason: Thanks very much, Mr. Speaker. Today I'm pleased to introduce to you and through you to this Assembly our guest Casey McCarthy. Casey is an AISH activist, heavily involved with the Self Advocacy Federation, the Special Olympics, and countless other organizations. Until recently she was also a constituent of mine. I would now ask Casey to rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of the Assembly.

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

Ms. Notley: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Today I'm very pleased to introduce to you and through you to this Assembly our guests from various organizations fighting to preserve the natural heritage of the Castle wilderness area. Chelsea Flook, Gabriel Cárdenas, Nicholas Mickelsen, and Sarah Elmeligi have all come here today from different parts of the province to help stop the government's attack on one of the most biologically significant and threatened natural areas in North America. The Alberta NDP would continue to stand with these organizations like CPAWS and the Sierra Club Canada to help preserve and protect our province's natural heritage for future generations.

I would now like to ask my guests to rise as I call their names: Chelsea Flook, who is with the Sierra Club Canada; Gabriel Cárdenas, who is with the concerned citizens and is a community organizer; Nicholas Mickelsen, who is with the New Democratic Youth association; and Sarah Elmeligi, who is with the Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society. I'd like the whole Legislature to join me in welcoming them.

Members' Statements

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

Heart Month

Mr. Rodney: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Today we celebrate Valentine's Day, and this month we commemorate Heart Month. Throughout February organizations such as the Heart and

Stroke Foundation of Alberta, NWT & Nunavut will be raising awareness of the risks of heart disease and informing Albertans that heart disease is preventable and manageable.

It's estimated that 70,000 Canadians have heart attacks every year. High blood pressure, high blood cholesterol, being overweight, excessive alcohol, physical inactivity, smoking, and stress are all risks that Albertans can address to reduce their chances of developing heart disease in the first place.

Today even our children are at greater risk of developing heart disease. Youth obesity rates are increasing while activity levels are decreasing. In Alberta approximately 22 per cent of children and youth are overweight or obese. Children as young as six are being diagnosed with high blood pressure as well as type 2 diabetes.

These two risks can be significantly reduced with a healthy diet and, of course, a more active lifestyle. The government of Alberta supports the Heart and Stroke Foundation of Alberta, NWT & Nunavut in encouraging Albertans to stay healthy and to make wise nutritional choices while increasing activity levels.

Mr. Speaker, I invite all members of our Assembly to join me in congratulating the Heart and Stroke Foundation of Alberta, NWT & Nunavut for raising awareness of heart disease not only during Heart Month but throughout the year as well as for the contributions they've made over time towards achieving their goal of eliminating disability and deaths from heart disease.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Fish Creek.

Health Care Services in Alberta

Mrs. Forsyth: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Today I want to speak about health care. I spend most of my time talking to the health care workers in the trenches. They talk to me because the government won't listen and they don't trust them. I find it extremely ironic that this government, the Premier and her top ministers specifically, go on and on and on about having discussions and conversations with Albertans, and they won't talk to the health professionals who know a lot more about the number one issue to Albertans, health.

This government doesn't respect the hard work of doctors. The doctors have not had a contract for over a year now. The government keeps breaking off negotiations and playing hardball like cutting funding for primary care networks, a documented success story that helps reduce admissions to hospitals. Does this make sense with the family doctor shortage? Doctors have been intimidated and bullied by this government for years. The health minister has the audacity in question period to call it a workplace issue. The Premier when running indicated that she would call a full public judicial inquiry. Alas, another broken promise.

What is the government doing now? Well, they've found money to hire more vice-presidents at Alberta Health Services. In the last year the number has gone up, from 72 to 89, over 20 per cent. They've also opened a hotline for doctors. I wonder if these new vice-presidents will man that hotline.

Mr. Speaker, it's time for the government to have a real conversation with real people in the trenches and not their closed-door meetings. It's time to end the intimidation. It's time to give the support that they need to the real people that matter, the health care professionals and Albertans.

Oral Question Period

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

Electricity Prices

Dr. Sherman: Mr. Speaker, happy Valentine's Day. It's great to see Madam Premier wearing Liberal red colours.

Mr. Speaker, Albertans' power bills are like a box of chocolates. They never know what they're going to get. Yesterday the Minister of Energy told Albertans who want lower prices to pick up the phone and call 11 different providers, and if you're on the regulated rate option, decrease your cost by 42 per cent. Instead of forcing Albertans to make dozens of calls for help after they've been gouged, why doesn't the Premier just make the fixed-term contracts the default option?

1:50

Dr. Morton: Mr. Speaker, we're quite proud of the fact that we give residential consumers this choice. It's not very complicated. Albertans every day make a choice when they go to borrow money for a mortgage. Do they want a fixed rate, do they want a variable rate, or do they want some combination? It's exactly the same situation with respect to electricity, and Albertans appreciate that choice.

The Speaker: The hon. leader.

Dr. Sherman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. That wasn't a tasty chocolate, Mr. Minister.

The fact is, Mr. Speaker, that Albertans continue to get gouged by high power bills, and this government won't do anything about it. Given that sky-high electricity prices do the most harm to the vulnerable in our society – those on fixed incomes, seniors, and hard-working families – does the Premier have the heart to tell these Albertans why there is nothing in the PC government's budget to provide any sort of relief from these sky-high bills?

Ms Redford: Mr. Speaker, what we know is that in this province Albertans do have a choice with respect to whether or not they enter into fixed-term contracts. There's certainly not any reason for them to call 11 different providers. They can simply go to a website and get the information, make the decision, call, and sign a contract if they wish. The Minister of Energy is absolutely right. By doing that, they will be able to reduce their cost of electricity 42 per cent.

Now, we know that in a deregulated market sometimes the prices are high; sometimes they're low. We've had the good fortune over the past five years of having significantly lower prices, and that's very important. But with respect to whether or not vulnerable Albertans might need support, that's available. We didn't have to add it to the budget because it's already there.

The Speaker: The hon. leader.

Dr. Sherman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Given that in other jurisdictions such as British Columbia and Quebec government involvement ensures electricity prices are far less than those set by private power companies right here, will the Premier please show some compassion to Albertans and fix the price gouging happening under this government's flawed policy of electricity deregulation? Yes or no, Madam Premier.

Ms Redford: These are dangerous words from the hon. member, government involvement. Government involvement, Mr. Speaker, leads to the public debt being increased with respect to the cost of electricity so that future generations need to take on that debt, and we're not going to do that.

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

Critical Transmission Review Committee Report

Dr. Sherman: Mr. Speaker, let's talk about government involvement. Not surprisingly, a committee led by a former PC Party vice-president just came back with a report supporting this government's request to build more expensive transmission lines without an independent needs-based assessment by the AUC. The Premier talks a lot about listening to Albertans and consulting with them before any action is taken, yet it seems these new transmission lines are going full steam ahead. Is the Premier all talk, or will she stop this project in its tracks and send it to the AUC for an honest, transparent, needs-based assessment?

Ms Redford: Mr. Speaker, this is a very interesting report, which, of course, everyone will know the government received yesterday. We've made a commitment to respond to it in a very immediate time, and we will. There are some very specific recommendations in there with respect to cost sharing, with respect to competitive bid processing.

I'll tell you, Mr. Speaker, that this was a panel made up of people who were consumer advocates, who understand the system, who consulted with over 50 people and, in fact, made recommendations that everyone will be fully aware were not my ideas last year. So I'm quite confident that as we move ahead and we look to economic development in this province, this is something that we're going to be able to work with.

Dr. Sherman: Mr. Speaker, given that this committee agrees with opposition parties that Bill 50 should be brought back right here to the Legislature to remove this cabinet's ability to designate any future projects as critical, will the Premier commit to stopping this project right now until the government can introduce legislation allowing for a public consultation and independent experts to make the call and not cabinet? Independent, Premier.

Ms Redford: What's wonderful about this report is that it does give us a wide range of options. As we've said, Mr. Speaker, as our Minister of Energy has said, we will provide a comprehensive and fulsome response. We will not do what the hon. member is suggesting we do, which is cherry-pick. This is an important piece of integrated policy planning. We will respond. It will be a good response, and it'll be good for Alberta.

Dr. Sherman: Mr. Speaker, there's a lot of cherry-picking going on here, winners and losers, and I hear Albertans are the losers in this Premier's hands.

Given that the report admits that the construction of these power lines will once again cause Albertans' power bills to go up and make these young people pay forever, is the Premier going to do anything to stop the continual gouging of Albertan families, or is she just going to leave them at the mercy of these huge private corporations?

Ms Redford: Mr. Speaker, there are many people in this House that are fond of saying that this is question period and not answer period, but what I will say is that I would have appreciated it if the hon. member had listened to my first answer in this series of questions, where I talked about the fact that there were some really good recommendations in this and that we will be responding forthwith.

The Speaker: Third Official Opposition main question. The hon. Member for Calgary-Varsity.

Castle-Crown Wilderness Area

Mr. Chase: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The Castle-Crown area is a critical wildlife zone, the home of 223 species that are rare or at risk of extinction. Environmental groups have stated at length that this area is crucial to the maintenance of specific fish and wildlife populations. A recent survey has found that three-quarters of the residents are opposed to the logging in the area and wish Castle-Crown to be named a wildland park. My questions are to the Premier. Given that the Castle-Crown area is such a gem for watershed, wildlife, and recreation, how can you authorize logging in this area, an area that Albertans clearly want to preserve?

Ms Redford: Mr. Speaker, this is an issue, of course, that has been part of public discussion for the last couple of weeks and couple of months, and the minister has responded with respect to the policy that we have in place with respect to a forest management agreement. The most important piece of this is that what we're talking about is an area where there is abundant habitat. We do have wildlife that's thriving. I think that speaks to the fact that we have a forest management agreement in place that's allowing for economic development and environmental sustainability at the same time.

Mr. Chase: Again to the Premier: given that there are no proven pine beetle or fire threats in this area and that logging roads will facilitate even more illegal off-roading accessibility, how can this government justify this unjustifiable cumulative onslaught of the Castle-Crown?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Oberle: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I could scarcely do better than to echo the words of the Premier. The landscape that we see today, the beautiful landscape that's appreciated by Albertans far and wide, is a result of over a hundred years of harvesting. The habitat types that exist on that landscape today are the result of over a hundred years of harvesting and 50 years of full commercial logging. I think that speaks to the success of a management plan and the responsible operations of the companies.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Chase: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The majority of countries, states, and provinces have abandoned the type of logging that has prevailed over the last hundred years.

Again to the Premier, in case we have a pop-up Whac-A-Mole: given that the Castle-Crown special area provides one-third of the water for southernmost Alberta as well as being a diverse habitat for plants and wildlife, when will you declare the Castle-Crown a wildland park? Will it be watershed or wood chips? Which side are you on?

Mr. Oberle: Mr. Speaker, amongst the many, many values that we consider in forest management planning is watershed protection.

Ms Blakeman: It's a special place.

Mr. Oberle: I might point out to the hon. member, if the Member for Edmonton-Centre would allow me, Mr. Speaker, that we've done monitoring, not just planning but monitoring on those watersheds, and they're amongst Alberta's healthiest watersheds. Again, it's the result of 50 years of full commercial harvesting, 100 years of multiple forest use on that landscape. [interjections]

The Speaker: Okay. Okay. Okay. We've got every education leader in the province here today plus a number of children, and if this is the example we want to show to them, please, I will ignore the hon. member when the sixth question comes because she's already had more than her share to say this afternoon.

The hon. Member for Calgary-Glenmore, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands-Norwood.

Critical Transmission Review Committee Report (continued)

Mr. Hinman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The decision-making process for the north-south power lines has been wrong from the very beginning and has asked landowners, businesses, and residents to pay the bills for big corporate profits. In 2004 Justice Tilleman stopped the building of these lines on the grounds of apprehension of bias, and this was upheld in the Court of Appeal by Justice Conrad. The government then pushed these lines forward by passing Bill 50 and declaring these lines critical. Now even their own review committee says that Bill 50 is wrong and that the process should go through the AUC. Will the Premier do what is right for Albertans and industry by restoring decision-making to the AUC and repeal Bill 50?

2:00

Ms Redford: Mr. Speaker, the preliminary comments with respect to this question by the hon. member, quite frankly, are ancient history. Whether or not there may have been developments almost seven or eight years ago with respect to this are not relevant to the circumstances today. What I will say is that the report that we received yesterday did speak to the importance of economic development in this province, that part of that is ensuring that we have a connected grid. As I've said, we think there are some very interesting recommendations in this report, and as my Minister of Energy has said, we will be responding in a fulsome way, in a comprehensive way to this report in very due time.

Mr. Hinman: Mr. Speaker, it's not ancient history.

Given the fact that AESO was offside on this and so was the cabinet, we need to review it again. Given that the government's own report admits that the review process is wrong by taking authority away from the AUC and not using a competitive procurement process for building the north-south lines, will the Premier please protect Albertans and our industries from overinflated power prices by repealing Bill 50 and stopping the overbuild?

Dr. Morton: Mr. Speaker, our friends on the other side here have been complaining for years now that, one, there was not enough consultation and, two, that we didn't take enough time. Well, we have done the consultation. We've done two months of consultation, and now we're taking the time to consider the recommendations that the committee has made. They can't have it both ways. Do they want us to take the time or hurry up? We're going to take the time and consider these recommendations.

Mr. Hinman: We've been consistent the whole time.

Given that the vast majority of the groups, especially those representing consumers and industry and those that were at the hearing of the north-south lines, were against it and given that the only cost-benefit analysis by the U of C showed that this is a multibillion-dollar boondoggle and given that the only presenters that actually supported these lines were those who would profit from them, will the Premier quit hiding behind this sham report

and tell Albertans why she is putting her interest and that of the power brokers ahead of Albertans?

Ms Redford: I have no particular interest in these power lines beyond the fact that I'm the Premier of a province that I believe will be the economic engine for the future of this country. What I saw yesterday, Mr. Speaker, in that that report was a framework that talked about how we can continue that success. We've had some very interesting discussions in the past two or three months about the importance of building infrastructure in this province, outside of this province, whether it's the Keystone pipeline or the Gateway pipeline. Infrastructure matters for economic development, and that's what Albertans are going to do.

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

Electricity Prices (continued)

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much. Alberta families are paying the highest electricity bills in Canada, but when this Tory government is challenged about it, they have no answers for Albertans. Instead, they respond with half-truths, misleading statistics, and red herrings. Mr. Speaker, Albertans want real answers for the highest power bills in history. Do you have one for them, Premier?

Dr. Morton: Mr. Speaker, I'll be happy to table later today a report by London Economics International that shows power prices in context, comparing Alberta-delivered electricity prices with other Canadian provinces on a level playing field, March 2011. We'll be happy to provide that. This talk about Quebec prices – 96 per cent of the electricity in Quebec is generated by old hydro. They generate it cheap, and they sell it expensively down to the States. It's not an apples-to-apples comparison.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Mason: Thanks very much, Mr. Speaker. I'd like to ask the Premier why she doesn't answer questions when they are put to her in this House. Why are you hiding behind your ministers?

Ms Redford: Mr. Speaker, I'm sitting here with a front bench of excellent cabinet ministers that know their issues, care about Albertans, consult with Albertans. There are certainly times when I answer questions. Every single time that a question is put to me, I ensure that the answer that is provided to this House is the most fulsome and detailed answer possible, and this is a cabinet that will ensure that happens. I believe that when we go forward in the future of this province, leadership is not about one person; it's about a team. I'm very proud of this team, and this team will continue to work together.

The Speaker: The hon. member, please.

Mr. Mason: Thanks very much, Mr. Speaker. Well, at least we got an answer from the Premier even though it wasn't the question.

Given that electricity is an essential service for families, farms, and businesses, can the Premier explain why this government clings to a broken power market that is manipulated by big power companies, creating wild price swings and the highest power rates in Canada?

Ms Redford: Mr. Speaker, these allegations are completely unfounded. The fact is that we in this province made a decision

many years ago that a deregulated market was good for Alberta consumers, for household consumers and for industrial consumers. What we will say is that while we move forward, if we look over what has happened in the past five years, as the Minister of Energy has said, we don't actually find the hon. member across being too upset when power prices are low, only when they're high.

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

Environmental Monitoring

Ms Blakeman: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. This government has an action and a credibility problem when it comes to environmental protection and our international reputation. All it does is try to sell a message rather than working to ensure that it has the scientific foundation and the action on the ground to back it up. To the Minister of Environment and Water: why is this government moving forward on monitoring without an independent commission in place? That is the only way to ensure scientific credibility. Why?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mrs. McQueen: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. We are moving forward with monitoring, and we made that announcement with Minister Kent a couple of weeks ago. We're doing this in phases. We're moving forward with the monitoring, as I've said before, so we wouldn't lose the spring monitoring season. We've announced \$11 million in our budget. We have agreement from the industry that they will over the next three years provide \$50 million with regard to that. The next step, as I've said before, is that now we're working on this external body with regard to independent monitoring.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Ms Blakeman: Thanks. Without science that spring monitoring isn't going to be credible.

To the same minister: what is the reason to move forward without signed financial commitments in place? Without them we're leaving Albertans to carry the risk for all of the liabilities of this project.

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mrs. McQueen: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'd like to say that, quite frankly, we have the support for what we're doing from people like Dr. Schindler who have also expressed their support with regard to the way we are moving forward and the quick manner that we are doing it. We have the support of the science community, academic community, industry, and our caucus colleagues here. We are moving with a science-based monitoring program that will be independent.

Ms Blakeman: Minister, I asked you about financial commitments. I don't think Dr. Schindler is going to pay for that.

To the same minister. The government appears to have grasped the concept of independent, science-based monitoring for the use of surface water. So how long do we have to wait for this same realization about groundwater monitoring, especially in association with fracking?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mrs. McQueen: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'd like, perhaps,

for the member to be listening as well. I did talk about not that Dr. Schindler would be paying for this but that along with our budget dollars, \$11 million, industry has committed over the next three years \$150 million to monitoring. We are already starting our groundwater mapping. We've done from Edmonton to Calgary. Quite frankly, we are going to continue working on the environmental issues that are important to Albertans.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Leduc-Beaumont-Devon.

Municipal Sustainability Initiative Funding

Mr. Rogers: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. As a former mayor and president of the Alberta Urban Municipalities Association I know the funding challenges faced by communities all across this province and the tremendous value of a program like the municipal sustainability initiative. This did not exist during my time as mayor. Recently the coverage following the budget announcement alleges that the MSI funding is based on how a municipality votes; namely, who their MLA is. To the Minister of Municipal Affairs: are MSI funds awarded based on any such political discretion?

Mr. Griffiths: Mr. Speaker, it's incredibly unfortunate that such an accusation has been made. MSI was formed in consultation with the AUMA, AAMD and C, municipalities all across this province, an extensive consultation from one end to the other. The formula is very explicit. It's 48 per cent based on population, 48 per cent on the education property tax, and 4 per cent on roads. The municipalities can even go online and look at the value within about a week of exactly how much money they're going to get. There's no political playing with this game. Any suggestion otherwise is irresponsible.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Rogers: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Again to the minister. Mr. Minister, to my recollection the AUMA and, by extension, municipalities in Alberta have always had an excellent working relationship with this government. Will the comments by the AUMA president harm this relationship?

2:10

Mr. Griffiths: Mr. Speaker, I've worked for 10 years as an MLA to build better communities. I've travelled all over this province, going to 328 of the 422 communities. Municipalities are an incredibly important partner in building stronger communities and a better province. The comments of one individual will not affect this province's relationship with municipalities in building a better Alberta.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Rogers: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Again to the minister: with the pending review of the Municipal Government Act are you and this government contemplating expanding any powers for municipalities to meet the growing diverse challenges faced by all these communities?

Mr. Griffiths: Mr. Speaker, I've announced already that we're going to do an extensive rewrite of the Municipal Government Act in three different parts. We're going to do that in consultation with municipalities because we understand that municipalities have unique and new challenges from one end of this province to the other, and we have to make sure that municipalities have the tools, the resources, the responsibility, and the revenue to make the

appropriate decisions to serve their citizens, just like we in this Assembly serve the people of this province.

Education Funding

Mr. Hehr: Mr. Speaker, the Minister of Education is big on making claims that the education system is being improved under his watch. That said, the facts speak for themselves. I see no accomplishment in telling school boards they're not getting adequate funding for the next three years. Why are there 450 fewer teachers in our classrooms this year compared to last? Does the minister honestly believe this is good for our children's future?

Mr. Lukaszuk: Mr. Speaker, I am not only laying claim that I'm trying to improve an already excellent education system, not only because of myself or my predecessors here on the floor of the Legislature but, frankly, all of these education stakeholders that we have in the galleries. I have to tell you that we haven't yet debated the estimates on Education, but for the first time in the history of this province our educators, our partners, have the predictability of funding for the next three years. The budget for Alberta Education will be growing from \$6.8 billion to \$7.1 billion. However, local priorities on how many teachers need to be hired to deliver this high-quality education will be made by school boards.

Mr. Hehr: That answer and a buck 50 gets me a cup of coffee at Tim Hortons, Mr. Speaker.

I asked why there are 450 fewer teachers in the classroom today. Why and how has that happened under this minister's watch?

Mr. Lukaszuk: Mr. Speaker, if \$7.1 billion buys him a cup of coffee, he's a very thirsty young man.

Decisions are being made by school boards. I have to tell you that last fall the Premier and this cabinet committed an additional \$107 million. That hired 680-some teachers, I believe, and that \$107 million now is replicated in the three subsequent budgets. Decisions will be made at the local school board level on how many teachers are required to deliver the program.

Mr. Hehr: I guess it's the school boards' fault.

My last question is in regard to the minister's ability to budget. Given that the minister expects teachers will sign an agreement for a 1 per cent salary increase, along with unicorns and magical fairies how can the minister believe this is a legitimate number to budget on?

Mr. Lukaszuk: Mr. Speaker, there are no faults because we're not in the business of pointing fingers. I stress the word "partnership," and I find all the players in the system are partners in education. If they want to play the blame game, they're more than welcome to do it.

The fact is that we also will not be negotiating collective bargaining agreements on the floor of this Legislature. We have partners who will be negotiating, and I'm sure they will strike a deal that will be right for the children of Alberta.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for St. Albert, followed by the hon. Member for Calgary-Mountain View.

Ambulance Services in St. Albert

Mr. Allred: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My questions, through you, will be to the Minister of Health and Wellness. Many

municipalities, including the city of St. Albert, have a history of providing excellent paramedic services integrated with local fire departments. In 2009 Alberta Health Services took over these services with the promise that we would have improved service. Why is it that that service has declined to a critical stage, with excessive wait times being the norm?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Horne: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. I would disagree with the hon. member that service levels have declined in St. Albert. In fact, the median response times for St. Albert lights-and-sirens calls have remained steady at around seven minutes since the transition. Response time for the 90th percentile has actually improved in St. Albert, from around 15 minutes at the time of the transition to around 13 minutes today.

Mr. Allred: Mr. Speaker, given that the city of St. Albert formerly had five ambulances and wait times of less than nine minutes and now has only two ambulances available a little more than half time and, of major concern, 8 per cent of the time St. Albert has no ambulances and wait times averaging 14 and a half minutes and sometimes up to one hour, what is the minister doing to respond to this unacceptable degradation of service?

Mr. Horne: Well, Mr. Speaker, it has been very clear to me since the end of last year that we have a problem with data availability around EMS response times in Alberta, and that is why in January I asked Alberta Health Services to make all EMS response times in Alberta public on their website. That process will begin at the end of the month.

In response to the hon. member's question about ambulance availability, there is provision for up to five ambulances to be available in St. Albert at any particular point in time. There are currently two permanently stationed there and a third at the Sturgeon hospital. When that third ambulance is not on the road, Mr. Speaker, the paramedic assigned to that unit is working in the emergency department.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Allred: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. I certainly agree that we do have a data problem.

Mr. Speaker, given that we had a very clear plan on how to eliminate the ambulance queue at the entrances to hospital emergency rooms, why do we continue to see ambulances and their attendants lined up, waiting to release their patients and get back on the road to answer other emergency calls?

Mr. Horne: Mr. Speaker, we do continue to see these delays, and one of the reasons we do is that over the last year emergency department visits in Alberta have gone up by an average of 17 per cent. That's a very significant increase.

I can tell the hon. member that I've had the opportunity to discuss the St. Albert issue with the mayor of St. Albert. We will continue to work together on this. There are some further developments I'll be able to announce shortly with respect to communication between EMS workers and AHS management.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Mountain View, followed by the hon. Member for Grande Prairie-Wapiti.

Farm Worker Exemptions from Labour Legislation

Dr. Swann: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. For decades in Alberta an average of six children per year died on farms and

ranches, yet this hon. Human Services minister responded to my concerns in a letter dated January 2012: the restrictions the legislation places on the employment of children, including those relating to minimum wage and minimum age, do not apply on a farm or ranch environment. To the minister: is this an acceptable situation in Alberta in the 21st century?

Mr. Hancock: Well, Mr. Speaker, in Alberta the vast majority of our farms are still family farms. It's traditional for families to work on the farms. The labour rules that apply in other workplaces across the province do not apply in that same manner on a family farm, but we also can work with families on farms. The loss of any child is horrendous, and the injuries of any person on a farm are horrendous, and we need to work on improving the understanding of safety and those sorts of issues on farms while we retain the right of families to work their farms.

Dr. Swann: That's a tiresome response, Mr. Speaker, for many, many in the farm-working industry. What do you mean to say when you say: we're putting children first? Six deaths a year.

Mr. Hancock: I put children first every day of my life, and I have every time [inaudible]. The future of this province depends on making sure that every child has the opportunity to maximize their potential. That means protecting children when they need protection, even on farms. But we don't go into people's houses; we don't go onto people's farms and tell them how to raise their children. We do protect children when they're in danger, and we do that through education, through family support, and through many other mechanisms. Every child is important.

Dr. Swann: I'm talking about industrial farms also and paid children. The Barley report suggested not only education; we have to have legislation on these farms. This is a judge. You are a lawyer. When are you going to act and get legislation to protect our children on farms?

Mr. Hancock: Mr. Speaker, we constantly look at what we can do better, and the minister of agriculture tasked a committee to bring forward a report on that. That report has come forward. We're looking at that now to see if there are other things that we can do, including possibly the question of whether changes in policy or legislation could be necessary. But let's be perfectly clear. Legislation doesn't make people safe. People understanding that they have to operate in safe conditions and they have to care about their workers: that's what makes people safe, and that's the kind of atmosphere we want on our farms across the province.

2:20 Medevac Services at Namao Air Base

Mr. Drysdale: Mr. Speaker, media reports last week indicated that the President of Treasury Board and Enterprise was in discussion with the Edmonton Garrison to transfer medevac services to their airstrip from the Edmonton City Centre Airport. My question is for the President of Treasury Board and Enterprise. Is it true that medevac services will be moved to the Garrison?

The Speaker: The hon. Deputy Premier.

Mr. Horner: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. My colleague is partially correct. We are in preliminary discussions with the land force western commander at the Garrison about the possibilities around reactivating what was at one time the fourth-longest airstrip in the Commonwealth. There may be some opportunities there, but no decisions have been made at this time.

Mr. Drysdale: The safety of patients and transport times to local hospitals have been a concern of my constituents since it was announced that the city of Edmonton would be closing the downtown airport. Will transport time from the Garrison be a consideration in this decision?

Mr. Horner: Absolutely, Mr. Speaker. Because of the Health Quality Council report we need to find an alternate landing strip, so indeed we are looking at a number of different locations that will provide that. We view the Garrison as a possibility where we may be able to move not only medevac services but also the government of Alberta transportation services and perhaps some other private partners out to that strip. All of the parameters the Health Quality Council talked about, all of the parameters around distance to the airport, distance to hospitals, and patients coming in from the north are going to be considered.

Mr. Drysdale: Mr. Speaker, my final question to the same minister: is this the only option being considered, and when will a decision be made about where medevac services will be situated when the municipal airport closes?

Mr. Horner: Mr. Speaker, we are actually looking at a couple of other possibilities for a secondary landing strip. Regardless of whether we go to the Edmonton International with the medevac services, we will still need to find an alternative landing area for bad weather or low altitude cloud levels. There are a few places in the area that we can look at; Namao is one of them.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona, followed by the hon. Member for Calgary-McCall.

Minimum Housing and Health Standards

Ms Notley: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. This PC government behind closed doors is drafting new rules to weaken the safety of rental housing in a shameful effort to reward the Premier's political donors. Enforcement of the current standards is so poor that at least eight people have died in fires in recent years, and now this government wants to erode the rules so enforcement becomes impossible. My question to the minister of health is: why won't he agree that even \$20,000 in donations to the Premier is not worth legalizing fire traps for low-income Alberta families and, instead, commit to no changes to this document about standards in rental housing?

The Speaker: The Minister of Health and Wellness if it's appropriate.

Mr. Horne: Well, thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. This question is not only insulting; it's frankly very uninformed. I have been presented by my department with no draft changes to regulations under the Public Health Act that address window size and dimensions. I can think of fewer MLAs, perhaps with the exception of one in this House, that have appreciated in recent months the significant damage and stress and anxiety that fire causes in one's constituency, having just endured two in my area. My constituents are dealing with this issue; they're talking to me about it every day. We're dealing with it. We're strengthening the standards, not weakening them.

Ms Notley: Well, Mr. Speaker, then I ask the minister again: will you commit today that there will be no changes to the Minimum Housing and Health Standards document dated 1999? Are there no changes to it?

Mr. Horne: Mr. Speaker, until such time as I decide to entertain consideration of any options for changes to that regulation, the answer is no.

Ms Notley: Mr. Speaker, given that the current requirements for windows and doorways to provide a clear, objective measure of what's safe to use for a bedroom that may hold children, grandparents, and people with disabilities, given that they're going to be thrown out or there's discussion of throwing those out in favour of the unenforceable term "reasonable," will the minister explain how his government or people in his government could have considered such changes for any reason except for being immoral? Your own staff have confirmed that these decisions are under consideration.

Mr. Horne: Well, Mr. Speaker, once again and for the final time, I have no idea what information this hon. member has or thinks that she has or the source. I can tell you that the government is committed to maximizing safety for all residents, particularly those in rental suites, with respect to fire, and we'll continue to do so.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-McCall, followed by the hon. Member for Bonnyville-Cold Lake.

School Infrastructure Funding

Mr. Kang: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm heartbroken to report that thousands of children go to school in Alberta in conditions close to those of Third World countries. Leaky roofs, bad plumbing, and substandard heating are the reality of too many students across the province, yet this government again failed to address the pressing infrastructure and maintenance needs that schools boards face on a daily basis. To the Minister of Infrastructure: is this your blueprint for our world-class education system, Mr. Minister?

Mr. Johnson: Mr. Speaker, the maintenance and the ongoing maintenance of schools are the responsibility of school divisions, and we flow about a hundred million dollars a year through to those school divisions. I'd stack our infrastructure in this province up against any jurisdiction in North America.

These things are a balance, and we struggle or wrestle with those just like a normal family does and any business does that decides priorities on where to put their money. I think this is a great example of how on one side we get told to spend more and on one side we're told to spend less. We're trying to find ways to spend smarter, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Kang: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. We want our children safe in the schools. To the minister again: given the fact that Grimshaw school is clearly a health and safety hazard for all staff and students, how can you justify your department's denial of funds for school maintenance for the last 10 years? Fifty per cent of schools are 50 years old.

Mr. Johnson: Mr. Speaker, we're very well aware of the issue at Grimshaw school, and I feel for those parents and those students. I know the local MLA has been quite an advocate.

Obviously, the Department of Education has to stack up their priorities right across the entire province. Once again, there's only so much money to go around, but Alberta is investing about a billion dollars in 88 school projects right now, which dwarfs any

other province in the country. We'll continue to look forward and try and deal with issues like this as soon as we possibly can.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Kang: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Nothing gets done fast enough.

To the minister again: given that school boards across the province have raised concerns over the increased use of P3 partnerships to build their facilities and the rising costs associated with these projects, will the minister commit to the public construction of our public schools?

Mr. Johnson: Mr. Speaker, the P3 projects are a real good-news story in Alberta. Of course, we can't use them in every situation. They're not right in every situation, but one thing they do for Albertans is provide certainty. They provide certainty for us that there is going to be a budgeted amount for maintenance and that that school 30 years down the road is going to be in great condition as opposed to just rolling maintenance funding through to school boards and they have to weigh different priorities amongst themselves.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Bonnyville-Cold Lake, followed by the hon. Member for Fort McMurray-Wood Buffalo.

Sale of Crown Land in Fort McMurray

Mrs. Leskiw: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Media stories in Fort McMurray indicated that government is getting ready to release more Crown land in Fort McMurray for development. Can the Minister of Infrastructure tell us more about these plans and whether the land will meet the needs of the community?

The Speaker: First of all, verification: media reports are inappropriate.

Proceed.

Mr. Johnson: Mr. Speaker, it's true that we are working on some more strategic land releases in Fort McMurray. Some of these were highlighted on pages 39, 40, 41 of the budget, where Fort McMurray was specifically mentioned, for the folks that actually read the budget. The people of Fort McMurray deserve to see a clear plan for which pieces of land are going to be released in which order so that we can send some clear signals to the market and we can help stabilize land prices in that very important part of the province.

Mrs. Leskiw: My second question is to the same minister. The second parcel of land in the Southlands area in Fort McMurray was supposed to have been put on the market early last year. Why the delay on this piece of land?

Mr. Johnson: That is a good question, Mr. Speaker. There were two pieces of land south of Fort McMurray that were anticipated to go on the market in the last year, both in an area called Southlands. One went on the market; folks down there were expecting the second piece to come on by the end of this last year, 2011. But it was always intended that the second parcel would not come on until the deal on the first parcel was closed, wrapped up. That took a little bit longer than we thought, with conditions being removed. That's done now. The second parcel will come on the market very soon.

Mrs. Leskiw: More land being available for development is fine, but too much land on the market may drive down property prices. Have you factored in people's investment before releasing all this land?

Mr. Horner: Mr. Speaker, I take exception to the preamble in the sense that the AGLC works to ensure that the gaming industry is well managed. It provides responsible gaming information and resources. There are a number of responsible gaming initiatives that have been developed by the AGLC, and in some areas they are recognized as a leader in the research and the development of those programs: responsible gaming information centres, player awareness terminals, the voluntary self-exclusion program, mandatory training programs, including Reel Facts, Deal Us In, and A Good Call.

The Speaker: The hon. member, please.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Now, again I'm going to ask the Deputy Premier this. Of the \$800 million in gross profits from slot machines last year, 72 per cent came from problem gamblers. Why is this greedy Progressive Conservative government knowingly robbing problem gamblers with slot machine addictions instead of trying to help them?

Mr. Horner: Mr. Speaker, I don't have the data that he's claiming to have, 72 per cent. I don't think he has it either, and it's unfortunate that he would bring that kind of thing into the House. This is a serious issue that we take very seriously. We are making investments into problem gambling. We're making investments into addictions counselling. We're making investments into the mental health of all Albertans.

Mr. MacDonald: Again, Mr. Speaker, to the Deputy Premier: why is this greedy Progressive Conservative government hiding the actual percentage of profits they take from these gamblers with the VLT and slot machine addictions with an Enron-style accounting process? Why are you doing that?

Mr. Horner: Mr. Speaker, I could, I suppose, call a point of order on that one. I could, I suppose, call it a number of things. It's an inaccurate, unarticulated, very poor question which does not deserve an answer.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Red Deer-North.

Education Property Tax

Mrs. Jablonski: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Today's headlines in the local newspaper in Red Deer stated: tax hike getting higher; provincial government approving largest education property tax increase in 20 years. To the Minister of Municipal Affairs: why is this government doing this?

Mr. Griffiths: Mr. Speaker, I appreciate the question. I saw the headline, too, and I was somewhat taken aback by it. I asked my department to look it up. It's hardly a huge increase. The city of Red Deer itself is going to see an increase of \$4 per month in their property tax, a total of \$60 a year. I don't know where they get their numbers from. The total amount collected for education from Red Deer is \$38 million, which goes to help in the spending of \$160 million on educating the children of Red Deer.

Mrs. Jablonski: Again to the Minister of Municipal Affairs: given that the budget documents said that no taxes were going up, why have I heard that education property taxes are going up?

Speaker's Ruling Questions about Media Reports

The Speaker: Hon. member, the problem with this is that we've

ruled this out before on many occasions. A verification of media reports, newspaper articles, is not the purview of this Assembly. If you're asking the minister to explain why a paper would say a certain thing, I don't know how that fits into the question period.

If the minister has something to add for further clarification, proceed.

Education Property Tax (continued)

Mr. Griffiths: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I've in fact had a couple of calls to my office asking a very similar question, and I've explained to everyone that in this province right now in this budget the education portion of property taxes, income taxes, our business and corporate taxes have all been frozen. The reason why the amount of taxes collected has gone up is because we have a prosperous province, where more businesses, more people want to come and work and more houses are being built. That's what has increased the tax roll and the resources available to this government to provide services to Albertans.

2:40

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mrs. Jablonski: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. To the Minister of Education: does every penny of these education property tax revenues go into the classroom?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Lukaszuk: Yes, Mr. Speaker. Certainly, the dollars that are received from assessment, which is growing – the value of a house is growing, so the tax is growing, not the percentage that you pay – are about one-third of the cost of education. The rest is contributed by Albertans. I consider that, frankly, an investment. You don't spend money on education; you invest money in education. This is the future generation of our province, which will be generating wealth for all of us.

The Speaker: Hon. members, 18 members were recognized today, with 107 questions and responses.

In 30 seconds from now we will continue with Members' Statements.

Members' Statements (continued)

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

2012 Western Engineering Competition

Mr. Johnston: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Today I'd like to recognize the competitors, volunteers, organizers, and sponsors of the 2012 provincial Western Engineering Competition, hosted by the University of Calgary. For 26 years the competition has inspired and challenged the minds of engineering students in western Canada, encouraging them to test their problem-solving skills in a competitive atmosphere. This year was no exception.

The five-day event allowed students to share engineering knowledge, challenge their skill set, and gain exposure to leaders in their chosen fields. Students competed in six challenges designed to showcase their talent outside the classroom. This year's competition focused on water, a resource Alberta is committed to managing and safeguarding now and in the future.

We all share responsibility for ensuring a healthy, secure, and sustainable water supply for our communities, environment, and

economy. Our quality of life depends on it. That's an important lesson for all of us, especially Alberta's next generation of engineers, and it would appear that they have taken this lesson to heart.

I would like to congratulate students from both the University of Alberta and the University of Calgary who placed first in the impromptu debate and engineering communication categories, respectively.

Mr. Speaker, this event was a wonderful showcase of the importance of engineering to Alberta's economy. May the lessons that these young engineers took away from the competition inspire them to continue on a path of successful research and innovation.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Bonnyville-Cold Lake.

Our Children, Our Future Education Consultation

Mrs. Leskiw: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It is my pleasure to rise today and speak about the Our Children, Our Future: Getting It Right consultations. Over eight weeks between November 2011 and January this year thousands of Albertans had the opportunity to share their thoughts and ideas on the future of education through community meetings, online, by e-mail, by phone, and through social media. The feedback was remarkable.

Mr. Speaker, I had the opportunity at the Bonnyville community meeting to see first-hand how Albertans speak passionately about education and want the best possible opportunities for our students. We heard about the importance of making schools safe and welcoming. We heard about making learning relevant for all students. We heard about keeping students engaged in their learning, and we heard about setting students up for success in life.

Maybe most importantly, we heard from students themselves who spoke eloquently about their challenges with schools and their hopes for the future. In fact, I'd like to share a few quotes from letters students from Dr. Brosseau school in my constituency wrote as part of the consultations. A grade 5 student: "School makes me feel mad because I don't want to get up in the morning to take my bus at 7 a.m. But it makes me feel happy because I like to learn and I want to get good grades and go to college and get a job that I want."

"If I could be minister for one day I would make sure that every student would participate in gym class. Gym gives students a chance to stay fit and I think it's very important for kids to stay healthy." A grade 6 student.

Mr. Speaker, I am confident that the bold ideas collected through the Our Children, Our Future consultations have provided meaningful direction for government and will support new education legislation for the province. Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-North Hill.

Community Sustainability Task Force Report

Mr. Fawcett: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Last week a report was tabled in this Assembly authored by the city of Edmonton Community Sustainability Task Force. The report, titled Elevate, looks into the plight of older inner-city neighbourhoods. As you and many members of this Assembly know, this is an issue I continue to highlight on behalf of my communities that I represent in Calgary-North Hill.

Today I want to share some words provided to my office from a constituent who eloquently describes the challenges faced by these communities and the residents. The subject of her e-mail is

Helping Our City To Grow Upward Rather than Outward. She writes:

After [the Premier] was elected, I heard her speak very eloquently, on the CBC Radio afternoon phone in show, to a father living in Edmonton's inner city, where a school had closed. His child now had to be bused . . . to the suburbs.

[The Premier] spoke about the importance of building vibrant inner cities that are welcoming to new families and the importance of helping our cities to grow up rather than out, for the sake of our environment. [The Premier] further commented that schools should be used for other community functions, in order to build strong community and generate revenue for the schools, in order to avoid closures.

My daughter and I live in Capital Hill (near Confederation Park) and often walk to school . . . I constantly talk to my daughter about the merits of living in the inner city, for us and for the environment. I also emphasize that we need to be a part of the social movement to end the urban sprawl, which poses so many difficulties for our city and our province's already stretched resources.

Sadly, if [my daughter's school] closes . . . [she] will have to be bused or driven to school. It seems like a move in the wrong direction for Calgary and for Alberta.

Mr. Speaker, today I urge the hon. Premier, the Minister of Municipal Affairs, and the Minister of Education to work with our two large municipalities, four metro school boards, and other relevant government and community stakeholders to implement an urban inner-city revitalization strategy which implements the recommendations of the Elevate report. Thank you very much.

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

Castle-Crown Wilderness Area

Mr. Chase: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Dirty rascals. For hundreds of years children at play attempting to outposition one another have chanted: I'm the king of the castle, and you're the dirty rascal. Unfortunately, in Alberta when it comes to protecting our Castle-Crown region, we have neither a benevolent king or a queen championing the cause but, rather, a short-sighted army of dirty rascals. The foot soldiers in this mercenary army of clear-cutting devastation contracted to the Spray Lake Sawmills, based out of Cochrane, are operating within the morally and economically deficient regulations of the ministry of sustainable resources.

With the battle cry of Stumps Trump this horde of legalized locusts has been granted permission to level one-half of the forested region of the Castle-Crown, an area recognized as one of 81 special places by the government of Alberta in 1998. The term "special," whether applied to a geographic location or to the needs of vulnerable Albertans, affords little or no protection by this government. The economic value of exported wood chips pales in comparison to the costs associated with damaged watershed, destroyed habitat, facilitated illegal off-road trail access, species endangerment to name just a few of the environmental concerns raised by the 80 per cent of southern Albertans opposed to the government's endorsed devastation.

To add further insult to injury, Alberta taxpayers will cover the cost of paving the road to the Castle ski resort. Travelers will be afforded a smoother ride as they view the clear-cuts along the resort road. As Spray Lake has been granted similar first in time, first in right government permission to log along scenic route highway 40 in K Country and around Bragg Creek, the province's environmental motto appears to be Bald Is Beautiful.

Albertans will soon have the opportunity to make a decisive cut of their own by registering their concerns at the ballot box.

2:50

Introduction of Bills**Bill 2
Education Act****The Speaker:** The hon. Minister of Education.**Mr. Lukaszuk:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I request leave to introduce a bill, Bill 2, the Education Act.

Education and the preparation of Alberta children for the future and the future of this province is a priority for this government. I am proud that the gallery is filled today with a number of educational partners, who I was pleased to introduce earlier.

The duties and demands placed on our education system today extend far beyond those of the late 1980s, when the School Act was introduced. We understand that education is the foundation of a democratic and civil society. We understand that education inspires students to discover and pursue their aspirations and interests and cultivates a love of learning and the desire to be a lifelong learner. Our understanding of these concepts has grown and has been enhanced by the extensive conversations Albertans have had with government over the past few years about the future of education.

Albertans take great pride in our education system, and they want to ensure that it continues to be world class. Our first responsibility is to make sure that all decisions are student centred and all decisions relate to learning and education. Albertans also said that education must help students make successful transitions to adulthood and create lifelong learners who contribute to healthy, inclusive communities and thriving economies.

What we heard in our most recent consultation confirmed that the direction we took from Inspiring Education was the right one but also led us to place stronger emphasis on two elements in education: one, that students are entitled to welcoming, caring, respectful, and safe learning environments; and, two, that education is a shared responsibility among boards, classroom staff, parents, students, and the community. As a result, we have made a good piece of legislation even better. For example, to foster the important partnership between boards, parents, and the community . . .

**Speaker's Ruling
First Reading of Bills**

The Speaker: I'm sorry. By tradition first reading is a moving of a bill, tabling it in the Assembly. In the past we've had a discussion with respect to explanation on first reading of bills. I indicated at the time we did it that private members' bills would offer an opportunity for individuals to speak up to probably no more than four minutes on a private member's bill, but I also indicated that if it was a government bill, not a private member's bill, they should look at a maximum of two minutes. There are some reasons for this. The minister will have ample opportunity to move this bill in second reading and will be able to speak up to 20 minutes. So I would ask the minister to kindly move the bill.

Mr. Lukaszuk: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It will take more than tradition to contain my excitement for education, but I will keep it short and tell you that I am very proud to table Bill 2, and I move that the bill be read the first time.

[Motion carried; Bill 2 read a first time]

**Bill 3
Appropriation (Supplementary Supply) Act, 2012****The Speaker:** The hon. Deputy Premier and President of the Treasury Board and Enterprise.

Mr. Horner: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I request leave to introduce Bill 3, the Appropriation (Supplementary Supply) Act, 2012. This being a money bill, His Honour the Honourable the Lieutenant Governor, having been informed of the contents of this bill, recommends the same to the Assembly.

[Motion carried; Bill 3 read a first time]

Tabling Returns and Reports**The Speaker:** The hon. Minister of Energy.

Dr. Morton: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'd like to table five copies of a report by London Economics International, which shows that when fairly compared, Alberta's electricity prices are competitive across Canada.

Mr. Denis: I'm tabling five copies of an article which I referred to yesterday entitled The Myth of Alberta's "Non-progressive" Income Tax. It's by Scott Hennig of the Canadian Taxpayers Federation, dated January 20, 2011, and it talks about the many benefits of the single rate of tax that all Albertans enjoy.

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

Ms Blakeman: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I have several tablings today that, given the shortness of time yesterday, I did not do. The first tabling is from Frank Fraser. I'm sure the Minister of Energy would be very interested in his document. He details at length his experiences with Direct Energy, trying to deal with overseas call centres and trying to get his electricity cut off after Direct Energy, on contract, gave them two accounts and then put the money in the wrong one. So that's on that particular issue.

My next tabling is from Chantele Theroux, who is writing about downtown owners and the difficulty with additional assessments being made when building codes or shoddy workmanship is not caught. They ended up with very expensive assessments. She's looking at possibly losing her condominium because they are now looking at owner assessments of over \$34,000 for a fairly modest condominium. So, clearly, there's an issue here that needs to be addressed as soon as possible.

My final tabling is from Ann-Lise Norman, and she's bringing to the attention of the Assembly the concern around the Castle region in Alberta that's been raised a number of times already today. I attach a copy of her letter to the editor on that subject.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-North Hill.

Mr. Fawcett: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I want to table the requisite number of copies of the e-mail from a constituent, Rayn Boyko, that I just referred to in my member's statement.

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

Mr. Chase: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm tabling e-mails and five letters from the following individuals who are seeking the preservation of the Castle wilderness: Gustave Yaki, Pat Lucas, Stuart McDowall, Sandra Bullock, Elaine Voth, Cheryl Bradley, Jim Cameron, Marion S. Wright, Richard Collier, Gordon Petersen, Carol Getzlaf, Margaret Main, Carolyn Fisher, David McIntyre, Carolyn Aspeslet, Dr. Samuel Lawn, Reynold Reimer, Timothy Grier, John Holmes, and Lorne Fitch. Lorne is a retired fish and wildlife biologist and an adjunct professor with the University of Calgary.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

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

Mr. Hehr: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Today I'm presenting a letter with the requisite number of copies from Robert and Linda Mattice of Entwistle, Alberta. In their letter they indicate the significance of their power bill increases, the lack of choice in their area as they're only able to choose from one provider, the fact that they are only allowed to pick one option, which is charging them essentially higher than almost anywhere else in Alberta. Their letter details this in great detail, and they have some corresponding documents. Should anyone want to question the veracity of their claim, it's all there for everyone to see.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

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

Ms Notley: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'd like to table the appropriate number of copies of postcards we've received from hundreds of Edmontonians calling on the government to provide full funding to open the family medicine and urgent care sections of the East Edmonton health centre.

Thank you.

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

Dr. Swann: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I have a tabling today from Sue Thomas of Calgary, a worker in the disabilities field, who wants to register both some appreciation and real concern about the lack of financial support for those working in the disability field. I quote: "We are grossly under-funded." The bonus given this year is much less than what it appears, and it makes it extremely difficult for us to feel valued and to live our lives.

Thank you.

3:00

Tablings to the Clerk

The Clerk: I wish to advise the House that the following document was deposited with the office of the Clerk. On behalf of the hon. Mr. Lukaszuk, Minister of Education, a publication undated entitled *The Network*, conference edition, prepared by the Alberta initiative for school improvement.

Orders of the Day

Government Motions

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

Provincial Fiscal Policies

7. Mr. Liepert moved:

Be it resolved that the Assembly approve in general the business plans and fiscal policies of the government.

[Adjourned debate February 9: Ms Blakeman]

Dr. Sherman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Thank you for this opportunity to respond to last week's budget speech. Oil is at a hundred dollars a barrel, Albertans are being denied basic services that they truly deserve, and we still have a deficit. Have you ever asked yourselves that question: why do we have a deficit? It's difficult to know where to begin addressing this document.

I'll start with a simple fact. This budget is a fudge-it budget. I say this is a fudge-it budget because it fudges revenue numbers in order to hide the fact that this current government has completely lost its way. This fudge-it budget uses pie-in-the-sky estimates of revenues the province can expect to take in over future years in an

attempt to trick Albertans into voting for a government that is sorely lacking, a government which is old, tired, and out of ideas, so devoid of ideas, in fact, that the only proposals they can make are imperfect imitations of policies proposed by the party that I lead, sort of like a wolf in sheep's clothing or a Conservative in Liberal clothing.

Dr. Swann: Imitation is a form of flattery.

Dr. Sherman: Imitation is a form of flattery, Mr. Speaker, but you know what? Albertans deserve the real thing.

Worst of all, this is a government which lacks the courage to be honest about its record and which lacks the courage to be honest with Albertans about the elephant in the room, and that is our structural deficit, a direct result of inadequate revenues and this current government's fear of doing what is needed to fix the problem.

Mr. Speaker, did you know that health care alone costs \$15 billion? Total personal and corporate income taxes only bring in about \$12 billion. They alone do not pay for our health care bill.

Not so long ago this government's ministers fanned out across the province on what all but the most naive knew to be a pre-election tour financed by the Alberta taxpayers. "Oh, no," the government protested. "It's no such thing; it's a listening tour." A listening tour. This government talks a lot about listening, actually, but who are they listening to? They say they're listening to Albertans, but I wonder which ones. Which Albertans told them to continue blowing through all our resource revenue just to pay today's bills? Even then they're not covering the bills. I haven't met these Albertans.

Who told this government that Albertans don't see a need for tax fairness so we can start saving our finite resource revenue? Since my party made our fair tax proposal, I've met and heard from a great many Albertans who enthusiastically say yes. It's hard to believe that this current government didn't meet any of them. If they did, they certainly didn't listen to what they had to say.

Mr. Speaker, I wonder if the current ministers met any Albertans who are absolutely sick and tired of paying the highest electricity bills in the country, and we are an energy province. I've certainly met a lot of them. If the ministers crossed paths with any of these good people – and it is impossible to imagine they didn't given the vast numbers of them – why didn't they listen and make a commitment in this fudge-it budget to do something about these outrageous bills? They talk about choice. It's a choice of high bills or higher bills. It's about competition. Albertans are competing to get the energy that they own.

Why didn't this government listen to our most vulnerable – to our seniors, to the hard-working Alberta families, and to businesses, who drive the economy – and take measures to undo the damage of electricity deregulation? An abject policy failure which costs us billions, and this government just carries on the path to a bad decision and a wrong decision. The Albertans I met would have applauded if this current government had done so. I'm left to conclude that either these government ministers were too busy meeting supporters on their tour, their campaign supporters, or else they didn't listen to any real Albertans they did meet.

Mr. Speaker, if our intrepid government ministers, while jet-setting across the province in luxury aircraft and luxury buses and staying in luxury resorts, met any real Albertans who were dismayed at the fact that we spend the most on education yet have the highest dropout rate in the nation, judging by the modest 3.4 per cent increase in total program spending in this fudge-it budget, I doubt it. We have amongst the highest class sizes, not enough

support for our teachers, and crumbling infrastructure for our schools, with leaky roofs and foundations that need repairing.

This modest 3.4 per cent increase, after all, is woefully inadequate to keep up with inflation and population growth. We've got a baby boom. We've got a ton of young children coming down the pipeline in this province who are going to help build this province, and this government is not investing in them. Once again, this government is asking our schools to get by with less, leaving it to the school boards yet not funding them properly. Hardly inspiring.

I also wonder if these ministers took time away from their rallies to talk to real Alberta parents who are sick and tired of being gouged by school fees. Considering that school fees are still in place, they clearly did not listen to any of these parents, parents who are reacting enthusiastically to our commitment to get rid of school fees, the most regressive tax I know of, a tax on learning, a tax on families, and a tax on our children.

Mr. Speaker, I wonder if the government ministers took the time to meet with postsecondary students as they travelled through strategic ridings in the province during the listening tour. If they did, they would have heard cash-strapped students saying that they need a break. They need a break because Alberta's sky-high tuition levels are burdensome in the extreme.

We've listened to these students. I was in Lethbridge, and that's exactly what these students told me. We need a break. That's why we would not just cap tuition but immediately reduce it by \$250 per student and then proceed to eliminate tuition entirely by 2025 whether you went to a trade school, a college, or a university in rural Alberta or in urban Alberta. Mr. Speaker, this is a very big issue in rural Alberta. When you have to leave home, you not only pay the high cost of living but pay the highest tuition fees. Our children in rural Alberta are not being afforded the opportunity to get the education that they truly deserve, the education that we as a society owe to them.

We would fix this. We would fix this by cutting this government's wasteful spending, by bringing in a fair tax, and by investing some of our resource revenues every year in a postsecondary education fund. The response we have received to this proposal from postsecondary students has been very strong and very positive. Why didn't this current government listen to these students and do likewise?

Mr. Speaker, they did do a half-baked measure recently. They did. The reason I call it half-baked is that they allowed students the opportunity to get more student loans. That just allows them to get into more debt. The way to prevent student debt is to actually cut tuition. That's how you get our children to go get a skill and an education. Instead, this government cut the budget for the Ministry of Advanced Education and Technology by more than \$150 million. Our universities have roofs that need fixing. They need more teachers and professors in the classrooms and more support. How can we go to a knowledge-based economy when we don't invest in the knowledge and education of our children?

3:10

Mr. Speaker, I wonder if the government ministers met any of the Albertans who use our health care system, the men, women, and children who cannot find a family doctor or who have endured unconscionable delays in the emergency rooms and surgery wait times. Worse yet is when they sit at home after that urgent 911 call waiting for that ambulance to arrive. Many times it doesn't arrive in time.

Did they meet any of the hard-working doctors and nurses and front-line staff who struggle heroically to deliver care despite the extraordinary lack of efficiency and accountability plaguing our

system? If they did, they would have heard that we spend more than any other province, yet we have amongst the longest waits and the worst performance outcomes in the country. There's no doubt that once they get into the hands of provincial health care workers, Albertans get world-class health care. No doubt about that. Mr. Speaker, I can say that because I've worked with a fantastic team of front-line health professionals.

If this government had listened, they would have heard that we have a great many seniors languishing in hospital beds because there are not enough not-for-profit long-term care beds or not-for-profit, community-based lodge beds. They would have heard that the direct result of this, actually, is congestion in emergency rooms because the hospital beds are full. They would have heard that our ambulances are idling outside our ERs because paramedics can't leave until their patients are admitted to an emergency bed. They would have heard all these things if they had taken the time to meet Albertans who use our health care system. This health care system problem is because of an abject failure in funding our seniors with world-class home care, lodge care, and long-term care.

However, it seems that once again this government did not listen because all that their budget offers is \$375 million over the next three years, quoting from the government's press release, "to support strategic health investments, including family care clinics, additional addictions and mental health services, home care, and enhanced rehabilitation programs." They obviously didn't listen to the doctors, the nurses, and the front-line staff because they think the solution is to simply throw money at the problem by increasing AHS's base operating fund by 6 per cent. That doesn't fix the health system, Mr. Speaker. Making the right decision fixes the health system.

Albertans, however, can tell you that what we really need is a smarter and more efficient health care system, which is what we propose. This is what Albertans are asking for, and while the government isn't listening, we are. Health care is the number one expenditure in the nation. It accounts for 40 to 50 per cent of expenditures, and Albertans and Canadians are waiting in lineups longer than ever. Our health care system in this country and in this province is not in the top three amongst the OECD countries.

While this government moves on the path to Americanization and for-profit privatization and for-profit, private tendering of contracts yet untendered contracts to their private buddies, we propose a doubling of home care funding and providing nonprofit, community-based lodge care and nonprofit, community-based long-term care beds for our seniors so they may get the dignity that they require. This, in turn, will free up space in our hospitals so Albertans can get timely access to world-class care, that has taken way too long to get.

If this government had been listening, they would know that what is needed is not a handful of pilot projects dreamt up by an uninformed Premier. We don't need pilot projects, Mr. Speaker. It's time for action and solutions. It's time to fix the system. The province is looking for leadership. They are not looking for another committee and another study. If this government had truly been listening, they would have also known that what is needed is improved performance and a concept which is alien to them, accountability. Accountability. Nowhere else in the country or in the world do administrators get fired, get a million or a couple of million dollars or maybe \$22,000 a month for life while Albertans suffer metres from care.

If you look today on Alberta Health Services' website, the top health care performance measure: they set it at a paltry 60 per cent level. They can't even achieve their own level, Mr. Speaker. They can't achieve their own paltry, low, stretch targets.

The number one spending issue: there's nothing in this fudge-it budget to improve the system, to improve performance, or to introduce accountability. This government doesn't listen, they don't understand, and they don't care. All they want to do is win an election. That's it. Well, we're listening, Mr. Speaker. This is why we will fix this mess created by this government, and we will guarantee emergency and surgery wait times within two years, get every Albertan a family doctor, return decision-making to the front lines, and bring in local accountability amongst other much-needed measures. This government isn't listening, but we are.

Mr. Speaker, this is a fudge-it budget that inflates future revenues, and it pulls the oldest trick in the government's playbook, big pre-election spending promises. We've all seen this movie before. My dear citizens of Alberta, do not be fooled. They pulled the wool over your eyes in the last election. Do not be fooled. We know what comes next if this government wins re-election. They're going to go, "Whoops, the international economy is bad," and they're going to be bringing in big postelection spending cuts. "Whoops. It wasn't our fault; it was the international economy's fault." There are other governments across the world that don't go: whoops; it's the international economy's fault. They've put hundreds of billions in the bank, and they're living off the interest, and they say yes to their people.

Mr. Speaker, this current government follows this formula because it cannot win the battle of ideas. It cannot. This government was once a force for solutions. It is now the cause of our problems in this great province. It was a force for solutions but is no longer. It's no longer what's best for this province. It's tired. It's old. It's out of ideas. They say that they listen, but what they do – this played-out government is reduced to cheap trickeries and completely lacks the courage to be honest to Albertans.

They say that they listen, but this is not borne out by the fact that they completely ignore Albertans who ask for fair taxation. Ninety per cent of Albertans, hard-working Albertans, wouldn't pay a red cent extra. In fact, if they've got kids in school or university, they'd get money back in their hands.

They ignore the demands for an end to the disastrous deregulation of the electricity market, they ignore parents who are sick to death of being gouged by school fees, and they ignore postsecondary students who want a break from the highest tuition fees in the country. They ignore Albertans who are asking, who've been pleading for years for a family doctor and for shorter emergency and surgery wait times. This government says that it listens, but they're only in it for themselves and for their buddies; hence, the pork-barrel politics and untendered contracts.

3:20

Mr. Speaker, we will provide a positive alternative for Albertans when election day rolls around because we will listen for a change. We will listen for a change. We will also do something that this government is too scared to do. We're going to be honest. We've tabled our plan, our vision for Alberta. We will be honest with Albertans about the biggest problem facing our province's finances, a structural deficit caused by wasteful spending and inefficient revenues. We will clean up this government's mess and put an end to fudge-it budgets and bring in a fair tax so we can actually start saving some of our resource revenues to invest in people by ending school fees and eventually eliminating tuition and fixing our health care system and caring for our seniors and our vulnerable.

Investing in People is something this current government uses as a slogan, but for us it's a guiding principle, Mr. Speaker. It's a guiding principle, and it starts with listening, caring, taking action, and saying yes.

Mr. Speaker, the fundamental difference between us and them is that they believe in saying no to the people. They believe in saying no, and they believe in trickle-down economics and think that money in the hands of a few people drives the economy. We believe that money needs to be in the hands of the working families, and that drives the economy.

Mr. Speaker, we say yes. We say yes to taking action to cut wasteful spending, stop pork-barrel politics, and bring in smart, lean, efficient government. We say yes to investing to make the lives of Albertan families better. We say yes to fair taxation. We say yes to balancing the books. We say yes to saving for the future for our children. We say yes to Albertans. We say no to this budget but yes to Albertans.

Mr. Speaker, it's been an honour. Thank you.

The Speaker: Hon. members, Standing Order 29(2)(a) is available. Hon. Member for Calgary-Mountain View, proceed.

Dr. Swann: Mr. Speaker, I'd like to hear the leader's comments on what he feels to be the major barrier to getting over the structural deficit in this province and what he would do to ensure that we move away as quickly as possible from a continued, year-after-year deficit position in this province that is so vulnerable to other markets and resource prices.

Dr. Sherman: Mr. Speaker, our biggest problem with the structural deficit is that the government is addicted. They're addicted not only to raising money off those with addiction problems, but they're addicted to raising revenues off nonrenewable resource revenues. They're addicted to buying elections, to just suddenly throwing money out there before the election and taking it all back the day after the election and hoping that Albertans will forget. They're addicted to not being honest with Albertans. They're addicted to not having the courage – the courage – to say what's right.

Mr. Speaker, if anything the courage they need is to say: listen; it's about fairness. It's okay to make a buck. It's okay for large corporations to make a buck. Today we have international nation states: China, France, the Arab world, the U.S. It's okay for them to invest here, and it's okay for them to make a buck in Alberta. But you know what? A little bit more of the fair share of that money should stay here to care for our seniors and educate our children, and that's why we need to increase our taxes for large corporations from 10 to 12 per cent. It's fair. It's reasonable.

We need to bring in a fair personal tax. That's how you fix a structural deficit, a fair personal tax. Mr. Speaker, 90.4 per cent of Albertans earn less than \$100,000 a year of taxable income. We suggest leaving them alone. If you earn above a hundred thousand bucks a year of taxable income for one person in a family – let's bring in a fair, progressive tax. Let's put the word "progressive" back in Alberta. That's what this is about. That's how you fix it, honesty and fairness.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: There's still time available under 29(2)(a).

There being no further questioners, I am prepared to recognize the next speaker. The hon. Member for Airdrie-Chestermere.

Mr. Anderson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure to stand and respond to this government's budget. I appreciate the comments of the Leader of the Official Opposition. You know, I obviously disagree with him on some of his solutions, but I also agree with him on some of the problems that he's diagnosed and some of the things that we could do without.

It really is something. I wish the folks at home could see the laughter on the other side when an hon. member of this House stands up and gives a speech and, you know, tries to represent Albertans and talks about courage and is essentially ridiculed across the way. It should be quite beneath some of the folks on that side in that regard.

[Mr. Zwozdesky in the chair]

In response to this budget, Mr. Speaker, Albertans expect their government to live within its means. They also expect their government to ensure that their tax dollars are spent carefully on key priorities such as health, education, infrastructure, seniors, policing, and other core social services. This PC Budget 2012 does neither. It is a reckless, electioneering, campaign document with unrealistic revenue projections and irresponsible spending promises. Given the tepid and fragile world economic recovery Budget 2012 is nothing short of a blueprint for eliminating the province's last remaining savings and raising taxes for Albertans.

What do we mean when we say: these projections, these pie in the sky projections, this *Alice in Wonderland* budget that we refer to over here? Well, let's take a look at some of these projections and see just how wonderfully realistic they are. In this budget there is an overall 22.5 per cent increase in revenues over the next two years – 22.5 per cent over a two-year period. How very conservative an estimate that is. There's a 40 per cent increase in resource revenues over the next two years. We've talked with folks at some of the major pipeline companies in Alberta, household names in the industry anyway, and in response to that number, a 40 per cent increase in two years, the word they used was "hallucinogenic."

It is an absolute joke to say that we are going to have an increase of 40 per cent over two years in our resource royalties. It's just not conservative. You can call it what you want, but it certainly is not realistic in any way, shape, or form. Anybody over there who knows anything about accounting or business or business projections knows that you do not project on the high end for revenues. That's a mistake, and everybody knows it. You always make sure you do a conservative estimate. You don't have to lowball it so much that it's unrealistic either, but you take a conservative estimate. Forty per cent over two years is egregiously unrealistic.

An increase of 6.5 per cent in property values and property tax revenues to the budget is unrealistic. We're in the middle of a housing collapse. We're still trying to get out of that. I know what the home values are in Airdrie, for example, and what's happened. I know from talking with many of the real estate agents that unless Calgary and area is unlike all the rest of this province, they're not going to go up 6.5 per cent. The value of our homes isn't going up 6.5 per cent this year. It's unrealistic.

A 9 per cent increase in income tax revenues this year, 9 per cent in one year: well, I sure hope income taxes do go up. That means more jobs. That means more people working and so forth. But 9 per cent? Absurd.

An 11 per cent corporate tax revenue increase this year: it's like we don't even know what's going on in the world right now. We look at the fragile recovery, the lack of recovery, and we're talking about an 11 per cent corporate tax revenue increase?

Projecting the average oil price at \$105 next year and at \$108 the year after that. You know what, Mr. Speaker? That one may come true. It's unlikely, but I would say that it's the lesser of the pie-in-the-sky projections that I see in this budget. But note that at \$105 next year the other side, the PCs, still will not balance the budget. They'll balance the accounting deficit budget, but they'll

still be drawing down from the sustainability fund. At \$105 a barrel: what an embarrassment. I mean, what are we going to tell our kids? We can't balance the budget at \$105 a barrel. Is that some kind of bad joke? It should be.

Projecting the natural gas price at \$3.50 this year – it's roughly at \$2.10 right now; it's very low, so it's already way below that right now – then \$4.20 the year after that and \$5 the year after that: every projection that we've seen does not have that type of increase in the price of natural gas.

3:30

Mrs. Forsyth: What about the money they lose when the dollar is at par?

Mr. Anderson: And there's the Canadian dollar and several other things.

Needless to say, the projections in this budget are pie in the sky, they're unrealistic, they're certainly not conservative, and they're irresponsible. If we're relying on these things to balance the budget and pay for a 7 per cent increase in spending, it opens our budget up, essentially, to just completely implode if the price of oil were to, say, fall to \$75, which historically is a pretty high level.

You can't run a business like this. You shouldn't run a government like this. The folks over there, many of whom I know, are smart individuals. A lot of them have run businesses. A couple of them have accounting backgrounds and so forth. They know this. They absolutely know this, yet they say nothing.

There is another way. The Wildrose caucus has put together a balanced budget alternative. Now, we will say right up front that in order to give an apples-to-apples comparison of spending, we are using the government's projections this year. Again, those projections are unrealistic, but we've built into our alternative budget a \$1.6 billion cushion in order to account for what we think are pie-in-the-sky projections.

What would the Wildrose balanced budget alternative do? It would result in a \$1.6 billion budget surplus and a \$60 million cash surplus for 2012-13. Specifically, it would invest \$4.1 billion in new infrastructure. Four point one billion dollars on infrastructure is an amount per capita significantly higher than B.C., Ontario, and Saskatchewan. It is still the highest of all the provinces except – essentially, it's the same as Quebec. But that's where it's at. This is really not an unrealistic or an unreasonable amount. It's tied for the highest in Canada.

These capital dollars, this \$4.1 billion, would be focused primarily on the building of high-priority capital projects, which we would post online in the order of priority to make sure everybody knows why they're in the priority that they are. It would be publicly posted. Everybody would see it. Such high priority projects would include finishing up the Calgary and Edmonton ring roads, the twinning of highway 63 to Fort McMurray, long-term care facilities for seniors – very important – and urgently needed schools while delaying capital projects for which the government right now has no money to fully staff.

So all of the capital projects out there right now will be continued on. They will just be spread out an extra year to give us some time to actually hire the staff that we need to fully staff them. All of the folks waiting for their health facilities in other areas or for the roads to be twinned in other areas – those will all be built under this Wildrose alternative budget. Some of the lower priority ones of those projects will just have to wait an extra year. This would save Albertans \$1.6 billion compared with the proposed Budget 2012 by the government.

We would increase operational spending by \$854 million. This is a 2.5 per cent increase over Budget 2011. In comparison, the PC Budget 2012 increases spending by over \$2.3 billion, or 7 per cent. By increasing the operational budget by just 2.5 per cent as opposed to 7 per cent, this will save Albertans \$1.5 billion compared with Budget 2012.

We would ensure that the majority of the nearly \$1 billion in new operational funding would be sent directly to the front lines. This will be done by freezing all public-sector wages for one year, just one year – everyone’s wages, if you’re working for the government, frozen for one year – and also by implementing a hiring freeze on all non front-line staff. Front-line staff, obviously, are nurses, doctors, teachers, et cetera. Unless you’re on the front lines, we will not be hiring additional folks. We would direct all of this new 850-odd million dollars towards the following – and we can do this because of the hiring freeze. That’s what happens when you control wages; you can hire more people. It’s a fantastic concept that the government needs to look into.

First, we would hire 1,425 new teachers, teaching assistants, and support staff for students with special needs, particularly that last category, students with special needs. They desperately need more teaching assistants, more help in the K to 12 system. That will cost \$114 million. The Education minister informs me that might be a little bit too low; it would be closer to \$145 million. Nonetheless, our projection would be \$114 million because many of those wouldn’t be teachers. They would be teaching assistants and support staff.

One thousand new senior care support workers for home care, long-term care, and assisted living. This would cost \$50 million. Again, we have seniors clogging up our hospitals. They don’t want to be there. They want to be in long-term care facilities, where they can get better care and the care they need. That would free up acute-care beds across the province. That’s \$50 million.

We would increase AISH payments by \$400 a month, as the government does in their budget, at a cost of \$270 million. We would increase funding for mental health by \$50 million. One thousand new nurses, technicians, and other health support staff: \$80 million. Improved access to emergency rooms and family doctors: \$100 million. We would increase funding by nearly \$80 million for additional publicly funded health procedures such as a thousand knee surgeries, a thousand additional hip surgeries, 8,000 cataract surgeries, and 50,000 MRIs, CT scans, and other diagnostic tests. Again, amazing what you can do when you freeze salaries even just for one year to get things back into balance. You have all those extra dollars to go straight to the front lines. No bureaucracy. No red tape. Helping Albertans right at the front.

We would hire 300 new police officers, corrections officers, and sheriffs, including five dedicated checkstop teams at \$53 million. We would budget to plan better for emergencies and natural disasters at \$100 million.

We would eliminate wasteful PC spending like the \$2 billion carbon capture and storage program and dismantle the Alberta Health superboard bureaucracy, putting all those folks to the front lines, or these vice-presidents can go find a job in the private sector. We would implement zero-based budgeting. We would, through attrition and buyouts, increase the worker-to-manager ratio in the public service from 4 to 1 to 10 to 1. That would obviously take more than just one year. We would cut all management bonuses for at least one year, and we’d roll back cabinet salaries by 30 per cent and cut MLA severance packages by over 67 per cent.

I know I only have roughly two minutes remaining, so I would like to close by saying this. In this province we don’t have to say that if we balance our budget and do what we need to balance the

budget, that means cutting front-line services. That is an argument of the far, far, far – I don’t even know if it’s a left-wing argument. It’s just a wrong argument. We can do both. We can balance the budget, and we can get more money directly to the front lines helping Albertans. That’s what the Wildrose alternative budget does. Further, what it also does is that it balances the budget without raising taxes.

Again I would ask the government before this session is over to please join with the Wildrose and pledge – I would say that surely we can agree that the majority of Albertans are going to be supporting one of our two parties in the next election. If that is indeed the case, will they stand with the majority of conservative Albertans across this province and commit that under no circumstances will there be any tax increases on the people of Alberta for the next four years, that none of the folks elected in that party over there and this party over here at the next election, that under no circumstances will we agree to raise taxes on Albertans. I think we can do it. I think that’s what Albertans want. They want us to live within our means. We owe it to our children and the future of Alberta to do just that.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

3:40

The Acting Speaker: Thank you, hon. member.

Section 29(2)(a) is available should anybody wish to question the previous speaker or make comment on his comments.

Seeing none, is there anyone else who wishes to speak to the main motion? The hon. Member for Calgary-Currie.

Mr. Taylor: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Thank you for this opportunity to address the Assembly on behalf of the Alberta Party and to bring greetings on behalf of our leader, Glenn Taylor.

We’ve all had a few days to think about the new provincial budget, and first I want to engage in a little deconstruction of the budgeting process as practised by the PC government. Provincial budgets are made up of two parts. There’s the actual budget for the next 12 months, and then the way this government does it, there are projections for the 24 months to follow. Usually the actual budget has at least a nodding acquaintance with the truth. Governments outline how much revenue they can reasonably expect to collect this year, how much they plan to spend and on what they plan to spend it, how much of a surplus or deficit will be left once expenses are subtracted from revenue, and then they have a plan that they will follow, more or less, most of the time, provided nothing happens that makes the roof cave in.

It’s the budget projections for next year and the year after that which can get pretty wackily fantastic and where governments can pretty much just make stuff up if they want because, after all, they’re just projections. Our best guess is the consensus estimate of the experts we consult, et cetera, et cetera. By the time the year after next actually gets here and that thing that none of the experts foresaw has gone sideways to throw the projections out of whack, well, then government can throw up its hands and say: who knew?

Let’s just accept that those projections for fiscal 2014-15 – that provincial revenues will be \$10 billion higher than they are today without so much as a penny in tax increases, that the streets will be paved in gold, and it won’t matter if there’s a water shortage because we’ll all be swimming in milk and honey – are just stuff the government made up this time. Let’s just set that part of the budget aside for a minute and focus on the part that I call the actual budget.

I think the government has got the actual budget for the next 12 months largely right. Here’s what I mean. The spending commitments made for the next 12 months on a \$400 monthly increase in

payments to AISH recipients, on raises for vastly underpaid PDD contracted agency workers, on access to primary health care, on education, on seniors reflect much of what the Alberta Party has heard from Albertans in our Big Listens, and they reflect much of what Albertans have been telling me for the last 10 years, both as an MLA and when I was in media, that they want from their government. Mr. Speaker, they've been trying to tell the government the same thing, of course.

Now, there are things the government missed. Alberta is a world energy leader, and the Alberta Party believes that the government needs to be more clearly committed to doing the things necessary to ensure that we can remain so. Mr. Speaker, that's about opening up new markets and getting pipelines built, yes. But it's also about a stable regulatory and royalty environment that provides stability and certainty and confidence to industry and to government in the public interest to insist and deliver on best practices, environmental stewardship, and continuous improvement in both.

One of the most productive ways to achieve the economic diversification that all parties in this House seem to agree Alberta needs is to foster a culture of entrepreneurship. To support such a culture, the Alberta Party is committed to providing a zero per cent small-business tax rate for all new business start-ups for their first three years.

There is new money committed in this budget to the establishment of three family care clinics as pilot projects. Indeed, we see that there is quite a bit of new money committed to health care. What is not so obvious is a clear commitment to ensuring that everyone is able to easily access a primary care network or a clear commitment to preventive care. Keeping the person healthy is cheaper than treating the person who is sick. We need to shift the culture of our health care system and our health care thinking from the reactive practice of medicine more to the proactive prevention of disease and injury.

We think this government is still struggling to accept that the kids have grown up and want to go out on their own. Our local governments – cities, towns, counties, and municipal districts – make many of the decisions and provide much of the infrastructure and many of the services that have the most direct daily impact on our lives. Yet for all the talk of all the funding this government will provide to local governments, it still amounts to dad giving the kids an allowance and lending them the keys to the car. Yes, it's a bigger allowance than they'd get if Mr. Manitoba down the street was their dad and, yes, from time to time they even get to drive the Lexus, but it's still an allowance, and the kids are adults. If the kids invite dad over for breakfast, dad ought to do the proper thing and go, not boycott breakfast because the kids criticized his budget.

Local governments deserve to be formally recognized as an equal order of government, and education can benefit from the same kind of emphasis on local control. The Alberta Party is committed to decentralizing decision-making with regard to the construction, operation, and disposition of school facilities. Neither Calgary nor Camrose needs help from Edmonton in understanding what their kids need.

For years the PCs have shown that they don't have the ability to listen effectively or the courage to implement what Albertans say they want. This has been reflected in their water for life strategy, the Inspiring Education report, the report of the Premier's Council for Economic Strategy, and pretty much anything to do with the land-use framework.

Economically actual provincial budgets concern themselves with the next 12 months. Politically this actual budget has to get the PCs through the next 12 weeks or less, which leads us back to

the second part of this budget, that contains the projections of another full-on boom within two years while all around us economies are ending up in the ditch. Now, Mr. Speaker, I suppose you could debate those rosy projections and the question of whether the government that came up with them was smoking something and, if so, whether they imported it from B.C. or grew it here at home and, although they don't mention it in this budget, have a secret plan to legalize or decriminalize and tax – oh, wait a minute. I forgot. That's a federal responsibility. But the projections in this budget don't matter. Why? Because as soon as this budget is passed, the government is going to call an election.

Mr. Speaker, the Alberta Party believes that the budgeting process itself must change. Not only does this mean zero-based budgeting to ensure that a thorough review of provincial spending is conducted, an idea that we're pretty glad to see this government bring forward, actually, but a complete overhaul of the way budgets are built and planned. First and foremost, budget cycles should extend beyond election cycles. An election cycle is typically four years. When a government manages its finances over a one-, two-, or three-year phase, it ends up making too many decisions in its own self-interest rather than in the public interest.

I don't care who's in power: PCs, Liberals, Wildrose, New Democrats, us. Even if the hon. Member for Vermilion-Lloydminster changes his mind about not running again and forms the Saskatchewan party of Alberta – I think their chances of success are, you might say, borderline, but what do I know? When the budget cycle is shorter than the election cycle, any government will make decisions designed to enhance its own re-election chances, a lot like this budget, Mr. Speaker. A five-year budget cycle puts Albertans first.

The construction of the budget should be an open, collaborative, consultative process extending over several months, giving citizens a real chance to contribute and to understand the final result. The people need to be included in setting priorities and planning the budget on an ongoing basis so that the budget reflects their needs and their values. Where and when it doesn't, because it won't always, they may not like the result, but at least they'll understand how we got there. You can't do that authentically in a two-week cabinet tour of Alberta, weeks before the budget is released.

We believe that even though this government has got a lot right in the actual budget for the next 12 months, its motivation for doing so was not long term but short term, winning an election within the next 12 weeks. Here, however, is what does matter about the part of the budget which will follow the election. Throughout his budget speech the Minister of Finance repeatedly returned to another theme that I've been hearing from Albertans for the last decade or more and which is now loud enough that the government has concluded it finally has to at least pay lip service to it. We have got to start saving our nonrenewable resource revenues and stop wasting our inheritance. In that speech there was much talk about the need to start saving, about the need to generate more sustainable, predictable revenue streams, and about the need to have an authentic province-wide conversation with Albertans about what that should look like. This means that after the election, they're going to want to talk to you about possibly putting your taxes up.

I agree. We need to talk. The Alberta Party caucus was the first to propose this conversation a year ago. We have said repeatedly that to get this government's finances on a sound footing so that the next generation will be better off than we are, not worse off, we all need to discuss what programs and services we expect from our government, how to save for the long term and how much to save, and if there's a shortfall between what we're paying in taxes

today and what it costs to deliver the programs and the services that we demand, what we're prepared to do to make up the difference.

3:50

It's not going to be an easy discussion, but Albertans are smart, tough, inventive, and focused on solutions. Albertans are the people who are ending homelessness. We know this province has almost unlimited potential, and we know we've come through a decade or more of being led by politicians who set the bar far lower than what we the people are capable of achieving.

Through you to the people of Alberta, Mr. Speaker, I'm sure the Premier will try to convince you that she needs a mandate from you to take you through that conversation, but she doesn't. By law she has almost another year to go before she has to call that election. If she's truly serious about holding a province-wide big listen, she has up to 11 months to have that conversation with you now. Then she can go to the polls and seek your approval to set Alberta on a new and more stable course, a course you've helped design. That would be doing politics differently, Mr. Speaker. That would be putting Albertans first.

Thank you.

The Acting Speaker: Thank you, hon. members. Standing Order 29(2)(a) is again available should anybody wish to question the previous speaker or make a comment.

Seeing no one, then I would ask if there are any other speakers to Government Motion 7. The hon. Member for Calgary-Mountain View.

Dr. Swann: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It's a privilege and a pleasure to stand and respond to . . .

Mr. Hancock: Point of order.

The Acting Speaker: The Government House Leader.

Point of Order Speaking Order in Budget Debate

Mr. Hancock: Mr. Speaker, under the normal rules of the House under 13(2) I'd be interested in your ruling with respect to recognizing this speaker. This is the budget motion, which is typically a framing motion so that the Minister of Finance can deliver the budget, and then the leaders of the opposition parties respond to the budget. That's the custom and practice of the House that we follow every year, and we don't normally have intervening speakers. We normally allow for the Leader of the Official Opposition to proceed and then the representative of the second, third, and fourth parties to respond to the budget motion. This is the framing motion for that. If it's going to be a budget debate motion open to the whole House to participate, that would be a different process, which we could engage in, but it would be a change in the normal procedures and practice of the House.

The Acting Speaker: Thank you.

Is the hon. member from the Wildrose Party wishing to rebut?

Mrs. Forsyth: Mr. Speaker, if I may, you know, it's very interesting to hear the Government House Leader talk about process. I saw the process he believed in yesterday. On from Thursday I didn't have time to get to Introduction of Bills in regard to a private member's bill, and then we wanted to get some unanimous consent so we could revert to the Orders of the Day, which was private member's bill debate, which I consider something that's very, very important for members of this

government, and then go on to motions at 5 o'clock. This same Government House Leader turned it down.

You know, he's starting to talk about process, and I just find that if it's good for the goose, it's not necessarily good for the gander. If it's good for the government, it doesn't necessarily mean it's going to be good for anybody else. I look forward to hearing your ruling.

If I may, Mr. Speaker, if we're going to talk about process, let's talk about what's fair for everybody. Yesterday was an unbelievable example of how this government does not believe in democracy. We continually see that on a daily basis. We're seeing it again today, what's happening with the AUMA because they're arguing and the government has decided: we're not going to go to breakfast because they were critical of us on the budget.

I'll look forward to your ruling. Thank you.

The Acting Speaker: We've heard from the party. Thank you.

Hon. members, there is no hard, fast, steadfast rule that says that only certain people can speak to this particular government motion. However, the hon. Government House Leader is correct. There has been a tradition that has been respected in the past, and I was looking forward to that, which is why I sent a note to Parliamentary Counsel about 10, 15 minutes ago asking for clarification just in case this question should come up.

Now, the hon. Member for Calgary-Currie was generous to leave a few minutes on the table, and another member rose to speak at my request for anyone who wants to rise, so I recognized him. We will hear the rest of his speech.

However, to the government members, as you well know, you have the option to adjourn debate at any time, and if you wish to speak on the process thereafter with other members opposite, I would invite you to do so.

For the moment the chair has recognized the Member for Calgary-Mountain View, and we'll look forward to hearing his comments.

Debate Continued

Dr. Swann: Thanks very much, Mr. Speaker, for your gracious inclusion. I'm pleased to rise and speak to Government Motion 7, the response to the budget. Indeed, there is much to be grateful for in our wealth and our prosperity in this province. I would say that this budget represents a generous, perhaps overly generous, response to this challenge that we face to ensure that Albertans have the best services in the country, that we protect the vulnerable in our society, that we develop our resources in a responsible way, and that we ensure that our children are not compromised in the future by our spending today relative to the needs of tomorrow.

This Premier has indicated very clearly in this budget that there are many issues that are actually hold the line and that she is doing more of the same that this government has been doing over the last decade at least. The government is banking on high resource revenue despite one of the most unstable times in the world. There's a danger again that we are creating the conditions for continued instability in those most crucial of human services like education, health care, postsecondary education, seniors' care, the supports for people with disabilities. There's no clear stability in our budget because it's continuing to be at least one-third dependent on an unstable resource revenue.

We're now living, then, at the expense of our children's future, and I think it's time for us as a government on all sides to say yes to some more aspects of sustainable financial planning, sustainable environments, sustainable energy development, and

sustainable human services based on a revenue stream that is stable. We need to say yes to better planning for both capital and maintenance budgets in this very heavily infrastructure-intense province. We need to say yes to restoring trust in our relationships both within the human services programs that we provide and with Albertans, and we need to say yes to a more open and transparent communication around what is real and what is not real in the way we are working with people and the environment.

There is no single answer to restoring trust in a government that has been at it 41 years and created all kinds of debt, personal debts and relational debts, and obligations, but a good start would be to have an honest conversation with staff, with Albertans about areas that are not working in our systems, that are not efficient, that are not effective. Measuring outcomes is surely one of those, and this government is talking about results-based budgeting, which is an excellent start. It cannot end there. I mean, results are very difficult to measure. In many subtle ways the human dimension is paramount. If we have no trust, if we have no significant ability for people in an organization to actually have their voices heard, if there is a sense that people will be intimidated or punished in some way for criticizing or suggesting change, then we will not have the kind of processes that will provide the results that this government continues to talk about.

There needs to be not only transparency but accountability. There need to be clear, measurable goals in which people can not only be seen to be performing but also be held accountable for shortages on those goals and action needs to be taken commensurate with the failure, whether that's a remedy for the inadequate performance, or it may mean moving that person out of the bureaucracy instead of promoting them or having them leave with a huge severance package. There's a tremendous cynicism that comes with a government that doesn't really do the tough work of serious management that's based on targets, evaluation, and then commensurate action when standards are not met.

4:00

I would emphasize that because results-based management doesn't take into account the fact that we have been underperforming for decades. We now have a workforce that is profoundly demoralized primarily because the bosses are not doing their jobs. They are not holding senior people accountable. They are not ensuring that there is a transparency and a subsequent accountability for those who are not meeting targets, and there is a loss of faith in the whole system.

A lazy and incompetent government, then, results in failure to analyze carefully the really long-term as well as short-term risks and benefits. It fails to budget adequately for seniors' care, as we've seen, and for public health care in a sustainable way, for action on poverty, for example, which costs us today. If we believe this thoughtful report of last week, it costs us today \$7 billion to \$9 billion every year, not to mention the suffering and loss of mental health and physical health that some of these folks experience as a result of not being given the resources, the supports, and in some cases the education and the job opportunities that would result.

We have a double loss, then, when we fail to actually budget for a stable, educated, healthy population – I'm really talking about prevention, Mr. Speaker – a budget that doesn't actually have the capacity to measure the impact of prevention, of fewer people addicted, fewer people in the criminal justice system, fewer people seeking medical care, fewer people on supports for independence or Alberta Works programs. This government doesn't measure that, so it's difficult for them to appreciate that those kinds of

results can result in tremendous cost savings and in a tremendous increase in productivity for this province.

People simply, as I've heard it across this province, want to know and have confidence that their elected representatives are responsibly investing their hard-earned tax dollars in evidence-based policies. Use evidence. What we see here is policy-based evidence being created. Once an ideological party decides where they want to go, what they want to do, then they pull in some researcher who will comply with their conclusions and in some way support unsustainable kinds of policies: an unsustainable energy future; an unsustainable environmental monitoring and enforcement system that is grossly underfunded and has lost the respect of the world; an underfunded community development system in this province that doesn't recognize the tremendous opportunities for strengthening community associations and building upon their capacity to maximize and multiply their efforts through citizens who are engaged, optimistic, committed to a brighter future for their community, for their children, and for their seniors throughout their lifespan.

Those are a few thoughts about a budget that seems to be more of the same and doesn't really address the stable foundation. I think Albertans and economists, frankly, from across the country and across the world have said that we should be doing better. We should be drawing on the resources of our population, providing a stable revenue stream that can ensure that the kind of basic, first-world expectations are being met in caring for people, for education, for health care, moving towards a more diverse energy mix and a more robust postsecondary and innovation approach that would actually move us towards a knowledge economy, towards more sustainable energy and environmental practices, and actually leave our children a strong legacy of both good policy and a financial foundation that's based on real payment for our lifestyles for today instead of borrowing, without consent really, from our future and selling off our topsoil, as so many have described it so well.

A related area that the budget alludes to – and I must give some credit – is ESL and new Canadians and the commitment to stronger investment in new Canadians. We have to do better, and we have to credential many of these people in a more timely way so that they can be both productive and healthier in themselves and in their families, working in the professions for which they've trained. I will give credit to a recognition of the need for more serious supports and targeted supports for new Canadians, who came here. We need them desperately to man our various developments and services and products that we are creating for ourselves and the world.

My final comment, I guess, Mr. Speaker, would relate back to my initial comments that Albertans are hungry for a government they can trust, for a government that looks long term rather than short term, that thinks public interest as well as private interest, that thinks about a stable revenue source, that provides for the very foundations of a healthy, civil society in which people can participate, can give their opinions with confidence and feel that they are being heard, and can help to create the kind of prosperity, health, and sustainability that all of us deserve.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Acting Speaker: Thank you.

Hon. members, 29(2)(a) is available should anybody wish to question.

If not, the hon. Government House Leader.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Unless the Member for Vermilion-Lloydminster wishes to address it.

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

Mr. Snelgrove: Thank you. It's an interesting position that I find myself in, Mr. Speaker, obviously, having been a member of government, now sitting over here and listening carefully to the opposition. While the budget is written in black and white, it is very clear that people see different things in the same budget, and they can interpret how they so please. That's an incredibly important part of the democratic process.

We are so very fortunate to be in Alberta. I for one have never ever been ashamed of the fact that Alberta is geographically located in an oil-rich zone, that we have some of the most productive forests and farmlands in the world. That's why people came here. That's why they are continuing to come here. Quite honestly, there is no one that I know that has the magic wand that can automatically open up this incredibly diverse puzzle that Alberta is with its 3 and a half million people and fit another 60,000 or 70,000 people in every year without significant changes.

While I can certainly accept that change can sometimes be difficult, it's probably what drives us. We know we have to continue to keep ahead of our competitors. I think that probably Albertans accept that we will be held to a higher standard, not because we're different but because we have the financial resources to do so, and that's all right, too. Challenging people to use their resources wisely is not only okay; I think it makes them better. I do want to say briefly, Mr. Speaker, that I find it unfortunate that we resort to somehow using the bureaucracy as a whipping boy for our financial problems.

One thing I learned in my years up here is that the people that work for the Alberta government – for us, for you and me, and for all the taxpayers of Alberta – generally work extremely hard. I have seen people in the civil service that are working 16, 17 hours a day and occasionally, when they're in a budgeting cycle, even more. Their weekends become ours, not theirs. Their children become the latchkey kids, like many of ours have become, yet they're just doing exactly what we ask them to do. For many of them, I can't imagine the pressures you have when you are a senior administrator in children's services or in health care when something goes wrong, but I can tell you that they are as emotionally attached to the people of Alberta as we believe we are. I don't think it helps when we use the civil service as the solution to the problem. They are what we will use, Mr. Speaker, to work our way through the problems.

4:10

I can tell you, Mr. Speaker, that there isn't another place in the world that wouldn't die to have our problems. We have problems of excess, baby. One only has to watch the news right now and see Greece, a country with some history, that is just kind of a magical place. The people of Greece are burning down their own buildings and destroying what was the cornerstone of democracy because someone else has had to tell them: "You got it wrong. You were too long on the spending, too short on the resources." No one was looking out for future generations and the pickle they've got themselves in and the way that people can come to believe that it was their right to be subsidized by the hard-working people of Germany, France, and other countries.

We're nowhere near there, Mr. Speaker, and I know we won't be there. I think it's important that when government budgets, they remember that we tax people's money. That's what we do. That's what we spend. We ought to remember that we don't tax the morals. I don't think the budget should become a debate on the different moral stands that we take with regard to endeavours that the government may have.

I certainly do expect that everyone in here will do everything they can as we go through the deliberations to make sure that the budget is fully debated. The people of Alberta, who probably are less interested in this than we would even imagine, would like to get on with work and continue to go home to their children, be able to pay for their house, car, the odd vacation, and bring their relatives and family members to enjoy what we take for granted here, probably the luckiest place in the world.

In many ways I feel I've been one of the luckiest people in the world to have the opportunity to live here with my family, and I look forward to the debate as we go forward. I want to thank you for letting me interrupt and for giving me the chance to speak, Mr. Speaker.

The Acting Speaker: Thank you. Standing Order 29(2)(a) is available should anybody wish to comment or question.

Seeing none, the hon. Government House Leader.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I would move that we adjourn debate.

[Motion to adjourn debate carried]

Government Bills and Orders Committee of the Whole

[Mr. Zwozdesky in the chair]

The Deputy Chair: Hon. members, the Committee of the Whole is ready to commence its proceedings.

Bill 1 Results-based Budgeting Act

The Deputy Chair: Are there any speakers at the committee stage? The hon. Member for Calgary-Mountain View.

Dr. Swann: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. A pleasure to rise on Bill 1, what on the face of it looks like a very responsible and sensible and important approach to budgeting. It's been raised many times in the House that some of us would have assumed that this was part of any responsible management system for both a company and a government that's trying to deal with its responsibilities to either shareholders in one case or citizens in this case.

It's touted as a results-based budgeting process or zero-based budgeting, going back to zero each year and assessing what programs and what salaries and what benefits are accruing from our budgeting process to date. It suggests that it would be a comprehensive review, and there may well be external consultants employed to review this. I think that's helpful, especially given the tendency for all of us to see the rosy side of our own work. However, it does mean more costs, and one has to consider that in terms of the overall efficiency of the budget.

Albertans, too, need to be part of seeing the details of how we are spending our money, and of course they seldom do because it's been such a complex and, I think, inordinately obscure process. Even the opposition can't get clear answers on a budgeting process that has large line items without significant breakdown. The ministers deftly avoid answering very specific questions about specific line items, whether it be new policy implementation or bonuses for staff without clear criteria for how these bonuses can be given out. So forgive us for being a little bit cynical about what this might mean in terms of change for this government.

Certainly, results are important. There's no question that we have to be measuring our activities based on what kind of changes occur. Hopefully, we're looking at changes in Albertans' abilities, in Albertans' opportunities, in Albertans' environment, in Albertans' outcomes from interaction in the health system, in Albertans' expectation of life, in Albertans' productivity and not based solely on activities and defined as outcomes or results within a particular department. One has to ask the question: results of what and compared to what? Are we simply comparing to last year, or are we actually going to compare those results to other jurisdictions and the best standards in the world? If we're not, we're spinning our wheels and fooling ourselves.

Surely, as I've mentioned earlier in this House, we cannot ignore the process that's happening within departments in getting those results. If we are demoralizing people, if we are not following fair process, if we are intimidating people in the process of doing our work in this government service, if we are ignoring and disrespecting people in the workforce, this may not show up in results, especially results compared to last year. I'm thinking specifically of recent surveys done in the emergency medical services system that show a hugely demoralized emergency medical service declining year over year. I've seen the same in Human Services, at least in the children and youth services reports, that show a declining morale in Alberta Human Services based on survey results.

How can one even begin to talk about results if the morale in a department is continuously going down? What does that say about the process of carrying out the work of a particular department? We have to get serious about, again, following good management principles. If we're serious about getting better results and comparing them to the world's best results, the standard of the day, then we also have to look at the processes that are going on within the departments.

Let me take health care, for example. Are we going to measure the number of people treated, or are we going to measure the quality of how those people were treated? How do we combine the measurements of access when we're waiting up to 40 weeks, 50 weeks for a hip or a knee replacement and a gentleman in one case waiting seven years for a kidney transplant at the age of 40 and seeing his life pass before him? How are we measuring the cost benefits and opportunities that that money could have been spent in a particular way to achieve perhaps slightly different but better results? We have to have a very sophisticated measuring system that actually measures what it is we want to see change.

We also have to understand for the well-being of the staff, the people in the departments that are carrying out these tremendous services for Albertans, that they are feeling valued, are recognized for their need for ongoing education, are being acknowledged in terms of their performance for improving and challenging systems that are not working for all Albertans.

4:20

It's hard to argue with a results-based approach to budgeting. There's no question that that needs to be part of the mix in any responsible management of public resources and provision of human services or monitoring of an environment. The big question is: can we trust a government that has for so long neglected many of these dimensions of success and hasn't set clear goals, hasn't got clear indicators of success in place? I can speak very confidently in relation to the health care system, where measuring numbers and turnover is simply not acceptable when we see the cost per service as the highest in the country for health services in Alberta and, again, see the morale of people and their

confidence in the leadership progressively going down over the last decade.

A big part of the reason I'm in politics today is that I've heard from so many in the public and in the professions that express their frustration at the lack of basic monitoring and accountability in the systems that are supposed to be serving Albertans. And by that I mean not just firing people who aren't doing their job – and it may come to that – but providing the adequate retraining and redirection and remedy to those who are not managing their people well, not managing the setting of goals and the monitoring of the goals of that process well and, therefore, not being held accountable for the sacred trust we've been given by Albertans to manage their resources and, in fact, their very well-being in the short term and the long term.

If I may, I'll just close with a remark about the longer term management. If we focus so closely on results from this year over next year, we will miss the longer term commitment that has to be there for a more sustainable environment, a more sustainable health care system and workforce, people that believe in where we're going and put a hundred per cent of their energy and their commitment into making the systems work better.

I would not want to leave this discussion without ensuring that we are very clear that short-term results-based decision-making is part of what got us into this problem. We're not seeing the long-term energy needs of this province. We're not looking at the longer term results in terms of an environment that is being daily compromised. We're not seeing the long-term impact of a poverty reduction program that is not addressing in any serious way the huge cost of our failure to deal with single moms, educational and learning disabilities in children, behavioural problem in kids, mental health problems, addictions. By not dealing with those issues, which would be a short-term increased cost, we are actually failing in the long-term well-being of the province and comprising the kind of results-based budgeting that I think this Premier probably wants in her heart of hearts.

That said, Mr. Chairman, I'd like to propose an amendment to Bill 1 that has to do with accountability, that actually establishes within one year of coming into force a special committee of the Legislative Assembly to comprehensively review how this results-based budgeting process actually works. It involves extra cost. Will it involve extra benefit?

Thank you.

The Deputy Chair: Thank you. If you could just present the page with copies that can be distributed. We will for the record refer to this as amendment A1. Hon. member, if you would just give us a moment to have it distributed. We'll take the original here. Thank you. Then we'll invite you to proceed with your discussion of this amendment.

I'm assuming everyone has a copy now. Yes? We'll let the member proceed, then.

Dr. Swann: Thank you, Mr. Chair. The foundation of Liberal thinking around all kinds of production of goods and services is around evidence. Whenever we make a decision, it's very clear that if we don't measure the impact of what we've done, we have not done a job. Everything we do has risks and benefits. If we don't understand at the end of the day what the results of a change in direction are, then we simply will not make decisions that have a lasting and changing value.

This amendment on behalf of the Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar is results-based budgeting amendment 1, we could call it. It reads:

3.1(1) Within one year of the coming into force... a special committee established by the Legislative Assembly shall commence a comprehensive review of the results-based budget process.

(2) The committee's review shall include recommendations for the establishment of an independent officer of the Legislature whose duties would include reviewing budgetary processes of the government.

Finally,

(3) The committee shall submit its report to the Legislative Assembly within one year after beginning the review.

Again, it speaks to state-of-the-art management principles. If we're going to change something that is ostensibly going to produce greater effectiveness or efficiency, surely we should measure the impact of that. Are we actually spending more money, and are we getting results from that as a result of this new approach? One would hope so. Again, there is no guarantee that anything we do is going to improve effectiveness and efficiency unless we measure it and hold ourselves accountable to both one another and the public.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

The Deputy Chair: Thank you.

To the amendment, the hon. Member for Calgary-Glenmore.

Mr. Hinman: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I find this an interesting one. I wasn't able to look it up on the Internet quite as fast as I wanted to – I thought the hon. member would talk a little bit more – but the federal government, I believe, has an independent auditor by the name of Page, if my memory is correct.

Anyway, I think this is an interesting amendment to Bill 1. I certainly am not in favour of Bill 1 with its current concept. I commend the Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar for his astuteness in looking at auditing and ensuring that we're using our dollars wisely. I guess this is very brief and isn't expanding much, but some of my questions would be because in opposition – and each of us over here understands this – the line items that we get are painfully inadequate to look over and to make any decision or to make any comments, really, on how the money is being spent. I think that in this there needs to be a more comprehensive expansion on, you know, what books we're actually going to be able to see, that this independent government individual would have better access but, more importantly, that the committee would have better access to have an in-depth study of the budget and be part of the actual process of the results-based budgeting.

I'm not sure. Like I say, these things always get thrown out quickly. I wish I would have had a little bit more time to prepare and read this and do a little bit of research.

Mr. Chairman, Bill 1, the Results-based Budgeting Act, is painfully inadequate, and there need to be some amendments in order to expand that and to have some parameters on what they're trying to achieve. The short fact of the matter is that the government's budget is the result of their studying of it. Now they're trying to put it in this budget with this bill, saying that we're going to have a results-based budget. Well, what have they been doing, then, before now?

With this amendment, which I would be in favour of, I think that we have some parameters here now to see how we are going to actually go through a process, a comprehensive review to see the results of how our tax dollars are being spent. That's really our responsibility here as elected members, to ensure that tax dollars are spent wisely. I would argue that the differences in this House, really, should come down to the debate on the priorities. Should we be spending more money in, you know, Education? Should we be spending less money in Transportation?

I think that we would all agree – perhaps I have a few colleagues here that won't agree with this – that we need to balance our budget yearly. I mean, there are times, you know, like in 2008 when we had a major crash. Those are years where perhaps government needs to carry on. It might have that one-year dip, but to go on for five years with deficit budgeting is just wrong. It's not sustainable. It shouldn't be going forward. Somehow there needs to be a process where elected members can come together on a committee, go over these things, and agree – we might disagree – and vote on where we want to spend the money; like I say, more in health care, more in education, less in justice. The criteria needs to be that we need to balance the budget, much like municipal government. They sit down around the table, and they'll go for hours and hours and days on end on the process of the results of what they've put down.

4:30

Bill 1 is inadequate. In just saying, "Oh, it's going to be results based," well, that's exactly what this budget is. This one here, A1 – I didn't write that down when you said that, Mr. Chair; it's A1 – is asking:

3.1(1) Within one year of the coming into force of this Act, a special committee established by the Legislative Assembly shall commence a comprehensive review of the results-based budget process.

(2) The committee's review shall include recommendations for the establishment of an independent officer of the Legislature whose duties would include reviewing the budgetary processes of the government.

(3) The committee shall submit its report to the Legislative Assembly within one year after beginning the review.

I think this is a step in the right direction. I feel, though, that it's not a complete step. Like I say, he's got my thinking process going here now. We really need to have some more amendments that would actually enable this committee to be part of the results-based budget process along with an officer of the Legislature.

Anyway, it's innovative. That's what we need, some new thinking, because this government certainly is lacking it, and this Bill 1 certainly shows that lack of innovation. By simply creating a bill, they think that they can create the illusion that now they've got great results from their painfully poor budget, which they've brought forward and that will be debated here over the next month.

I'd just like to speak in favour of this. It's an interesting concept, and it would be interesting to see if the government has any comments on this.

The Deputy Chair: Thank you.

The hon. Member for Calgary-*Buffalo*, please, on the amendment.

Mr. Hehr: Well, thank you very much, Mr. Chair. I, too, would like to speak, actually, in support of this amendment made by my hon. colleague from Edmonton-Gold Bar. The bill as written so far is much more of a public relations exercise than anything. The government is attempting to use this as a cloak to say that we're going to be fiscally responsible from now on by reviewing budgets and reviewing programs and reviewing the like. It's been said here before – and I'll say it again just for the sake of the record – that if the government hadn't been doing this already, it begs the question: what the heck have they been doing?

The act as written provides no guarantees, no assurances, no outcomes, no priorities, or, in a sense, any direction as to where this results-based budgeting process will lead. Also, it again is happening behind closed doors. How do we know whether the

results of this process are actually being accomplished? As I said at the beginning, it's an exercise in messaging, and whether it's successful or not, I'm not so sure.

But, hey, I guess the long and the short of this amendment is that it's trying to make this current act have some use and effect, some particular teeth to it, that it may actually make things better here in Alberta by applying a special committee made up of the Legislative Assembly and that actually does a review of this process. This bill also includes recommendations for the establishment of an independent officer of the Legislature whose duties would include reviewing the budgetary process of this government and submitting a report to this honourable House for us to review and look at and distill as to whether we're getting value for money or production from our resource revenues, from our tax revenues and the like in providing services to the citizens of Alberta. You know, it behooves us, if we're going to have a bill, that it actually does something. That's why I would be in support of it.

Obviously, budgeting processes are very important things unless you're going to totally discount the role of government. You need police services, fire services, ambulance services, the provision of medical services, a publicly funded education system, and the like. These are not easy priorities to manage, nor are they always easy to budget for. In particular, given our particularly volatile revenue streams at this current time, our reliance on oil and gas revenue, that is, in my view, short term and short sighted, we should be contributing more from the public purse to pay today's bills.

I find much wiser a pay-as-you-go philosophy of having people actually pay for the services they use, of people actually paying taxes for the health care, for the public education, and for, basically, the public good that we enjoy. I think we should ask more of our citizens to pay today for those things they're using instead of borrowing other people's money or future generations' money, which is the oil and gas reserves, unless we think it's a principled decision to spend all this wealth in one generation, which we've shown over the course of the last 25 years an ability to do.

We've spent \$200 billion to \$250 billion in petroleum revenues without saving a dime. I think anyone would say that in the long run this is not sustainable or whether it's morally or ethically correct to have actually done that. I would say that a far more conservative principle, a far more results-based budgeting principle, is to say: "No. We as a society are going to pay for what we use and save for the long run and use some of those revenue streams to build a heritage trust fund, like Mr. Lougheed envisioned, to go forward and allow us to have something left when the oil and gas is gone." I think that to argue otherwise is simply not common sense, nor is it logical, nor is it morally or ethically correct to the future generations.

If they apply some of these principles, what I've just described, to an actual budgeting process, to actually strike a committee to make this bill better, what I'd like to see is us looking at our revenue streams, looking at our results, and actually developing a fair taxation policy that represents not only what we need today but what we're going to need tomorrow, when the oil eventually runs out or the world moves on from oil, which will most likely be the case far before the oil runs out.

I thank you for your time, for allowing me to speak to this amendment, one that I think will bring some focus to the bill and maybe some results forward for the Alberta people. Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

The Deputy Chair: Thank you, hon. member.

The hon. Government House Leader.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I rise to speak against the amendment. It's ironic that in a House where we've just had speeches relating to the budget, most of which talked about how the budget should be balanced and that we shouldn't spend more money, we see the deputy leader of a party that's constantly chastising the government for spending too much speaking in favour of setting up yet another committee and another process that will yet cost more money when, in fact, we have a process in place already to do exactly this.

According to Bill 1 under section 3(1), "The President of Treasury Board . . . shall, no later than October 1 of each year, beginning in 2012, table in the Legislative Assembly a report that sets out the progress of the review."

We also have in our standing orders policy field committees. When anything is brought before the House that relates to the area that the policy field committee is responsible for, it falls within the jurisdiction of that policy field committee, so very easy for the policy field committee to determine that they would like to review that report and make comment on that report. Reports that are tabled in the House can be referred to the committee. So there's a process in place for the House to do this not once, as proposed by the amendment, but on an ongoing basis, and I would hope that the policy field committee responsible would indeed undertake that.

4:40

Now, the House could decide, if it wished, to make the change and refer it to the Public Accounts Committee, you know, if we wanted to add to the role of the Public Accounts Committee, but without doing anything, it does fall within the purview of the policy field committee to which the Ministry of Finance and the Treasury Board are reportable and, indeed, where estimates would go if they weren't otherwise directed to the House. This is already covered very well, not just on a one-time basis but on an ongoing basis, and therefore the amendment is not only a costly addition but unnecessary.

The Deputy Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Hinman: Well, I appreciate the Government House Leader getting up and giving those erroneous statements. Nowhere did I say that the government should spend more money. I talked about priorities. This government obviously is oblivious to the idea that when you budget, you actually prioritize your money.

He talked about the policy field committees. We don't have access to any of the information. It's very limited, Mr. Chair. It's ridiculous. It's almost pompous for the Government House Leader to get up and make such comments like there's an ability for the opposition to get any review of any of the budgetary items other than what's in the actual budget, which anybody in the province has access to. We never see any contracts. We don't see the RFPs that go out. None of those things take place.

Again, the whole agenda of the policy field committees is run by the government. I mean, all of those areas are run by the government. They're protective. They're secretive. They're closed in. We can't ask for different documents and say, you know: let's see the requests for proposals on these billion-dollar power lines that this government purports that we need. You know, after 12 years of saying that it's critical, that the sky is falling, nothing has happened, yet there are no reports coming forward, Mr. Chairman. It's just ridiculous, from the statements that he made, to say, "Oh, the Wildrose deputy leader is in favour of running a deficit budget now" because we're looking at having someone accountable.

I mean, Kevin Page, the Parliamentary Budget Officer that the federal government put in place in 2008, is the first one. It's interesting how critical he is of the government on how the government is spending their money or when they're unrealistic in their projections. I think that was the intent of this amendment. As I did say, if I would have known this was coming forward, I would have brought in another amendment for it, but it takes time, and we're not going to have that time. The debate will move on before an amendment would pass parliamentary approval.

I merely commented on the fact that we need a better system and not the government standing up and patting itself on the back for having a committee that they're going to present to this parliament and say: "Oh, look how great we've done in our budgeting, the results. Here's our report." This government receives report after report. I mean, they just had their critical transmission committee come and say how great and wonderful the government was to act on this critical need, Mr. Chair.

I have to stand up and correct the hon. Government House Leader in his comments that we want to increase the largesse of government, that we want to spend more money. This amendment is anything but that. The whole purpose of why they have Bill 1 and why this amendment to Bill 1 was brought forward is that we want to actually have some results-based financing. We don't have that. If this government thinks or even purports for a minute that they have it, then the results of their finance is that there are no cuts that can be made, that there's no largesse in the government anywhere, that there's no bloating of management in any of the departments, that every dollar has been covered.

They've had since October 1 to go through this budget. The Premier and her cabinet have all come forward and said that there are no cuts that can be made. That's ridiculous. There are many cuts that can be made. Sometimes in order to balance a budget, you actually have to pick and choose. "Can we go on two holidays as a family?" "No, only one." "So where are we going to go?" "Well, we don't have enough money. We're staying in Alberta, but we wanted to go to Disneyland or to Alison's Wonderland for a wonderful vacation." They don't have the money.

Mrs. Forsyth: To Jasper.

Mr. Hinman: Yes, a vacation to Jasper and to bring our future colleagues along.

Mr. Chair, it's offensive to Albertans that this government for the fifth year during record revenue has come up with this idea of results-based budgeting. I mean, it's comical when we look back at the last three years and realize what Bill 1 has been. Last year it was: "You know what? We kind of messed up, and what we need is an advisory council to the government." The Government House Leader just talked about not creating more bureaucracy and more counsel. Well, that's exactly what it was. Then we had a candidate for the leadership of his party get appointed to that nice position. The year before that, this government destroyed the oil and gas industry here. Did they ever apologize for that? No. They blamed it on world happenings beyond their control, which was in August '08, but they still implemented their faulty program on January 1, 2009.

Then for their budget in 2010 they said: oh, we need to pass this new, very important bill that's the Alberta Competitiveness Act. Why? Because all of the bills that they had passed had destroyed – we weren't competitive here in the province. We were losing industry. We were losing revenue. So they came up with these wonderful bills to try and put smoke and mirrors around their shortcomings, their fallibility in budgeting.

They think that because they write down a few little words on here, results-based budgeting, that Albertans are going to buy that. The result of proper budgeting, Mr. Chairman, would be a balanced budget. We've had five years to do it. It's doable. But each year that we don't, we dig ourselves deeper into a hole that will be tougher and will hurt more if we don't make the proper cuts now.

Something else needs to be done. Bill 1 isn't adequate in its current situation. This is a step in the right direction. Like I say, because of the process, we weren't privy to this amendment coming forward. I would have had another amendment to add some in-depth – I guess what I want to say is that all House members that would have access could actually go to the Finance minister and say: "You know, I want to see the requests for proposals on cataracts. I want to see these. Where are these decisions?" They'd actually have a committee of the Legislature that would have access to look at the results of the budget and where we're spending the money.

We have no access to that. We can't make any real comments on how or where they're spending the money because it's a line item budget. We need new computers. They're going to spend \$2.6 million. Where? How? Why? That's the extent of their debate. It's ridiculous. It's inadequate. It's incomprehensible that they would think that Bill 1 in its current condition is going to result in good budgeting going forward.

The Deputy Chair: Thank you, hon. member.

Any other speakers? Calgary-McCall.

Mr. Kang: Thank you, Mr. Chair, I would also like to speak in favour of the amendment brought forward by my colleague from Edmonton-Gold Bar. The intention of Bill 1 is that it essentially tasks the government to do a program review of all departments using a results-based budgeting process, leaving the term "results-based budgeting process" undefined, and then to report to the Legislature. So the amendment to Bill 1 is:

Within one year of the coming into force of this Act, a special committee established by the Legislative Assembly shall commence a comprehensive review of the results-based budget process.

Then it goes on further.

The committee's review shall include recommendations for the establishment of an independent officer of the Legislature whose duties would include reviewing the budgetary processes of the government.

So the independent officer will be reviewing the budget process on an ongoing basis.

The committee shall submit its report to the Legislative Assembly within one year after beginning the review.

This amendment is going to put teeth into Bill 1. We can have ongoing reviews of all the budget processes, and then we will know where we have gone wrong, where we have overspent, where we need to spend more, and where we need to cut back.

This amendment will force the government to have the budget processes and outcomes reviewed by an independent officer of the Legislature, similar to the federal Parliamentary Budget Officer. This will not only keep our spending in check; it will also produce better results if you pass this amendment, the rationale being the real improvements in efficiency, objectivity, and the possibilities obtained by the objective review of government programs by an independent officer of the Legislature as well as having a better budgeting process in place.

4:50

For those reasons, this amendment will give us an independent officer of the Legislature, and for those reasons I will favour this

amendment, Mr. Chair, because it will bring in transparency, efficiency, and objectivity. The process will be very, very transparent.

Thank you very much.

The Deputy Chair: Thank you. Are there any other persons wishing to speak to amendment A1 as presented moments ago?

Are you ready for the question, then?

Hon. Members: Question.

[Motion on amendment A1 lost]

The Deputy Chair: We're back to the main speakers list now on the bill, and I will recognize Calgary-Fish Creek.

Mrs. Forsyth: Well, Mr. Chair, thank you very much. I'm not sure how I feel about standing up and speaking about this bill, actually. I've thought about it over the weekend and as I drove home on Thursday night and when I drove up again on Sunday. You know, I try to rationalize where I've been, where I am today, and where I'm going. When I thought about Bill 1 that way, I thought about my time as a member, when I was with the government, and I think it was six and a half years as a cabinet minister and about the process that we went through budgeting and line-by-line items when the times were tough.

I remember doing exactly what the government is proposing, actually, way back when I was the Solicitor General. We had some rough roads, and the Premier at the time, Premier Klein, had sent out to all of the ministers at that particular time: pick your priorities. What's the most important thing in your department? I guess wants versus needs. That was in maybe 2001 or 2002. I can't exactly remember.

I've said in this Legislature before that if we had half the money the government has or even a quarter of the money the government has or a third of the money they have and the staff that they have to be able to do research, you know, I'm not sure where we'd be. With a limited budget a lot of the research is done by some very capable staff that we have in our small little caucus, but we end up spending hours upon hours doing our own research. As my colleague from Calgary-Glenmore has alluded, if we would have had just a little bit of time to do a little bit of research, it's amazing the debates that we could carry on in this Legislature.

You know, I look at this bill, and we've got a whole bunch of whereases.

Whereas the Government of Alberta is committed to ensuring that its programs and services are the right programs and services delivered in the right way to achieve the results that Albertans expect, in the most efficient and effective manner.

Mr. Chair, what on God's green Earth have they been doing for the last 40 years they've been in government? You know, you would think that as a cabinet minister and an MLA you'd be asking yourself: are we delivering the right way to achieve what's best for Albertans? It is beyond – absolutely beyond – my comprehension that the government would even have the nerve, honestly, to table a bill, to admit to Albertans that they've been screwing up for the last 40 years and that they really didn't know what they were doing prior. It's no wonder, as my colleague says, that we've got five years of deficits.

You know, let's make it real simple. I have to tell you that I was door-knocking this weekend on Saturday, and I talked to the constituents of Calgary-Fish Creek about the Results-based Budgeting Act. I don't know if you know what it's like when you're talking to somebody and you're talking over their head or they're just not comprehending or understanding what you're

doing. They looked at me as if to say: lady, I have no idea what you're talking about, so why don't you keep it simple? So you go back to the simplicity of saying that it's like sitting around the kitchen table and deciding about your budget when your husband has had to take a drop in salary because it's either that or he loses his job. So you're making decisions on what is truly a want versus a need: do we still continue to have steaks three times a week, or do we all of a sudden realize that we have to go on to hamburger? It's such a simplistic idea of how we budget.

Then we go on to:

Whereas a comprehensive review of the Government's programs and services will ensure that those programs and services are continuing to achieve the best results and to support Albertans, communities and businesses in reaching their full potential.

Well, we have or had – I'm not even sure if we do any more – a three-year budget cycle, a process that would allow us after the first year of the budget to go back. You know, if you had an agency that was doing some work contracted from the government: are you doing the right thing, and are you getting results? Again, it's one of those things that you just shake your head and say: Albertans truly, truly are not going to buy into this. It's like my colleague said, where we had – oh, let's see – in 2011 the Asia Advisory Council Act. I'm not even sure, to be honest with you, if that bill has been proclaimed. Has it? Does anybody know?

An Hon. Member: No mention if it wasn't.

Mrs. Forsyth: Okay. So we're not sure if that bill is even proclaimed.

Then we go to 2010, the Alberta Competitiveness Act. It's another one of those. You have to be kidding me. I mean, normal Albertans, everyday Albertans – and that's the Tim Hortons Albertans – get it. They don't need a bill like the Alberta Competitiveness Act. They don't need a bill like the Asia Advisory Council Act. They just want us to do what they've elected us to do: represent their interests. I have to tell you that I door-knock every summer. I door-knocked last summer and door-knocked the summer before, and I don't remember any one of the good people of Calgary-Fish Creek saying: you know, Heather, we need an Asia Advisory Council Act.

I write an article every month for my web page, and it's called What's on Your Mind. I decided that I was just going to take a little step back in history and was going to read what I've been writing for the last year. The article is called What's on Your Mind because it's what the constituents of Calgary-Fish Creek have told us for the last month. We track every phone call that comes into the office. We track every e-mail and fax that comes into the office and anybody that walks into the office. If I'm at the grocery store getting my groceries and somebody stops me and they want to talk about something about the government, every single one of those is tracked. When we get towards the end of the month, my staff does a graph and a printout and tells me exactly what the graph indicates as the number one priority for the constituents of Calgary-Fish Creek.

I have to apologize to them because we've been busy getting ready for session, so I haven't written What's on Your Mind for the constituents of Calgary-Fish Creek for the month of January. But I can tell you that it's the same thing that's been on their mind for the last nine months: health care, seniors, and then the third one will switch from education to infrastructure. I can tell you that in the month of December for the first time the .05-.08, whatever that piece of legislation was called, bumped everything off the map and took number one priority.

The government's role, quite frankly, and that of every single person in this Legislature as an elected representative is to listen to what they're hearing from their constituents and then go back and discuss it at the caucus table. The caucus then allows the cabinet to say: well, you know, out of 80 – I don't know how many MLAs they have because they keep losing them, but I think there are 62 now. I'm not sure, exactly. The representation of those 62 MLAs should be telling the government the direction of what they're hearing from the people who put them there and who elected them because that's their position.

5:00

We go on and we talk about:

Whereas the recommendations from such a review . . .

And I'm not sure what review they refer to. I guess it's the review of the government's program and services.

. . . can form a basis for future budget and policy decisions to achieve the best results for Albertans.

All nice. All wonderful. It makes you feel warm, and it makes you feel like the government is doing something, but then again you question what's happening, what they've been doing before.

Then we go on:

Whereas engaging Albertans is vital to determine what results they want and to validate the results achieved.

An unbelievable comment when you think about the fact that they just seemed to wake up on the date of February 2012, maybe one month or two months before an election, and they're talking about engaging Albertans and how vital it is. It's just arrogance, cockiness at its finest.

Then we go on:

Whereas an innovative, collaborative and engaged Alberta Public Service, working with purpose and pride, is committed to achieving results for Albertans and making a difference in their lives.

I'm not exactly sure what that even means, to be honest with you. If it's going back to maybe the comment that the Member for Vermilion-Lloydminster made earlier about the hard work that the public service does in this province, there's no question. I've been blessed, serving in two ministries, as the Solicitor General and as the minister of children's services. I said this last year when I was speaking in regard to the unbelievable job that the civil service did for me when I was the minister – and it's like the Member for Vermilion-Lloydminster said – that they go absolutely way beyond the call of duty. It's amazing how they all pulled together when we were working on budgets or, for that matter, when we had a crisis in the department. Everybody worked together.

[Mr. Cao in the chair]

We then go on to the review of the programs and services and exactly the role of the Treasury Board.

The Treasury Board shall provide for a comprehensive review of the programs and services provided by the Government and its agencies.

Again, you know, you have to wonder what Treasury Board was doing before. Up until a few months ago we had the President of the Treasury Board, and then we had another minister of something to do with Treasury Board. Since then we've just got the President of Treasury Board. What exactly has the President of the Treasury Board been doing for the last four years if he hasn't been doing a comprehensive review?

Mr. Chairman, I had the opportunity to sit on Treasury Board when I was a government member. It was a very, very good learning experience. I hadn't been elected that long, and it was at that time a very prestigious position to be sitting as a member of Treasury Board. The Treasury Board staff, as we're going through

this budget process, provide you with a very comprehensive review because of the fact that you have ministers coming to the table. They're wanting to have more money. They're arguing the fact of why their particular ministry should not take a decrease, should not stay the same, and most of the time should have an increase in spending. All of a sudden it seems like we're reinventing the wheel, or maybe this is one of those bills where we want everybody to think: under this new Premier we're changing how we do business.

I don't have a problem with that. The problem with the business that they're changing is something that they should have been doing for the last 40 years in regard to establishing budgets, determining priorities, and finding out what the right programs are, what the right services are, how you achieve the best results in what the government says is efficient and effective.

You know, I continue to think about this as I meet and engage with people out and about, and I really, really have trouble trying to rationalize and explain: well, I guess, the government hasn't been doing what they said they were doing, and now they've decided that maybe they should be doing this because it could be what Albertans want. We probably haven't been listening in the past, so now we'll tell them what they want to hear instead of asking what is really important to them.

We go on. They talk about the review process.

The review must be conducted in the manner and in accordance with a schedule as directed by the Treasury Board and must include an assessment as to whether the programs and services provided by the Government and its agencies meet their intended objectives and whether they are being delivered in an efficient and effective manner.

Well, Mr. Chairman, I really hate to sound repetitive, and I don't want to say, "I told you so", but honest to goodness, what the heck have they been doing for the last 40 years? I mean, it is where you have to shake your head over and over again and think, "I cannot believe that I'm standing up on the 14th of February debating the number one bill of the Legislature in the spring session, called the Results-based Budgeting Act" and try and comprehend what the government has been doing previously. I guess that from this they haven't been doing a very good job. Now, in the year 2012, they're going to change the whole budget process. They're going to start engaging Albertans, and more importantly they are going to start listening to Albertans, and that's very frightening.

We go down.

For the purpose of conducting a review under this Act, in addition to members of the public service, external experts may be engaged as the Treasury Board considers necessary.

What external experts? When you have the hard-working people that work in many of the departments, what I call the front-line workers or the workers that are in the trenches, they know what needs to be done in their particular departments. They know what the priorities are for their departments. They know that if we're talking about Human Services, the number one priority for that particular department is protecting children. It's real simple. What they need to do is make sure that the children in this province are protected and especially that the vulnerable children that are apprehended under children's services are taken care of, that they've got some love, that they've got some access to things if they come into issues. It's not rocket science.

Then they go on to say, "Albertans will have the opportunity to participate in the review." What review, and who determines that review? Is it Treasury Board? Is it the members of the public service? Is it the external experts? I mean, Mr. Chair, we have some unbelievable people that work and are engaged within the different departments of the different ministries that do an

unbelievable job, and let's give them some credit. As someone who has sat in two ministries, who relied on the people that worked within those ministries to tell me as a new minister, really, what the priorities were for their ministry, who knows it better than them?

You go out. In both ministries when I was a minister, I travelled the province and talked to the corrections officers that were out there and talked to the police. Even when I visited the correctional facilities, I talked to the people that were incarcerated, the offenders, to see what was on their mind. The children's services minister covered every regional authority in the province from as far north that you could go to as far south, reached out to the aboriginal communities, did visits in Wabasca, went to Eden Valley, you know, went to Hobbema, went to Siksika, talked to the people there. That's what's all important about engaging Albertans.

5:10

For the government, quite frankly, to bring up a Bill 1 and put in all of these whereases, what they're going to do, is completely unacceptable. They are now saying to Albertans: we've never done this before, so will you just give us one more chance in our 41st year as this is what we should be doing? You know, instead of the government telling the people what they're going to do, maybe it's time that the people tell the government what they expect them to do.

As we go through the process of debating this particular motion, I'm looking forward to hearing the government stand up and rationalize why they're going to support this bill. With that, I'll sit down.

The Chair: Any others? The hon. Member for Calgary-Buffalo, then.

Mr. Hehr: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair. I listened with some interest to my colleague on this side of the House and have listened to other people talk on this bill. We, interestingly, just had an amendment brought up from this side of the House to Bill 1 of this session, the act that's before us, that I think would have actually given this legislation some teeth and some purpose.

Starting on that, if we look at this bill, it purports to do great things, well, not really great things, but it essentially says: results-based budgeting. Clearly, this is a title meant, in my view, to produce some results in our budgets, actually have them produce results that are both economically viable as well as produce the services that a modern-day society actually utilizes, whether these programs are needed, wanted, or the like. That's what to me, actually, results-based budgeting would be.

If you go through the act, I don't see anything tangible that would lead to actually results-based budgeting happening. It's simply a platitude, more of a wish, more of a hope, more of a desire, more of a "we want this to happen" or "we're not going to make this happen." It provides no actual teeth to how this is going to happen. In fact, I've said it before, but why not? Redundancy is my strong suit. If they haven't been doing results-based budgeting before, one might ask what the heck they've been doing, and I think that's a fair comment when you really look at this bill. It purports to do a lot without doing anything.

To, I guess, the government's credit they have received quite a bit of play on this in the news media. People have sort of bought into this debate hook, line, and sinker, and it shores up their image as being fiscal hawks when we full well know it's really not much of a claim. If it helps them in that regard, I guess that's good for them. Whether this bill is actually good for the Alberta people,

that is another thing. I remain to be convinced. I'm hopeful that possibly some of the language in here may get to the ministers as well as their teams, and hopefully they will results-based budget from now on, which I guess means we're going to review the programs and see whether they're working for Albertans, again something I hoped they were already doing but apparently not.

I guess that, going forward, what I'd like to see out of our budgeting practices is more of an eye to balancing revenues with expenses and trying to look at a global picture of what we can do to provide essential services from governments, things like police, fire, ambulance, public health care, public education, and some of those things that, in my view, modern societies work better with, things that essentially make the trains run on time, so to speak, essentially allow societies to function at their highest productivity with the most people engaged and the most people supported in a reasonable fashion. For instance, many of these programs in society, I feel, are overarching. I think government has to take some direction in the organization of a society, and if done correctly, the government can provide efficiencies to what they were doing.

Essentially, sometime the rubber has to hit the road in terms of our spending, in terms of what we bring in on the revenue side from the taxpayer and what we currently rely on in fossil fuel resources. I've said this earlier, but in my view the last 25 years have shown that we can spend \$200 billion to \$250 billion in fossil fuel resources and not save a dime, okay? In my view, this is morally and ethically wrong. In my view, I don't believe it should be our *raison d'être* to spend every last dime of fossil fuel resources that come into the government coffers on providing services. I essentially think that if people want these services, they should have to pay for some of them themselves, okay? If they don't want these services, I guess that's going to be the time when the rubber hits the road, where we say: all right; we're going to cut these services.

That would be more moral and ethical than us simply spending all this money on keeping an artificially low tax base. That's essentially what we've done over the last 25 years, and in my view it may have been a road to electoral success, but it hasn't shown much leadership.

I'll say it here. You know, although our societies are structured differently, when books are written on how to run an oil and gas economy and what to do with the revenue streams, I think that when they compare what Norway has done to what we've done, there's no choice who did it better. They have \$600 billion in their kitty that they can now call upon when times are tough. We have \$15 billion, that essentially we saved before 1987.

I think that if this process, although I'm not sure it does anything, can lead to us getting sort of that commitment to saving, thus getting a commitment to paying as we go, a commitment to developing a fair taxation policy that recognizes that it's not in our best interests to spend every last dime of fossil fuel resources that comes into the government coffers on today's bills, then maybe this bill will have served its purpose. Until such time as I'm proven wrong, I think this has been a public relations exercise. To give the government its due, it's probably been a relatively successful public relations exercise, so I guess I'd give them some credit for that. Other than that, it's not of much consequence, not of much actual tangible relevance to seeing things done in a better, more manageable way. Although it's given us an opportunity to talk and lay some direction on the line, in my view it's maybe not the best use of a Bill 1.

5:20

Nevertheless, I thank you for the opportunity to discuss this

once again. I look forward to hearing the rest of my colleagues debate this. I don't know if I've heard anyone from the government side discuss this bill and hear from them how this is going to change the world or change how things are done. Maybe that would be a nice opportunity. We're all here. I think you guys all have to be here till 6 o'clock, so feel free to chime in, and we'll go from there.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Calgary-Glenmore.

Mr. Hinman: Well, thank you. I appreciate the opportunity to stand up and speak a little bit more about Bill 1, the Results-based Budgeting Act. I have to say that as the debate goes forward and a few more thoughts come to my mind, it really is disappointing. I can't help but think of Shakespeare: protest too much for an innocent man. I think that this government protests too much to be fiscal conservatives. Again, they went through the cycle of going into multibillion-dollar debt in the late '80s, early '90s. We struggled and came out of that up until 2005.

We then had a great boom for two or three years and were able to put a lot of money into the sustainability fund. I might say that the reason why they were able to do that is because there wasn't the capacity or the projects online that they could spend the money on fast enough. Thank heavens for that because if they could have found a dollar store to spend another dollar, I think they would have spent it. They bought up and did everything they could possibly get dibs on.

It's interesting that they bring this bill forward as Bill 1, and as I'd mentioned earlier in talking on the amendment, the last three Bill 1s have been somewhat comical almost, where they protest that they're something that they're not. They think that in order to tell Albertans, you know, that they're fiscal conservatives, they'll bring forward Bill 1 and make the big announcement.

It's interesting, though, how in the budget they projected such fantastic revenue over the next three years going forward, yet when you look back, they've had an incredible streak of revenue since, you know, 2003. Like I say, we've grasped our debt, been able to pay it off, put money in our sustainability fund, and then we've spent that money.

It was interesting also because action really does speak louder than words. Earlier today in question period the Government House Leader, Edmonton-Whitemud, was asked a question about protecting children on the farm, and he got up and said something. I wish that we could get *Hansard* quicker. He answered something along the line that bills and legislation aren't going to make our children safe, that it's what we've taught and how they're being protected.

Again, I want to say that the Government House leader is absolutely right. This bill and this legislation are not going to turn this government into a fiscally conservative government that balances the budget, so it doesn't matter whether this bill or the budget passes. It is not going to change the behaviour of this government, which is spend and spend more. I think they've forecasted very, very eloquently that they in the future want to tax and tax more, so they're going to take on that old saying, a tax-and-spend government, and they gleefully do that.

It's interesting that this government seems to have this concept at this point that Albertans are like spoiled children, that they can't have an idea of the bigger grasp of things and that if we don't spend this money, they won't vote for us. We have this desperate grab in this bill, Bill 1, stating: "You know, we're going to go through everything and review it, so vote for us. You can count on us."

You know, it's interesting that many times I've heard about

why democracies fail. Some people refer to it as the cycle of democracy. There's an individual that is somewhat credited – but, again, the debate always goes on – Alexander Fraser Tytler, who in 1770 wrote about the cycles of democracy. I want to read that, like I say, realizing that this isn't the real quote. It's evolved over the years. It's kind of eloquent, though. It's very, I think, relevant to the situation of democracies around the world right now.

A democracy cannot exist as a permanent form of government.

It can only exist until the voters discover that they can vote themselves largesse from the public treasury. From that moment on, the majority always votes for the candidates promising the most benefits from the public treasury with the result that a democracy always collapses over lousy fiscal policy, always followed by a dictatorship. The average world's great civilizations before they decline has been 200 years. These nations have progressed in this sequence: From bondage to spiritual faith; from faith to great courage; from courage to liberty . . .

And then we hit the top of the cycle.

. . . from liberty to abundance; from abundance to selfishness; from selfishness to complacency; from complacency to apathy; from apathy to dependency; from dependency back again to bondage.

It's an interesting quote. Like I say, to go back to the real question of why democracies fail, it's because the governments fail to balance their budgets. The governments fail to take on that responsibility of looking at the taxpayers' money and realizing how critical it is that they spend it appropriately and in the right areas.

Again, the crisis that we're going through around the world is this abundance of credit. We've sucked up this credit. The household debt is incredible in Canada and the U.S., in France, Italy, Portugal, Spain, Ireland. In all of these areas the bankers have been putting this out and allowing for easy credit and, basically, enslaving us to the point of: how are we going to pay it back? What's going to be the end result of this major deficit and debt that we're running into?

I remember – and this kind of dates me – that *Grease* was a popular movie when I was going to high school. We were having *Grease* days. An individual brought a greased pig into the high school. Everybody was trying to catch it to get rid of it. I think a pig is hard enough to capture just in its normal state, but when one is greased, you can't hang on to it. I look at this government and the struggle that they have. They've greased so many wheels and so many axles and so many whiny lobbyists that the harder they try to balance their budget or to hang on to their money, the slipperier it is. It flies out of their hands, and they're not able to do what they know they need to do.

But what's most distressing today, Mr. Chair, that's come out is the continuing bullying and intimidation by this government. It's reprehensible, and it's unacceptable. I didn't understand when the member was asking the question to the Minister of Municipal Affairs what the relevance of his question was. Then I find out that the minister had sent a letter to Linda Sloan, the president of the AUMA, and said: "You know what? We don't accept public criticism. You're wrong to do that." I'm paraphrasing. I could read the letter. I was quite blown away when I saw it. "And because of that, we're not going to come to your breakfast meeting on Thursday morning."

This, Mr. Chairman, is exactly the bullying and the tactics and the behaviour that I've been referring to from this government since November 2004. It's wrong. It's absolutely wrong, and it's unacceptable. Yet, as with any bully, they're so entrenched in it that they don't understand they're doing anything wrong. They

just think: “Well, this is the normal way of governing. Nobody should have the right to criticize.”

You know, I remember when I was out in Montreal for the first assembly of the Conservative Party of Canada. We were debating and deciding our policy and where we were going to go. Faron Ellis from Lethbridge College was there with our constituency at that time, our area. There were some people making some criticisms. You know, people say: “Oh, you shouldn’t criticize. You should offer better ideas.”

5:30

What is a critique? You know, as a coach you want to critique that athlete or that pianist or whatever and say: look, you need to change this, you need to do that. The important thing that Faron said to me that day was that criticism makes good organizations and good people better. And I thought about that a little bit. You know, that’s true. When my wife tells me that I’m not doing something – and I’m thinking of Valentine’s Day. Thank you very much for your support, honey, for the work that we do in here and not being able to be together this evening because I’m in Edmonton and you’re down south.

Mr. Chair, criticism, if taken in the right light, is a great help. I like people to tell me when I’ve done something wrong rather than to allow me to go on and keep repeating it. That’s not a good situation.

What’s also interesting that he added to that was that criticism also speeds up the demise of faulty organizations. So if you’re allowed to publicly speak about those things and then people see those criticisms publicly, it collapses poor organizations. And it doesn’t matter what area it is. Whether it’s government, whether it’s a charitable organization, whether it’s a nonprofit, criticism is important.

Yet this government wants to smother it and say it’s not allowable. Whether you’re a librarian and you criticize them, the response always is: you know, you need to toe the party line here, toe the government line because if you don’t, your funding is questionable. This is something that they do throughout the province in all areas, whether it’s education in telling the teacher to pull in the line. When they brought in the centralized superboard, they told all the health workers: if you speak out publicly, there are going to be consequences. We see Dr. Magliocco when he was sent the letter: this will jeopardize your career if you speak out and criticize publicly.

This government fails to understand the importance of public criticism. Fortunately, they can’t completely silence the opposition in this House, and we do have a few moments where we get to speak. Again, I found it comical that the Government House Leader got up and said, “Well, the normal process that we go through,” and then he went on to talk about that. The normal process for opposition and private members’ bills is that they’re allowed to have unanimous consent to take a leave of absence to table those. This government in its arrogance last Thursday wouldn’t allow it, yet Monday, when another unanimous consent needed to come forward, they were willing then.

They don’t have any respect for democracy, and they certainly have no respect for taxpayers’ money. They think they can buy votes. We listen to the Premier. She’s so excited. She’s proud: it’s going to do so well; the economy is just going to flourish; we can do that without the rest of the world, not even taking a moment to look at how fragile the world economy is right now. We’ve pushed it right to the edge in many, many areas. Even China and India, those great economic engines, at this time aren’t functioning, firing on all cylinders. [interjection] Oh, a government member says: yes, they are. They are not. And that’s

the problem of this government. Even when the engine is sputtering and failing to run, they just look at it like: hmm, well, we’re just taking a break.

It’s comical, Mr. Chairman. The problem is overspending of governments, and we’re not going to learn from that? This government is going to make this proposal, Bill 1, the Results-based Budgeting Act, like it’s going to do something.

If we go through the preamble, I want to skip down to: “Whereas engaging Albertans is vital to determine what results they want and to validate the results achieved.” I do not believe that Albertans want to run continuous deficit budgets. And what’s the Alison in wonderland, pie-in-the-sky answer? We’re going to have massive, massive surpluses within two years. Yet when you look, where is that going to come from? Personal and corporate and resource revenue. It’s unfathomable that we can be there. There is always a chance – never say never – but that doesn’t mean spend like there’s no tomorrow or it’s coming in. Don’t count your chickens before they’re hatched. Don’t count your revenue before it’s in the bank. But this government is failing to do that, Mr. Chair.

Bill 1 is just a poor, poor excuse for a protest of a fiscally irresponsible government to say that we are going to focus on results-based budgeting going forward. Well, what have they been doing for the last four months when they prepared this budget? No results-based. What have they been doing for the last four years for the four previous deficit budgets? Were those results-based? What were they basing their decisions on? Certainly not results based, and they won’t go forward on that. What they’re basing their decisions on is that we are going to have another rainbow, and a pot of gold is going to be there. We’ll go and we’ll snap it up next year, and there will be five pots of gold the year after that. “All is well. Trust us. We’re spending your money well. No problems. Let’s just keep spending. Let’s just keep doing it.”

Results-based budgeting. Again, a switch there. What they really wanted to start off saying was zero-based budgeting, but then they thought: oh, no; that’s too much work. Zero-based budgeting means that we have to justify everything. Results-based means that we just need to say that the results are good. Zero-based budgeting would ask: “Do we go on a \$100,000 cabinet tour to actually ask about a budget that’s already written? Do we take a \$70,000 holiday to Jasper?” That isn’t results-based or zero-based budgeting.

This is a government that has no concept of having to try and hold money, grasp and hang onto that money. The worst of their results-based financing was the offence shortly after March of ’08. This government, including this Premier, gave themselves a 35 per cent pay hike, and then they want to turn around and tell all of our wonderful public servants and front-line workers: you guys don’t need it, but we do. That’s the worst and most offensive form of leadership that you can have, for the leader to say: “We deserve our feather-tick bed, but you will sleep on stones. That’s just the way it is.”

Their leadership has failed Albertans. They continue to live an opulent lifestyle, saying, “You know, we need all of these things,” but they want to turn around and say, “You guys need to stay at 3 per cent or 5 per cent; we can do 35 per cent.” Leadership is to freeze their wages first and then to turn around and talk to Albertans, teachers and nurses and doctors, and say that maybe they should even cut their wages. Well, they did, 35 per cent ahead, 10 per cent back, or some magical formula. You know, 15 steps forward, we’ll take one back, and they think: oh, isn’t that wonderful leadership. It’s not good enough, Mr. Chair. The results of their actions have been every other public worker saying: if you get that, well, then we should get more. It’s wrong.

What you need to do is have the results from action. Action speaks louder than words. It's time this government reined in their spending, prioritized their spending, and realized that it isn't sustainable. They have sucked the sustainability fund from \$17 billion down to \$4 billion. After next year I would project that it will be gone. Then how do we sustain the spending? Total misuse of the sustainability fund. One year: we can see that. We had some revenue shortfall, fine. Four years and five years in a row to take out massive amounts, up to \$6 billion in a year: there's something wrong with the budgeting process of this government and these members.

They're spendaholics. They're addicted. They're addicted to spending. They're addicted to power. The only thing they can do – and, again, I think of a family intervention when it comes to addictions. You've got to surround them and pull them down. This government and their addictions, they need a time out. I suspect that shortly Albertans are going to give many of them a time out when they go to the people of Alberta and say: "Trust us. We know how to spend your money better than you do. Trust us. We have a revenue problem. It's not a spending problem. We'll discuss that after we're re-elected and there's nothing that you can do about this."

This is the situation we're in. This is what Bill 1 is supposed to be about. It's about deception of the people of Alberta, saying that next year we're all of a sudden going to put a magnifying glass and find ways of making cuts when they've had that magnifying glass all along. For the last five years they've had it.

5:40

Mr. Chair, it is wrong. I'm against this Bill 1. It's the most ridiculous bill this government has brought forward. Last year Bill 1 was the Asia Advisory Council Act. That was ridiculous. The one before that was quite ridiculous. It said: "Oh, since we're not competitive here in Alberta because of what this government did, we'll pass a competitiveness act. That will tell the world that we're competitive again and open for business." They had to change the royalties. They had to change their structure in order to bring business back into the province. They need to change it again.

If we want the Alberta advantage, if we want businesses to come here, they need to be fiscally responsible. That doesn't mean building \$16 billion in power lines and then saying: now that we've pushed this through and we've achieved what we want, we can turn it back to the experts who said we didn't need it to look after the next 30 or 40 years. This is the equivalent of buying a 1982 Caravan and putting it in the garage for 30 years.

The Chair: The time has terminated.

The hon. Deputy Government House Leader.

Mr. Denis: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair. I'd move that the committee rise and report.

[Motion carried]

[The Deputy Speaker in the chair]

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Leduc-Beaumont-Devon.

Mr. Rogers: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The Committee of the Whole has had under consideration a certain bill. The committee reports progress on Bill 1. I wish to table copies of all amendments considered by the Committee of the Whole on this date for the official records of the Assembly.

The Deputy Speaker: Having heard the report, does the Assembly concur in the report?

Hon. Members: Concur.

The Deputy Speaker: Opposed? So ordered.

Consideration of His Honour the Lieutenant Governor's Speech

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

To His Honour the Honourable Colonel (Retired) Donald S. Ethell, OC, OMM, AOE, MSC, CD, LLD, the Lieutenant Governor of the Province of Alberta:

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

[Adjourned debate February 13: Mr. Campbell]

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

Mrs. Sarich: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's an honour and privilege to rise today before the Assembly and reply to the Speech from the Throne delivered by His Honour the Lieutenant Governor of Alberta. Before I begin mentioning my thoughts about the Speech from the Throne, I would like to recognize and give thanks to the Honourable the Lieutenant Governor for his dedicated and personal passion for our great province.

Mr. Speaker, I am especially pleased to rise on behalf of my constituents of Edmonton-Decore, whom I've had the honour and privilege to serve for four years. I'm very supportive of the directions in the Speech from the Throne, and I believe it offers a principled general framework for directions that we need to pursue on behalf of this province in the years to come in the interests of all Albertans. Throne speeches are by their nature quite general, but to me that presents each MLA with a real opportunity to suggest what some of the needed specifics might be from the perspective of elected representatives in this Assembly. In other words, what do we need to do in order to turn these solid general directions into effective actions that will help us in our efforts to put in place the kind of legislation and programs desired by the people we represent?

Mr. Speaker, like many members of this Assembly, I've been spending a great deal of time lately on the doorsteps of my constituents, and I can say with considerable confidence what it is that the residents of Edmonton-Decore want me to be pursuing on their behalf. The first thing to note is what they don't want. The residents of Edmonton-Decore don't want us to try to solve all of their problems for them or to provide programs and services that they can easily provide for themselves, nor do they want us to put unnecessary rules in place that would stand in the way of building opportunities that contribute to our economy and society as a whole.

Rather, when they send a representative to this Assembly, they would like their MLA to do something that is much less paternalistic and much more helpful. That is in essence to provide the necessary policies and programs to support the development of healthy and well-educated families and strong and safe communities.

Mr. Speaker, the people that I represent have education and health care at the top of their priorities. They believe and I believe that these two areas are absolutely central to the well-being of individuals, families, and communities and that this Legislature

has a crucial role in creating the conditions so that all of our families are healthy and well educated.

In addition, they believe and I believe that strong and safe communities are also vital to our individual and collective well-being and that they don't just happen. Their development, Mr. Speaker, is fostered by wise decisions by the people of this Assembly as well as representatives at the local level.

So what is it that we need to do in terms of more specific measures to make progress on this overall goal of supporting the development of healthy and well-educated families and safe and strong communities? One of the most helpful places to start is by recognizing that if we want strong schools, where the talent and potential of all of our children are fully developed, we must acknowledge that many of the reasons some children are not successful at learning have little to do with education and, instead, have much to do with noneducational factors such as hunger, poverty, and the lack of development in those crucial early years.

Mr. Speaker, in terms of needed action in this particular area it is essential to note that we're not trying to replace the work of families but, rather, to better support them so that children can succeed as learners. Further, that is going to require the provision of wraparound services for children at the school site, which will allow children's crucial and noneducational needs to be met so that teachers and support staff can concentrate on meeting their educational needs.

We need to work from the principle that strong schools and strong communities are intimately connected. If you want one, you have to work on the other as well. Mr. Speaker, that involves both newer and older communities and the role of school boards in both because our children live in both settings. I support the efforts to revitalize older communities because we need strong schools in strong communities. I'm very delighted to see recent efforts by our communities, school boards, and city council to work together in this regard in Edmonton. I believe this Legislature needs to support those efforts in effective ways.

Also, I believe that it is essential to better support families with young children in those crucial early years so that every child comes to school ready to learn. There are important collaborations going on between educators in Finland and Alberta in this regard, supported by this government, and we can learn much from Finland about how to support families in early learning through better diagnostic efforts and targeted supports to deal with problems that are identified in the early years. Mr. Speaker, if we can effectively support early learning in these ways, the payoffs down the line will be enormous for individuals, families, and our whole society.

Another thing that we need to work on if we are serious about healthy and well-educated families in strong and safe communities is the area of poverty reduction in our province. A comprehensive approach to poverty reduction, which is being pursued in six other provinces, not only strengthens our families and communities but has the potential to reduce crime and other social problems and, in the long run, to save money that is inevitably spent to deal with the consequences that play out in our communities across the province. Mr. Speaker, I promoted last year in this Assembly the idea of a comprehensive, preventative poverty reduction strategy for our province, and I am pleased that our Premier has indicated that she sees merit in this approach as well.

If we are serious about better supporting our families and communities, Mr. Speaker, we also need to look more closely at the situation of our seniors, particularly those with health that has declined. I'm very supportive of our government's aging-in-place initiatives, and I encourage all of us to look more closely at the vital issue of long-term care. All of our seniors are entitled to a

situation of dignity and respect, but there are simply not enough long-term care placements available and, as a result, too many of these vulnerable people are in acute-care beds within our hospitals. This situation is not working for those individuals or for our health care system in general. We can do a better job in this particular area, and in working together with allied professionals, helpful solutions can be created and implemented.

5:50

Mr. Speaker, when we talk further of health and of well-educated families, there is another opportunity in front of us that stems from the link between health and learning. In recent years the Canadian Council on Learning has completed an excellent body of work making clear the important gains that can come from improvements in health literacy, real gains that can result in enormous savings in health care expenditures. For years I've been a strong advocate for the development of a comprehensive approach to health and learning in schools and school systems, and I encourage us to strengthen our directions in this vital area in the coming year. The Canadian Council on Learning this past year strongly advocated for the voluntary and co-operative effort of the provinces to work together to provide a pan-Canadian structure to improve learning outcomes in Canada.

Mr. Speaker, I've been most impressed by our new Premier's willingness to take a leadership role in important questions beyond Alberta's borders. This wonderful province of ours is poised to take on a much larger role in such issues, and I believe our Premier should be the one to take on the task of leading the way in promoting these improvements in learning in the manner that the Canadian Council on Learning has urged. There is no province better placed to do so and no one more qualified than our Premier to launch this initiative.

This throne speech has set the right directions. I believe that if we pursue these types of initiatives on behalf of our constituents, we will need help to support stronger families and communities and will in the process build a foundation for a stronger, more competitive province in an increasingly competitive and globalized world. We will do so by focusing on our mandate and strengthening our foundation to support families and communities in wise ways.

Mr. Speaker, I have often said that the future of our province is unwritten, and I'm very proud to say that the people in our province together with this government are going to build the next Alberta by working through the challenges and confidently creating and capitalizing on an abundance of opportunities. It is truly an honour and privilege to join with Albertans to create the next chapters of our great province.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Deputy Speaker: Standing Order 29(2)(a) allows for five minutes of comments or questions.

Seeing none, does any other hon. member want to join in on the speech? The hon. Member for Calgary-McCall.

Mr. Kang: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's a great honour and pleasure to rise today to respond to the Speech from the Throne by His Honour the Lieutenant Governor. I would like to thank His Honour for his service to the province and to our nation.

Mr. Speaker, the Speech from the Throne should be a blueprint, and it should be like a road map into the future, the future this government is taking us to. After listening to the speech and reading it, I'm appalled that there's nothing really new in the Speech from the Throne. Sure, there's support for health care, postsecondary education, and the environment – that's a good step

in the right direction – but we should be doing more. Whatever it takes to keep our environment clean, we have to have clean water, clean air. We should be doing more to protect our environment. If we don't protect our environment, it will cost us dearly in the future. I know what it has done to my home province in India. The water people drink is contaminated. People are dying from cancer, and people are suffering from hepatitis. We should be more vigilant about our environment so that we can have clean air and clean water.

Mr. Speaker, we are blessed to be living in a country and a province that's probably the richest jurisdiction on this planet Earth. We are literally blessed to have natural resources such as coal and gas. We have strong agriculture. We have forestry. With a population of only 3 and a half million, I think, if you put the per capita numbers together, we'd still be the richest people on this Earth.

That brings me to mining the oil sands, Mr. Speaker, the second-largest reserve of oil on this Earth. The oil sands are not just becoming the bread and butter of this province; they have become the provider, the bread and butter, of the whole nation. I'm talking about the export of unpressed, unprocessed bitumen. Premier Stelmach compared this to the sale of the topsoil of the Earth, topsoil to be sold. He promised to process more bitumen in Alberta to keep all the good-paying jobs in the province and not to ship all the jobs with the unprocessed bitumen to the States or other jurisdictions.

Now we are talking about two pipelines, the Keystone XL and the pipeline going to the west coast. When we start sending unprocessed bitumen, Mr. Speaker, to China or India or Southeast Asia, then we will be shipping those good-paying jobs with that, too. Sure, we need those pipelines. Sure, we need to ship our oil and other products to the markets, but we should be processing more bitumen here and shipping the finished product. We will not only get a better price for our product, but we will keep all the pipeline jobs right here in Alberta.

There are a number of major upgrading plants which were approved. They were going to go up in the heartland area and were going to bring billions of dollars of investment, new investment, into the province. We should be looking at reviving all those major projects. Let us work to have all those jobs in Alberta. It will bring in more revenue in personal income taxes

and carbon taxes as well, Mr. Speaker, and it will help to balance our budget. Since we go through the cycles of prosperity, boom and bust in our economy, this will also help us to ride out recessions in better ways than now.

Mr. Speaker, we could have gotten away from the cycles of boom and bust had this government been saving enough from the nonrenewable resource revenues. Premier Lougheed had the foresight to set up the heritage trust fund in 1976, as we know. Had we been serious enough to build up the heritage trust fund, we could have had probably a hundred billion dollars by now in the trust fund. The income from that trust fund could have insulated some of the shock of revenue falls during the recession. Our heritage trust fund savings are almost the same as they were in 1986. Norway and Alaska set up their trust funds a lot later than us and, for example, Norway has over \$500 billion in their trust fund, and it's growing.

Mr. Speaker, we should be looking at saving more. We could save for future generations so they could enjoy the same if not better living standards than we enjoy today. They are the owners of the natural resources as well, our future generations.

Now, coming back to health care, Mr. Speaker, you know, I think we're in trouble on the health care front. Long lineups. We have been doing everything. We've been spending more per capita, but we still have issues with health care. We have long lineups in emergency departments, and we have long waiting lists for knee replacements. A constituent of mine called yesterday, and he's on kidney dialysis and has been waiting seven years. I mean, we're failing Albertans on health care. This government has been trying to fix health care.

The Deputy Speaker: Hon. member, I have to interrupt you. It's 6 o'clock. You can continue next time. You have probably about 7 minutes left.

I want to remind hon. members that the policy field committees will reconvene at 6:30 p.m. in committee rooms A and B for consideration of the main estimates of the Department of Justice and Attorney General and the Department of Intergovernmental, International and Aboriginal Relations.

According to Standing Order 4(2) the Assembly stands adjourned until tomorrow at 1:30 p.m.

[The Assembly adjourned at 6 p.m. to Wednesday at 1:30 p.m.]

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Province of Alberta

The 27th Legislature
Fifth Session

Alberta Hansard

Wednesday, February 15, 2012

Issue 6

The Honourable Kenneth R. Kowalski, Speaker

Legislative Assembly of Alberta
The 27th Legislature

Fifth Session

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Legislative Assembly of Alberta

1:30 p.m.

Wednesday, February 15, 2012

[The Speaker in the chair]

Prayers

The Speaker: Good afternoon.

Let us pray. We confidently ask for strength and encouragement in our service to others. We ask for wisdom to guide us in making good laws and good decisions for the present and future of Alberta. Amen.

Please be seated.

Introduction of Visitors

The Speaker: The hon. Deputy Premier.

Mr. Horner: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Today I have the privilege of introducing two great Albertans to the House, Brigadier-General Andre and Mrs. Kaetlyn Corbould, two great Canadians that have contributed significantly to our province.

Since joining Edmonton's Military Family Resource Centre as a board member and later chair in 2003 and, subsequently, her membership in the Edmonton Salutes Committee, Mrs. Corbould's efforts on behalf of the capital region's military families have been outstanding. Working within the volunteer organizations, she has continually sought to develop ties to partner organizations within the province and to improve services to military families who have faced numerous challenges resulting from the heavy tempo of operations associated with Canada's international and domestic operations. I would like to inform the House that in recognition of her outstanding efforts, she was awarded the Chief of the Defence Staff's medallion of distinguished service, a rare honour that is given only to the most deserving for their contributions.

Her husband, Brigadier-General Andre Corbould, has an equally distinguished resumé of accomplishments. Whether commanding Edmonton's 1 Canadian Mechanized Brigade Group, which provided security for the 2010 Winter Olympics, commanding troops in support of the Winnipeg floods, or directly supporting the dive effort following the Swissair tragedy on Canada's east coast, Brigadier-General Corbould has worked tirelessly in his efforts to make Canada a better and more secure country. Internationally his distinguished service has brought him to the Balkans, East Timor, and Afghanistan, from where he recently returned after a one-year tour of duty as Deputy Commanding General of the United States Army 10th Mountain Division. As the deputy commander of a 25,000-soldier division conducting operations throughout southern Afghanistan, he brought international recognition to Canada for his contribution to the international effort in that country.

They are seated in your gallery this afternoon, Mr. Speaker. I would ask that they rise and that we give them the traditional warm welcome and thank you from Alberta. [Standing ovation]

Introduction of Guests

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Education.

Mr. Lukaszuk: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's a pleasure and an honour to introduce to you and through you to this Legislative Assembly a group of very enthusiastic students from Dunluc

elementary school. They have been participating in a mock Legislature, and they passed a bill to make school uniforms mandatory. Half of them are happy with this, and half of them are not, so it's not much different than what happens in the real legislative sittings. They are accompanied today by Mr. Sam Kostiuk and also Madame Cynthia Pharis, who are their teachers. I would like them all to rise and receive the warm welcome of this Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Infrastructure.

Mr. Johnson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's a privilege to rise and introduce to you and through you a group of your constituents from Neerlandia public Christian school, with 19 students and five adults here this afternoon: their teacher, Jim Bosma, and parent helpers Sharla Bakker, Helena Hamoen, Christien Hospers, and Gail Verheul. I believe they are seated in the members' gallery, and I would ask them to please rise and receive the traditional warm welcome.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Bonnyville-Cold Lake.

Mrs. Leskiw: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. On behalf of the hon. Member for Fort Saskatchewan-Vegreville I would like to introduce to you and through you students from the Win Ferguson elementary school, the school that shines. These students have made the trip to Edmonton from Fort Saskatchewan, Alberta. I want to acknowledge the teachers and parents who made this trip happen: teachers Carla McTurk and Sheila Storey; and parents Jason Fournier, Lori Klebak, Jenny Croteau, Debbie Harrison, and Sandra Harrison. They're seated in the public gallery, and I would ask them to rise and accept the warm welcome of this Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Service Alberta.

Mr. Bhullar: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It's indeed a pleasure today for me to rise and introduce somebody that's been a friend for about 10 or 12 years now and in some ways a mentor, someone that's built a great reputation fighting for that powerful airport tunnel in northeast Calgary, Alderman Jim Stevenson.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Health and Wellness.

Mr. Horne: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure to rise today and introduce to you and through you on behalf of the Minister of Human Services two guests from his constituency of Edmonton-Whitemud, Ken and Joan Digweed. This is Mr. and Mrs. Digweed's very first visit to the Legislature, and I'm very pleased to welcome them on behalf of my colleague. They are seated in the members' gallery. I would ask both to rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of this House.

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

Dr. Sherman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Today I have two introductions. It's my pleasure to introduce to you and through you to all members of this Assembly my constituents William Rohats and his parents, JoAnne and Bob, as well as William's caregiver, Aibin George, who I first met at the International Day of Persons with Disabilities back in December. William is a very intelligent young man with a wonderful sense of humour, qualities that help him manage his Tourette's syndrome and cerebral palsy. He's always optimistic, always looking for solutions. He's also very interested in politics and feels that caregivers of people with disabilities deserve better pay. William and his family have asked me to pass on their sincere gratitude to the Premier for the raise in

AISH benefits, and I'm happy to do the same. Thank you, Premier. Hon. members, please join me in offering William and Aibin as well as William's parents the traditional warm welcome of the Assembly.

Mr. Speaker, for my second introduction I would like to introduce to you and through you to all members of the Assembly the newest member of the Alberta Liberal caucus staff, Amy McBain. Amy was born and raised in Edmonton and lives doors away from the hon. member from the fabulous constituency of Edmonton-Centre. She's a graduate of the broadcast journalism program right here in Edmonton at NAIT. She will be working with our communications staff as our new media liaison person, and we are glad to have her join our team. Amy is seated in the public gallery. I'd ask her to rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of the Assembly.

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

Dr. Swann: Thanks very much, Mr. Speaker. It's a great honour and privilege today to introduce five people who are here to raise awareness about the failed mental health system in Alberta for them and their families. Cheryl Brown and Ryan Dean were victims of violence from a schizophrenic family member identified repeatedly as a threat without proper action being taken over a number of years. Mike Butler is an Edmonton citizen whose wife was murdered five years ago due to the failure of our mental health system both in managing and in referring his brother for proper treatment. Phill and Julia Murphy, whose daughter, a minor, struggles with addictions and mental illness, continue to be neglected by Health and Human Services. I'll ask them to stand and be recognized by the Legislature.

Thank you.

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

Mr. Elniski: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure to rise today and introduce to you and through you to all the members of this Assembly the management team of one of my favourite organizations, the Oliver primary care network. I'll introduce each individual to you, and then I'll have them stand and receive the traditional greeting when we're all done. First, of course, is Colleen Enns, the executive director; Lee Hall; Kendall Olson; Charlotte Metcalf; Romel Jarrar; Jamil Ramji; Barb Moysey; Sharon Macklin; Lorie Radmanovich; and Jacquie Frend. I'll be doing a member's statement on them shortly. If they would all now please rise and receive the traditional warm greeting of the Assembly.

Thank you.

1:40

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Infrastructure.

Mr. Johnson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's a pleasure to rise and introduce to you and through you Ed Shaske from Smoky Lake, one of my constituents. Ed was a former chief economist for the province of Alberta during some of the Lougheed era, and he's now a columnist with the *Smoky Lake Signal*. He's a pillar of that community, involved in many groups and in many functions around the town. It's a privilege to have him here today. I'd ask him to please rise and receive the traditional warm welcome.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Sustainable Resource Development.

Mr. Oberle: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It's an honour to rise today and introduce to you and through you to the House a

friend and councillor from the town of Peace River, Mr. North Darling. He was elected as a councillor, and now he's the deputy mayor. Of course, he's down for the AUMA board meeting. Mr. Darling is actually new to politics, but I'm pretty confident that his background in the private sector as a carpenter and working in the oil and gas industry and, probably most importantly, as an improvisational comedian has prepared him well for politics. I'd ask North to rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of the Assembly.

The Speaker: There's one I'd like to acknowledge and introduce today, and that's the hon. Member for Whitecourt-Ste. Anne and Minister of Seniors, who is celebrating the anniversary of his arrival in the world today.

Members' Statements

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Leduc-Beaumont-Devon.

Leduc No. 1 Oil Discovery

Mr. Rogers: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm very pleased to rise today to celebrate a discovery that made history, Leduc No. 1. On February 13 65 years ago in a field some three miles south of where the town of Devon is located today, Vern Hunter, or Dry Hole as he had become known, and his crew brought in the well that heralded the prosperity we have enjoyed in this province.

Mr. Speaker, Imperial Oil had drilled some 133 dry wells and was on the verge of giving up its search in the area. Leduc No. 1 was the catalyst that saw tremendous growth in central Alberta and, indeed, all of Alberta. Our province now boasts the third-largest proven oil reserves in the world. The growth of the city of Leduc can be directly attributed to this discovery, and the town of Devon was planned, designed, and built by Imperial Oil to house the workforce needed to develop the neighbouring field.

This discovery spawned a very successful production and service sector with tremendous expertise that continues to drive the economy of our great province. The Nisku industrial park, located within 15 kilometres of the site, employs some 20,000 people and is second only in scale to another such energy business centre in the state of Texas, Mr. Speaker. The site has been developed and preserved to educate today's and future generations about the significance of this discovery.

I commend all the volunteers and the neighbouring communities of Leduc county, the city of Leduc, and the town of Devon for their tireless efforts in preserving the site and for planning the anniversary celebrations to take place the weekend of August 18 and 19 of this year. I invite all my colleagues and all Albertans to visit this national treasure and join us for the celebration.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Municipal Funding

Mr. Hinman: Mr. Speaker, on Monday Wildrose leader Danielle Smith released our 10-10 municipal funding plan. Under the plan 10 per cent of tax revenues and 10 per cent of budget surpluses will flow through directly to municipalities with no strings attached: no complicated grant applications, no crossing your fingers and hoping for approvals, no waiting on pins and needles for badly needed dollars, just steady and predictable funding.

The point is to take politics out of municipal funding. Linda Sloan, president of the AUMA, made that point last week when she responded to the provincial budget. She said what opposition parties and municipal politicians across Alberta have been saying

for years, that municipal dollars are handed down based on politics, not always on need. Sloan has since incurred the full wrath of this petty and vindictive government.

The Municipal Affairs minister staged a government-wide AUMA boycott, and the Premier's chief of staff publicly called her a malicious liar, this on the same day the government tabled antibullying legislation.

Danielle Smith talks about a new deal for municipalities, and this whole shameful episode shows exactly why we need one. Municipalities have had enough of this government's economic bullying and of having their funding depend on their level of support for the PC Party. It's time for a provincial government that respects municipalities as a legitimate order of government and empowers them to meet the needs and priorities they set for themselves.

Mr. Speaker, municipal politicians are just like each and every one of us in this Assembly. They serve to make their communities the best they can be. They don't need nor do they deserve a provincial government that looms large over their heads threatening to drop the hammer if they don't quite fall in line. Public criticism makes good organizations stronger and bad organizations fail sooner. After this ordeal I'm confident that the provincial government will prove to be the latter.

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

Oliver Primary Care Network

Mr. Elniski: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. In my last member's statement I made reference to a new clinic that is currently short not of doctors but of patients. The organization behind this, who I introduced earlier, is the Oliver primary care network. This PCN serves well over a hundred thousand Edmontonians and had 171,000 patient interactions last year. This is certainly a statistically valid sampling, and it shows some remarkable results. Of the 171,000 interactions 87 per cent of those people saw a doctor as soon as necessary and, even more impressive, 94 per cent of them saw their own doctor.

Equally interesting, Mr. Speaker, is the ability of patients to feel confident in their ability to manage their own conditions. Persons receiving care in many areas, including mental health, dietitians, chronic disease management, INR, and kinesiology, show that well over 70 per cent of them believe that they had learned enough from PCN staff to manage their own condition. Overall, in each of the five programs self-rating of good, very good, and excellent account for 75 to 95 per cent of patient responses.

My favourite metric, Mr. Speaker, and the one I think best describes this PCN's goal is the reduction in medication error when transitioning from hospital to home. A PCN pharmacist is available to ensure that the patients take the right medication at the right time. This arrangement proves that the PCN model is the right way to deliver services, and I'm going to give them a slogan: We Know Who You Are, and We Know What You Need. While it's not It's All in Calder, it certainly tells people why it's all in Calder.

Many people who reside in my constituency are older and typically not in as good of health as the average population, making my constituency a prime place for the delivery of this health care model.

Mr. Speaker, I want to thank Colleen and her associates today for the exceptional level of service they bring to my constituency and elsewhere.

Thank you.

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

National Flag of Canada Day

Mr. Xiao: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Today I'm pleased to rise to speak in celebration of National Flag of Canada Day. While Canadians first celebrated this occasion in 1996, it commemorates an important event that occurred on February 15, 1965. At noon on that day our Canadian flag was raised over Parliament Hill for the first time.

During the inauguration ceremony the hon. Maurice Bourget, Speaker of the Senate at that time, spoke about its significance. He said, "The flag is the symbol of the nation's unity, for it, beyond any doubt, represents all the citizens of Canada without distinction of race, language, belief or opinion."

Back in 1965 the red maple leaf embodied our nation's hopes and dreams for the future. After almost 50 years of representing Canada, I believe that the flag has taken on new meanings. Mr. Speaker, people around the world now recognize the Canadian flag as a symbol of democracy, of prosperity, and of freedom. For Canadians our flag has become a source of great pride. We are proud to live in a country where our rights and freedoms are protected. We are also proud to raise our children in a place where they have access to excellent public education, health care, and many other services that few in the world are so privileged to receive.

Mr. Speaker, I feel very fortunate to live in this great country and to be represented by the Canadian flag. I would ask every fellow citizen to take a moment today, National Flag of Canada Day, to reflect on what our red and white maple leaf flag means to you.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

1:50

Oral Question Period

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

Government Relationship with the AUMA

Dr. Sherman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. In the throne speech it's written: "A terrific quality of life requires the province to work closely with all municipalities." It was very disturbing, therefore, to read the Minister of Municipal Affairs' letter to the Alberta Urban Municipalities Association president, Linda Sloan. In the letter he berated her for criticizing the budget and announced that government caucus will boycott the AUMA breakfast tomorrow morning as punishment. This is a democratic province. To the Premier: who made the reckless and irresponsible decision that the entire government caucus will boycott the AUMA breakfast?

Ms Redford: Mr. Speaker, we have a great deal of respect for the work that the AUMA does, and some of the comments that have been made in the last week have been terribly unfortunate. One of the things that's been very important this week is to determine, of the comments that were made, whether they were made on a personal basis or on behalf of the organization. My understanding is that the minister has been working very closely with the organization to resolve those issues, and we'll ensure that we continue to work very closely with local municipalities because that is what will build the province.

The Speaker: The hon. leader.

Dr. Sherman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Our municipal leaders: that's where the rubber hits the road. They are the representatives of the same voters who vote for us. Given that just three years ago the chief of staff was forced out of the Wildrose Party after he crudely mocked the former Premier's Ukrainian accent and then just yesterday he defamed the president of the AUMA – quote, let's be clear: Linda Sloan didn't just criticize the budget; she lied maliciously, unquote – will the Premier show leadership and take personal responsibility and apologize to Albertans on behalf of the government and immediately fire her chief of staff?

Ms Redford: Mr. Speaker, I was made aware of these comments about an hour ago. I have said publicly that I do not condone the comments, and I have already directed my chief of staff to apologize directly for them.

The Speaker: The hon. leader.

Dr. Sherman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Given that this government has gone out of its way to avoid giving answers on this issue, I would like to ask the Premier a very direct question. Due to the disrespect shown by the minister, will the Premier ask the Minister of Municipal Affairs to apologize immediately to Albertans or demand his resignation?

Ms Redford: Mr. Speaker, the job of the Minister of Municipal Affairs is to ensure that we are delivering services to Alberta's municipalities by working in partnership with municipal governments. Everything that I've seen the minister do in the last week has ensured that we have a relationship with AUMA that will allow that to continue. I firmly stand behind the minister's comments and will do no such thing.

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

Dr. Sherman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Everything I've seen recently was what we would normally call schoolyard bullying.

Electricity Prices

Dr. Sherman: Mr. Speaker, yesterday I asked the Premier why this government doesn't just make the fixed term contract the default option instead of telling Albertans to make a dozen phone calls to find a rate that won't break their bank account. She chose not to rise and answer yesterday. Perhaps today will be different. To the Premier: why doesn't the government show some practical leadership and make the fixed-term contract the default option to help working families?

Ms Redford: I don't know what the hon. member is talking about. I distinctly remember him asking this question yesterday, and I distinctly remember rising and answering it, and not for the first time, Mr. Speaker. What we know is that while there are a number of companies that provide options, the customers only have to make one call, and that's to the Utilities Consumer Advocate, to get the information that they need. If they do choose to sign a contract, we know that it will reduce their costs by 42 per cent today.

Dr. Sherman: Mr. Speaker, if the Premier was actually listening and if she actually cared, she would know exactly what I'm talking about.

Given that yesterday my question for the government to get involved in fixing the price gouging happening under this failed policy of deregulation was dismissed by the Premier as dangerous

words, I'd like to ask the Premier: who would these words be dangerous to? Albertans, who finally get some much-needed relief from sky-high electricity bills, or their government's corporate buddies?

Ms Redford: Mr. Speaker, dangerous words were government involvement. Dangerous words were presuming that the solution to this is for government to fix the problem. What we know is that in other jurisdictions where this has happened, what that has meant is that they have taken on debt with respect to the cost of electricity, and we're not going to do that in this province.

Dr. Sherman: Mr. Speaker, what's dangerous is that this is the same government that caused the problem. You caused the problem.

Given that this government has gone out of its way to avoid giving direct answers and gone out of its way to hurt hard-working families, will this government do anything at all – anything – to give Albertans relief on sky-high energy bills, Premier? Can you answer that question?

Dr. Morton: Mr. Speaker, I'd like the Leader of the Opposition to listen carefully. Since deregulation the private sector at private risk has added 6,600 new megawatts of power to the Alberta electricity grid, entirely at the risk of private investors. There is no public debt in this province, unlike Ontario and Quebec, with \$20 billion, \$30 billion, \$60 billion that the consumers have to pay twice for.

The Speaker: Third Official Opposition main question. The hon. Member for Calgary-Mountain View.

Mental Health Services

Dr. Swann: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Mental illness services continue to fail Albertans and their families, both in hospitals and in the communities. Alberta has 50 per cent of the national average in psychiatric beds, and this government is in denial. Hard-working mental health staff themselves are distressed as they see too many Band-Aids, resulting in revolving doors for our most desperate citizens and their families, with violence – preventable violence – the result. To the Premier: with wait times for psychiatric and outpatient assessment in Calgary alone at four to six months and overcrowding of our emergency rooms and psychiatric beds, when will this government stop denying and make mental health a priority?

Ms Redford: Mr. Speaker, this government believes that mental health is a priority. As Minister of Justice I've stood in this House for three years and said that we needed to deal with mental health. And we need to deal with it comprehensively. We need to deal with it in the community, we have to deal with it through institutions, and we have to deal with it within families. As you may well know, in this budget introduced in this House last Thursday, this government and our minister of health have suggested a significant increase with respect to funding on mental health, and I'll look forward to that debate during that period.

Dr. Swann: Mr. Speaker, standing up and speaking about mental health does not improve front-line services.

Primary care networks are the first line in prevention, early intervention, and maintenance care for people with mental illness. Why this year, then, is there no strengthening of primary care networks?

Ms Redford: Mr. Speaker, we have introduced this year alone

projects that will introduce family care clinics in locations across this province for the exact reason of ensuring that there is a comprehensive approach to family health care, to primary care, and to mental health. I will tell you that Albertans know that, and I will not in this House be lectured to by this hon. member as to what he thinks might be best in his mind with respect to mental health.

Dr. Swann: So we're going to try some pilot projects instead of strengthening the system that you've established. Those primary care networks are the fundamental way of getting people out of emergency departments. Three people in this gallery experienced violence, including death of a family member, due to failure of this mental health system. When will we see timely and effective care for people with mental illness in this province?

Ms Redford: Mr. Speaker, one thing that I know that has happened when we deal with safe communities agendas, with primary health care, and with mental health is that there are sometimes some really sad tragedies. I will tell you that it is the commitment of this government to ensure that we avoid those at all costs, but I will also tell you that this government will not make political hay out of those tragedies.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Fish Creek.

2:00 Government Relationship with the AUMA (continued)

Mrs. Forsyth: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. By sending a combative and intimidating letter to the AUMA, this government sent a chilling message to municipal officials across this province: if you're not with us, then you're against us. Not only is this completely inappropriate behaviour; it is wrong, and it's unethical. But the Premier's chief of staff decided to take it a step further by calling the president of the AUMA a malicious liar. Can the Premier then tell Albertans if she stands behind her chief of staff's petty comments and whether or not she believes the AUMA are malicious liars? And, please, Premier, don't tell Albertans that you just heard about it an hour ago.

Ms Redford: Mr. Speaker, I'm glad to see that the hon. member listened to part of the answer. I was very clear. I said that an hour ago I publicly said that I did not condone this language and that I've directed my chief of staff to apologize.

Mrs. Forsyth: Thank you, Premier. Given that the primary role of the chief of staff is to help implement the Premier's agenda for the government, can this Premier tell us if she agrees with most Albertans that her chief of staff was completely out of line?

Ms Redford: Mr. Speaker, asked and answered.

Mrs. Forsyth: Given that this government, Mr. Speaker, has gotten quite the reputation for its intimidation tactics and bullying of not only our elected officials but of health professionals as well, can you, Premier, then tell Albertans when this bullying is going to stop?

Ms Redford: Mr. Speaker, I'm not quite sure what she's speaking to in particular. What we know is that this minister has asked the Health Quality Council to undergo some very significant work with respect to what's going on in the health care system, and I'm looking forward to the results of that report.

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

Emergency Health Services

Mr. Mason: Thanks very much, Mr. Speaker. This government has consistently failed to provide timely access to emergency care for Albertans. Once again the latest report from the AHS has shown that patients are spending hours and hours in waiting rooms because of this government's incompetence. Albertans are suffering while the government does nothing. My question is to the Premier. Will the Premier admit that her government is unable to run the health care system and apologize to Albertans?

Ms Redford: What we know is that there are a number of factors that go into making a health care system effective, and there is no doubt that two of those are metrics and statistics. You will know, Mr. Speaker, that I'm committed to ensuring that we have positive outcomes in the health care system. One of the things that we're going to have to take a look at is not only where we are with respect to those commitments but also what the statistics have been going in. I understand from my minister of health that, unfortunately, we've seen a 17 per cent increase in the use of emergency rooms. That is unfortunate. It speaks to something else, which is that we need to make sure that support is being given where it needs to be given. I know the minister of health is working in a very transparent way with emergency doctors to resolve the issue.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Mason: Thanks very much, Mr. Speaker. Well, this government tries over and over to fix it. They set targets, and then they don't meet them, and then they set new targets. Given that the East Edmonton health centre was planned to include an urgent care centre that would have diverted 30,000 cases from the Royal Alex ER every year and given that the government has refused to fund the centre, what answers can this Premier give to those Edmontonians who are unnecessarily waiting for hours and hours in the Royal Alexandra emergency room?

Mr. Horne: Well, Mr. Speaker, to pick up where the hon. Premier just left off, in addition to the increase of 17 per cent in emergency department visits the government has also been working very hard with physicians over the last year to open up additional primary care networks, the three new family care clinics that the Premier referred to and well over a thousand continuing care spaces each year, moving us toward our goal of 5,300 over five years, and on a number of other initiatives that give Albertans an alternative to emergency departments when it's appropriate.

The Speaker: The hon. member, please.

Mr. Mason: Thanks very much, Mr. Speaker. Well, this government has consistently failed to keep its promises to reduce waiting times in emergency rooms, and Albertans are tired of waiting for hours or even days in hallways. Why will this minister and this Premier continue to give hollow promises to Albertans instead of admitting that they're incapable of fixing the system?

Mr. Horne: Mr. Speaker, the hon. member conveniently ignores the work of literally hundreds of physicians and nurses and other health professionals over the last year to make significant improvements to our system. While it is true that in the case of these particular indicators we may not meet the targets that were

proposed for the end of March, we have made very significant progress in other areas. The most important indicator to this government is providing the right care by the right provider at the right time to each and every Albertan. Primary health care is what's going get us there.

Government Relationship with the AUMA (continued)

Mr. Taylor: Mr. Speaker, you asked me some time ago, at the inauguration reception for the Premier, why I was planning on getting out of politics. I can't think of a better example of why I want out than the government's unanimous hissy fit yesterday with the AUMA. To the Premier. I don't care who started it; I don't care who said what. You are our Premier, and the people you serve expect you to be bigger than this. What are you going to do to make this right?

Ms Redford: Mr. Speaker, we're going to do exactly what we said we would do, which is have a partnership with municipalities that is constructive for all Albertans. One of the ways that we can do that is to ensure that we have clear communication between the AUMA and the government. There is no reason to presume that simply because comments were made, we should accept the fact that they were made. If we believe that there were comments made that were not something that we agree with, I think it's entirely within the rights of this minister to correct that information and to clarify the communication between the two organizations. I think they're making very good progress on that.

Mr. Taylor: Again to the Premier. I'm just curious here. Since local governments are pretty much at the whim of this government, which doles out their allowances, how is yesterday's behaviour supposed to give them any confidence that the minister won't just pull all their MSI funding the next time he feels insulted by something one of them said?

Mr. Griffiths: Mr. Speaker, I need to make something very clear. I have always accepted criticism, new ideas, and discussion. That's part of democracy. But when we get to a point where slanderous comments are made, I don't think we should tolerate it simply because we're politicians. It demeans everyone in the political process to allow slanderous comments to be made. Now, in speaking to Ms Sloan, she made it very clear that those slanderous comments were not made by her. I take her at her word, and we'll be at the breakfast tomorrow.

Mr. Taylor: Again to the Premier: while I believe municipalities should be an equal order of government, given this government's insistence on retaining the paternal model, will the Premier at least promise to be the adult in the relationship from here on in and to ensure that her minister behaves like one, too?

Mr. Griffiths: Mr. Speaker, I've been working on building better communities in this province for 10 years. I made it very clear with the AAMD and C and the AUMA when I met with them many times over the last four months that I want to work towards a new funding arrangement with MSI and to an enhanced MGA that's empowering to municipalities so they can provide the right services. None of that has changed. We're going to continue to work as partners to build better communities because that's our number one job.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Calder, followed by the hon. Member for Calgary-Buffalo.

Primary Care Networks

Mr. Elniski: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I indicated in my member's statement that a new clinic has opened in my constituency that is in need of about 2,000 patients.

An Hon. Member: What constituency?

Mr. Elniski: Edmonton-Calder, hon. member.

This clinic, as part of the Oliver primary care network, is solving access issues in my neighbourhood. My question is to the Minister of Health and Wellness. Given ongoing discussions about improving access to primary care services, how is it possible for a PCN to have a need for patients?

Mr. Horne: Well, Mr. Speaker, the answer is very simple. The people of Alberta have a need for PCNs. The hon. member is quite correct in indicating that this new capacity in his constituency is going to add greatly to the services available in that community. The PCNs determine by a process of a business plan what programs and services they are going to offer in each of their respective member clinics. This particular PCN has a budget of approximately \$3.5 million per year. They serve over 110,000 patients. I have every confidence that your constituents' needs will be well met.

The Speaker: The hon. member, please.

Mr. Elniski: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Also to the Minister of Health and Wellness: are primary care networks helping to improve access for other Albertans in the province?

Mr. Horne: Well, Mr. Speaker, as has been pointed out by members on all sides of the House, primary care networks have done a great deal to improve access to the care that Albertans depend on every day. There are currently over 40 PCNs operating across the province. They involve approximately 2,400 family physicians and serve more than 2.8 million Albertans. Services such as mental health, rehabilitation, addictions, and other related services are available to Albertans through their local PCNs. We're working to support them, and that's part of the discussions with the AMA at this point in time.

The Speaker: The hon. member, please.

Mr. Elniski: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My final question is to the same minister. Are primary care networks giving Albertans better access to family doctors?

2:10

Mr. Horne: Mr. Speaker, that's an excellent question. The answer to the question is yes, not only because of the great involvement of family physicians in our primary care networks but specifically because of the involvement of other health professionals that work alongside our physicians each and every day. The involvement of dietitians, nurse practitioners, physiotherapists, pharmacists, and others leaves physicians freer to see a greater number of patients, particularly those with more complex needs, who need to see a doctor more frequently.

Thank you.

School Fees

Mr. Hehr: Mr. Speaker, picture this. It is the first day of school; a young immigrant family brings their six-year-old to school. Can you imagine their excitement as well as their fear and anxiety?

Adding to all of this, on the first day the principal notifies them that they will need to pay hundreds of dollars for the child to attend the school. To the Minister of Education: will you provide the necessary funding so that schools don't have to rely on school fees for busing and basic instruction?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Lukaszuk: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The current funding model, which is per child funding with additional funding envelopes for special needs, is adequate, I would argue, in many cases more than adequate, to deliver the Alberta curriculum. Now, when parents choose to deliver children to schools of choice which are outside of their catchment area or where school boards and locally elected trustees choose to deliver additional enrichment programming, there may be fees attached to that. But basic Alberta education, which is not so basic, I might add, is fully covered by the funding that is provided to schools.

Mr. Hehr: The minister should talk to principals and teachers, who would disagree with that assertion. By not fully funding our education system, schools have to rely on fees to provide basic busing and instructional materials for kids. It's just a tax by another name. Will this minister eliminate this unfair tax?

Mr. Lukaszuk: Mr. Speaker, if this member chooses to refer to it as tax, then he may, but that would mean that this is a tax levied by local school boards and locally elected trustees, not the government of Alberta.

However, it has come to my attention that there is a great deal of disparity in school fees being charged by a variety of school boards. I have full intention to look at the structure of school fees that school boards are charging and see what it is and what should and should not be allowable.

Mr. Hehr: I'd ask the minister: instead of propping up private schools, why not just commit these dollars to public education to eliminate school fees?

Mr. Lukaszuk: Mr. Speaker, for the first time in the history of this province this government has committed to a three-year funding model, elevating it from \$6.8 billion to \$7.1 billion over the next three years. We're spending \$23 million per day on education. Funding levels are not the issue. But we do have to take a look at what fees are being charged to make sure that basic Alberta education, which is world renowned, is delivered free of charge to our students because there's no need for additional fees for that.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Bonnyville-Cold Lake, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Social Housing for Seniors

Mrs. Leskiw: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My first two questions are to the Minister of Municipal Affairs. Seniors in Alberta who live in government-owned housing deserve a quality place to call home. With many social housing units more than 30 years old what are you doing to update them?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Griffiths: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. The member is absolutely right. We have through the Alberta Social Housing Corporation ownership of about 26,000 housing units, which incorporate 14,000 seniors' self-contained units and almost 4,000

lodge spaces, and there are another 6,000 lodge spaces owned by municipalities. We have a plan going forward for the next five years to utilize the \$260 million in the Alberta Social Housing Corporation to rejuvenate those housing units because we know how critical that housing is going to be to Alberta seniors going forward.

Mrs. Leskiw: That's good news, and it was a pleasure to be part of the announcement earlier today in Bonnyville, especially considering that among other upgrades there will be an additional 52 units added to Villa Ouimet and Bonnylodge.

To the same minister. It's clear that partnerships are key. What's the role of housing authorities in updating government-owned housing stock?

Mr. Griffiths: Mr. Speaker, I firmly believe and this government believes that solutions are usually found at the community level. It's incredibly important, regardless of us having a general provincial strategy to rejuvenate those properties, to make sure we work hand in hand with the municipalities, the municipal housing associations, to make sure that we build housing that's appropriate for the needs of those seniors in those communities. I can't emphasize enough how important those partnerships are and that co-operation is. The initiative has to come from the local level.

Mrs. Leskiw: My last question is to the Minister of Seniors. Thank you, Minister, for travelling up this morning for the announcement. What does an announcement like this mean to seniors that live in lodges across the province?

Mr. VanderBurg: Thank you for that question, and thank you for the congratulations on my birthday, Mr. Speaker, but a more important birthday was this morning in Bonnyville. A lady named Anna turned 103. She lives in the Bonny Lodge. This is about Anna and all of the people that live in that area to have quality services for years to come. The Bonny Lodge was built in 1960 and served that community very well. This new lodge will serve that community for decades and decades, and I'm so proud to have been part of that opening this morning.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar, followed by the hon. Member for Red Deer-North.

Revenue from VLTs and Slot Machines

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you. Yesterday the Deputy Premier suggested that my statistics on problem gambling were inaccurate. Unfortunately, they are not. Today I have more questions for this government regarding VLT and slot machine revenue. To the Deputy Premier: what per cent of the money inserted into a VLT or slot machine is retained as profit by this government?

Mr. Horner: Well, Mr. Speaker, off the top of my head I'm not recalling the exact split. I know there is a formula there on the VLTs as a percentage split, and I'm sure the hon. member has that.

I also wanted to comment that yesterday the hon. member brought up the number of 72 per cent from one study out of a number of studies that have been done. It's interesting to note that he should have also brought up the fact that Alberta is a recognized leader in the research on problem gambling and, in fact, invests more than most jurisdictions in North America.

Mr. MacDonald: Again to the same minister: why does the government advertise – and they advertise right here, sir – that the

average take for VLTs is 8 per cent when in reality this government is raking in close to a 30 per cent profit on an annual basis from VLTs?

Mr. Horner: Well, Mr. Speaker, again, the government of Alberta is recognized as a leader in the charitable gaming model. There are a number of jurisdictions around the world that have come to Alberta to look at our model and, in fact, are looking at copying the model because it goes back to communities. The dollars are invested where the dollars are created, and I think that's a very admirable way for us to do the charitable gaming model.

Mr. MacDonald: Again, Mr. Speaker, to the same minister: who secretly ordered the accounting changes to hide the true amounts collected in government profits from VLTs and slot machines? Was it this government, was it the AGLC, or was it the office of the Auditor General? Who did that?

Mr. Horner: Mr. Speaker, I'm not familiar with any secretive changes, and I'm certain that the hon. member, who I believe has had a great deal to do with the Public Accounts Committee in this Assembly – and I would caution him to be careful about suggesting that the Auditor General is making secretive changes to accounting practices. I think that's crossing a bit of a line there.

The Speaker: I agree. There is extreme caution with respect to statements like that.

The hon. Member for Red Deer-North, followed by the hon. Member for Airdrie-Chestermere.

Education Legislation

Mrs. Jablonski: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Last fall the Minister of Education decided to delay Bill 18, stating that even after significant discussions by the previous minister, more consultation was required. I'd like to know what value this eight-week exercise added to the drafting of the new education legislation. My question is to the Minister of Education. Perhaps Albertans had reached consultation fatigue on the education legislation. Did anyone new actually participate in this eight-week session?

The Speaker: My understanding is that in a matter of minutes from now there will be the moving of second reading of the Education Act, so I think we may be able to avoid questioning on that until we get into the actual second reading.

Mr. Lukaszuk: It is an intriguing question, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: It is an intriguing question. That's not the point.

Does your next question have to do with the Education Act, which will go to second reading shortly?

Mrs. Jablonski: Yes, it does, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: Well, let's just wait until then, okay?

The hon. Member for Airdrie-Chestermere, followed by the hon. Member for Calgary-McCall.

2:20

Provincial Tax Policy

Mr. Anderson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Both the budget and throne speeches clearly state that this government, if re-elected, intends to review taxation after the election. This is unacceptable. Elections are about telling voters where party leaders and candidates stand on different issues, and then letting people decide

which direction they wish to go. The Wildrose leader and MLAs will be signing a pledge that promises Albertans the only way taxes are going under a Wildrose government is down. To the President of the Treasury Board: will you sign this pledge on behalf of your government and your constituents? Sign the pledge.

Mr. Horner: Mr. Speaker, the last thing that I will ever do, living in the province of Alberta, is join or sign a pledge by the Wildrose Alliance Party of the province of Alberta.

The hon. member does not read very well, I guess, because in our documents it does not say that we're going to review taxation. We're going to review the fiscal framework of this province, which includes, among other things, Mr. Speaker, all parts of our spending. It includes the programs that we're dealing with. It includes the pieces of savings that we're going to be moving forward with in what we're doing to build a province that will have 10 million people.

Mr. Anderson: Let's try this again. To the Municipal Affairs minister – and I hope I can still have breakfast with you after I ask you this question – given our province already takes in more revenue and spends more than any other province, including our tax-and-spend Liberal friends in Ontario and Quebec, and given the current budget predicts Alberta will be swimming in cash within two years and given you are a self-professed fiscal conservative from the rural heartland of Alberta, surely you are willing to sign the pledge to not increase taxes, aren't you? Sign the pledge.

Mr. Griffiths: Mr. Speaker, we need to make the appropriate decisions on what's best for Albertans. I remember at AAMD and C you could have heard a pin drop in the room when that party's leader pledged to drop infrastructure spending to \$4 billion. Everyone started to discuss where their schools, their hospitals, their roads, their water and infrastructure were going to come from. I'd like to see him sign that pledge and promise Albertans he'll do less.

Mr. Anderson: A key step in any addiction recovery program, including spending addiction, shopping addiction, is to take a pledge. One last time to the minister that oversees the oil and gas that this government says is going to have us popping champagne and cranking up the government cheque-writing machine for the next several years. Given that in a former life this Energy minister was a steadfast proponent of limited government and recoiled at the very thought of tax increases, surely you of anyone over there, Minister, will sign the pledge not to increase or create new taxes. Give Alberta taxpayers a lifeline, sir. I'm begging you. Please sign the pledge.

Dr. Morton: Mr. Speaker, I'll be very happy to sign a pledge that ensures that the schools that are needed in Airdrie and Chestermere will be built, built by this government and not by that government.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-McCall, followed by the hon. Member for Calgary-Shaw.

School Infrastructure Funding

Mr. Kang: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. For years if not decades this government has outright neglected to ensure schools remain in safe, workable, and, most importantly, teachable condition. This has repeatedly been brought to the government's attention, most recently by the Holy Cross school division. To the Minister of

Infrastructure: given that this problem has built up over the last 20 years by this government's mismanagement, is this government just playing the role of the ostrich, burying its head in the sand and choosing to ignore this problem?

Mr. Lukaszuk: Mr. Speaker, perhaps a word of explanation or sharing of information is required because I heard that member asking questions yesterday. The member should be aware of the fact that schools are built by Alberta Education, but the moment the building is actually built and ready for occupancy by students, we hand over the keys to a school board, and then this school board operates and maintains the building and makes sure that the building is in a workable state. So any issues relevant to the condition of a building as it is being maintained by the school board are to be addressed with the trustees of that local jurisdiction.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Kang: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. To the minister again. School boards across Alberta have estimated deferred maintenance bills on Alberta's crumbling schools to be \$2.3 billion. When are these schools going to be in a teachable condition, Mr. Minister?

Mr. Lukaszuk: Well, Mr. Speaker, as you know, we have allocated dollars not only for maintaining current buildings but also for building additional buildings. The facts are simple. We are facing an unprecedented growth of population in enrolment in kindergarten and grade 1. The province attracted last year 128,000 new Albertans, mostly young Albertans that are having young families over here. The answer is: we definitely need to focus on building more schools to accommodate this growth, and we will be working with school boards relevant to maintaining their current schools in a shape that is respectable and adequate for the children in our province.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Kang: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Yesterday the new Minister of Infrastructure blamed the school boards for, in his own words, the maintenance problems. Is the minister seriously sticking to his story?

Mr. Johnson: Mr. Speaker, what I said yesterday is that this government flows about a hundred million dollars a year to school boards specifically for maintenance of the schools. Those school divisions have maintenance plans that they implement, and they have the ability to decide priorities within their school boards. That's what I said, and we stick by that. Obviously, we'd love to flow more money to those school boards if possible, but it's a balancing act, and we're trying to do the best we can for Albertans.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Shaw, followed by the hon. Member for Calgary-Varsity.

South Calgary Health Campus

Mrs. Ady: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Recently in census data, as we heard earlier, there have been a lot of people moving to the province, a lot of them young. Calgary is a very, very young city. In that same article they talked about the aging baby boomers, and the answer was to have babies. Well, the south of Calgary has answered that call. They're having babies. We have a baby boom happening. My questions are to the minister of health. We're

looking at that new hospital. We want to have our babies there. When can we expect to be able to deliver the babies of south Calgary at the new hospital?

Mr. Horne: Well, Mr. Speaker, I can say with confidence that there will be many, many babies born at the south Calgary campus when it opens later this year. The hospital is opening in phases. Because of its size the first phase will open this summer, and that will see the family outpatient clinics open to patients. That will be followed by the opening of the emergency department in the fall.

Mrs. Ady: That's good news, Mr. Speaker. But they're also asking me – the concern is: are there enough doctors, are there enough nurses to open a brand new hospital? Can you assure us that Alberta Health Services has that plan under hand and that they'll be there?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Horne: Yes, Mr. Speaker. Since my appointment as minister I have asked a number of questions about staffing plans for the south Calgary campus. I can tell the House that when the first phase opens this summer, there will be approximately 780 staff, including physicians and nurses. By late 2013, when all services are fully operational, Alberta Health Services will have approximately 2,400 full-time staff, including 180 physicians, at the south health campus.

Mrs. Ady: My last supplemental would go to the Minister of Infrastructure. During the recession we had a hard time keeping projects on cost. Was this project able to come in on budget on time, and when are you going to give the keys to the minister of health?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Johnson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. What I can tell you is that the budget changed on this project over the years, and at its peak it was about \$1.4 billion. I'm happy to report that we expect the project to come in slightly under the \$1.3 billion mark. The occupancy permits will be issued in March, and workers will start in the building as early as April. It's a great news story for Alberta for generations to come.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Varsity, followed by the hon. Member for Dunvegan-Central Peace.

Castle-Crown Wilderness Area

Mr. Chase: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Our current Premier has achieved the highest level of postsecondary education since Alberta's first Conservative Premier, Peter Lougheed. However, in response to my Castle concerns questions yesterday, the Premier stated: "What we're talking about is an area where there is abundant habitat. We do have wildlife that's thriving." My questions are to the Premier or her sustainable resource representative. Is the government aware that in its natural state, without any human footprint, the Castle is part of a very narrow strip of forest that separates mountains from grasslands?

Mr. Oberle: We certainly are aware, Mr. Speaker. The whole point of forest management planning is understanding a particular forest in itself and in its context. I'm not sure what the member is driving at, but the Castle management plan was considered with great care, and we're well aware what natural forests do. I would point out that natural forests are burned regularly in our province

in the northern forests, and that's a part of renewal. Would he advocate that we allow forest fires to burn uninterrupted across the eastern slopes?

Mr. Chase: Obviously not, but forest fires are more productive than clear-cutting.

Is the government aware that not only is wildlife not thriving in the Castle, but there are most notably over 200 species at risk, including the grizzly and the cutthroat trout?

Mr. Oberle: Mr. Speaker, as I said before, forest management plans in this province are prepared with great care. They consider wildlife habitat needs, watershed needs, the full gamut of values in our forests, and I'm quite confident in this particular management plan.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Chase: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Does the government honestly believe that clear- or block-cutting will not affect the ecological health of this region and its watershed? If so, please table the peer-reviewed scientific studies which substantiate your failed forest management plan.

2:30

Mr. Oberle: Well, Mr. Speaker, then I have to jump back to the fact that we have been logging in the Castle at some level for a hundred years and full commercial logging for 50 years. The landscape that we see in the Castle today is a result of that logging. The habitat types that we see today, that are draped on that beautiful landscape, are a result of that logging. Not only has it sustained jobs and communities and families in Alberta; it has sustained wildlife habitat, too.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Dunvegan-Central Peace, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview.

Grimshaw Holy Family School

Mr. Goudreau: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. As was indicated here in the House, Holy Family school in Grimshaw is on the verge of collapse. An independent report said that all systems are beyond their useful life. This means that electrical, plumbing, heating, mechanical, and insulation systems are beyond repair and must be replaced. To the Minister of Education: what steps are being taken by your department to address Holy Family school's critical infrastructure needs and to keep its students safe?

Mr. Lukaszuk: Mr. Speaker, I have personally toured that school, and I have to tell you that I was very much disappointed with the state of the physical shape that that particular school is in. I'll be the first one to tell you that I am not surprised that parents of these children are not happy with the condition of the school. However, I have to tell you that parts of the school were built in 1962, parts in '64, in '67, and in '89, and even the part of the school that was built in 1989 is falling apart.

Mr. Goudreau: Mr. Speaker, the independent report also said that repairing Holy Family school and bringing it up to code is nearly the same cost as building a new school for 12 and a half million dollars. To the Minister of Education. Infrastructure and mechanical systems are failing, and ongoing maintenance is a drag on limited resources. When will the families, students, and staff know whether Holy Family school is part of Alberta Education's new capital plan?

Mr. Lukaszuk: Mr. Speaker, there are two issues to address. Number one, obviously kids need a better school to go to, and we are working on a plan to make sure that that happens.

I have some additional questions. How is it possible that parts of a school that were just built in 1989 are crumbling and the school is ready for a bulldozer? Most of those kids, actually, after school are going to homes that are older than parts of that school and that, I'm sure, are in a good state of repair. So I will also be looking at the level of maintenance and whether the school is being maintained properly so that we don't see taxpayers' dollars being spent in a manner that 20 years after construction, the school is crumbling.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Goudreau: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. To the same minister: given that the school division has spent nearly \$800,000 on maintenance and operating costs for Holy Family school over the past 10 years and given that the division would rather use a portion of its operating surplus to build a new school rather than pour money into crumbling infrastructure, will the minister partner with the school division to build a new school in Grimshaw that will serve students for many years?

Mr. Lukaszuk: Well, Mr. Speaker, I would be more than willing to partner. While the heating and the cooling in the school are not working, while the electrical and plumbing systems are failing, I will be looking at partnering by way of utilizing the \$7 million that that school board has in its savings account, using some of those dollars towards, perhaps, building a new school. Again, the question still is: how is it possible that a school is in this condition and kids are wearing winter coats during class time and the school board has \$7 million in an operating account?

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview, followed by the hon. Member for St. Albert.

Electricity Prices

(continued)

Dr. Taft: Thanks, Mr. Speaker. Well, it was already clear from the way the Premier avoids responding to most questions on electricity deregulation that she doesn't know the file, and her attempt at a response in question period yesterday confirmed her ignorance. I expect she's being fed this ignorance by the Minister of Energy. So to that minister: will he admit the truth, which is that regulating the price of electricity does not require the provincial government to take on any debt whatsoever?

Dr. Morton: Mr. Speaker, the facts speak for themselves. You look at the other provinces that have Crown corporations where the Crown takes the responsibility for generating. The costs that I indicated earlier, \$11 billion, the costs here since 1996, that are not borne by the taxpayer, are private investors. We look at Ontario and Quebec with debt around their hydro at \$36 billion and \$62 billion, respectively. The facts speak for themselves.

Dr. Taft: Well, again to the same minister: given that the regulated system, which Albertans enjoyed until this government shattered it, could compete with and often beat any other electrical system in North America without any investment or debt at all by the provincial government, will this minister admit that his defence of electricity deregulation is half baked and misleading?

Dr. Morton: Mr. Speaker, the hon. member seems to be living in

the '80s and '90s. I'd remind him that in this decade Alberta is growing rather quickly, and the world is changing. I refer you to the study that I tabled yesterday, London Economics International. It shows that in nonhydro jurisdictions Alberta for the last decade compares completely favourably with other nonhydro jurisdictions.

Dr. Taft: Well, again to the same minister: given that the only advice this minister had for Albertans facing exorbitant power bills was to tell them to phone 11 different companies and compare rates, when in every other province people automatically get lower rates without any hassles, any trips to websites, why does this minister insist on sacrificing the money of ordinary Alberta families instead of just returning to regulated rates?

Dr. Morton: Mr. Speaker, the members opposite always seem to think the solution is more government involvement; we don't think so. The facts speak for themselves. I'm happy to repeat what I said yesterday. You can pick up the phone today. Albertans have a choice. Other provinces don't have a choice. You can reduce your electricity rates by the end of this month by 40 per cent by going to a fixed-rate contract.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for St. Albert, followed by the hon. Member for Calgary-North Hill.

Trades Opportunities for Armed Forces Veterans

Mr. Allred: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Last month the Minister of Advanced Education and Technology announced support for helmets to hardhats, a program designed to assist Canadian Forces members in making the transition from active duty to full-time employment in the construction industry. My son is retired from the military, and even though he's not employed in the construction industry, I see that this program appears to have considerable merit. My first question is to the Minister of Advanced Education and Technology. Based on the relatively low take-up of a similar program in the United States, will this program have an impact on the predicted labour shortage that our province is forecasting?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Weadick: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. I know every member of this Legislature and this government have great respect and admiration for the members of our armed forces. You know, this program that we're talking about, whether it helps one veteran or 10,000 veterans, is just the right thing to do.

Mr. Allred: Mr. Speaker, my second question is also to the Minister of Advanced Education and Technology. Your department is only recognizing military credentials in 10 trades. With over 60 trades and designated occupations, why hasn't the province opened up more opportunities to armed forces personnel?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Weadick: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'd like to thank the member for that message. In fact, we're the leader in Canada, recognizing more trades than any others, but we continue to work with our armed forces and the federal government to look for other trades that we can bring in and continue to make part of our red seal program here in Alberta. So we will continue to work with our armed forces partners to find ways to bring more of our veterans into our trades in this province.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Allred: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Again to the Minister of Advanced Education and Technology. The government of Alberta has committed funding to the program's development and a website, but are those measures enough to bring more soldiers into the trades? In particular, what communication strategy is proposed to attract retiring members of the military?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Weadick: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. We have created the website to make access easy for our veterans, but we also do a number of other things – attending trade shows, going directly into bases and working with the members there – to try to ensure that they know that there is an easy and a smooth transition as veterans into our trades in this province of Alberta. So we'll continue to look at ways to streamline our processes.

Thank you very much.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-North Hill.

Provincial Budget Projections

Mr. Fawcett: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. The 2012 budget estimates for nonrenewable resource revenues are fairly optimistic. There are a few areas that have particularly caught my attention, and I'd like some clarification. My question is to the Minister of Energy. Can he please explain to me the policies that his department has for forecasting the price of oil and gas today and into the future?

2:40

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Dr. Morton: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Indeed, our forecasts are optimistic; we're happy to report that to Albertans. We do those forecasts based on our predicted supply and demand, the balance between supply and demand, and then we compare those numbers with private-sector analysts, banks and other private-sector analysts. I'm very pleased to tell the House that both the price for oil and our projected price for gas for the next two years are actually slightly under the average of private-sector forecasts. So it's a very responsible prediction for future revenues.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Fawcett: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. To the same minister. It's noted in the budget that the greatest increase in royalty revenues over the next few years is going to be in bitumen royalties, where we'll see a jump from about \$4 billion last year to almost \$10 billion in '14-15. Can he explain how his department specifically came up with these numbers?

Dr. Morton: Again, Mr. Speaker, I'm very pleased to report those numbers to Albertans. Partly, this very significant increase in royalties from bitumen is due to increased production and also increased prices. The real key is that in the next three years we'll see 13 new oil sands projects move from prepayment to postpayment royalties, at which point the royalties double and even triple depending upon the projects. That explains the dramatic increase.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Fawcett: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. My final supplemental is to the same minister, and it's in the area of bonuses and sales of Crown leases. They've averaged about \$1

billion a year over the last few years, yet I notice that the number is going to increase to about \$2 billion. Can the minister explain how he came up with those numbers?

Dr. Morton: Again, Mr. Speaker, it's based on analysis of commodity prices and industry cash flow that we come up with those numbers. I would point out that while \$2 billion is higher than the average over the last decade, it's actually a billion dollars lower than how we've come in in the 2011-12 budget year. Again, it's a very responsible and relatively conservative forecast of revenues from that source.

The Speaker: Hon. members, that concludes the question-and-response period for today. Nineteen members were recognized; 100 questions and responses were accommodated.

In 30 seconds from now we will proceed with Members' Statements, but in the interim can we revert to Introduction of Guests?

[Unanimous consent granted]

Introduction of Guests

(continued)

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Leduc-Beaumont-Devon.

Mr. Rogers: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. In my member's statement earlier I talked about Leduc No. 1 and its importance to this province. In the public gallery are two constituents who are instrumental in this great Energy Discovery Centre that we have south of Devon. I'd like to ask Ron Pollock and Lynn Brown to rise and receive the warm traditional welcome of this Assembly.

The Speaker: In a few seconds from now we will continue with Members' Statements.

Members' Statements

(continued)

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

Safer Internet Day

Ms Woo-Paw: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Each February we recognize international Safer Internet Day. You may be surprised to hear that Canadians spend more time online than any other country, more than 43 hours each month, which is almost twice the world average of 23 hours.

The Internet is an exciting and educational tool that can enhance learning and be an important part of our social lives, and I think many of us here can also vouch that it is an important part of our work life. E-mail, instant messages, blogs, chat rooms, online gaming, and other web tools are also becoming a large part of our children's lives. With all of this online access in Canada, children and youth can be at risk of being targeted by predators or becoming victims of cyberbullying. With our support and guidance young people can be empowered to discover the online world safely.

Mr. Speaker, parents and caregivers need to know where to turn for information and resources on this issue. The Alberta government has a number of resources to assist in engaging parents, children, and youth which can be found on the Human Services website. Albertans can use these interactive tools to help them talk about Internet safety with their children and families.

This year's Safer Internet Day theme is Connecting Generations and Educating Each Other, and I encourage all Albertans to keep the lines of communication open.

Thank you.

The Speaker: Hon. Member for Vermilion-Lloydminster, would you like to participate?

Tribute to My Family

Mr. Snelgrove: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. As my time comes to a close here, I do have some people I'd like to recognize and thank, particularly my parents, Bob and Margaret Snelgrove, who get immense enjoyment – and I don't know why – watching question period every day. Not that it isn't exciting. Anyway, they'll have to find something else soon. They've been incredibly supportive. They say that I got my stubbornness from my dad and my fairness from my mom, and I'm not sure that they'll settle this argument. Mom and Dad, thank you so much for putting up with me.

Primarily, I need to thank my family. My four young children now are grown young men. When I go home, I see what an incredible job my wife, Bev, did with them. They give us tremendous pride every day. I watched them all play hockey on the same team on Sunday. So, Fred, don't cut health care. I'm going to try one game this year with them, but I may need your services after.

Mostly, Mr. Speaker, I have to thank my wife, Bev. The decade apart has been difficult, but in many ways it's made us grow together. She's an incredible girl, and where Old Father Time is dragging at me, she has maintained her beauty from the day we were married 34 years ago. As we start the next adventure in our life together, I certainly look forward to it. She's been my toughest critic. She's been my strongest supporter, a determined motivator with everything except that stupid exercise machine she wants me to get on, but with that, I'm sure I'll have time to do it. I want to thank her for making me the luckiest man in Alberta, and I look forward to the next life together.

Thank you.

Tabling Returns and Reports

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Health and Wellness.

Mr. Horne: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased to rise today to table the requisite number of copies of a recent academic paper submitted to the Society for Academic Emergency Medicine. The authors include several notable Alberta physicians, Alberta Health Services, and the University of Calgary. These reports highlight operational policy changes made in Alberta emergency departments and hospitals which led to statistically significant decreases in lengths of stay and other aspects of emergency department care. These decreases occurred despite a very significant increase in the number of visits made to emergency departments over the same period. These policies helped lead us to significant reductions in the time required for EMS staff to off-load patients in our emergency departments.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-North Hill.

Mr. Fawcett: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I'm going to table the requisite number of copies of the Alberta Economic Development Authority's annual activity report for 2011 on behalf of the Deputy Premier.

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

Ms Notley: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'd like to table the appropriate number of copies of eight electricity bills Albertans have sent to the NDP opposition showing significantly high electricity costs.

Thank you.

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

Dr. Swann: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I have a number of tablings today on behalf of the leader. There's a tabling of four different documents relating to media coverage of the tiff between the Municipal Affairs minister and the AUMA president. I have appropriate copies of those.

I also have eight copies of letters from individuals across the province who have been directly affected by the lack of mental health services in the province, with significant suffering for themselves and their families, including one from Cheryl Brown, who is in the audience today, relating to her son; Sally Hayward from Lethbridge, who was threatened and injured by her son because of inadequate treatment; Kimberly Porlier; and a number of other people across the province.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

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

Mr. Chase: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm tabling e-mails and 11 letters from the following individuals who are concerned about the proposed logging in the west Bragg Creek area, all of whom believe clear-cutting will damage essential watershed and recreation areas that thousands of Calgarians use to promote health and fitness and be detrimental to wildlife and natural species. They are Adam Storms, Sherri Rinkel Mackay, Heather Garipey, Susan O'Shea, Greg Potter, Laryssa Warne, Gaynor Hoyne, Annette Le Faive, Hugh Magill, Eric Tromposch, Troy Delfs, David Easton, Derek Abdalla, Liz Tassy, Margaret Main, Ralph Carter, Carolyn Fisher, Dr. Stephen McNeil, John Holmes, and Christine Rogowski.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

2:50

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

Mr. MacDonald: Yes. Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I have a number of tablings today, and they all relate to the questions we have been asking in the last couple of days. The first tabling is a pamphlet that you can get at any casino or establishment that has VLTs. This certainly indicates that the house's edge, the government's edge, is 8 per cent in gambling activities.

The second tabling I have is a response dated December 21, 2011, to myself as chair of the Standing Committee on Public Accounts. This is a follow-up response from AGLC from their appearance before the committee on November 30, 2011. Certainly, it is interesting to note in this document that they state that cash-in, cash-out totals for VLTs were not maintained after 1998-99.

The third tabling I have is a letter that I wrote on January 18, 2012, to the chief executive officer of the Alberta Gaming and Liquor Commission asking a number of questions and pointing out that the response provided to all members of the committee and myself from the AGLC was not true and that there were cash-in, cash-out totals for VLTs after 1998-99.

The next tabling I have is a letter dated January 25, 2012, to myself, the chair of the Standing Committee on Public Accounts,

from the office of the chief executive officer of the Alberta Gaming and Liquor Commission. This letter provides the cash-in, cash-out totals for VLTs and also the cash-in, cash-out totals for slot machines for various years. I appreciated the correction that the AGLC has provided to the committee. There's more work to do on that, but we'll get to it.

Now, the next letter that I have to table is dated February 2, 2012. It's from myself to the chief executive officer of the Alberta Gaming and Liquor Commission, and it's asking for information around the Auditor General's role in the accounting changes that were made in 1999-2000 at AGLC.

My last tabling is a letter that I received – and I appreciate receiving this – from the chief executive officer of the AGLC. This letter is dated February 13, 2012. It, too, is a very interesting read, and I would encourage all hon. members, including the Deputy Premier if he has time, to read all of this information before we get back to question period tomorrow.

Thank you.

The Speaker: On urgency, though, events in 1999 are not urgent in this Assembly.

Statement by the Speaker

Calendar of Special Events

The Speaker: Hon. members, there have been occasions in the last number of days when members have given statements with respect to weeks, events, and the like. There is a moment now available for me to just alert all members that February does have some significance to a lot of other groups in our society. As an example, February is Black History Month. We've already heard of that in an eloquent statement by the hon. Member for Leduc-Beaumont-Devon. February is also Hearth Month, Junior Achievement Month, Psychology Month.

A number of various weeks are commemorated, as are days. February 1 to 7 was World Interfaith Harmony Week. February 2 was World Wetlands Day. February 4 was World Cancer Day. February 5 to 11 has been designated Burn Awareness Week, International Development Week, National Eating Disorders Awareness Week, National Therapeutic Recreation Week, and White Cane Week. February 6 to 12 was World Orphan Week. February 7 is known as Magha Puja, also known as Fourfold Assembly or Sangha Day for Buddhists. February 7 is Safer Internet Day. February 8 was Winter Walk Day. February 12 was Sexual and Reproductive Health Day.

February 13 to 19 is Random Acts of Kindness Week. That's this week. We all know that yesterday was Valentine's Day. Today is International Childhood Cancer Day, as it is National Flag of Canada Day. I would just like to point out that the only Assembly in this country, of the 15 of them, that actually has the flags of the nation and its provinces and the territories is this Assembly. No other Assembly in Canada does it.

February 19 to 25 is Brotherhood/Sisterhood Week, as it is Scout-Guide Week. February 20 is Family Day. February 20 is Heritage Day. February 20 is Maha Shivaratri, a Hindu festival dedicated to Shiva. February 20 is World Day of Social Justice. February 21 is International Mother Language Day, as it is Shrove Tuesday, or Mardi Gras's kickoff. February 22 is Ash Wednesday, as it is World Thinking Day. February 23 is National Aviation Day. February 26 to March 3 is Freedom to Read Week. February 27 is International Corporate Philanthropy Day, and February 29 is Rare Disease Day.

I think that's a wrap.

Orders of the Day
Government Bills and Orders
Second Reading

Bill 3

Appropriation (Supplementary Supply) Act, 2012

The Speaker: The hon. Deputy Premier and President of Treasury Board and Enterprise.

Mr. Horner: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's a pleasure to rise and move second reading of Bill 3, the Appropriation (Supplementary Supply) Act, 2012.

The supplementary amounts provided by this bill reflect the fiscal picture outlined in the third-quarter fiscal update, released on February 9. These amounts are necessary for the government to conduct business and fulfill its commitments during the current fiscal year. The additional amounts are mainly related to grant commitments for the GreenTRIP, provincial judges, Slave Lake wildfire assistance, and funding for the assured income for the severely handicapped program and the persons with developmental disabilities program.

I certainly urge all of my colleagues in this House to support the bill, Mr. Speaker.

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

Dr. Swann: Yes. Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. A pleasure to rise and speak to the supplementary supply bill, Bill 3. As always, concerns on behalf of Albertans that this government consistently understates budgets for the year, comes to the Legislature after the fact, and fails to anticipate a large number of issues – in this case one good-news story relating to PDD – and the tremendous backlog in supporting persons with developmental disabilities and those on AISH.

Why this couldn't be anticipated and dealt with in a timely way, why this particular group cannot be indexed as MLA salaries are indexed every year, with inflation and cost-of-living increases, is beyond us, and suddenly it becomes a supplementary supply addition that we vote on, well aware that this government continues to do just whatever it chooses without respect to proper budgeting processes and respect for the public purse. It doesn't seem to change. In my full seven years in the Legislature every budget has supplementary supply attached to it. One can understand forest fires and floods. Those cannot be fully anticipated although year to year there should be some predictability that we're going to spend something on those.

Again, on behalf of Albertans I think there are serious questions about the government's ability to budget, its willingness to hold the line, its willingness to use the public purse as it would choose as its own domestic budget and not make the necessary conscientious effort to research, to develop the full range of budgeting tools and look at the planning for the future with a more comprehensive lens and to try to in fact achieve a budgeting process that now our new Bill 1 is attempting to put a new face on, the zero-based budgeting process or what some are calling the results-based budgeting process. One can only hope, Mr. Speaker, that this will move us towards more responsible spending in a government that calls itself conservative but acts anything but conservative.

Still nothing for the savings plan – what is it? – 25 years since a great Conservative leader called Peter Lougheed initiated the savings plan. One wonders if there would even be a savings plan

in this province if he hadn't initiated that plan because nothing has been done with it since he left.

3:00

On behalf of the people of Alberta there are serious questions about this government's commitment to not only live within its means but to plan appropriately and budget for what Albertans care most critically about. Only recently have we seen a consistent budget for health care, a five-year plan that will provide some stability and some predictability to our health care system. There's still no clarity around seniors' care and how we're going to ensure that we protect and provide affordable, quality care for our seniors in these coming few years with the demands only increasing.

Recently we've also seen some movement towards a commitment to public education, but it's not at all clear that this will meet the needs when taking into consideration the maintenance budgets that are so often talked about in the House. Surely the government at this stage can manage to plan for both public education and postsecondary education in a way that includes capital costs and operating costs and maintenance. That shouldn't be beyond the reasonable expectations of Albertans who share their hard-earned dollars with this government.

The environment, too, is something that one would wish was being dealt with in a more consistent, stable, and predictable fashion because what we have seen is progressive erosion of that most important service that is designed to protect our economic future, ensure the reputation of our oil industry, and reduce the health risks associated with pollution and injury to our air, our water, our land, even our food products as a result, Mr. Speaker.

Supplementary budgets repeatedly coming forward without a sense of a long-term vision, without a sense of comprehensive research and being based on the best available evidence as opposed to simply building on what was done last year don't wash with Albertans.

We've heard recently about the failure of this government, also, to address a long-term commitment to poverty reduction, and it begs the question: when will we see consistent support for those with mental illness – I've talked about disability – those with addictions, and the homeless that are costing this government hugely in health services, criminal justice activities, and all kinds of care that is required as result of more emergency needs because we're not prepared to budget and plan for the long-term well-being of our most vulnerable populations?

We've talked in that context about establishing a fair tax system in this province. When will we see the rich paying their share, corporations paying their share, and all of us allowed to plan in a much more sustainable and responsible way so that supplementary budgets are not routine but are actually the exception? We on this side have talked increasingly about reviewing the tax system, ensuring that those over \$100,000 a year are paying more and that we eliminate this novelty in Canada called the flat-tax system and move to a more fair and progressive tax system for people who are earning up to a million dollars and paying at the present time the same percentage that the \$50,000 a year people are paying. Let's get serious about stable funding, predictable budgeting, comprehensive analysis, and responsibly managing the public purse that has been entrusted to us.

We know that there are going to be a large number of new Canadians coming into this province and coming into this country. Surely we can anticipate some of the costs associated with that and ensure that our budgets reflect a commitment to their cultural adjustment, their linguistic changes, their professional training, their ability to communicate. If we don't do that, we will be

coming again next year for supplementary supply for new Canadians and new Albertans, who surely deserve better.

On behalf of Albertans I think the opposition is strongly again suggesting that the government take very seriously their new Bill 1, which is going to be an attempt to review things in a comprehensive way before spending just the cost-of-living or inflation increases for many of these budgets. Look again at downsizing government, amalgamating departments that don't need to be separate. Look again at the carbon capture and storage fund for ways that it could reduce this demand on supplementary supply every year. Think about a fair tax system that would provide a much more stable base of funding and much more predictability, not this coming to the Legislature with cap in hand, assuming that everything that was spent in this past year without approval and no ability to reject it because of the consistent majority that the government enjoys.

Let's do better, and let's take seriously this effort of the Premier to start a more predictable, comprehensive review of budgets and stay within them. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: We're still open. The hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview.

Dr. Taft: Thank you. On Bill 3, the Appropriation (Supplementary Supply) Act, this is an opportunity to get a few matters on the record concerning the government's budgeting and finances. The Member for Calgary-Mountain View did a very good job of raising some specific concerns. One of the issues I want to bring to the table, Mr. Speaker, is how this bill fits into the larger budgeting process and the larger accounting system of the provincial government.

I think we should start from the premise, when we're considering a budget bill in Alberta, that Alberta is, by any reasonable measure, probably the richest place on Earth. We already start with an abundance of blessings: the land, the water, living in a democratic society, in a peaceful setting. But what sets Alberta apart from the rest of the world are two things. One is our relatively small population. We think of Edmonton and Calgary as big cities, Mr. Speaker. Take all of Alberta together and it's about the same as greater Seattle. It's not much more than metro Montreal in terms of population. So, that's one thing. On the other side, we are outright the owners of the largest hydrocarbon reserves – well, vying with Venezuela as the largest in the western hemisphere and second- or third-largest on the planet. What happens, Mr. Speaker, when you do the math there, you realize that per person we are the richest jurisdiction on the planet.

Now, you might argue that that's a bit simplifying things, but the fact is – and I think we have to remember this, every one of us as MLAs – that the people of Alberta, through this Assembly, outright own that resource. There was a very long struggle from 1905, when neither Alberta nor Saskatchewan was granted the rights that other provinces had, the rights of ownership for their natural resources, through a series of court cases, difficult elections, and so on, right through until 1930 when finally the federal government conceded ownership of natural resources to this Assembly. I look around this room. It must have been an astonishing day to be in this room when the Premier at the time, Premier Brownlee, stood up and announced, having negotiated the deal in Ottawa with then Prime Minister Mackenzie King, that the people of Alberta owned the resource. Little did they know at the time the incredible value of that resource.

Today we know the value of that resource. It's something like, counting the oil sands, 173 billion barrels of oil equivalent in proven reserves, using current technologies, that are owned by the

people of this province. If you do the math on that, well, the numbers very quickly become absolutely staggering. Imperial Oil tabulates on their books the value of their reserves, and they give them a value of about 10 bucks a barrel, Mr. Speaker. If we were to cut that in half, given that this is oil in the ground and so on and all that effort needs to be put into recovering it and extracting it, if we were to say \$5 a barrel for those 173 billion barrels, that's like \$800 billion in assets that this government owns on behalf of its people.

3:10

I would like to see something like that recognized when we're having budget debates of all types, whether it's supplementary supply, interim supply, or the full budget. This really is the richest place on Earth, Mr. Speaker, and there's no excuse in my mind for there not being something in this Appropriation (Supplementary Supply) Act that actually allocated savings into – I would like to see it – the heritage fund. Wouldn't it be exciting if this bill came forward at the end of the year like this and said: we're not just covering expenses for forest fires and other expenses like that; we're actually chipping in a little bit extra at the end of the year into our savings account. Then I could really get excited about a piece of legislation like this.

My view – and it's widely held by lots of people of many different political stripes – is that the heritage fund needs to be at least in the \$200 billion range if we are to have a sustainable economy in Alberta, and by that I mean where we can sustain lower than average taxes and we can sustain good-quality public services.

So this Appropriation (Supplementary Supply) Act, Mr. Speaker, while it covers some important spending, is missing, in my view, an absolutely crucial line. That's a line that would actually say: okay, we're going to put some more money into savings. If we could get to that point – and I hope under this government we do get to that point. Maybe it will be after the next election, I don't know. I hope we don't get there by cutting because, despite all the rhetoric here about overblown provincial spending, over the last several years Alberta's spending on public services: you know, some years it's high; some years it's low. It's about what you'd expect. It's the savings that we're really falling short on.

I would also like to see one other thing in the government's plans and in their budgeting and in their accounting, and that would be to follow the lead of private-sector energy companies and fully list the reserves as assets on the balance sheet so that we not only counted the money that was, you know, held in various government accounts and other assets that are there, but we actually reflected what we own as a government, and that includes the incredible energy reserves here. Then we would be able to look at that and get a proper picture of just how wealthy this province is. I think it would help frame better, more informed discussion about how we're going to take this province and keep it on track in the years and decades ahead, Mr. Speaker.

I wanted to get those comments on the record as part of the context for this Appropriation (Supplementary Supply) Act. In terms of the act itself I think it's safe to say that our caucus is generally understanding. None of us like to see adjustments at the end of the year. It's good practice to stick as closely as possible to the budgeted figures. But in all honesty and in all fairness to this government, the margin of error represented by these numbers is pretty small. The budget targets have generally been closely met, and I should congratulate the government and the public servants, who worked so hard to follow those plans on that account.

There are other points that the Member for Calgary-Mountain View has made in relation to other considerations for Albertans who face genuine hardships, but those are already on the record, so I won't repeat those. I just wanted to provide my sense of the context that would make this a better piece of legislation.

Thanks, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: Standing Order 29(2)(a) is available. Anyone under Standing Order 29(2)(a)?

The hon. Solicitor General and Minister of Public Security.

Mr. Denis: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I move that we adjourn debate on second reading of Bill 3.

[Motion to adjourn debate carried]

Bill 2 Education Act

The Speaker: Now the hon. Minister of Education.

Mr. Lukaszuk: Well, Mr. Speaker, I'm glad that I caught your eye again. I shall proceed with my comments. Thank you very much. I'm honoured to rise today and move second reading of Bill 2, the Education Act.

Mr. Speaker, this is an excellent time in Alberta and in Alberta's education system. The hon. Premier has made education along with health care, as you know, central priorities for this government. Alberta already has a strong education system, and we plan to make it even stronger. That is why we're bringing forward legislation that will ensure Albertans have access to education opportunities that are meaningful to learners, that support Albertans' goals as a democratic society and confirm our belief that education is a partnership between students, parents, teachers, support staff, school boards, and postsecondary systems, and that provide opportunities for success that will build a strong future for our children and our province.

This legislative framework, Mr. Speaker, is a very important step on our path. It will support our partners in education as they use their knowledge and expertise to provide high-quality education programs and services that are meaningful and creative and that deliver to the needs of students, society, and taxpayers. The changes are necessary to ensure that our education system meets the needs of students in coming decades.

As you know, the government has undertaken significant consultation to help define our desires and results for education in Alberta and to create an education system that inspires children and youth to achieve their maximum potential, a system that meets Albertans' needs and Albertans' expectations for developing engaged thinkers who think critically and creatively; ethical citizens who demonstrate respect, teamwork, and democratic ideals; and adults who live and work with an entrepreneurial spirit in facing challenges with resiliency, adaptability, risk taking, and bold decision-making. Bill 2, Mr. Speaker, provides the framework for a system that will do just that.

Over the past few months I've received a huge volume of input from students, parents, teachers, and the general public. That community contribution took the well-considered draft legislation introduced last year to a new level. We heard that we are indeed moving in a direction that reflects the desires and wishes of Albertans. We heard that we could strengthen two underlying and very connected principles of the act: the first, that all students are entitled to welcoming, caring, respectful, and safe learning environments; and the second, that education is a shared responsibility with clearly defined roles for its partners.

The first has been addressed by including in the act, Mr. Speaker, what is fundamental to the nature of Alberta and to the education system: that we will respect the diverse heritage and abilities of our society and that we will promote understanding and respect for others. Using the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms and the Alberta Human Rights Act as important guides, the Education Act prescribes that all school programs must reflect the province's diversity and – it cannot be said too often – promote understanding and respect of others.

3:20

The Education Act is very clear that bullying is not acceptable and will be dealt with. We have granted school boards greater flexibility to address bullying in all of its forms, and we have directed them to use those new tools. We have confirmed that whether inappropriate behaviour occurs in or outside of the school, before or after school, or whether it happens on the Internet, it will not be tolerated, and it will be dealt with. We have defined bullying and linked our province to national activities by legislating our own provincial bullying awareness and prevention week.

Government, parents, classroom professionals, and school boards all want our students to keep their focus on the classroom results that matter most for their future. That is a key reason why this act stresses that addressing bullying requires boards to act in support of both students who are bullied and bullies themselves. Victims need help to regain a sense of security and self-confidence at school, and bullies need help to not only stop but to manage their negative and hostile reactions to peers and to develop more positive behaviours. This will help bring respect, compassion, and empathy more fully into school culture and will help our students to free their minds from worry so that they can focus on learning what they need to learn.

As I mentioned earlier, Albertans have called for the act to highlight that education is a shared responsibility. The kind of full-service support to students that Albertans want cannot happen without our partners in education: parents, teachers, support staff, trustees, boards, and students themselves. Ensuring that all students achieve their potential requires the collaboration, engagement, and empowerment of all partners in education. We have set out the responsibilities of students, parents, boards, and trustees not to create legislatively enforceable requirements but, rather, to clearly identify the expectations of parents and students to be active participants in education. Student responsibilities include actively participating in their learning, the learning of those around them, and the pursuit of educational success. Students are also expected to contribute to a welcoming, caring, respectful environment.

The new act puts the Minister's Student Advisory Council into law. It provides a way for students to share directly with the minister what they hear from other young people about their school experience. This will help to inform government about what is important to Alberta students. Ensuring that the student's voice has a significant role in the education system is important, Mr. Speaker, and I am really proud to formally make this council a part of our education system. The membership of the council will continue to change as our members complete their high school education, but their advisory work will continue to be an important way of honouring the student voice and of shaping the education system to meet the ever-evolving needs of our students.

The Education Act recognizes and reinforces the crucial role parents play in their children's education and supports greater co-operation and communication between parents and school personnel. The act makes it crystal clear that parents have the

responsibility to make informed decisions respecting the education of their children and to play an active role in their children's educational success. Access to information, Mr. Speaker, is stepped up under the 10-point plan, and this act includes new audit requirements that require boards to broaden the composition of the audit committee. With all elements of the community working together as partners in education with the common goal of providing welcoming, caring, respectful, and safe learning environments, we will all benefit from our students' knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values when they mature.

In supporting diversity, Mr. Speaker, the act gives boards and schools greater flexibility to support inclusive education and children who require additional learning supports and programming through the delivery of specialized supports and services to students that have identified needs. Learning environments that respect diversity nurture a sense of belonging and a positive sense of self, helping to create and maintain a welcoming learning environment.

We need to do more to support high school completion, Mr. Speaker. While Alberta's high school completion rate has been steadily improving over the past five years, it is still nowhere where we want it to be. The Education Act will raise the age to which a student is required to attend school from the age of 16 to the age of 17. I would like to credit the hon. Member for Little Bow for originally raising this issue and the previous Legislature for recognizing the good that this will achieve. We want students to finish high school, and we are increasing their ability to do so.

This act will also raise the age to which students are eligible for high school funding from the age of 19 at the beginning of the school year to the age of 21. Many students who drop out of high school return after one or two years, and we want to ensure that finances are not a barrier to high school completion for these particular students. What does not change is that school boards will continue to make decisions relevant to how to meet the needs of older students.

Another change in the Education Act which will have a positive impact on high school completion is that we have changed how a student's residence will be determined. Residency will now be determined by where the student lives rather than where the student's parents live. This reflects our increasingly mobile society, helping students and families to make the choices that are best for them and to support a more student-centred system.

Because of our strong commitment to closing the educational achievement gap between aboriginal and nonaboriginal students, we will continue working very closely with aboriginal peoples from around the province and, as I mentioned when announcing the 10-point plan, with federal government. We all recognize that high school completion is an important pathway to achieving economic and social success for aboriginal communities throughout Alberta. Indeed, Mr. Speaker, this is the case for all communities.

Another way the Education Act will play an important part in the province's future is by elevating collaboration among school boards, postsecondary institutions, and the community to make the transition between secondary and postsecondary education a smooth one. It benefits everyone when students continue their education within Alberta and become lifelong learners in search of further educational or career opportunities. Alberta Education already awards high school credits to students who are registered in and successfully complete off-campus programs such as work experience, a registered apprenticeship program, and the green certificate program. Greater collaboration between K to 12 and the postsecondary system will enable Alberta students to take advantage of new opportunities and ensure their place in the

economy of tomorrow. This act expresses and advances a sustainable vision for our future because knowledge is a resource that can never be depleted.

Today's students are often described as the Net generation because an ever-larger portion of their learning, in fact their lives, is spent online. That is why this act is not just about bricks and mortar schools; it's about building the connections and networks that are needed to improve the quality of education for Alberta children and youth. The integration of education and technology is allowing students to use the latest technology and techniques, the same kind of tools they may be using in the workforce. The alternatives for individualized, flexible learning are improving every day, and they are firing students up through engagement opportunities and choices.

The Education Act respects that education occurs in an increasingly diverse range of learning environments. It recognizes the importance of choice and confirms our ongoing support for public schools, separate schools, private schools, francophone schools, charter schools, and home education. Our government will continue to support and encourage parents to exercise choice as to how education is delivered to their children. As in the School Act we continue to define school as the principle of a structured learning environment with expected educational outcomes. The Education Act, therefore, maintains programming approaches, including alternative programs offered by school boards, charter schools, private schools, and home education.

The dimension of separate schools as part of our publicly funded education system is an important element of our system, so we have proposed several changes that are designed to modernize the process for establishing separate schools. This process allows for greater community engagement while not altering the constitutionally entrenched minority denominational rights. In addition, Mr. Speaker, separate school electors will now have a choice as to which jurisdiction, public or separate, they may vote or run for election as a trustee. This allows members of a minority faith whose interest lies with public schools to have representation on the public board or be on the public board themselves.

3:30

We have made some changes in the Education Act that relate to governance, which we believe will improve community engagement, create new opportunities for boards to be responsive and creative, and increase collaboration and co-operation between boards and other educational partners. One of these changes, Mr. Speaker, is to provide authority to appoint First Nation trustees when there is an educational service agreement between the First Nations and a school board. This will bring a new perspective to the board and address the principles of inclusive, equitable access and expanded governance team.

A change from School Act to Education Act is that new legislation will grant school boards natural person powers. Under the School Act boards are limited to doing only the things that are specifically authorized or required. Providing natural person powers gives boards greater opportunity to be responsive and creative in dealing with educational needs within their jurisdiction. Taken as a whole, the act holds boards responsible for reflecting a student-centred focus and the principles of inclusiveness, diversity, and excellence.

Passage of this act, Mr. Speaker, will enable Alberta to build on our incredible foundation of excellence. It is all part of our plan to give young Albertans access to a full range of educational opportunities, opportunities to realize their dreams. Once the act is passed, regulatory and policy reviews will take place to ensure that all of the regulations align with it. This will be an opportunity

for parents, teachers, trustees and board, and community to influence and provide input to regulations and policies. This new legislation will not be proclaimed in force until the regulation and policy review is complete.

This act of the Legislature supports change, but it is the people who live education each day who will implement it across the province, and a wide system it is: nearly 600,000 K to 12 students across the province, 298 school authorities, 2,134 schools, and more than \$34 million invested in students every school day. From stakeholders to students, from policy-makers to parents, Albertans have told us what they want an educated Alberta of the future to be like. They have helped us develop legislation to make that desire come true. We know that the legislation which recognizes choice, creates partnerships, establishes accountability, and provides opportunities for success is the foundation on which we will be building a strong future for our children and for our province.

Supporting this bill going forward makes good sense, Mr. Speaker, and good governance. I imagine looking back in the years ahead and knowing this was the legislation that put our students first and our province on an exciting, engaging, and values-driven new learning path.

Mr. Speaker, I encourage all members of this Assembly to support this bill as we continue to debate it. Thank you.

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

Dr. Swann: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It's a pleasure and a privilege to stand and speak to Bill 2, which looks like a very progressive piece of legislation on the surface of it. I mean, the devil is always in the details. When we hear about issues related to bullying prevention, stronger partnerships between parents, trustees, and boards, stronger partnerships at post-secondary institutions, these are all good directions to take. I commend the minister for taking hold firmly and advancing some of these issues because, surely, we cannot continue having the highest dropout rate in Canada in our secondary schools, especially challenging with the needs of our First Nations and Métis and Inuit populations. It's nice to see a stronger focus, better representation, and higher commitment to inclusive learning environments for them.

[The Deputy Speaker in the chair]

Just to highlight for the record, this bill's purpose is to focus on inclusive educational environments and concentrate on decision-making powers with local school boards. Some of the issues that it brings up within the body of the document, I'll outline seven new commitments the government is making.

First of all, companies may apply for the establishment of a charter school. That's something new, and I'll be interested to hear more debate on that: what kind of companies and who benefits, what kind of extra charges might be associated, whether these are going to be exclusive or inclusive schools, and how much the public purse would be supporting these. Second, it allows parents more access to information on their child's education, a positive thing to be sure. Third, it puts in place an expanded audit committee involving third parties, making sure that school decisions reflect the goals of students and their communities. Fourth, relating to bullying and a student advisory council, it clearly shows some forward direction in dealing with this scourge that has to be addressed more directly than it has been. Fifth, students will be challenged to be more responsible for creating welcoming environments and respect for diversity. Sixth, the parents, boards, and trustees will be truly recognized as

partners in the educational development. Finally, boards will work with postsecondary institutions to create more partnerships and codes of conduct.

I would like to acknowledge specifically the commitment to raising the age of compulsory education from 16 to 17. Increasing the age of access to high school from 19 to 21 so that young adults are fully funded to upgrade when they haven't made it through the system in the average time, that's a positive one.

I'm not sure about the meaning of school boards having natural person powers. We'll be interested in hearing more about that discussion: what it means in terms of decisions made by boards relative to, say, school fees, what it means in terms of new directions in the school, what it might mean in terms of lawsuits against school boards.

At the same time that we're giving school boards more power, it also appears that we're giving the minister much more power. How is that going to be addressed and balanced? Obviously, there are concerns always at the shared balance of power between the minister and the elected boards, so there will be lots of discussion, I'm sure, around that.

Updating the processes for establishing separate school districts is a welcome decision, as there are contentions there and we do need more clarity and guidelines.

Providing criteria for the establishment and operation of charter schools: I'm puzzled by that one, Mr. Speaker. I would have thought that the criteria for the establishment and operation of charter schools was well established, and I'll be very interested in following the debate and the importance of that issue.

Redefining the definition of resident and independent student.

These are all good initiatives. It appears to be less prescriptive than the School Act previously, but, as I say, there are concerns around the new powers that it appears to be giving to the minister and his administration.

It says nothing about some of the issues the Alberta Liberals have been raising: eliminating school fees, eliminating private school funding, providing a breakfast and lunch program for children who are struggling to meet their basic needs as well as the learning needs of the community.

We also are on the record, Mr. Speaker, as supporting full-day kindergarten and preschool as important contributions to preparing children adequately for formal school and for success. We'll watch that with great interest as well.

All in all, there are some positive recommendations here, and I have no doubt that many of these will be fully supported. I look forward to hearing more discussion and debate about some of these issues and learning more about the meaning of some of these.

I will close my discussions and welcome further.

The Deputy Speaker: Any other hon. member? The hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview on the bill.

3:40

Dr. Taft: Yes, on the bill. Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm starting to lose my voice. I'm sure everybody is sad to hear that.

This is a very extensive bill. I think it's about 200 pages long, so there's a lot of substance here. As the minister and others have pointed out, it's well over 20 years since we had a complete overhaul of this kind of legislation. I guess given the extent and importance and cost to the education system, it's not a surprise that it's a big piece of legislation, but what it does is it places a lot of demands on us to find the time and the resources to go through the legislation and to have a meaningful debate here. So I hope the government gives us ample time to do that. I do look forward to

comments from all sides of the House. I'm sure many of the government members will want to jump in after they do their homework and participate in the debate, at least I would hope they do that.

I want to start, Mr. Speaker, with the preamble because the preamble provides the context for the legislation, and I think some effort was put into the preamble over the last couple of years to make it as strong and compelling and perhaps even poetic as it could be. You know, regardless of whether it succeeded on those merits, I think it's worth commenting on some of the issues in the preamble. The second point in the preamble is: "Whereas education is the foundation of a democratic and civil society." I think we will have to read this entire legislation in that context.

I've slowly over the years come to the conclusion that the single most important thing that we do as a society is to educate our citizens. I have spent most of my career working around the health care system, and there was a time when I thought that providing public health care was the most important thing that a government can do. There's no question it's very important because without our health we don't have very much. But at this point in my life as I look at Canadian society, I actually have come to the point of believing that more important than health care is education. Perhaps the only thing that rivals that would be the work of the justice system because if we don't have rule of law, we don't have a functioning society.

I'm very pleased that the legislation emphasizes education as the foundation of a democratic and civil society. I was concerned over the last couple of years, as I'd heard that this legislation was in development, that it might come forward and say that education is the foundation of our economy and try to gear the whole education system not to educating citizens and building a society but to serving economic interests. I think that would have been a very alarming development because, after all, even the economy is here to serve society, not the other way around. I think evidence and history would show that if we educate citizens to be the foundation of a democratic and civil society, our strong economy will come along with that. I'm of the belief that democracy and civil society support a flourishing economy, not the other way around. If there was one that comes first, to me it would be civil society. So I'm quite pleased at that framing in the legislation.

The preamble continues in that vein. I find all of that hopeful here. When we're in committee, Mr. Speaker, we'll have an opportunity to go through this clause by clause, so I won't bother with that right now. But I do want to make note that the preamble is good, it's important, and I would commend it to all members of this Assembly as a little bit of reading and indeed to anybody in Alberta with an interest in the education system.

The Member for Calgary-Mountain View commented on a handful of items, and a couple of those I just want to also repeat and emphasize. One of those is an issue that I've brought over and over to the floor of this Assembly for many years, and that's the issue of school hunger. It's a difficult issue to convince people about because there's a kind of disbelief. I say that because I was in the same position. Years ago when I first began being told about hungry kids in school, I thought: "Oh, come on; this is Alberta. It can't be that way. Maybe some kid slept in and didn't get breakfast, but there can't possibly be widespread hunger in our schools."

I've come to be taught the sorry lesson, Mr. Speaker, that in fact there are thousands of kids in Alberta who go to school hungry every day because they don't come from functioning households, functioning at least in the way we would think, where the parents make sure there's food in the fridge and the kids are up and fed and so on before they go to school; maybe they're given a lunch

on their way to school. Unfortunately, thousands of kids go to school without that kind of support, and it is a fundamental failure of our society and, I argue, of this government that that's tolerated. I don't think that issue is addressed in the legislation. I might be wrong. But I would love to see, for example, something in the preamble about ensuring that children or students who attend school have adequate nutrition.

I'm not arguing for a lunch for every kid in every school in Alberta. We don't need to do that, and we probably shouldn't do that although there are jurisdictions that do in the world. I am arguing for targeted programs for at-risk populations. To me, that's every bit as important an investment, in fact a precursor investment to our investment in education because if we don't make that investment, then all the money we spend on teachers and schools and books and computers is for naught. That's something I'll be looking for in the legislation. From my first review of it I don't think it's addressed.

I am also wanting to examine this act for what it says about the needs of our First Nations, Métis, Inuit, aboriginal populations, and indeed immigrant populations, but I'll separate those. In Alberta there's a very large aboriginal population, and it's growing far faster than the average of the rest of the population. A very, very significant portion of our aboriginal population are children. We owe a duty to those children and we owe a duty to our society to make sure that they are given every equal advantage that other Albertans get in education.

I'm quite sure the minister is aware and sympathetic to the concerns that the resources and financing given to schools on reserves don't match what's given elsewhere. Reserves, we all understand, are not the jurisdiction of this government, but sadly when people living on reserves are not well educated and they drift off the reserves, they do end up as a responsibility of this government. So we have an interest as a government and we have a deeper interest as human beings to do a better job in educating our aboriginal people for everybody's benefit.

I know from my first glance at the preamble that that spirit is probably in the legislation, but I don't know whether the word about that is in the legislation, and I will be looking for that. It may not be in there directly. Maybe it's in there indirectly in sections under funding and resources or something like that. That'll be a real concern of mine.

3:50

I also want to get on the record an issue that was raised in question period today and I think was raised a few minutes ago by the Member for Calgary-Mountain View, which is around school fees. This is an active debate and will probably remain an active debate in the Legislature. There is a clear trend in our education system for fees to grow to not only ever-larger amounts but to cover ever-broader responsibilities. There was a time when fees were essentially there for things that were purely extras: a field trip to the zoo or the uniforms for the school track team when they went to the grade 6 track meet, things like that.

I remember as a kid that there were bake sales at schools. In fact, I got in trouble once because my mother baked brownies for the bake sale at the school when I was in elementary, and she gave me the plate of brownies to deliver, along with a couple of my friends, from home to school. Boy, those looked like good brownies. The next day my mother – darn it, anyway – phoned up and asked the head of the home and school association how the bake sale went: "Did the brownies get a good price?" The head of the home and school said: "Sorry, Mrs. Taft. What brownies were those?" Now we were caught; we'd eaten the brownies. Anyway, that was the kind of level that school fees used to be at.

Now, I think all of us have schools in our constituencies where the fees go way beyond that. There are fees for things that would generally be considered fundamentals like library books, special fundraising programs, including casinos, for schools to pay for computers, and on and on it goes. I think we have to have a more serious debate about how we solve that problem and make sure that fees are not an obstacle to children attending school or that the lack of fees doesn't mean that a school ends up providing a worse education because it can't afford the extras that are, in fact, essentials. So school fees come up a lot.

I'm also noting, as I first look through this, that this legislation is consistent with legislation in general; it empowers the minister more and more. More and more details are just taken out of legislation and put into regulations. That means they're taken out from the purview of this Assembly and put into the purview of the minister and of the cabinet. That raises a lot of concerns. It certainly provides more flexibility, but it does raise questions around accountability, influence, and even the whims of the day that may be affecting politics at any given time.

With those comments, Mr. Speaker, I will wait and see what else is said in second reading, and I look forward to more extensive debate when we get into committee. I don't know if the government is a hundred per cent committed to this getting passed into law this spring. The minister is saying yes, so I guess we'll have lots of time with it. I know it was introduced in an earlier version last year and very wisely, I think, left to sit on the Order Paper so that there could be widespread review and consultation. I wish the government did that more often. I do now see from the actions of the minister that this time it's determined that this will get through the Legislature. That's great. Let's have an animated debate.

Thank you.

The Deputy Speaker: Standing Order 29(2)(a) allows for five minutes of comments and questions.

Seeing none, the hon. Member for Airdrie-Chestermere.

Mr. Anderson: Yes. Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure to rise on second reading of Bill 2, the Education Act. I want to congratulate the minister and his predecessors for the very large amount of work that obviously went into this, a large amount of consultation. There are many good things in this act, and we'll get into some of the things that I think could be tweaked in a couple of sections to make it an even better act when we get to Committee of the Whole.

Today I wanted to give kind of an overview of what I would like to see in our education system, and of course there's no better time to discuss it than now since this act covers so much of what we're trying to achieve in the education system in Alberta. Of course, I will have some good things to say. I will also have some criticisms of where we've come from on a few things and some suggestions of actual solutions. So I hope that the Assembly and the minister will give at least some time to listen to this and, hopefully, implement some of the suggestions.

Ensuring that Alberta's children have access to a world-class education is one of the most important roles the provincial government can play in building our province. In partnership with the important core values taught by parents, education provides a launching point for a healthy and contributing citizen. To deny a child a proper education is to greatly increase the risk of losing that child to ignorance, poverty, and even crime.

The provincial government currently spends more per capita than any other province on education. Although many of those dollars are sent into programs and to the front lines where they are

needed, the problem is that hundreds of millions of dollars are wasted and often misallocated by what has become a massive, centralized bureaucracy at the Legislature and a lot of political decision-making. As we have seen with the new Alberta superboard, placing control of program and service delivery in the hands of a large, centralized bureaucracy is a recipe for disaster. Even more disturbing has been the current PC government's record of selecting new school sites based on politics rather than actual need. It is far more transparent, efficient, and effective to decentralize decision-making into the hands of parents, local schools, and elected school boards. They best understand the needs of their students and would never think to play politics with our children's welfare.

An important feature of Alberta's education system is that it provides parents with a greater range of educational choices than other jurisdictions in North America. This is one of the strongest points of our education system. Although strong public schools are critical to our education system, Catholic schools, public charter schools, private schools, specifically nonprofit private schools, and home-schooling provide educational opportunities and teaching methods that are sometimes unavailable in our public system. In fact, our public schools have responded to competition from Catholic, public, charter, as well as private and home-schooling by rolling out a diverse range of excellent core and optional courses that are benefiting students across Alberta. Continuing to foster a culture of educational choice, innovation, and competition will pay dividends for our teachers, our parents, and of course for children for decades and decades to come.

As most teachers and parents well know, the traditional classroom model of a teacher lecturing students of the same age has become increasingly outdated. This type of system often results in gifted students having their potential restricted by peers who may not learn as quickly while students who have not grasped key concepts are moved on to higher grades and more complicated subject matter regardless of whether or not they are ready. This can result, of course, in frustration, the domination of a teacher's time by a few struggling students, and perpetual poor grades for some students, and frustration and poor grades can lead to behavioural problems.

Furthermore, all students respond to different teaching methods in different ways. The standard classroom lecture model may work well for some students, but for others it results in a constant battle to comprehend and to learn. Fortunately, emerging technologies and teaching methods make it possible to centre teaching on the learning needs of each individual student. Taking advantage of these educational advances will ensure that our children are able to learn at the right pace and in the right way for them rather than participating in the traditional one-size-fits-all approach.

Moving on to the area of special-needs students, something very near and dear to my heart, there are thousands of Alberta parents – and any of us who go door-knocking have met dozens and dozens, even hundreds of them – that have children with special learning needs. It is absolutely critical that we ensure that these students and their parents are provided with the funding necessary to address these challenges as early as possible in a child's development. Failure to do so can have catastrophic consequences for the child and the child's family and will result in massive, massive costs to taxpayers down the road.

4:00

Unfortunately, although our preschool programs for special-needs children are actually quite good, one of the best in the country if not in North America, our programs and our funding for

special-needs students in the grades 1 through 12 education system are chronically underfunded, frankly, and we need to do a better job. Often special-needs funding in the K to 12 system is difficult to access, with parents and teachers having very limited say in how it is best utilized. In most cases parents will want to work with their child's school to include their student in a regular classroom setting. When proper support is provided, inclusive education is very beneficial to both special-needs students as well as their classmates. Some parents may choose, however, a different option, and this choice should be respected as well. Each special-needs student is unique, very unique, and should in partnership with parents be considered and supported accordingly.

We in the Wildrose feel that Alberta's students and parents deserve improvement in their education system. They deserve better. So the following are several points that a Wildrose government, if elected or if in opposition, would push for in order to strengthen our K to 12 education system by implementing the following reforms. First, we would empower individual public, Catholic, and public charter schools by implementing a funding model that sends per-student operational and maintenance funding directly to the school each student attends while accounting for the fixed costs of schools in smaller rural communities. Individual schools would then be able to determine how to allocate those resources most appropriately, be that to hire more teachers, for new equipment, et cetera.

Second, we would transfer decision-making authority concerning the building of new schools away from the provincial government and place it squarely in the hands of locally elected school boards. This would be done by implementing a publicly disclosed and objective funding formula that grants capital funds directly to local school boards based on student enrolment, school utilization rates, student growth projections, and other relevant factors. We'd get them the capital funding that those boards need; they would decide where the schools are most needed.

Third, we would establish multiple pilot projects across the province where open enrolment and tuition-free public, Catholic, and public charter schools are committed to opt into what we call a competency-based learning and assessment education model. Students in these schools would have the opportunity to learn at a pace and in a way that is tailored to their individual needs and would not move on to more advanced material until they had demonstrated strong understanding of a previously taught subject matter. Students who learn at an accelerated pace under this system would also be able to obtain college- and university-level course credits while still in high school. Students that start falling behind in this new system would be immediately identified and would receive the support they needed to catch up to where they should be at their age level.

We need to end the days where we push kids almost like cattle through a stall just to get them to the next level so that we don't have to deal with them anymore in the grade that they're in. But we don't want to go to a system where if a child isn't excelling or passing a certain unit – they're not doing well in a certain area but are doing well in all the other areas – we fail them and send them right back to the beginning of their grade. Both are equally unacceptable. We've got to find a better way to use technology, to give our kids the learning opportunities they deserve.

Fourth, we would grant public, Catholic, and public charter schools more flexibility to offer a specialized curriculum track in the trades, arts, music, physical education, and in business. Also, we would protect a parent's right to choose what school their child attends – be it public, Catholic, public Charter, private, or home-schooling – and continue the current Alberta Education practice of permitting a fixed percentage of regular per-pupil funding to

directly follow a student to the nonprofit private school of their parents' choice if desired.

Next, we would mandate the public reporting of each school's graduation rate and overall subject-by-subject assessment results so that parents have the information they need to make informed decisions regarding their child's education.

Next, we would work with teachers and other educational professionals to replace the outdated and inadequate provincial achievement tests with a new standardized assessment model that evaluates a student's actual improvement and comprehension of subject matter and more effectively identifies where further learning is required. It is also important to ensure that teachers are provided with the professional development training necessary to implement such a model. In other words, Mr. Speaker, the PATs are very flawed, indeed.

However, they do serve a purpose. They do allow us to have some sort of standardized assessment of our students that is open to teachers, and we would not be in favour of just simply cutting the PATs in favour of not having them and not having any way to assess our students. I hope that the minister will not go down that road.

However, the PATs are flawed, so we need to look at a way that we can transition to a new assessment model using that competency-based learning method that was talked about earlier as one possible way to do it, where students aren't moved on in a unit until they've shown that they understand the material. This will give our parents and our teachers the ability to know exactly where their child is, where every child is at any one given time. They'll know exactly if they need to get more resources, instead of waiting two or three years later before they realize: "Oh, no. This child can't read. This child can't read at a fifth grade level, and he's in grade 7. This is a problem." We need to make sure that our learning assessment model gives parents what they need, gives teachers what they need, and gives students what they need with regard to knowing exactly where their kids are in the curriculum at any one given time.

Also, we would ensure that students are properly assessed and any special learning needs identified as early as possible in a child's development. We would mandate that adequate funding follow each special-needs student to the institution of that child's parents' choice to be used in a way that the parent and the school's learning support team feels will best meet the individual needs of the child. Right now special-needs funding is sent to the school boards, and they decide what to do with it. This model doesn't work. Every parent with a child with special needs that I talked to says the same thing: it doesn't work. The funding for special needs has to follow the individual child so that when a parent goes into a school and sits down with the learning support team and their child is assessed and is found to need X amount of support, that money goes straight to that child and not to the school board, which sometimes will hand out that money based on, well, different funding pressures and things that they're dealing with.

Finally, we would respect the choice of parents who wish to give their special-needs students the opportunity to attend the same classrooms as typical students wherever possible and ensure that adequate supervision and support is provided to each such student so that the classroom can remain a healthy learning environment for all.

Mr. Speaker, these are but a few of the ideas that we've been hearing as a Wildrose caucus as we go out and talk to folks. It has honestly been one of the most interesting and exciting areas that I have been involved with over the last two years, in particular, as Education critic. As someone who has four kids – two are in the public system; two are too young as of yet but will be there soon –

I feel very passionate about this. I want to make sure that they and their friends and all Alberta's kids have an education system that is second to none, is best in the world. We have a good education system now. We can do better.

Thank you very much.

The Deputy Speaker: Standing Order 29(2)(a)?

Seeing none, the chair shall now recognize the hon. Member for Calgary-Buffalo.

4:10

Mr. Hehr: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's a great privilege to discuss today in this honourable House the Education Act as put on the floor yesterday and to give my initial comments on the act and maybe offer some ideas of my own and some concerns that I may have.

Although I am the Education critic and it might appear from question period that I'm oftentimes cranky and the like, I will fully admit that I believe students are learning in our classrooms better than they ever have before. I'm of the assertion that our public school teachers and the kids who take part in that system are learning great things and are going to do things better than we have in this generation, and they're going to find solutions to problems that we may have created amongst ourselves the last hundred years or so.

With that introduction, I also was reminded, doing some reading the other night, that the hallmark of any egalitarian society that recognizes equality of opportunity will be publicly funded education. Without a public education system where kids, whether they're born of a rich family or a poor family, whether able-bodied, whether disabled, whether they are the next Einstein or the next Madame Curie – we need a system that ensures that equality of opportunity exists. I think the glowing statement in regard to equality of opportunity has been and always will be a strong publicly funded education system to ensure equality of opportunity.

I'm always, too, wise to listen to the hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview. When he goes before you, you are always captured by his eloquence and his reasoned approach to almost every bill he speaks on in this House. I know it will be a great loss when he retires as I have come to appreciate his comments and his commitment to not only this House but to things like public education very much over the years. He highlighted the preamble of this bill and noted that there is much effort put into crafting some of these sentiments and statements that, hopefully, will move the chains forward for the vast majority of Alberta students. As goes education, so goes Alberta. I'm hopeful that some of his words are recognized.

I, too, want to compliment some of the preamble. The hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview was perfectly correct in what he said about the second line in the preamble. "Whereas education is the foundation of a democratic and civil society." He's perfectly right. School is where we learn to care, share, play, and even fight together and realize that at the end of the day we're all human beings and we all have many of the same issues at heart. What we learn at school and how we learn to get along in this fashion is how we will carry forth when we are older, when we are taking part in society in a fuller measure.

I like some of the language. "Whereas the role of education is to develop engaged thinkers who think critically and creatively, and ethical citizens who demonstrate respect, teamwork and democratic ideals." If we move forward, another one, it says that "the Government of Alberta recognizes the importance of an inclusive education system that provides each student with the

relevant learning opportunities and supports necessary to enable students to achieve success."

An inclusive education to me essentially represents the public school system. Whether you're born of a rich family or a poor family, you are going to be allowed to develop your skills in the most forthright and robust manner possible. That's, to me, what establishes an inclusive education system. That is the hallmark.

I know my hon. friend from Edmonton-Riverview hasn't spent as much time on the act or the preamble as I. There is one cautionary note in there and one tragic flaw that I see in the preamble, and it is significantly different from the previous Education Act, where it says in the second last preamble: "Whereas the Government of Alberta is committed to providing choice to students in education programs and methods of learning." I'll describe a little bit of my concern over that use of wording and its change from the last act.

As many of you can see from my questions in question period, many in the last session and probably more forthcoming, I've asked the minister about private schools and the funding that Alberta gives to private schools, which is the highest in the nation. We are one of only five provinces who engage in this type of funding, and we fund private schools higher than any other jurisdiction. That's a fact. In fact, the rest of the provinces do not engage in this practice and, in my view, are probably stronger for it in the long run.

We look at this language of providing choice, and when I asked the minister this in question period, choice is commensurate with private-school funding, okay? That's what it means. That's what the minister by his answers in question period associates choice with. To me, that is an unneeded choice of words to put into a preamble in your Education Act. If you look at the old act, which came in in 1988, the act said that the government of Alberta remains committed to one publicly funded education system. It has evolved from there, where they have splintered off and funded private schools at, I believe, a 50 per cent funding level in the '70s to a 60 per cent level just after the 2004 campaign to a 70 per cent level after the 2008 campaign.

What we're seeing, in my view, that private-school funding has done is that it has served to divide communities rather than unite them. It separates children rather than uniting them, and that to me is something that governments should not be involved in. If people want to send their children to private school, sure. It's their right to do so, but that doesn't mean we have to fund or subsidize their choice in schools.

If you look around the province, in the main private schools charge larger tuition, in fact some schools very large tuitions, \$17,000 admission fees. Private schools take their choice of children. Many, if not most, do not accept children with disabilities, do not accept people with learning challenges, are able to pick and choose their students as they wish. One that I saw even makes students take an IQ test to see whether they are able to participate in that school. Further, we see that many private schools have become religious schools, where different people of different faiths can set up their school and receive government funding. Hey, I'm all for them being able to set up their school. We just don't have to fund it. Okay? They're religious schools. This separates society; it doesn't embrace it. [interjection]

4:20

The hon. minister will get a chance to get up and express his views on the Education Act, and I look forward to him commenting. Right now I'm giving my views. I understand they're not his views. I'm often refreshed by the fact that we don't all think alike in this room because oftentimes when we all think

alike, we don't think very much. I'll look forward to the minister's comments and his support of private schooling and his support of the voucher system and how we should be going on a more American model of schooling because that's been a real success. We'll point to that model, and the hon. minister can stand up and point to that model and quote to the hallmarks of how this has worked well for that society. I look forward to the hon. Minister of Energy's comments in defence of that system and how it's led that society forward.

Those are the principal things that I believe the government should . . . [interjection] The government, by only funding private schools to 70 per cent, makes the argument for me. If the hon. minister was correct, why isn't his government actually funding private schools to 100 per cent of the level? The Wildrose is advocating for that position.

The government, by its sort of middle ground, is self-admitting that they're not sure if this is right for society or right for all of their caucus. Unless I'm wrong in interpreting it in that fashion, that's what it says to me, okay? If this government truly believed what the hon. Minister of Energy was saying there, they would fully fund it 100 per cent. Why doesn't the government do that if they truly believe that? I think they realize that private schools and the continued expansion thereof lead to a breakdown in what our communities say. I look forward to the hon. minister giving his comments on that and why his government doesn't fund them to the 100 per cent level if he actually believes that this is the best way to go.

Nevertheless, I'll leave that topic for now and talk about some of the positive things I do see in the act because there are some positive things. We can look at the act in total. It is by most accounts a prescriptive document that allows a lot of flexibility for our school boards and the continued interpretation of the act going forward. That said, a lot of the devil is going to be in the detail. This act doesn't deal with funding models. It does not deal with how many kids are going to be in the classroom.

I'll note for the record that in 2003 the Learning Commission report came out with recommendations on class sizes that we have not yet come close to recognizing. Those goals and aspirations are not prescribed in this act.

I also know it is silent on school fees, okay? It's continuing, as the hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview pointed out, to become a point of contention for many students, as I said in question period earlier, a tax by another means and an unfair tax for that matter, in my view. It doesn't deal with providing lunch programs in certain areas that may need them. Those are some of the things that need to be clarified, and then there will be ongoing issues that we debate in this Legislature.

I was, like I said earlier, encouraged by some of the things involved in this act. One of those was raising the age of attendance to 17. Although it's very difficult . . . [Mr. Hehr's speaking time expired]

The Deputy Speaker: Standing Order 29(2)(a). Any hon. member? The Deputy Government House Leader.

Mr. Denis: Being someone who's been to public school, Catholic school, and private school, I would like to adjourn debate.

[Motion to adjourn debate carried]

Consideration of His Honour the Lieutenant Governor's Speech

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

To His Honour the Honourable Colonel (Retired) Donald S. Ethell, OC, OMM, AOE, MSC, CD, LLD, the Lieutenant Governor of the Province of Alberta:

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

[Debate adjourned February 14: Mr. Kang speaking]

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Fish Creek.

Mrs. Forsyth: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. I look forward to the Speech from the Throne every year. We as Albertans get a sense of where the government will be going and where they are coming from. This province is a wonderful place to live, work, and raise a family. The wonderful people I serve in Calgary-Fish Creek let me know when they are unhappy about something, and if they have a problem, I try to help them.

Mr. Speaker, I door-knock every year, usually from May to September. I listen to what they, my constituents, tell me at the door, and I take their conversations to heart. Every month I post an article on my website called What's on Your Mind. It's not what's on my mind but what my constituents from Calgary-Fish Creek tell me. I have a good sense of what the people in my community feel on the issues.

I, like my constituents, am concerned with what I heard in the throne speech. I listened closely, and I read the speech again just to be sure. I was shocked – absolutely shocked – to hear the governing party take credit for the Alberta we live in today. I'm going to quote: "A little more than 40 years ago Alberta set out on the road to the modern age under the leadership of people with such foresight." [interjection] Mr. Speaker, you know you get under the government when you start having them yell at you when you're in the middle of the throne speech, doing a speech that represents what your constituents are telling you. [interjections]

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Fish Creek has the floor.

Mrs. Forsyth: Mr. Speaker, I was offended in a few ways; for one, by the attitude of the government and of all the parties that have spent too much time in power. It's that the world did not seem to exist before they took power. Quite frankly, that's arrogant. To pretend that this fine province and its fine people are a product manufactured by the governing party is an insult. After the throne speech you probably came away thinking that the PC Party invented the wheel and that they are the best thing since sliced bread.

Alberta has a proud history, and the reason for that is quite simple. It's the people of Alberta. The reason we have a successful economy is because of all the entrepreneurs out there building businesses and creating jobs. The only thing holding our health care system together is the hard work of our health professionals. They are the front-line workers like the doctors, the nurses, the LPNs, and all the other wonderful staff that are holding on for the sake of all Albertans. Alberta is great despite the governing party, not because of it.

Here's another quote that made my jaw drop. "Recognizing the need for imaginative new programs, it made bold decisions that built up the province we take for granted today." Now, if I'm reading that the way my constituents in Calgary-Fish Creek are, we're not grateful enough to the PC Party for the world we live in today. Quite frankly, I feel grateful to serve the people of Calgary-

Fish Creek and Alberta, not the other way around. Albertans built this province. They built the schools, they built the businesses, and they built the homes that we live in today.

I became an MLA because I believed in the Alberta advantage. I believed in a government that listened and was responsive to the needs of Albertans. What I liked about the Alberta advantage was that the government knew when to get out of the way and trust Albertans to lead it. Now the government is asking Albertans to get out of the way; the government has everything taken care of. I know my constituents don't feel the same way. They're nervous about a group of people who talk about discussions and conversations but do what they want anyway.

4:30

A saying has always stuck with me for as long as I've been in government. We have two ears and one mouth so that we can listen twice as much as we speak. I certainly hope this government takes that quote to heart, so I ask: why does this government continue to assume they know what's best for Albertans?

I know that Albertans have and always had a pioneering spirit. To this day Alberta is a land that attracts people from all over the world. They come here for the opportunity and the freedom to make a better life for themselves and their families. That is their dream, and that is mine, too, and quite frankly we've succeeded. This is the best place in the world to live and raise a family and do business. We as Albertans create Alberta in our image. We decide; that's democracy. But I wonder if the Premier feels the same way. Here is another quote. "Your government will not miss the opportunity to reshape Alberta." Excuse me? Reshape? There is nothing wrong with Albertans. Quite the opposite, in fact. Albertans are the reason this province is great. What Albertans want is the opportunity, quite frankly, to reshape the government.

There is a reason why I'm no longer in the governing party. It was my choice and a difficult one at that. I've been privileged and I've been humbled by the opportunity to serve the residents of Calgary-Fish Creek. Quite frankly, they're my bosses. They're the people I always listen to. They told me what had been troubling them for some time: the government had stopped listening. It had all the answers no matter what the questions were.

Here's another quote that struck me. "Alberta's families and businesses have a government that will help them adapt and build a province that present and future generations will be proud of." Albertans know full well how to make the province succeed and how to create a province to be proud of. They don't know what results-based budgeting is. I wonder if many in government know either. What Albertans do know and what Albertans understand is that their budget is made at the kitchen table, where they decide the wants and the needs. I don't think the governing party is up to that simple challenge.

I am proud of Alberta, Mr. Speaker, at this very moment. I always have been and always will be. I don't think twice about saying it. I must assume, however, that this government under the Premier is not proud of Alberta. She must think that there is something wrong with its foundation. Is she ashamed? I have no idea why. Alberta is amazing. This province has been great to me, and there are millions out there that feel the same way. Why? Because they built it. They get their hands dirty, they put in their time, and they put in their effort. They made Alberta what it is today.

Nothing worthwhile is easy. We've earned the Alberta we have today through hard work and smart work, not because of the Premier's office. That's why I'm concerned when I read that "it's time for foundational change." The Premier thinks that with a change in the leader and some substitutes on the cabinet bench

we've started the foundational change. Quite frankly, that's completely wrong. The foundations of Alberta are not in the Premier's office or in the cabinet. They are in the people of Alberta. Alberta's foundation lies in the grassroots. There is nothing wrong with the people of Alberta. They elect the government; the government does not elect the people.

All I've seen in the last year from the governing party is lip service and, quite frankly, cosmetic change. Albertans are not fooled. They know what's going on in their schools, their hospitals, and their communities. If they'd been listening, they'd know that by now.

I'm hopeful, Mr. Speaker. I know Albertans will persevere and they'll succeed. Nothing will hold them back; nothing ever has. This government has a clear choice, listen or get out of the way.

The Deputy Speaker: Any others on 29(2)(a)?

Seeing none, the Deputy Government House Leader.

Mr. Denis: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I move that we adjourn debate on the throne speech.

[Motion to adjourn debate carried]

Government Bills and Orders Committee of the Whole

[Mr. Cao in the chair]

The Chair: The chair shall now call the committee to order.

Bill 1 Results-based Budgeting Act

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

Dr. Swann: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair. I'm pleased to speak at Committee of the Whole on Bill 1, the Results-based Budgeting Act, of the government. I've spoken on this once before. The principle is good. There's no question that we need to evaluate how we're spending money, how we're deploying resources, how we're planning for the future based on results. I don't think anybody can challenge that need, and I'm pleased to see the government explicitly committing themselves to it.

As I mentioned yesterday in second reading, when we get to the implementation of this bill it becomes a problem. Are we going to be comparing results from last year? Are we going to be comparing results to the best in the world? Are we going to be looking at what prevention would result in, which is an absence of data in some cases. If alcoholism is not happening, if addictions are not increasing, if injuries are not happening, if people are being counselled and avoiding the use of emergency departments unnecessarily: we have to be clear about what the indicators of success are and what these results might be.

This government has not shown leadership on establishing some consistent baseline indicators of performance, whether it be in our health system or whether it be in our royalty system. Part of the challenge that we face as opposition is how one would begin to measure results from the budgets that are being spent, particularly when we don't see line items that indicate specifically where money is going. We see large expenditures. We see no clear indication of where one could expect results from a certain expenditure. So it's going to have to be a lot more transparent and a lot more accountable if we are to buy into this notion that the Premier and this government are serious about results-based management, starting from the ground up and looking at real results.

In addition, I guess, I want to ensure that we don't simply ignore the process. If all we're measuring is results, it's possible to create all kinds of statistics that show improvement. But if we're not looking at a demoralized population, intimidated staff, increasing sick leave, if we're not looking at departures from the departments, then we're not really looking at the whole result and not assessing the degree to which departments are actually inspiring their workers, engaging in constructive change within a department, and making appropriate promotions and demotions and firings in some instances.

A lot hinges on what this government chooses to define as results and whether they start to ignore the process of functioning of a particular department. I want to put on the record that when the rubber hits the road, the principle of results-based management is excellent. In practice it is very difficult to do in a way that is transparent, that is actually measuring the right things, and that is holding themselves accountable to not only better than last year in that department but the best in the world.

4:40

I would just put those caveats on the table and say that I personally support this principle, results-based budgeting. But I hope the government will take under advisement the concerns about defining those results and about not ignoring the processes going on in departments that would move us toward a sustainable, healthy work culture for the staff and the various officials in departments and that would actually result in substantial improvement not only in the department but in the population. Ultimately the results have to be measured in reduced wait times, improved health in the population, improved prosperity for average Albertans, improved care of people with disabilities and learning problems and addictions. If we don't see those kinds of results, Mr. Chairman, what are we measuring, and what are we basing results-based budgeting upon?

We'll be watching very carefully in the first year as I assume this will be enacted. We'll be watching very carefully. In fact, we recommended as an amendment yesterday through Edmonton-Gold Bar that we establish a committee of the House to actually hold us accountable for what is happening in results-based management and what kind of quality results we get and what kind of transparency we get from this government around what they're measuring, what they determine a success, and what they do about the unsuccessful aspects of a budget review.

Thank you, Mr. Chair. I'll take my seat and open the floor to others.

The Chair: Any other hon. member wishing to speak in Committee of the Whole?

Seeing none, the chair shall now put the question.

[The clauses of Bill 1 agreed to]

[Title and preamble agreed to]

The Chair: Shall the bill be reported? Are you agreed?

Hon. Members: Yes.

The Chair: Opposed? Carried.

The hon. Deputy Government House Leader.

Mr. Denis: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair. I'd move that the committee rise and report.

[Motion carried]

[The Deputy Speaker in the chair]

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

Mr. Elniski: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The Committee of the Whole has had under consideration a certain bill. The committee reports the following bill: Bill 1.

The Deputy Speaker: Having heard the report from the hon. Member for Edmonton-Calder, does this Assembly concur in the report?

Hon. Members: Concur.

The Deputy Speaker: Opposed? So ordered.

Government Bills and Orders Second Reading (continued)

Bill 3 Appropriation (Supplementary Supply) Act, 2012

[Adjourned debate February 15: Mr. Denis]

The Deputy Speaker: Any other hon. member wish to speak on the bill?

Seeing none, the chair shall now call the question.

[Motion carried; Bill 3 read a second time]

Consideration of His Honour the Lieutenant Governor's Speech (continued)

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

To His Honour the Honourable Colonel (Retired) Donald S. Ethell, OC, OMM, AOE, MSC, CD, LLD, the Lieutenant Governor of the Province of Alberta:

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

[Adjourned debate February 15: Mr. Denis]

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Mountain View on the speech by the Lieutenant Governor.

Dr. Swann: Yes. Thanks very much, Mr. Speaker. It's my first chance to get up and respond to the throne speech, and I'm very pleased to do so. The Premier raised a number of issues. The Lieutenant Governor raised a number of issues in the throne speech that relate to the future of Alberta, the needs of our population in relation to health care, education, the environment, energy, a lot of motherhood statements that, really, many of us were left feeling rather pale about and lacking in serious direction except for her primary bill, that we've just passed.

I guess I'd like to say that the Alberta Liberals have a vision for Alberta. This caucus has put together an exciting and visionary platform for Alberta that I think Albertans will embrace. It has to do with a serious review and commitment to health care, beginning in prevention and ending in end-of-life issues that address not shortfalls of funding – we don't need more money. We need better management of the wonderful human potential we have in this province and the tremendous opportunity that's being squandered by not addressing poverty, not addressing seriously the challenges faced by persons with disabilities, children with

learning problems that need to be identified earlier, emotional and behavioural problems that need to be seen by mental health services, early signs of breakdown in families, and addictions that can be prevented by a proactive system that is actually based in communities. Primary care networks are a good initiative that this government has taken over the last seven years and now appears to be abandoning.

In the absence of a bigger vision from the throne speech, we are offering to the Premier and to this government and to Albertans a more visionary approach to getting back to basics, you might call it, Mr. Speaker, supporting people where they are, assisting them in their fundamental needs for food, shelter, clothing, and mental health supports, early intervention programs for kids and families that are at risk and in some cases in distress, and an ongoing set of community services which have been dramatically cut by this government over the last 20 years in spite of the wealth. We have compromised so many good support programs in this province and placed at risk and at huge expense, as the Poverty Costs report indicated last week, tremendous opportunities here for prevention, for early intervention, for more cost-effective services in this province.

4:50

That's just one aspect of what we would want to bring to the table as a throne speech that would inspire Albertans and reinspire the Human Services people, the child and family services people, mental health people, addictions people that we get it. We understand the primary needs of people and that the primary responsibility of government is to ensure that everybody in this place has access to healthy environments, healthy food, opportunities for advancing themselves educationally, occupationally, and vocationally, that we will do everything possible to create a level playing field for success and for reaching human potential in this province. So that was the big deficit for me in listening to the throne speech this year, the lack of any serious commitment to the people of this province and to prevention.

The other area where I thought we missed an opportunity and continue to miss an opportunity is talking about innovation in this province and talking about a knowledge economy but not investing in the innovation and postsecondary education system. It has to be much more accessible to people than it is today. It has to be much more accessible to those on low income and to those who struggle educationally but who have remarkable skills in many different technical areas and innovations that simply need the support of a system that wants citizens to be productive citizens, taxpaying citizens, and to fully reach their potential. Our postsecondary system is not being funded adequately, and we're losing tremendous opportunities economically, socially, and I think even in the environment because of people who are being excluded due to financial or other barriers. We simply don't have the capacity in our postsecondary system today.

The other area which brought me into politics is a stronger agenda for the environment. The environment was given nominal attention in the throne speech, but it is the primary resource. Everything else is a subsidiary of the environment. Our lives, our economy, our social well-being, our health: all of these depend on a healthy, sustainable environment.

Without a serious commitment to climate change and the tremendous impacts not only across the world where there are the most severe impacts but on our people with water shortages, depletion of food production, more difficulty with desertification, loss of forest cover, and impacts on water quality and quantity as well as new infectious diseases and extreme weather events, we are again not showing leadership to the world by dragging our feet, by

ignoring the international community's call for thinking about our young people, our future, the long-term well-being of the planet.

Instead of being the laggards, be leaders in climate change. Set absolute targets, not relative intensity targets. Set a price on carbon so that everybody is clear and fair about how we deal with these pollutants, carbon and other greenhouse gases. Set timelines and hold ourselves to it. Use the money that we get to invest in energy efficiency and new technologies that the rest of the world, including China, is going to lead the planet on.

We are going to be buying from China solar panels, wind energy, new technologies that will transform the energy future of the world, and instead of being leaders, we are dragging our feet and are focusing on a single resource because of short-term thinking and a lack of commitment to the environment, to the long-term well-being of our people and our planet.

Who but Alberta should be setting the stage for leadership on climate change? We have technology. We have science here that is beyond many countries' dreams. We have intelligent people. We have resources. We have opportunities that other countries do not have. We have a carbon-intensive economy. Let's show the world what a carbon-intensive economy can do to lead the way in reducing carbon.

Instead, we see, as I say, really regressive and apologetic decisions that protect, so called, an industry but actually have destroyed the reputation of our industry because we haven't taken leadership, because we haven't set standards and enforced standards that the world can respect. Again, as far as vision, this throne speech didn't give us that.

We have heard from economists across the globe that Alberta is not meeting its expectations, shall I say, regarding stable, dependable funding. We continue to live on a roller coaster, and this government has said that's good enough. We'll take what we get from our resources, we'll continue to depend for a third of our budget on oil wealth and land sales and not have a stable base upon which Albertans can depend for their basic needs being met: housing, nutrition, health care, education. That is an area where I think, again, this government is not prepared to be courageous and show leadership and establish a fair tax regime where all Albertans can be confident that they and their children and their children's children will have a solid base for well-being, prosperity, and meeting their potential.

I was pleased to hear the throne speech address new Canadians and the workforce that is going to be coming here and the commitment to supporting new Canadians. That is a very good and a very important commitment because what I'm hearing at the front lines is that many of these people are falling through the cracks, particularly professionals. Engineers, teachers, nurses, physicians who are driving taxis for many, many years and becoming depressed, engaging with the health care system trying to seek help for their problems, when they have such potential, such skills, if we can work with them more consistently, more appropriately and prepare them for entering our workforces, especially at a time when we're short of some of these professions.

It's distressing to see wasted human potential. It's distressing to see people suffering from lack of a service where some of these professionals could be providing it, especially in culturally appropriate ways. A large number in the Indian community are lacking culturally appropriate services, for example, or the Chinese community because they can't get appropriate, culturally responsive services. We have these people among us. Let's work with them. Let's invest in them. I was pleased to see some acknowledgement of that in the throne speech, so I will indicate support for that.

All in all, Mr. Speaker, it was a lacklustre throne speech that hasn't inspired many in this House and, I dare say, in the province. I hope that those who are working as officials in our Human Services and other parts of government, officials, front-line workers, take heart from some of the vision and challenges that the opposition throws towards the government because it's clear that this government has run out of ideas. They're tired.

They have done things in a certain way for so many decades that it's pretty hard for them to think outside the box, frankly, and a new face on the government doesn't actually do the trick. There are too many vested interests, too many debts to pay, too many benefits to be reaped by maintaining both the relationships and the decisions, the policy decisions, that continue to be made in this House for what I would call self-interest, political interest and not the interests of Albertans, certainly not the long-term best interests of our children.

With that, I'll take my seat, Mr. Speaker, and offer the floor to others.

The Deputy Speaker: Standing Order 29(2)(a)

Seeing none, the hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview on the throne speech.

Dr. Taft: On the throne speech, yes. It's a privilege for me to deliver what will be my last response to a throne speech. I think this is the 12th one I've heard, Mr. Speaker. While I appreciated the best efforts of the Lieutenant Governor to give it life, I also, like the Member for Calgary-Mountain View, found it to be pretty lacklustre. I've heard surprisingly little about it since it was delivered, which I think would confirm what most people have said. So I will, as promised, keep my comments fairly brief, but I do want to go through it point by point.

I did like the approach taken by the Member for Calgary-Mountain View when he alluded to some of the things that we as the Alberta Liberal caucus would like to see in a throne speech. I'm going to take a little bit different approach.

5:00

I do want to start on page 1, and I'll quote as I go along from the speech. At that point the Lieutenant Governor said, "In my lifetime alone, Alberta has come a long way." It certainly has, and I think it's worth all of us remembering that in one lifetime Alberta has gone from being the poorest province in Canada to in 1936 becoming the only province in Canadian history to default on its debt. That's how poor Alberta was one lifetime ago.

Today, as I was saying a little earlier in the Assembly, we are the wealthiest jurisdiction probably in the world. That's wonderful for all of us who have been able to ride that great wave of prosperity and wealth and advancement, but I think there are two or three lessons in that that we all need to keep in mind. One is just how much that really depends on one industry, one resource, the oil and gas industry, which the Member for Leduc-Beaumont-Devon talked about today. He mentioned – I must say this – the discovery of Leduc No. 1 by "Dry Hole" Hunter. "Dry Hole" Hunter's son, who's now a retired or nearly retired schoolteacher, lives in my constituency, and "Dry Hole" Hunter's grandson is hoping to go to the Olympics in London this coming summer, competing for Canada in kayaking. So just a little aside there.

One of the lessons about this incredible wave of prosperity for Alberta is that it's all come on the back of one resource. The other is the sheer speed of it. Those of us here need to remember that just as over one lifetime we went from the bottom to the top, in one lifetime we can go from the top to the bottom, and if we're not careful, I'm concerned that we will, Mr. Speaker. If we don't do

things like build up the heritage fund and secure our long-term and build up a more diverse economy, the day will come – and it can be shockingly fast – when we are on a prolonged ride back to the bottom.

Mr. Speaker, on page 3 there's a glimmer of hope. It's pretty vague, but it's there if I look carefully. It's the third-last paragraph. It's the part of the speech that talks about reviewing the fiscal situation of Alberta, and I will quote here again. It says:

Your government will examine its entire fiscal framework to ensure it spends Albertans' tax dollars appropriately . . .

Then I want to emphasize this:

. . . while saving intelligently for your future and for generations to come.

This will include reviews of the Alberta Heritage Savings Trust and Sustainability Funds.

I will end the quote there. I will be as thrilled as any Albertan will be if this government actually delivers on this and gets in place a framework that systematically and with real discipline begins building up the heritage savings trust fund and does it without gutting other public services.

There will be a lively debate, I'm sure, in the upcoming campaign between, for example, the Wildrose Alliance, which would, I think – I don't want to put words in their mouths – like to cut taxes and cut services and perhaps channel those savings . . .

Mr. Anderson: Don't put words in my mouth.

Dr. Taft: Am I putting words in his mouth? Okay. I won't bother. I won't be unfair. I'll stop there.

Certainly, our position is that there's ample wealth in Alberta to fund top-quality services while at the same time building up our savings.

That was perhaps the closest this throne speech came to inspiring me. Then at times I found the throne speech has fallen into a situation where words are cheaper than actions. On page 4 the throne speech talks about "enhancing our trade and technology institutes and colleges." Sadly, Mr. Speaker, when I look at the budget for advanced education, it's not even keeping up to inflation. This government is talking about enhancing post-secondary education, but its actions do not deliver on that.

Later on that page the throne speech addresses an important idea of recruiting more students from Métis and First Nations communities. I cannot emphasize how important that is for the future of this province. I've spoken on the floor of the Assembly and in the hallways of the building here to the Minister of Education about this, and I think he gets it. I think we all get it, but we need to deliver on those words.

Finally, in the last paragraph on page 4 there's a little bit of a mystery. The mystery is the reference to "the introduction of family care clinics." The mystery is: what the heck is a family care clinic? How does it compare to the primary care networks? Are we setting up a whole parallel system to the primary care networks? What's the difference between a family care clinic and the primary care network?

Dr. Swann: Do we need more experiments?

Dr. Taft: Yeah. The Member for Calgary-Mountain View is saying: do we need more experiments? Why don't we just bolster the primary care networks? Maybe they're a great idea, but I'm waiting for the details. I don't know that we need to get into a whole further system. Unless it's perhaps about some for-profit corporation coming into Alberta and setting up a whole bunch of these. I don't know.

Then there were a couple of lines in the speech that I thought were actually pretty bitter. They weren't meant that way, but I think they would have been felt that way by a lot of Albertans. On page 5: "A successful Alberta is one in which every Albertan is empowered to be part of the economic, social and cultural life of the province." Well, I agree with the sentiment, but this government consistently fails, and it fails in full and deliberate consciousness of its failure, whether it has to do with, as I will repeat over and over, the fact that every day thousands of kids six, seven, eight, nine years old sit in the classrooms of this province hungry through no fault of their own and this province refuses to do anything about it or whether it's so many other people who can't possibly go through their lives feeling empowered as part of the economic, social, and cultural life of this province because of the policies of this government. I'm sure it wasn't intended as irony, but it certainly came across as irony to me and perhaps worse, Mr. Speaker. But I don't want to get unparliamentary.

On page 7 – and that's the second-last page of the speech, so I'm coming towards the end of my comments – at the top of the page it talks about "the infrastructure necessary to get our resources to new markets." It doesn't specifically refer to the Northern Gateway pipeline, but that's probably implied here. I would just like to register my thought that we need to look at other ways, other routes, alternatives to the Northern Gateway, whether it's to different ports, whether it's through different means. I hope this government hasn't committed to one company's vision of how we build infrastructure to get our resources to new markets.

The next paragraph, I thought, was rather revealing about this government's real attitude to the environment. The only discussion about the environment in here is not about protecting the environment; it was about developing the environment. I would like to have seen something here about genuine environmental protection. Even more ironic was the claim on page 7 that "governments are now standing together behind a plan that is credible, science-based and fully transparent." I underlined in my copy the words "science-based," Mr. Speaker. The science of climate change is overwhelming.

5:10

Actually, there was a powerful column in today's newspaper written by a man who was a candidate for us in Calgary in the last election, and his name is Mike Robinson. He was the head of the Glenbow Museum, an accomplished recipient of the Order of Canada, a brilliant man. He's moved to the west coast of B.C. His column was about the different attitude in B.C. and Alberta to the issue of climate change. I won't go into the details there, but I want to drive home the point that if this government really is interested in science-based environmental policy, it would acknowledge the findings of the UN panel on climate change and the broad consensus of scientists from around the world and start to take more serious action on climate change. I think this government's policies are science based only when the science suits the convenience of the government, and that's a dangerous situation.

Mr. Speaker, I've consumed enough time. I got several points on the record. You know, I wish the government well in advancing a constructive, evidence-based, science-based future for Alberta, but I don't have my hopes very high for them.

Thank you.

The Deputy Speaker: Any others?

The hon. Deputy Government House Leader.

Mr. Olson: Mr. Speaker, I move that we adjourn debate.

[Motion to adjourn debate carried]

Government Bills and Orders

Third Reading

Bill 1

Results-based Budgeting Act

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

Mr. Denis: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I'm actually rising to move third reading.

I think that everybody in this Chamber in their own way, maybe having regard to their own particular opinion, will actually agree with a lot of my comments today. Even if you don't, I do think that it's important to have a discussion about Bill 1.

Mr. Anderson: A wholesome discussion.

Mr. Denis: Thank you very much, Member for Airdrie-Chestermere. I do appreciate that as well.

As this member will also remember, back in 2009 the gentleman who's now the Minister of Municipal Affairs approached several people. He thought: you know, we support this party, but we want to see a bit of a different direction. Of course, many members, including the Member for Calgary-North Hill, soon to be Calgary-Klein, also joined us in this effort. We wanted to talk at the time about more program reviews, Mr. Speaker, realizing that we just can't keep on building bureaucracy after bureaucracy. I could go back to many quotes from Reagan or Thatcher that still matter today, but one thing that we wanted to do is keep spending growth to population growth plus inflation or less, basically ensuring that the government does not grow larger, at least on a sustained basis, than the private economy does in and of itself. Of course, it is my philosophy that the primary economic driver of this province, I'd say of any successful economy is the private sector and not the government in and of itself. The current budget, Mr. Speaker, does this.

I don't suggest for a moment that the Premier got the idea for Bill 1, that we're talking about today, from myself, from the Member for Calgary-North Hill, from the Minister of Municipal Affairs – I don't suggest that for a moment – but I can support it because it is very consistent with what we had talked about a couple of years ago. This bill reflects the fact that Albertans have expressed their concern that government be accountable and transparent in its budgeting process. It's not about hack and slash, slash and burn, whatever you'd want to call it. It's about being more effective. It's about being more efficient. Albertans want to be confident that the many important services and programs delivered by this government are not only effective but are also sustainable.

Mr. Speaker, when I was the minister of housing for just under two years, I applied this approach and was able to reduce our spending by 39 per cent without affecting service levels by engaging in private-sector partnerships. Some people in this Chamber may have thought, you know, that we shouldn't be doing this just for particularly ideological reasons, but it has worked for the taxpayer and for those in need of housing, particularly the homeless. I wanted to thank the Canadian Taxpayers Federation for speaking favourably about this approach, as they did in their magazine last year.

Mr. Speaker, Bill 1 will direct that each line item in a budget is re-evaluated on its financial merits. It will start with assessing whether a program is achieving its intended objectives and go on to determine whether they are being delivered in the most efficient and effective manner, and this will happen in every department over a three-year cycle.

Mr. Speaker, we can and must be better financial managers if we want to ensure that the Alberta we have today continues to be the best place to live and work for people of all ages and backgrounds. Bill 1 gives us the tools to achieve that goal. It will allow us to prudently align resources with expected results, and it underscores the need for stronger performance indicators to measure whether and to what extent these goals have in fact been achieved. Bill 1 will bring clarity and consistency to the government's current budgeting process so that we can confidently assure Albertans that their government is committed to being financially responsible with their valuable tax dollars.

I can tell you from my own personal experience that this is what I hear at my doors, this is what I hear at doors in other ridings, and this is what I hear constantly when I'm out speaking as a minister of this government. By focusing on objectives and results, output and performance, Bill 1 reflects this government's strong commitment to sound financial management and ensures that the government policies and programs are the right ones at the right time, today and for future generations.

Lots of talk from the opposition is about tax increases, and even though there are no tax increases whatsoever in this budget, we must remember that all governments in this province are granted by the people and not the other way around. The reality is that if any government allows itself to get out of control, what usually follows? Tax increases. Mr. Speaker, once again, there are no tax increases in this budget.

The other way to go through an initiative like this is to review each department's spending every three years. Mr. Speaker, I'd be very proud to have the Department of Solicitor General and Public Security be first to go through this process. I would consider it a privilege if that was assigned to me.

In closing, I would like to once again reiterate my support for this bill. This strikes the right balance between fiscal prudence, economic sustainability, and ongoing social responsibility. I think that all of us can congratulate the Premier in her first bill as Premier for putting this as the number one priority, financial and fiscal accountability.

Thank you.

The Deputy Speaker: Any other hon. member wish to join in? The chair shall now recognize the hon. Member for St. Albert.

Mr. Allred: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I'd like to rise today and speak in favour of Bill 1, the Results-based Budgeting Act. It's an honour to speak to this, the first bill of the Fifth Session of the 27th Alberta Legislature. As a proponent of strong fiscal planning I am pleased to see that our budgeting process is evolving in this direction. It is not always easy to demonstrate fiscal restraint, but this is a necessary step that will help to ensure Alberta maintains a healthy and prosperous economy.

Mr. Speaker, there are a few elements of this bill that I would like to comment on today. I'd first like to commend the hon. Premier, the Deputy Premier, and the rest of our government for their commitment to an improved budgeting process. I believe that implementing a results-based budgeting framework is the right choice for Alberta. We live in a dynamic world, and it is imperative that our government build flexibility into our system to deal with the changes we face. By establishing a three-year review cycle for all government spending, we will continue to ensure that Albertans' tax dollars are being used efficiently and effectively.

In addition, Mr. Speaker, I'd like to applaud our government for devising a budgeting strategy that holds the opinions of Albertans at its core. I know that under our new leadership we will continue

to move in the right direction, in the direction Albertans want our province to go.

5:20

I'm also pleased to see that all agencies, boards, and commissions will be reviewed under the three-year process set out in Bill 1. In particular, I'm very happy to know that the Alberta Gaming and Liquor Commission will see regular reviews. Since 1987 Albertans have benefited from the revenue of Alberta's gaming industry through the Alberta lottery fund, but it appears to me that some of these revenues come from Albertans who cannot afford to gamble away their hard-earned dollars, so I'm hopeful that Bill 1 will lead to frequent reviews of Alberta's gaming revenues and practices, which could help us to discover improved ways of maintaining the important funding coming from Alberta's gaming industry while mitigating the social costs associated with gambling addiction.

Mr. Speaker, as the first province to pay off our accumulated debt and to establish such savings tools as the heritage savings trust fund and the sustainability fund, Alberta has become known for our economic leadership. Bill 1 will further establish Alberta as a leader by bringing new fiscal discipline to government as we rapidly approach a return to surplus budgets. Our tremendous economic performance in conjunction with this improved budgeting process will open up a number of opportunities in our province. For example, it's my sincere hope that through stronger fiscal planning we will be able to once again increase our rate of savings in the heritage fund.

Mr. Speaker, 30 years ago this fund was designed to be an endowment for future generations to help diversify our economy, to improve Albertans' quality of life, and lastly, as a rainy-day fund. I believe it is important that we review these objectives to determine if they are still relevant today. As such, I've been pleased to hear the hon. Premier speak more and more about the heritage fund lately, and I eagerly await the affirmation of a renewed long-term vision for the fund that will serve Albertans into the distant future. Bill 1 will not only create opportunities to renew and revitalize Alberta's savings, but by putting our budgeting process on a three-year cycle, it will also set the stage for our government to provide the much-anticipated stable long-term funding for essential services such as health care and education.

Furthermore, by improving our fiscal position, Bill 1 will enable Alberta to continue diversifying our economy, which will allow us to reduce over time our reliance on nonrenewable resources. The improved efficiency we will achieve through this bill will permit increasing investment in valuable industries such as renewable fuels, carbon capture and storage, and health and bioindustry innovations. Overall, it is clear that Bill 1 holds great potential, and if we harness the benefits of this new budgeting process effectively, Bill 1 will create a great deal of opportunity in the province of Alberta.

In closing, Mr. Speaker, I believe that Bill 1 is a step in the right direction for our province. I know that the savings we will accrue by using a results-based budgeting process will go a long way in further improving Alberta's position. Our province is already in an enviable social and economic position in Canada and, in fact, in North America and internationally. By passing Bill 1, we will be painting an even brighter future for our province.

For all of those reasons, Mr. Speaker, I will be voting in favour of this legislation, and I encourage everyone in this Assembly to do the same. Thank you very much.

The Deputy Speaker: Any other hon. member wish to join in?

Seeing none, the chair shall call the question.

[Motion carried; Bill 1 read a third time]

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

lateness of the hour today I would move that the House stand adjourned until 1:30 p.m. tomorrow.

Mr. Denis: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Given the

[Motion carried; the Assembly adjourned at 5:24 p.m. to Thursday at 1:30 p.m.]

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Province of Alberta

The 27th Legislature
Fifth Session

Alberta Hansard

Thursday, February 16, 2012

Issue 7

The Honourable Kenneth R. Kowalski, Speaker

Legislative Assembly of Alberta
The 27th Legislature

Fifth Session

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Legislative Assembly of Alberta

1:30 p.m.

Thursday, February 16, 2012

[The Speaker in the chair]

Prayers

The Speaker: Good afternoon.

Let us pray. Let us keep ever mindful of the special and unique opportunity we have to work for our constituents and our province, and in that work let us find strength and wisdom. Amen.

Please be seated.

Introduction of Visitors

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Intergovernmental, International and Aboriginal Relations.

Mr. Dallas: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Today it is my honour and pleasure to introduce to you and through you to all members of this Assembly two representatives of the Federal Republic of Germany, the ambassador to Canada, His Excellency Dr. Georg Witschel, and Mr. Michael Bernd Reuscher, honorary consul of Germany for northern Alberta.

Mr. Speaker, Germany continues to be an important export market for Alberta, and we share a strong and productive partnership in education and culture. In fact, 2012 marks the 10th anniversary of the Alberta-Germany office in Munich and our province's twinning agreement with the German state of Saxony.

Ambassador Witschel is in Edmonton for the bestowal ceremony of the Cross of the Order of Merit to Mr. Reuscher. I had the pleasure of sitting down with the ambassador yesterday to discuss the ongoing activities between our province and Germany. Ambassador Witschel and Mr. Reuscher are seated in the Speaker's gallery. I see that they're standing. I'd ask them to receive the traditional warm welcome of this Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Environment and Water.

Mrs. McQueen: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise today to make an introduction on behalf of my good friend and colleague the hon. Member for Strathmore-Brooks. The member is, unfortunately, unable to be here this afternoon. However, he is pleased that His Worship Mayor Steve Grajczyk and Chief Administrative Officer Dwight Stanford from the town of Strathmore are able to join us here today. The gentlemen have risen, so let's give them the traditional warm welcome of this Assembly.

Introduction of Guests

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Human Services.

Mr. Hancock: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. It is indeed a privilege for me today to rise and introduce to you and through you to members of the Assembly a wonderful guest and colleague in the service of Albertans, Catherine Ripley, Edmonton public school trustee for ward H, which serves my constituents of Edmonton-Whitemud. She works tirelessly for the children in her ward and for education policy. I've had the great pleasure of participating with her in a southwest Edmonton community meeting that she organized last fall on the Education Act with her fellow trustee, Michael Janz. It was a great opportunity to come out and be engaged with community members and parents on

issues of education. I would ask her to please rise and receive the traditional warm welcome and thank you from this House.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Justice and Attorney General.

Mr. Olson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's a pleasure today to introduce to you and through you to all members of the Assembly a special guest, a colleague, and a good friend of mine, the mayor of the city of Wetaskiwin, Mr. Bill Elliot, who is in your gallery. Before being elected to his first term as mayor in 2010, Mayor Elliot served as an alderman for the city of Wetaskiwin for 21 years. Along with his long history of public service he also dedicated a large part of his life to Alberta's education system. He was a teacher and principal for 32 years before retiring in 2004. His contributions to the city of Wetaskiwin should be applauded, and that's why I would ask the mayor to rise so that he can receive the warm welcome of this Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Education.

Mr. Lukaszuk: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's an honour to introduce to you and through you to all members of our Assembly 25 very dedicated teachers who are visiting Edmonton today on a teachers' convention. This is the North East Teachers' Convention that they are attending, and they're here from a variety of school boards from the northeastern part of our province. The school boards are Northland, Fort Vermilion, Lakeland Catholic, greater St. Paul, Aspen View, and Northern Lights. I would ask these teachers to rise and receive our traditional warm welcome.

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

Mrs. Sarich: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my honour and privilege to rise today to introduce to you and through you to all members of the Assembly eight guests here in recognition of the February 10, 2012, grand opening of Extendicare Eaux Claires, a 180-bed long-term care facility in my constituency of Edmonton-Decore. These individuals represent the management and staff of Extendicare Eaux Claires, who provide dedicated support and care to all their residents. I'd ask them to please rise as I mention their names. They include Margaret Burnes, director of care; Renée Ferweda, community manager; Eduardo Sedoripa, community manager; Amanda Barba, in-service co-ordinator; Jennifer Bourret, rehabilitation supervisor; Tracy Larson, general services supervisor; Marilyn Wood, recruiter; Colleen Lycar, regional director. I would now ask these hard-working Extendicare representatives to please receive the traditional warm welcome of the Assembly.

Thank you.

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

Mr. Elniski: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's truly a pleasure today to introduce to you and through you to all members of this Assembly a constituent and staff member of mine, Ms Arlene Charles. Arlene has an extensive background in land administration, having worked with Enbridge, TransCanada PipeLines, Shell, and Indian and northern affairs. She also has strong ties to the community through her volunteer work with the Institute for the Advancement of Aboriginal Women. Most recently she joined the Edmonton-Calder team as a constituency assistant, where she has truly excelled and is becoming a casework guru. If I may make a slight example, we got a phone call in our office about a young couple who found themselves without a home at about 4 o'clock yesterday afternoon, and I think it was

about 9 o'clock last night before Arlene got the matter resolved to everyone's satisfaction. I'd ask Arlene to now rise and receive the traditional and well-deserved greeting of this Assembly.

Thank you.

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

Mr. Mason: Thanks very much, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure to rise and introduce to you and through you to all members of the Assembly a number of workers from the Royal Alexandra hospital and other health care facilities in our city who are here to observe, potentially, the debate and some questions around the walkout that's taking place now across the province and the very insulting offer that has been made to them. They are Al Pelletier, Sherry Holtet, Jana Kulusic, Dewaight Todd, Dina Moreira, Luis Cardenas, Dan Milo, Sami Mansi, Deana Adams, and Fernanda Rebelo. I would ask them to now rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of our Assembly.

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

Mr. Chase: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I would like to introduce to you and through you to all members of the Assembly three Congolese Albertans who are concerned about an illicit Canadian mining operation in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Their second letter, which I will later table, begins: "We, the members of the Congolese Diaspora in Alberta accuse the Canadian mining businesses for illicit operation in Congo."

The Speaker: This is introductions, hon. member. This is introductions. Please introduce.

Mr. Chase: Yes. The members that I was attempting to introduce to you and through you to this Assembly . . .

The Speaker: Well, I'm sorry. Proceed, please, with introductions.

Mr. Chase: Thank you. Would Samy Mukadi, Albert Mbuyi, and Rene Tahibula please stand and receive the recognition of the Assembly.

Merci, M. le Président.

1:40 **Members' Statements**

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

Extendicare Eaux Claires Long-term Care Complex

Mrs. Sarich: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It was my honour and privilege to join my colleagues the Minister of Seniors and the Minister of Health and Wellness to help celebrate the grand opening on February 10, 2012, of the Extendicare Eaux Claires, a world-class long-term care complex in my constituency of Edmonton-Decore. The newly constructed three-storey complex provides an additional 180 beds to Edmonton's long-term care system.

Extendicare Eaux Claires is designed with distinct areas consisting of 30 rooms within a neighbourhood, a homelike arrangement that assists in building a great sense of community for all the residents. Mr. Speaker, each resident has their own personalized large living space complete with a private bathroom. The homelike atmosphere is in large part due to the tireless, dedicated management and staff, who provide resident-focused care and support. The first residents were admitted into the new home in early November of last year.

Also, residents have access to the on-site services, which include registered dietitians; occupational, physical, and recreation therapists; rehab aides; maintenance staff; and social workers.

I was privileged to meet many of the residents and their families during the opening of the Extendicare Eaux Claires home, and time after time they emphasized personal satisfaction and pleasure with the new complex, with the high standards, great services, and the level of dedicated care by all the staff members.

Mr. Speaker, our government's commitment to long-term care in partnership with the Canadian-owned and -operated Extendicare provides quality, patient-focused continuing care options for Albertans.

Congratulations and best wishes to Extendicare Eaux Claires.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

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

Labour Negotiations with Hospital Support Staff

Mr. Mason: Thanks, Mr. Speaker. Over the past several hours hundreds of people employed by Alberta Health Services in communities around the province have been taking job action. These workers are in some of the lowest-paid jobs with the most unpleasant and onerous duties in the health system yet jobs that are critical to ensuring that people in hospitals are receiving excellent care.

The people taking action today work in meal preparation, as porters, cleaners, therapy assistants, and pharmacy assistants. These workers are paid on average less than half the Alberta average earnings, in the range of \$500 a week. It is very tough to make ends meet on that sort of salary. This month the average electricity bill they will face in their homes will be nearly \$200.

Many of the people taking this action are women for whom these jobs are vital, who have children dependent on them. Food, housing, and other basic needs entirely eat up such small salaries, with nothing left over. These people are at the heart of the health services delivered yet have been treated like third-class citizens.

These workers were insulted over the last few weeks. Alberta Health Services ignored a mediator's recommendation, that the workers had already rejected, and made an offer to them that was even lower, a few cents an hour for most. This is bargaining in bad faith, seeking to bully workers who make far less than what is needed for their families.

Contrast the treatment of these support workers with the ever-multiplying managers inside government for whom the average compensation is over \$140,000 a year; or Alberta judges, who just received \$30,000 more per year retroactive to 2009; or cabinet ministers, who a couple of years ago voted themselves a \$42,000-a-year increase and a \$54,000 increase for the Premier.

There is no reason for these caring people to be pushed to this action except that the unfair labour laws in the province mean they cannot get a fair settlement and that they are pushed to a point of desperation. The government that had a commitment to human rights and fairness would immediately commit to real bargaining with these workers and move . . .

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Bonnyville-Cold Lake.

Seniors' Housing in Bonnyville

Mrs. Leskiw: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Over my past four years as MLA for Bonnyville-Cold Lake my number one priority for our community has been to increase accessibility to seniors' housing, particularly in the town of Bonnyville.

Mr. Speaker, yesterday was the first step in making this a reality for seniors in need in my community. The hon. Minister of Municipal Affairs announced \$10 million in funding towards the redevelopment of both the Villa Ouimet apartment complex and the Bonny Lodge. This funding supports phase 1 of a two-phase project which renews both the seniors' self-contained apartments and lodge spaces. This phase includes plans to remove three four-unit complexes, to build 30 new units, and a 22-unit link to the main lodge as well as modernization of the kitchen and dining area. When completed, the project will provide 128 units.

This project will be carried out in partnership with the Lakeland Lodge and Housing Foundation, which manages the Villa Ouimet seniors' apartments and Bonnylodge on behalf of the government. I would like to express my sincere appreciation to the foundation and, in particular, the chair of the board and Bonnyville town councillor, Ray Prevost.

Mr. Speaker, yesterday was an incredible day for my community, and it was a milestone for Bonnyville seniors. I am so proud to be part of a government that takes action to continue to support and improve the quality of life for seniors across this great province. Yesterday was one step in many for this government.

Thank you.

Homelessness Initiatives

Mr. Webber: Mr. Speaker, we are blessed to live in this province. Our economy has made a strong recovery, and there are many opportunities for Albertans. People are coming here for a new life where they can build their own success stories in Alberta.

But there is a group of people right here in our province who are building their own success stories every day, people whose success might not be readily recognized. They are the homeless people, and they are coming back into our communities and building better, healthier, more productive lives. Their common denominator is Alberta's plan to end homelessness by 2019. Today if you met some of these people whose lives have been transformed, it would be hard to believe that they once were homeless people.

Let me briefly tell you a story of a formally homeless man who lives in Edmonton. Severe drug addiction drove him to the street, where he lived for about a year. He lost his wife and child. His situation was dire. Eventually he entered a detox facility, and he received help through a housing first program. People in the program helped him to find a place to live and gave him the supports that he needed to stabilize his life. With their help and support his life really started to turn around. He is a very different person today, Mr. Speaker. He lives with his wife and child and a second child. He's also a student at the local university, studying psychology. His dream is to become a drug and alcohol counsellor to help people whose lives may take the same path his did. He is succeeding. He is giving back to his community.

His and many other lives have been touched and transformed by the compassionate values instilled in Alberta's 10-year plan to end homelessness by 2019. Since the inception of the plan more than 4,800 people like the man I just spoke about have been given the chance and the support to reclaim lives of dignity and independence.

When homeless people succeed, we all succeed, Mr. Speaker. It costs almost three times more to leave a person living on the street than to give a chronically homeless person a place to live. Ending homelessness just makes sense morally, fiscally, and socially.

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

Edmonton Clinic Health Academy

Mr. Bhardwaj: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. While other jurisdictions plan for the future, Alberta is already there. Last month I had the honour of participating in the official opening of the Edmonton Clinic Health Academy on the University of Alberta campus. I'm not exaggerating when I say that this clinic will change how we deliver outpatient care and improve health sciences education and research in the province.

Our Premier has spoken clearly about how Alberta needs to be more patient centred, and the Edmonton Clinic Health Academy will help us do that. It will create and support interdisciplinary research and team-based education that will enable the innovative health care Albertans and Canadians want and deserve. For example, engineers will work with people from rehabilitation medicine and computer science to develop new technologies to help people with prosthetic limbs. Dietitians, occupational therapists, dentists, and pediatricians will practise team care in simulated doctors' offices, a far cry from the days when different disciplines learned and trained in separate silos.

At the Edmonton Clinic Health Academy people are working and learning together and developing solutions that work with the broader community to bring innovations to the people who need them the most. I look forward to the new discoveries and solutions to come.

Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

Oral Question Period

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

Labour Negotiations with Hospital Support Staff

Dr. Sherman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. This morning support staff at hospitals all around the province had been pushed to the breaking point and started a wildcat strike to protest the unfair and disrespectful contract offer by AHS. As a working emergency room doc I know how essential front-line staff are to providing world-class care to Albertans, and all they're asking for in return is respect and fairness. Will the Premier put care back into health care and order the health minister to go back to the negotiating table with a contract worthy of their service and dedication?

1:50

Mr. Horner: Mr. Speaker, we are disappointed to see that type of job action that impacts patient care and patient safety. I am understanding that an application around the dispute has been put forward to the quasi-judicial board that handles such matters, and I think it best to be left in their hands.

Dr. Sherman: Mr. Speaker, I'm disappointed that the action or, rather, inaction of this government has led to this crisis. Given that the members opposite voted themselves a 34 per cent pay increase and given that the Premier had no problem throwing money around for her leadership campaign, cabinet tours in Jasper and caucus retreats, why is it so hard for this government to find the money to give a measly 3 per cent pay raise to the hard-working men and women, the heart and soul of the health care system, to clean up the blood and vomit and excrement off the floors of the hospital?

Mr. Horne: Well, Mr. Speaker, as the hon. the Deputy Premier just said, Alberta Health Services has an application before the Labour Relations Board, which is being heard at this hour for a

cease-and-desist order on the matter that was raised by the hon. Leader of the Opposition. With respect to the workers in question I can tell you in an unqualified way that this government has nothing but respect and value and admiration for the work that those workers perform every day throughout our health care system.

Dr. Sherman: Mr. Speaker, let's talk about respect. These hard-working men and women clean up the blood, vomit, and excrement off the floors of our hospitals. Given that senior executives are blaming the same front-line staff for the surgery cancellations and the crisis that's been caused and now they're being issued a back-to-work order, will the Premier stop campaigning and put an end to warlord politics and issue a back-to-work order for her health minister to pay these good people what they're worth?

Mr. Horner: Mr. Speaker, as has been stated several times already, the process of labour negotiations is under way outside of this Chamber. We don't negotiate contracts for employees inside this Chamber. We respect their right to do that, and we'll continue to do so.

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

Emergency Health Services

Dr. Sherman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Given that they've already failed in labour negotiations – they've had a year to solve this problem – Albertans are literally dying to get into care. Doctors, nurses, paramedics, and now front-line support staff are speaking up and telling this government that their health care system is broken. Instead of listening and fixing the problem, the Premier and health care minister are covering their eyes and closing their ears and hoping that this will just go away. When will the Premier give her head a shake and stop the PR spin and tell her minister to get serious about reducing the suffering and help Albertans waiting for care?

Mr. Horner: Mr. Speaker, this is about a labour negotiation. This is about two parties that are in the process of doing their negotiations over contracts. There are legal processes involved in how this works. Frankly, we respect that process a great deal, and we want it to continue.

Dr. Sherman: Mr. Speaker, this is about lack of leadership. Given that in an e-mail in 2006 in the midst of an ER crisis the current health minister says, quote, patients who are seen in ER and admitted to hospital are unable to be moved to acute-care ward beds because those beds are full, and this delays access to treatment and serious bottlenecks develop, end of quote, yet today he says that it's the 17 per cent increase in patients that's the problem, will the minister stand up and please tell us whether he was wrong in 2006, wrong today, or just plain wrong all the time?

Mr. Horne: Well, Mr. Speaker, ignoring the negativity, cynicism, and personal attacks that all too frequently come from the other side of the House, what I can tell you is that we had a very productive second meeting yesterday with emergency department physicians from across the province, Alberta Health Services, and the Alberta Medical Association. I want to tell you that the first job of any member of this House should be to stand up and thank those people for what they have achieved in Alberta's emergency departments in the last year.

Dr. Sherman: Mr. Speaker, as front-line staff I am thanking them for doing what they do each and every day, and this government isn't doing it.

Given that the series of e-mails shows that the current health minister had prior knowledge and did not react to the ER crisis, which is now under review by the Health Quality Council, until after it hit the news and given that it's happening all over again with front-line staff picketing the streets, will the minister take responsibility, stop trying to be a government PR hack, and actually do something to fix the system? Minister, you've been a part of this problem.

Mr. Horne: Well, Mr. Speaker, it certainly sounds to me like we have yet another conspiracy being alleged in this House. I'm not actually going to dignify it with another response.

In fact, in his earlier question, Mr. Speaker, if I heard him correctly – and I'll stand corrected if the Blues prove me wrong – he made a further statement that people were dying waiting for care, again with no offer of proof. What I will tell you is that this government has reduced the number of patients waiting in acute-care beds for continuing care. We've made significant improvements in the four-hour benchmark.

The Speaker: Third Official Opposition question.

Emergency Room Wait Times

Dr. Sherman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Given that a certain minister is a specialist in mental health and, contrary to what that same health minister says, ER wait times are the most important measure of a health care system's performance and that despite the billions thrown at our system, Alberta has the lowest performance measures in this country and this government is failing miserably to meet even their pathetically low measures, will the Minister of Health and Wellness stop warehousing seniors in hospital beds by providing nonprofit home care and long-term care so we can actually use our health care system for those who are sick?

Mr. Horne: Well, Mr. Speaker, a physician, of all people, should be able to acknowledge the complexity in a health care system of achieving meaningful gain on a single benchmark. As we've talked about many, many times, the root causes of emergency department wait times in, I might say, the fastest growing province in Canada are the need for additional primary care, a recognition of additional continuing care spaces as a need, which we have acted on – and we are going to achieve 5,300 spaces over five years – and significant resources added to mental health, of which I'd offer the most recent budget as an example of our commitment.

Dr. Sherman: Mr. Speaker, the root causes of our broken health care system sit across the way there, this government and this minister.

Given that the top performance measures are being met in the U.K., where patients are being placed in beds within four hours of arriving in the ER 95 per cent of the time, why with this province's great wealth can't this government provide outcomes even a fraction of those as good as the U.K.? Minister, a fraction.

Mr. Horne: Well, Mr. Speaker, I think the hon. leader needs to decide whether he wants to talk about e-mail chains from 2006 or whether he wants a substantive, serious discussion about health policy in this Chamber. If it's the latter, we're willing to come forward. If it's the former, over to you.

Thank you.

Dr. Sherman: Mr. Speaker, health care workers don't care about policy. They care about action. They care about solutions. They want the system fixed. Given that billions of dollars are spent in our health care system with increasingly poor results, it seems obvious that this government wants the public health care system to fail, and this minister has been consulting with them for 10 years to helping it fail because he wants to Americanize it. This is the man who presented the document to privatize health care. Is this government simply planning to wash its hands of a problem it doesn't understand and cannot solve by privately contracting it out?

The Speaker: The hon. minister if you wish.

Mr. Horne: Well, Mr. Speaker, apparently we're back onto the conspiracy theory train again, but I will be very proud to tell you that we are having tremendous success. If we look at Calgary and Edmonton, for example, alternate level of care patients, patients waiting in acute care for continuing care went down from 317 in September in Calgary to 160 as of January 24. The trend was similar in Edmonton, with a drop from 202 to 152. We are well on our way to making our five-year goal of 5,300 additional spaces.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Fort McMurray-Wood Buffalo.

Provincial Tax Policy

Mr. Boutilier: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Like all MLAs I drove home after the Speech from the Throne and the budget last week and, in fact, went for my usual double-double at Tim Hortons in my constituency, and I overheard two elderly gentlemen going back and forth about taxes. They were confused with the PC government's plan. One of them said to me: "Guy, you've got to help us out. What is the PC government going to do about our taxes? Are they going to pick our pockets?" My question is to the Premier. Can you please clear up this confusion? Are you going to pick our pockets after the election?

The Speaker: The hon. Deputy Premier.

Mr. Horner: Thank you so much, Mr. Speaker. Every minister in this Chamber signed the three-year business plan. They signed the pledge for this year's budget. Our goal – and I hope the hon. members will help us do it – is to pass the budget in this House before an election happens. If we do that, that's the budget for the rest of the year. They've told us they're going to raise taxes before. They tell us they're going to raise taxes now. The people that they shouldn't trust are over there.

2:00

Mr. Boutilier: I think the member has hurt my feelings.

Given that the Premier can't answer the question, I'll ask it again. Will you take a 30 per cent reduction in the pay increase that you gave yourselves, every one of your members in the front row of cabinet? Will you join the rest of us in Alberta?

Mr. Horner: Mr. Speaker, I'm not sure what 30 per cent pay increase the hon. member might be referring to. If he's referring to the one that happened I think four or five years ago, the hon. member was there. I will say and remind the hon. member that there is a judicial review of the MLA compensation that yourself, Mr. Speaker, and the Members' Services Committee, which is the all-party committee of this Legislature, have undertaken, and we look forward to the results of that review.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Boutilier: Yeah. Thanks very much, Mr. Speaker. To the Premier. Albertans are getting tired of your waffling on answers when it comes to their taxes. No one can seem to get a straight answer out of you, but I'm going to try anyway one more time. In a simple yes or no answer: are you going to raise taxes after the election? Yes or no. Keep it simple for the folks at Tim Hortons.

Mr. Horner: Mr. Speaker, I'm confused, obviously, by this hon. member's lack of understanding of what the budget is. In the budget, that is tabled in this House, that we are going to be debating as we move through this – and I hope they enter into the debate because they may learn something. What they may learn is that in this budget for the year 2012-13 there are no new taxes.

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

Labour Negotiations with Hospital Support Staff (continued)

Mr. Mason: Thanks very much, Mr. Speaker. Support workers who do the back-breaking, menial jobs in our hospitals have been treated with contempt by this government for too long. They earn half the average weekly wage in Alberta, yet the government offered them a 2 per cent raise over a three-year contract. That's about 32 cents an hour. My question is to the Premier. Will she intervene with Alberta Health Services to ensure that the janitors, the cleaners, the porters, and the food service workers receive a fair offer which allows them and their families to live with dignity?

Mr. Horner: First of all, Mr. Speaker, I don't believe that what they're doing is menial. I believe that what they're doing is of tremendous value to the patients and to the system that we have in the publicly funded health care system. We are, out of respect for the negotiating process, going to allow that process to unfold as it should because they have that right, too.

Mr. Mason: These workers have struggled far too long, Mr. Speaker, within the current framework, where their basic rights to withdraw their services are disallowed by this government, and they can't get a fair deal. To ask the workers to go back to a system that's clearly broken and serves the employer and not the employees is most unfair and shows a lack of respect for these workers. Will the Deputy Premier please stand in the House and offer them some fairness in this whole deal?

Mr. Horner: Mr. Speaker, because they are in the category of essential workers, there is an arbitration process as well. I'm going to reiterate – and that hon. member should really respect the negotiating process and the process that two parties will go through to establish a contract – that you don't negotiate them on the floor of this House.

Mr. Mason: Well, Mr. Speaker, given that the UN has already ruled that the labour laws in Alberta are not fair to workers and given that support workers in Alberta's hospitals have only been offered a 32 cents an hour raise and provincial judges just received a \$35,000 raise, cabinet recently voted itself a \$42,000 raise, and the Premier got a \$54,000 raise, how can the Premier look these workers in the eye and tell them that they've been treated fairly?

Mr. Horner: Well, Mr. Speaker, I think the hon. member should be clear with Albertans. Cabinet did not just vote themselves a raise nor did anyone in this Assembly just vote themselves a raise. Members' Services deals with those issues. And from 2008 . . .

Mr. Hinman: Talk about smoke and mirrors.

Mr. Horner: The hon. member says smoke and mirrors. The smoke and mirrors, Mr. Speaker, is when the hon. member says something that happened five years ago and tries to insinuate to Albertans that it's today. And he sits on the committee. [interjections]

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar has the floor.

Revenues from VLTs and Slot Machines

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you. This government is taking a larger percentage of cash played by Albertans in VLTs and slot machines as revenue than it claims. It is creating the illusion that the odds of winning are far better than they truly are. It is unacceptable that this government intentionally deceives Albertans as to what the risks of VLTs and slot machines are. To the Minister of Finance – and welcome back, sir – what per cent of the money inserted in either a VLT or slot machine is retained as profit by the government?

Mr. Liepert: Well, Mr. Speaker, I think that we have to address some of the wording that this particular member is using when he's talking about this issue. I just heard him use the word "deceive." I heard him this morning in the media using words like "cook the books" and "a shady form of mathematics." I think, frankly, that is despicable, and I think he owes this Assembly an apology.

However, I will say this in answer to his question. The audited books of the Alberta Gaming and Liquor Commission show that 92 per cent of every dollar that goes into a machine is paid back . . .

The Speaker: The hon. member, please.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you. It's this government that owes gambling addicts an apology.

Again to the same minister: why did the government start to hide on an annual basis the cash-in, cash-out statistics for VLTs and slot machines, the percentage of profit that you're taking from gamblers? Why did you hide that from them?

Mr. Liepert: Mr. Speaker, again another allegation that is totally incorrect. No one is hiding anything here. The books of the AGLC are open to the Auditor General. About 12 years ago the Auditor General made some recommendations about accounting practices. The AGLC is now following those recommendations. There's nothing hidden. There's no shady form of mathematics. There is no cooking the books as this member alleges. I repeat: if he cannot prove that, he owes this Assembly an apology.

Mr. MacDonald: Mr. Speaker, the AGLC hid that information not only from the Public Accounts Committee, but they hid it from the citizens as well. Again to the Minister of Finance: will the government publicly report on an annual basis the cash-in, cash-out amounts for VLT and slot machine revenue so that Albertans know what the real percentage of profit is that the treasury gets from this form of gambling?

Mr. Liepert: Well, Mr. Speaker, I stand to be corrected, but I believe that's exactly what we do today. The particular member chairs the Public Accounts Committee. The AGLC was before the Public Accounts Committee and has answered all of the questions. I saw a letter that the chairman of the board had written to this

particular member answering all of the questions that he posed. There's nothing hidden here.

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

Education Services for Teen Parents

Mr. Bhardwaj: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. My first question is to the Minister of Human Services. Braemar school in Edmonton has had success over many years supporting pregnant teens, but often they struggle in accessing the financial resources to help them to be successful. Mr. Minister, are we letting down this segment of society? Are you aware that this problem exists?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Actually, I was delighted yesterday to be able to attend Braemar school and the Terra foundation with the Premier and the Minister of Education. We had an opportunity to talk with some of the young moms there about the issues that they face, about their financial struggles, their issues with respect to housing, issues with respect to child care, and, most importantly, their aspirations for themselves and their children. It was a very good morning. We were there because we are actually celebrating ways in which we can work together with the school and the foundation to make it easier for those young women to succeed.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Bhardwaj: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. My next question is to the same minister. Learning of the struggles these young women face, is the newly created Ministry of Human Services doing anything specifically to make sure these teens can access the necessary resources and turn their dreams into reality?

2:10

Mr. Hancock: Well, Mr. Speaker, this is something that I'm actually very excited about because as an individual and as an MLA for quite a number of years I've been approached by the Terra foundation about what we could do to make it easier for these young women to succeed. We had a number of ministries that were engaged: Education, children and youth services, employment and immigration to name three. With the creation of the Ministry of Human Services we were able to bring that all together so that now we can actually fund Terra and allow Terra to fund these teens for their success.

We've simplified the process for the teens. We've taken a lot of the angst out of the process for them, and they're going to now have a very good chance of being successful.

The Speaker: The hon. member, please.

Mr. Bhardwaj: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. My final question is to the Minister of Education. In Alberta our high school completion rate continues to be one of the lowest in the country. Does the minister really believe that this kind of programming is going to make a significant difference?

Mr. Lukaszuk: It will make a significant difference in the lives of those young ladies who are benefiting from this program, and that is very important. I have to tell you, Mr. Speaker, much like the Minister of Human Services has indicated, that I have nothing but admiration for these young women. Despite the circumstances that they have found themselves in in their lives, they are committed to

education. Most importantly, they are committed to the future of their children. We as a government and as a society owe it to them to support them in any way we can so that we ensure that they complete their high school education.

The Speaker: The Hon. Member for Calgary-Mountain View, followed by the Hon. Member for Calgary-Hays.

Emergency Health Services

(continued)

Dr. Swann: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Emergency medical services workers are now openly talking about people dying before getting care due to delays in the ability to respond to emergencies. They're talking about not only this risk to others but now the growing risk to their own lives and the public's as they try harder and go faster to compensate for a failed system. When will the minister recognize the root cause of this problem and get the Health Quality Council involved to sort out the complexities he's not able to?

Mr. Horne: Well, Mr. Speaker, I've had the opportunity to talk to many emergency services workers as well, and while I will acknowledge some of the very serious issues that they shared with me with respect to their feelings about resources and time to enable them to do the job they would like to do for their patients, I have yet to hear one emergency services worker suggest to me that someone has died while waiting for care. I'd be very interested in any further information or documentation on that score because I would take it very seriously.

What I will tell you, Mr. Speaker, is that . . .

The Speaker: The hon. member, please.

Dr. Swann: Mr. Speaker, is the minister aware that despite some new hires, six EMS workers resigned from Edmonton in the past month. No net gain here, Mr. Minister. Edmonton is no longer a desirable place for EMS to work. What are you doing about it?

Mr. Horne: Mr. Speaker, the hon. member is correct that there are particular issues in Edmonton, issues that are cause for concern to both EMS workers and management. I'm pleased to tell this House that as a result of some recent discussions with Alberta Health Services, the management for EMS in this province will be returned to the zone level by May of this year, and that will enable EMS workers, front-line workers, to work directly with management staff in their home communities with respect to addressing these issues.

Dr. Swann: Mr. Speaker, when will the minister admit that the bungled takeover of EMS by this province has failed Albertans and call for an independent review with the Health Quality Council?

Mr. Horne: Mr. Speaker, this government will never admit that acknowledging that EMS workers are front-line health workers and are part of the formal health care system – we will never acknowledge that that was a mistake. That was a correct decision. It's the right policy, and it's the right position to move us forward.

With respect to Edmonton – and I had no difficulty in admitting this in the past in the House – there are questions with respect to the adequacy of units, staffing, and stations. We are well on our way to addressing those issues now. We will continue to work with EMS and AHS to make sure that they are dealt with.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Hays, followed by the hon. Member for Calgary-Varsity.

Review of Medical Examiner Cases

Mr. Johnston: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Alberta Justice has launched an internal review into the files handled by a former employee of the medical examiner's office in Calgary. My questions are all to the Minister of Justice and Attorney General. This is the second time in a year that there has been an incident like this stemming from the medical examiner's office. Can the minister offer Albertans an explanation as to why this is happening again?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Olson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Firstly, I want to say that we have confidence in the work of the office of the medical examiner, but it's important for the integrity of the office and the justice system and for public confidence in the justice system that we conduct this review. That's why we are asking that all criminal files of the particular pathologist in question be reviewed. We're committed to a full, transparent process, but we're going to respect the personal, legal privacy rights of the people involved.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Johnston: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My first supplemental question is to the same minister. Is the pathologist in question still working for the medical examiner's office?

Mr. Olson: Mr. Speaker, the person in question has not been working for Alberta Justice or the medical examiner since September of 2011, but I want to stress, I want to emphasize that the reason for this person leaving has nothing to do with the investigation that we are currently undertaking. This person, as all of our pathologists, was board certified, a highly trained person with credentials to practise in Alberta.

Mr. Johnston: My second supplemental to the same minister: how can Albertans be certain that this won't happen again?

Mr. Olson: Well, Mr. Speaker, as I said, we have great confidence in our medical examiner's office. They are highly qualified, highly skilled, they're in great demand around North America, and Alberta is very proud of the staff that we have. We do take the reliability of the system seriously because it's so essential to the operation of our justice system. I should say that there was a previous review, that the hon. member referred to, and after that review we implemented some changes which now call for peer review of anything before it goes to the police.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Varsity, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Beverly-Clareview.

Caregivers for Persons with Developmental Disabilities

Mr. Chase: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Being developmentally disabled or being a caregiver for a developmentally disabled Albertan should not be a life-threatening experience. A year ago Valerie Wolski, a mental health worker, was strangled to death. Last November David Holmes succumbed to scalding injuries. Rather than addressing the obvious shortcomings, the persons with developmental disabilities central region has appealed the occupational health and safety findings regarding Valerie's death. To the Seniors minister: how can you justify this appeal?

Mr. VanderBurg: Thank you for the question. Mr. Speaker, first, make sure that everybody knows that this was a tragic loss to the

community, that it was a tragic loss to the family, and my thoughts go out to both. A staff member on duty caring for one of the vulnerable Albertans should never have been in this situation. It's not acceptable, and we must do everything we can to make sure an occurrence like this doesn't occur again. PDD Central did appeal on an administrative item on the order.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Chase: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. There's a problem within the government itself across ministries, occupational health and safety and Seniors, PDD.

Again to the Seniors minister: given that last fall you didn't answer my letter requesting information on PDD Appeal Panel appointees' and PDD board members' qualifications and training, will you now commit to providing those answers to this Assembly?*

Mr. VanderBurg: Well, I can tell you, Mr. Speaker, that I've been open and transparent about everything I do. I take pride in answering my calls and my letters. I can assure the member that if that did occur, it would be corrected.

I can also tell you, Mr. Speaker, that occupational health and safety did make some interim recommendations to PDD central. They were all enacted. Action was taken. Not only that, but they shared those orders very quickly with all the PDD regions across the province, and action was taken.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Chase: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The action taken obviously didn't work because there is an appeal by PDD in front of occupational health and safety. They don't believe the evidence. How much longer and at what cost in lives and families' economic well-being will your ministry continue to hide behind privacy laws which protect the government at the expense of Alberta's most vulnerable?

Mr. VanderBurg: Mr. Speaker, it's absolutely ridiculous. This member knows my track record. I've been open. I've been transparent. I've called families. I've called PDD central. I've worked with caregivers. He knows that that's absolutely false.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Beverly-Clareview, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona.

Provincial Spending

Mr. Vandermeer: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My first question is to the Minister of Finance. Yesterday the former TD Bank chief economist, Don Drummond, released a lengthy and scathing report that was commissioned by the government of Ontario. This report basically warns the Ontario government that the province will become another Greece if it doesn't get spending under control. I would like to ask the minister if he has had a chance to read the report and determine if there are any recommendations that Alberta should consider and implement.

2:20

Mr. Liepert: No, Mr. Speaker, I have not. It was just released yesterday, and my recollection is that it's some 500 pages and 300 recommendations, something along that line. I think, though, that what has to be acknowledged in this Assembly is that, thank goodness, from Alberta's standpoint we don't find ourselves in the position that Ontario finds itself in. I would dare say that a lot of

that needs to be attributed to the fact that we've had a 40-year Progressive Conservative government in this province.

The Speaker: The hon. member, please.

Mr. Vandermeer: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's also my understanding that you were in Toronto yesterday, and I'm wondering if you had a chance to discuss the report and its recommendations with the investment community.

The Speaker: Well, it better apply to Alberta here. We're not worried about what goes on in Ontario in this Assembly.

Minister, have you got something about the Alberta perspective?

Mr. Liepert: Well, Mr. Speaker, I think that the reality of it is that we feel very strongly that Alberta is a strong contributor to Canada, and other parts of the country are benefiting as a result of a strong Alberta. However, we're still part of Canada. Debt, wherever it is in Canada, is not good for Alberta. I think one of the things that there was a strong view on in the financial community was the fact that Alberta has introduced and, I guess, as of last night passed Bill 1, which is going to do a lot of what the report is recommending Ontario follow.

Mr. Vandermeer: My second supplemental to the same minister: would it be the minister's intention, then, to recommend to the Premier that the government of Alberta undergo a similar thorough review of our spending?

Mr. Liepert: As I said in the last answer, Mr. Speaker, I think we're actually ahead of that because we just passed a bill last night, Bill 1, which is going to over the next three years ensure that all departments over a three-year rolling period will have a thorough review of value for money. While this is a report that needs to be acted on at some point in time, we're actually acting right now by passing this legislation.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona, followed by the hon. Member for Calgary-McCall.

Labour Negotiations with Hospital Support Staff (continued)

Ms Notley: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. On not one but two occasions this government's draconian public-sector labour laws have been judged by the United Nations to be in breach of convention 84, freedom of association. To the minister of labour: when will this government reverse its unfair attack on some of Alberta's hardest working and lowest paid workers and restore to them the fundamental human rights enjoyed by all citizens in democracies world-wide?

Mr. Hancock: Mr. Speaker, we have some excellent labour laws in this province, evidenced by the fact that we have one of the lowest rates of work interruption and work stoppage in the country. We have in place appropriate processes to allow people to do collective bargaining and also, in cases where there are essential services involved, to resolve those disputes through mediation and arbitration processes. There are ways to resolve issues in this province, and for the most part they work very well for all parties, and that's evidenced by the fact that the economy in this province is still very strong and working well.

Ms Notley: Well, it's certainly not evidenced today.

Given that this government's commitment to ignore internationally recognized rights to freely associate has systematically

*See page 177, right column, paragraph 4

bullied vulnerable employees into desperate action and given that our draconian labour laws provide no incentive to employers like Alberta Health Services to bargain in good faith, why won't the minister admit that it's his third-world, backwater labour laws that have created today's crisis in our hospitals?

Mr. Hancock: What an absolutely preposterous statement about the situation in Alberta. One could not describe any worse – I'm speechless. The hon. member is absolutely preposterous in what she's saying. In Alberta we have people who go to work every day, that resolve their issues with their employers every day, and there are processes to do collective bargaining and to resolve disputes in an appropriate way, including mediation and arbitration, and those work. We have a disputes resolution process. We have a labour board which is. . .

The Speaker: The hon. member, please.

Ms Notley: Well, Mr. Speaker, what the minister calls appropriate the UN calls illegal. Given that this was reflected in the obnoxious spectre of this Legislature confirming a \$35,000 raise on Monday for judges and then today turning a blind eye to AHS denying a 60-cent-an-hour raise to these good people up there, why won't the minister admit that this government is so out of touch with fairness that they need fair labour laws so that maybe Alberta's workers can remind them?

Mr. Hancock: The hon. member just continues to display ignorance. We have a process for resolving issues. One of those processes is a judicial inquiry commission, which is mandated by the courts to resolve issues with respect to judges because they do not have the right to negotiate or bargain, so there's an inquiry process which resolves their issues. The government cannot dispute that without putting them in a position to say why we disagree with that inquiry. There are other processes for other workers, and they work very well.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-McCall, please, followed by the hon. Member for Calgary-Foothills.

Safety Standards for Farm Workers

Mr. Kang: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Today the Alberta Federation of Labour is making it clear that transportation laws need to be tightened for farm workers after the tragedy in Ontario with a van full of farm workers who suffered horrible deaths. To the Minister of Transportation. Like twinning the highway from Edmonton to Fort McMurray is a practical, common-sense idea that will save lives, so will applying occupational health and safety standards to all Albertans, as the Premier promised. Will this minister make riding in the boxes of pickup trucks illegal for all Albertans?

Mr. Danyluk: Well, Mr. Speaker, first of all, I'm glad that the hon. member opposite recognized all the good work that's being done on highway 63.

If I can defer the first part of the question to the hon. Minister of Human Services.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Kang: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I was talking about the farm workers in the backs of pickup trucks.

To the same minister again: if it is illegal for members of this House to ride in the box of a pickup truck because it is unsafe, why isn't it illegal for a farm worker to do the same? Is a farm

worker's health and safety less important than a politician's, Mr. Speaker?

Mr. Danyluk: Well, Mr. Speaker, I'd be very glad to research the exact details of the hon. member's questions, but as I recall, it is not legal for individuals, whether they be farm workers, whether they be youth, whether they be individuals of any description, to ride in the back of a pickup truck on our highways. I think that is the law right now, and I think it's in place.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Kang: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. We are talking about making it illegal for all Albertans anywhere.

To the same minister again: given that this government's own throne speech calls for Alberta's farmers to be the best in the world, can the minister tell this House once and for all why the best farm workers in the world don't get the best safety standards in the world?

Mr. Danyluk: Well, Mr. Speaker, I will not agree with this hon. member. The farm workers and the agriculture industry in this province, in this country are the best in the world. I would reiterate the comments that I made previously about the laws that pertain to our highways. What is done on private land, on agricultural land, is regulated by Human Services.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Foothills, followed by the hon. Member for Calgary-Glenmore.

Emergency Room Wait Times (continued)

Mr. Webber: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. We heard from the Minister of Health and Wellness yesterday that Alberta Health Services will not be meeting its four- and eight-hour emergency department wait time targets. Now, this news raises curiosity for Albertans as well as a number of questions. To the Minister of Health and Wellness: why won't the wait time targets be met by next month's deadline?

Mr. Horne: Mr. Speaker, there are a number of reasons for that. Most notably, as was referred to earlier, we have had a 17 per cent increase in emergency department visits across the province since November 2010. We expect that demand to continue as Alberta's economy continues to boom and more and more people move to the province. That said, there have been tremendous efficiencies gained within the hospitals over the last year due to the very hard work of physicians and other professionals.

2:30

Mr. Webber: To the same minister: what efforts are being made, then, to reduce the wait times?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Horne: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Well, there are several. In terms of the overall health care system we're continuing our work to expand primary care networks and family care clinics, making sure that people have a place to go in or near their home community to access primary health care and do not need to go to the emergency department. Our work continues to expand continuing care capacity. We are on track to open another thousand continuing care spaces this year. In addition, we've allocated \$25 million in the budget for enhanced home care, and we are hoping that this will prevent the need for people to be admitted unnecessarily to hospital.

Mr. Webber: Okay. To the same minister: what is being done to address the bed-blocker issue, which does have a direct downstream impact on the people waiting in emergency departments?

Mr. Horne: Well, Mr. Speaker, while I personally try not to use the term “bed blockers,” it does refer to those individuals who are awaiting placement in a long-term care facility in an acute-care bed in our system. As I mentioned in response to an earlier question this afternoon, we have seen those numbers of patients decrease significantly over the last year. I think opening additional continuing care capacity is part of the answer to this. I also think and I’ve been told by Alberta Health Services that a number of these patients waiting in hospital could conceivably go home with enhanced home care support, and that’s what we’re working on now.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Glenmore, followed by the hon. Member for Strathcona.

Municipal Funding

Mr. Hinman: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. This morning the Wildrose caucus and other MLAs enjoyed a wonderful breakfast with AUMA members, and it was refreshing to hear the honest and open discussion about the problematic grants for municipalities in our province. We listened to the AUMA president, Linda Sloan, hit the ball out of the park as she once again reiterated their position that millions of dollars of government grants are going out according to how people vote provincially. As a result, she received an enthusiastic standing ovation from her colleagues. Does the Minister of Municipal Affairs, who did show up, now agree with the Premier’s chief of staff? Is she a liar?

Mr. Griffiths: Mr. Speaker, it’s another absurd accusation. In fact, this afternoon we’re going to be releasing the numbers by municipality for MSI funding. I’ve been very clear. It’s a strict guideline that was created in conjunction with AUMA and AAMD and C, and I have the latest numbers that show that the regional municipality of Wood Buffalo and Airdrie-Chestermere had the largest increases to MSI this year based on the formula.

Mr. Hinman: That’s the problem, Mr. Speaker. They’re talking about the 23 other government grants, and they focus on the one that they’re handcuffed on.

Given that former mayor Glenn Taylor, who was speaking at this morning’s breakfast, spoke about the numerous conversations that he’d had with many in the room about the bullying and the intimidation tactics of this government and how provincial grants are used for partisan purposes, does the minister, then, think that he, too, is a liar?

Mr. Griffiths: Mr. Speaker, what’s impressive is that they’re talking about partisan politics and their quotes are coming from partisan people about this government. My experience today at the AUMA breakfast as I wandered around was complete support for the MSI program that we have, for the formulas that we use, and the support and partnership we have with municipalities from one end of this province to the other.

Mr. Hinman: Really, Mr. Speaker. Partisanship? To my understanding, the minister is good friends with Darren Aldous, the past president of AUMA. Given that Darren also has stated that many decisions have been made for political reasons, with

some MLAs aiming for infrastructure announcements in their ridings, does the Minister of Municipal Affairs think that Darren along with all the other mayors and councillors who are critical of this government’s funding are all pathological liars?

Mr. Griffiths: Mr. Speaker, I just spoke with Mr. Aldous this morning – we are good friends – and he never said any such thing to me, so I’m not going to comment on what this member may report because for all I know, he’s misquoting that very good individual, who has represented his communities and the AUMA very well in his membership.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Strathcona, followed by the hon. Member for Calgary-Varsity.

Funding for Diabetes Self-management Supplies

Mr. Quest: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. Every day in Alberta more than 50 people are diagnosed with diabetes. It was good to hear today that the province has added coverage for some crucial diabetic supplies and medication to help Albertans manage this chronic condition. My first question is to the Minister of Health and Wellness. Coverage was announced for diabetic test strips, essential for monitoring the management of diabetes. Can the minister tell us why it has taken so long to provide coverage for these critical supplies?

Mr. Horne: Well, Mr. Speaker, this morning’s news that Alberta will cover a whole range of diabetic supplies, including test strips for Albertans, is indeed welcome. I can’t think of an MLA on any side of this House who hasn’t heard from constituents about this concern over the last several years. This announcement will see \$13.3 million invested in supplying not only diabetic test strips but lancets, syringes, and other supplies for insulin-treated diabetics across the province.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Quest: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Also to the Minister of Health and Wellness. This coverage will be welcome news to many Albertans who pay between \$30 and \$60 per week just to monitor their diabetes. Can the minister tell us who is eligible for this coverage and who isn’t?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Horne: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Eligibility is available to all Albertans who are members of either the seniors’ drug plan, the nongroup plan, or our palliative care Alberta Blue Cross benefit plan. Anyone in Alberta is in a position to take advantage of that. Coverage is limited to \$600 a year per individual. We currently have approximately 206,000 diabetics in Alberta; 90 to 95 per cent of those people are type 2 diabetics, and a number of them will be insulin treated along with type 1 diabetics. So a very large number of people will be eligible.

The Speaker: The hon. member, please.

Mr. Quest: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Last question to the same minister. Today’s announcement only addresses the management of diabetes, which is good. Can the minister tell us what we’re doing to prevent people from getting this disease in the first place?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Horne: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. I’m proud to say that

Alberta is leading the country in our efforts to prevent diabetes and other conditions that lead to diabetes such as obesity. Obesity itself accounts for 90 per cent of type 2 diabetes cases. Our chief medical officer of health, Dr. Corriveau, has been a champion in promoting action on the obesity front on the national stage. As the co-chair of the Public Health Network he is leading federal, provincial, and territorial efforts to promote healthy weights and curb childhood obesity.

Mr. Speaker, this is something about which we should all be concerned. I don't think we can remind ourselves enough that this generation of children in Canada is expected to have a shorter life expectancy than the generation that . . .

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Varsity, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Calder.

School Board Funding

Mr. Chase: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Cuts, job losses, deficits, overcrowded classes: these are the hard realities school boards have to face every year thanks to this government's mismanaged budgets and unreliable funding. Sustainable funding for our children's future is what should have been done right from the start. To the Minister of Education: will the minister stand up for equality of opportunity and promise to review the funding formula that penalizes our rural school boards?

Mr. Lukaszuk: Mr. Speaker, I cannot speak for what should have been done right from the start because that would have been Liberal Premier Rutherford that would have perhaps done it right from the start, but I can speak to this budget. This is the first budget in the history of the province that provides three-year sustainable funding to school boards and allows school boards to make very flexible decisions within their jurisdictions to reflect their individual pressures.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Chase: Thank you very much. Premier Rutherford, Premier Manning, and Premier Lougheed had it all over these most recent examples.

To the same minister: given that distance and commuting are major challenges for rural families, will the minister commit to freezing transportation fees for rural schools, saving parents hundreds of dollars?

Mr. Lukaszuk: Mr. Speaker, as you probably know very well, the Education budget is on the floor of the Legislature. That member will have ample opportunity to debate every line item of my budget in the next few days, and I will be able to explain all those lines in detail. At the end of the day I would remind this member that over the next three years our budget will be increasing from \$6.8 billion to \$7.1 billion, which is phenomenal.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Chase: Thank you very much. Again to the same minister: given that schools in Alberta are still short 450 teaching positions and that rural communities face hardships on a daily basis, will this government increase funding for rural school boards?

Mr. Lukaszuk: Mr. Speaker, I will repeat what I just said. Over the next three years the budget will increase from \$6.8 billion to \$7.1 billion. We are spending approximately \$35 million per day on school boards right now, and the member will have ample opportunity to ask individual questions during the budget.

2:40

The Speaker: The Department of Education estimates will be featured in this Assembly on Tuesday, March 6, starting at approximately 3 p.m. The building is open to all citizens in the province of Alberta.

Now we have an additional statement to be made by a member of Executive Council. Hon. Minister of Seniors, do you wish to provide some additional information?

Caregivers for Persons with Developmental Disabilities (continued)

Mr. VanderBurg: Yes. Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Just to further clarify a question that I had from the Member for Calgary-Varsity, here's my letter of December 12 in response to his letter of November 22.*

I am writing in follow-up to your November 22, 2011, inquiry to the Persons with Developmental Disabilities . . . Appeal Secretariat office regarding when and how appointments are made to the PDD Appeal Panel. I am pleased to provide the following information.

I think the accusation that the member made was clearly inappropriate. Sir, I would ask that you ask for his apology.

The Speaker: Well, first of all, under our rules once I recognize a member of Executive Council, it means that the person who raised the question may ask an additional question, so we'll see where we go with this.

Go ahead.

Mr. Chase: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Not only did the hon. minister not provide information on PDD Appeal Panel appointees and PDD board members' qualifications and training, as I asked. My question would be, obviously, to the Seniors minister, but he can pass it on to the Minister of Human Services. Why can't your two ministries get your acts together to protect not only disabled individuals but disabled individuals' caregivers? Why does it have to be an appeal process?

The Speaker: I clearly saw a difference of view here, so I'm going to ask that this matter be studied with the Blues over the weekend, and if there's a point of privilege that the hon. minister would like to raise, he can raise it on Tuesday. Okay?

We will proceed with the Routine in 30 seconds from now.

Members' Statements (continued)

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

Loss of Trust in the Government

Dr. Swann: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Today another group of health care givers has said: enough. Doctors, nurses, EMS workers have been saying it. Caregivers in PDD have been saying it. Even astute businesspeople in this province have been condemning the mismanagement in this province. Now the people who keep our hospitals running safely and smoothly under daily crises couldn't take it anymore. Maintenance and cleaning staff, lab technicians, and porters took an unprecedented step to a wildcat strike.

What pushes them to this extremity? It is the loss of trust and government corruption. This government refuses to do its job. Citizens in all walks of life speak of being disregarded, dismissed, and bullied, and increasingly people are saying: enough is enough. It's troubling when one's contribution is devalued or one is

*See page 174, left column, paragraph 4

silenced. It's intolerable when this disrespect interferes with the ability of conscientious workers to care for their fellow human beings, when workers return home aware that they are unable to meet the standard expected in their work, when daily they place at risk people that they are supposed to be caring for, when maintenance doesn't have the resources to properly fix a damaged floor or pipe, when cleaning staff are pushed beyond their physical limits and forced to leave conditions they would not accept in their homes.

This government has broken its trust not once but many times to those charged with caring and protecting our most vulnerable citizens. The evidence of incompetence and corruption is now undeniable, and the fat cats in power must be held accountable. Albertans at all levels are seeing this gross mismanagement of people and resources and the cover-ups and the lack of accountability. This must stop before our spirits are broken and more lives are lost. This government is no longer a source of solution. It is the source of our problems. When trust is gone, collapse is not far off. It's time for this government to go.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Lethbridge-East.

Random Acts of Kindness Week

Ms Pastoor: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. February 13 to 19 is Random Acts of Kindness Week, and this so fits in with what I started with my kids a long time ago and have used as a mantra ever since, that if we all play kindly in the sandbox, we all win.

A random act of kindness can be volunteering in communities, supporting charities, or lending a helping hand to neighbours and friends. A simple smile and eye contact is surprisingly powerful. Albertans are renowned for their big hearts, community spirit, and the tremendous care they show for one another and the world around them.

With this special week in mind, I'm pleased to share an important call to action on behalf of Alberta's Prevention of Bullying Youth Committee, a group of 15 dedicated young people from all across the province who help promote awareness of bullying and work closely with us to create safe and caring schools and communities. The youth committee is encouraging Albertans to go to www.b-free.ca and share their random acts of kindness stories with the world. They're asking us to sit with someone at lunch who is usually left out or send a supportive text message to a friend who's been bullied or put down.

The smallest act of kindness or encouragement can make the biggest difference in anyone's life. Their call to action is about coming together to create a caring, respectful society and leaving bullying behind, one act of kindness at a time. Go to the committee's b-free website, submit your act of kindness story, and help inspire even more compassion and respect for others. Together we can make a bully-free Alberta.

Thank you.

Notices of Motions

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

Dr. Taft: Yes. Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise today to give you oral notice of my intent to make a motion under Standing Order 30. Do I read the motion into the record now?

The Speaker: No. You're just advising notice. I'll call on you later.

Tabling Returns and Reports

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

Mr. Hinman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I actually have two tablings now. First, I'd like to table the partisan quote from the friend of the Minister of Municipal Affairs, Darren Aldous, which says that "without certain and predictable funding, cities are not able to do simple long-term planning. Many decisions have been made for 'political reasons,' he said, with some MLAs aiming for infrastructure announcements in their riding." This is from the *Herald* on the 16th of June, 2011.

My second tabling is on behalf of an Albertan, Anne Landry. I would like to table the required five copies of documents recording her journey to try and get her own file information. Anne Landry feels that she has been treated unfairly by the Alberta Information and Privacy Commissioner and has filed court proceedings in Alberta Court of Queen's Bench. I have the required five copies of the certified record of proceedings that she has filed. Ms Landry is hoping that by tabling these documents, it will help shed light on the ordeal that she has had to undergo just to try to get information on her very own file.

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

Ms Notley: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'd like to table the appropriate number of copies of electricity bills that 14 Albertans have sent to the NDP opposition, showing significantly increased and higher electricity costs.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Airdrie-Chestermere.

Mr. Anderson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'd like to table the requisite amount of copies of two letters from constituents. The first is from Vic Neufeld, who makes \$35,000 a year and whose wife is a person with a developmental disability, who is not receiving AISH at this time but otherwise would be able to. The reason she can't is because her husband is making \$35,000. It's just something she wanted the Legislature to be aware of.

The second is regarding an individual, Mr. Paul Thebeau, from my constituency as well, who was denied over and over a requisition to get an MRI test that he wanted his wife to get at a private clinic and was willing to pay for but could not get the requisition for some reason, even though there was capacity. It seems like a very brutal hole in the system, and it didn't make a lot of sense to him.

I'm tabling both of those.

2:50

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

Mr. Chase: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Earlier I introduced to you and through you Samy Mukadi, Albert Mbuyi, and Rene Tahibula, who are members of the Alberta Congolese community, and they have asked me to table this document which begins:

We, the members of the Congolese Diaspora in Alberta accuse the Canadian mining businesses for illicit operation in Congo. This is the second letter that we write on the post election crisis that continues to prevail in the Democratic Republic of Congo today. As in the first letter, of December 15 2011, we condemn and accuse . . .

I am tabling the list of accusations, Mr. Speaker.

Thank you.

Projected Government Business

The Speaker: The Official Opposition House Leader.

Dr. Taft: Yes. We would love to hear on this side of the Assembly what the government has planned for next week.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: The hon. Government House Leader.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I think the Order Paper is pretty clear, but to fulfill the Routine of order on Tuesday, February 21, in the afternoon it will be day 6 of consideration of His Honour's Speech from the Throne, but after we will be in Committee of Supply with respect to the estimates of the Ministry of Finance and as per the Order Paper should time permit.

On Wednesday, February 22, in the afternoon it will be day 7 of consideration of His Honour's Speech from the Throne, but the Committee of Supply will sit from 3 till 6 p.m. or such time as it needs to consider the estimates of Executive Council and as per the Order Paper thereafter.

On Thursday, February 23, in the afternoon it will be day 8 of consideration of His Honour's Speech from the Throne, and we will deal with second reading of Bill 2, Education Act; Bill 4, St. Albert and Sturgeon Valley School Districts Establishment Act; Bill 5, Seniors' Property Tax Deferral Act; and third reading of Bill 3, Appropriation (Supplementary Supply) Act, 2012.

Request for Emergency Debate

The Speaker: Hon. members, we have an application under Standing Order 30. I would refer all members to their standing orders so that they can understand what we're talking about here now. This is a request to basically abandon the normal Routine that's found in the standing orders. This deals with a matter of urgent importance. The urgent importance is not the issue at stake; it is the process and the procedures. So I want these comments – I will recognize a number of speakers if they choose to participate – to be a very, very fine discussion on why the Routine should be abandoned, not the issue itself.

The hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview.

Work Stoppages by Hospital Support Staff

Dr. Taft: Thanks, Mr. Speaker. I rise to propose the following motion.

Be it resolved that this Assembly adjourn the ordinary business of the Assembly to discuss a matter of urgent public importance; namely, a work stoppage today by general support service workers at at least two Edmonton hospitals, work action threatening patient welfare and undermining public confidence in this government's ability to manage Alberta's public health care system.

The Speaker: Hon. member, can you just bear with me for a second, please? You read the motion into the record, and this should be circulated to all members. But we have one other issue because if we agree to what your request is, we can't get to the other issue. So I've got to deal with the Government House Leader on his point of order.

Point of Order

Allegations against a Member

Mr. Hancock: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. I have not been raising points of order much during this session so far, but there

was a situation today when the Leader of the Official Opposition offended the proceedings of the House under 23(h) of the standing orders, making an allegation against another member, and 23(i), imputing false or unavowed motives to another member.

In question period at that particular time the member was addressing the hon. minister of health and accused the hon. minister of health of, among a number of things, personally trying to undermine the health system and drive us to a – I don't have the benefit of the Blues – privatized American health system.

This issue has been raised a number of times in the House. It's been made clear by the Premier, by the minister of health, by anybody who's asked what the government's direction is with respect to a publicly funded health system. It's also been very clear that the minister of health is not on that agenda, and the Leader of the Official Opposition knows it full well.

It's inflammatory rhetoric. It is unconscionable for him to knowingly misstate in such a blatant manner in order to make his point when he knows full well that what he's saying is not true, and I would ask that the hon. member be asked to withdraw those statements.

The Speaker: Hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview, you're speaking now?

Dr. Taft: I am. I have the heavy burden today, Mr. Speaker, of filling in the shoes of our House leader – so I'm going to do my best here – and part of that responsibility is to speak to this issue.

I will cut immediately to the chase because I know you appreciate that. I refer to a document here, Mr. Speaker, which I'm pretty certain has been tabled in this Assembly before. If it hasn't, I can table it again. These are PowerPoint slides and a document that's dated July 12, 2010. It includes the name of the Member for Edmonton-Rutherford, and it's a legislation briefing to, I believe, the caucus of the day. It specifically refers to a policy shift, and I'm quoting now here, Mr. Speaker: consider private insurance options for limited health services; regulations could enable and regulate scope and operation of private insurance.

It's pretty clear from this that, in fact, this is a briefing given to the government caucus about 18 months ago with the name of the Member for Edmonton-Rutherford on it that was advocating a shift to private health insurance, and that's part of the debate here.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I don't think there are any grounds whatsoever for a point of order.

The Speaker: Well, hon. Minister of Health and Wellness, I'll give you an opportunity to say something, if you want to, seeing as you seem to be the focus of this.

Mr. Horne: Well, thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. First of all, my job here is not to continue to deny accusations presented by members opposite. I have spoken to this matter in the House before. I have made it clear that I am not the author of the document that was tabled in this House. I question the basis upon which any member of this House would attempt to connect me to the document either as an author or as someone who would personally attest to any statement or belief or other piece of information that may be communicated by the document.

I am on record, Mr. Speaker, as someone who defends, supports, and works to improve the value of our publicly funded health care system. I think my record both prior to becoming an elected Member of the Legislative Assembly and prior to my appointment as Minister of Health and Wellness bears this out. I could point to any number of public records and media reports that may provide support to this.

What I would say, Mr. Speaker, is that the continued tabling of and reference to this document, other e-mails, and other purported pieces of evidence to attempt to assign a belief system or an attitude or any other motive is in fact an insult both to me as a Member of the Legislative Assembly and, I would humbly suggest, to the proceedings of this House.

I renew my objection to this. I have no way of controlling, other than through appeals to Mr. Speaker, the conduct of other members, and I would consider it appropriate in the circumstances that the hon. leader be asked to withdraw the remark. Thank you, sir.

The Speaker: Hon. members, one of the really important rules that we follow is found in *Beauchesne* 494, where it reads that acceptance of the word of a member about matters concerning themselves should be accepted. We've heard this today. I hope that will become the norm.

Secondly, there's a bigger problem, though, than all of this. We don't have these issues, you know, if everybody followed the rules they signed their name to. The members signed a document that said: no preambles on second or third questions. If everybody would remember that they signed that – I've been hearing this week about people wanting to sign documents or something. I repeat that. The members have signed that. No preambles. Willingly and enthusiastically everybody agreed to it.

3:00

So I read the second question.

Mr. Speaker, health care workers don't care about policy. They care about action. They care about solutions. They want the system fixed. Given that billions of dollars are spent in our health care system with increasingly poor results, it seems obvious that this government wants the health care system to fail, and this minister has been consulting with them for 10 years to helping it fail because he wants to Americanize it. This is the man who presented the document to privatize health care.

The way the *Hansard* people have identified this, they've come up with about six different sentences. Finally, you get to the question.

Is this government simply planning to wash its hands of a problem it doesn't understand and cannot solve by privately contracting it out?

You know, if we had no preambles, we wouldn't have most of these. And you all signed your name to it. This is what I find so astounding. After having to read through the rules, this is a daily violation on preambles.

I'm going home this weekend, and I'm going to read my memo to everybody, and I'm going to look at the document that has all the House leaders signing this, no preambles, and all their caucuses being enthusiastic about it, no preambles. When I come back on Tuesday, we'll see if anybody can remember other than me, who will stand up and interject.

Okay. We've clarified all of this. We've heard the statement of the member. We know what *Beauchesne* 494 is all about. We'll come back on Tuesday, and we'll try to be nice to one another.

Work Stoppages by Hospital Support Staff (continued)

The Speaker: Hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview, you read the motion into the record.

Dr. Taft: Yes.

The Speaker: I will give you a number of minutes to explain the reason for your urgency petition.

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I understand the issue here is urgency; it's not the substance of it. I will be working under probably the usual references for this sort of debate, *Marleau and Montpetit* 584 and 585; *Beauchesne*, the several paragraphs from 387 to 398.

Marleau and Montpetit says that the issue needs to be specific and urgent and important, and that just requires an ever-so-brief review of the facts on the ground to demonstrate the urgency and the specificity of it. What we have, Mr. Speaker, are some hundreds of support workers at acute-care hospitals who have walked off the job today due to a breakdown in labour negotiations. There has been a cancellation of a significant number of surgeries as a result.

Because of widespread support for the cause our understanding is that the walkout appears to have spread from Edmonton's two largest hospitals, the Royal Alex and the University, to facilities across many areas of the province, including Leduc, Cold Lake, Smoky Lake, Boyle, the Northeast health centre. So this appears to be, I think, a very urgent issue. It's hard to think of something that would be more urgent than people's health care, you know, people's surgery and so on.

It's very specific. We're talking about a well-defined, specific, addressable issue. I think on those grounds the situation meets the requirements of *Marleau and Montpetit* 584.

This is, Mr. Speaker, a nonpartisan issue. This is not an issue that's being driven by any political party particularly; it's being driven by the hearts and the passions and the concerns of the people involved regardless of their politics.

As to the urgency of it, Mr. Speaker, and just for the benefit of those in the gallery, this is about how the issue could be addressed through means other than the Assembly. I don't believe there are those. There's no government bill on the Order Paper specific to this. There's no private member's bill specific to this issue. In fact, I don't think there's anything on the Order Paper that addresses this. There are no government motions.

Really, we are on the brink of a long weekend. We do know, Mr. Speaker, that on long weekends things like accident rates and emergency demands surge. This issue, for all we know, could be engulfing the entire province by the time this Assembly meets again on Tuesday afternoon. I think what happened today at the Royal Alex and the University is like a spark set to kindling. This kindling is right across the province, and we may find that by the time the long weekend is over, Alberta's health care system is in widespread upheaval because of this. And between now and Tuesday afternoon, when we reconvene, there isn't another chance for us as legislators to address the issue.

It is so pressing – and I'm referring here specifically to *Beauchesne*'s 389. It is "so pressing that the public interest will suffer if it is not given immediate attention." The public has an enormous interest in the functioning of our health care system. Any one of us over the next few days could need that service or, indeed, will probably know people who need that service, so it is a pressing public interest.

I think that the public interest demands that discussion take place immediately because, Mr. Speaker, there is simply no other forum in which it could occur. We have no other means as legislators to address the issue. That is the combination of factors, I believe, that makes this absolutely suited and appropriate for an emergency debate of this Assembly.

I've kept my comments brief, Mr. Speaker, because I think the point is so strong that it speaks for itself. Thank you.

The Speaker: The Government House Leader.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It would behoove me to speak to this in two particular ways. The first is that the motion itself, in my view, should be ruled out of order by yourself. In *Beauchesne's Parliamentary Rules & Forms*, sixth edition, page 114, 391 says that "subjects excluded by those rules cannot be brought forward . . . such as a matter under adjudication by a court of law." It is, I think, very much public knowledge and, certainly, something you can take advisement of that it is not legal to strike in certain areas and particularly with respect to hospitals.

I would not purport to put my own viewpoint as to what the nature of this job action that was referred to is, but I can tell you that it's before the Labour Relations Board, which is an adjudicatory body. It is a body that is tasked with hearing these particular claims. It's independent, and it is charged with ruling on these particular claims as to whether or not this is a legal strike. It is doing that this afternoon, so it is inappropriate for this House to engage in a discussion about this particular incident at this particular time because it is a labour matter which is before the Labour Relations Board.

Further, Mr. Speaker, I would indicate that while the issue of the health and safety of people in our hospitals is clearly an important matter for the public, a debate this afternoon in this House is not an appropriate way to involve ourselves in what is essentially a labour dispute. In fact, perusal of the legislation will make it very clear that if, in fact, this is an illegal job action, which is the matter before the Labour Relations Board, there would be sanction or ruling by the Labour Relations Board.

Also, there are appropriate mechanisms for resolving the dispute. It's not a such a matter that there's no way for the dispute to be resolved. There are mediation and arbitration processes available to the parties. If parties felt aggrieved by any of the processes, they could avail themselves of those dispute resolution mechanisms. So for this House to resolve itself this afternoon to discuss this matter, which is essentially at the root a job action, while it's before the Labour Relations Board and while there is at law methodology for resolving the dispute is quite inappropriate.

That does not at all deal with the issue of whether or not this is an urgent and important matter for the public. Obviously, the care of the public is an important matter to this government and to all Albertans. That is why there is the legislation in place precisely to deal with these sorts of matters.

It's not an appropriate matter for the House this afternoon while it's under this sort of discussion and while it's before the Labour Relations Board.

3:10

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona. And I caution again that the issue here is urgency and the changing of the Routine, not the issue. I'll remind that to the Government House Leader as well. Not the issue. It's the urgency of the debate in this Chamber.

Edmonton-Strathcona.

Ms Notley: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Indeed, my comments start on that point, that what we are talking about today is urgency. As has already been identified, we are discussing a work stoppage that debate might conclude has been incited by the conduct of Alberta Health Services in their bargaining efforts.

The Speaker: And here we go.

Ms Notley: I'm just stating the facts.

The Speaker: Again, I have to focus.

Ms Notley: I'm about to move on.

The Speaker: Please do.

Ms Notley: Okay.

The Speaker: Because it's going to be 4:30 and you'll still be talking to one another about it.

Ms Notley: In terms of urgency the matters are in fact unfolding as we speak. As we speak, Mr. Speaker. It's a matter that I think has extended beyond the two locations noted in the motion by the Member for Edmonton-Riverview to other locations as well. Hence, it grows exponentially as matters of minutes and hours go by, and that speaks to urgency.

As well, at this point there are actually no mechanisms in place to control it outside this Assembly, I would submit, because, in fact, notwithstanding the points made by the House leader, the very fact that we're in this position is a function of the other strategies and other mechanisms having failed. The labour relations regime has failed. The laws have resulted in people taking action because they for whatever reason do not see them as applying to their situation. So the other mechanisms are not effectively working right now; hence, the government has lost control of the situation.

The point has already been made that there's no other place on the legislative agenda for us to discuss this.

The Speaker: That's the only subject matter that I want to hear about.

Ms Notley: That and urgency.

As I've said, there's no other place between now and Tuesday where we could even begin to talk about it and, quite frankly, I don't think we could on Tuesday either.

As I've just noted, the matters are unfolding so quickly that it would be short sighted to think that urgency and emergency would not occur repeatedly over the course of the next four days. Those emergencies would relate to patient care, patient safety, worker safety, the safety of our employees who work within the health care system, and, as I've said already, the overall public confidence in our health care system.

I would also on the issue of urgency, Mr. Speaker, refer you to some elements of precedent in that in this House urgency has been found to be in place when we were talking about the availability of vaccinations. I believe it was about two years ago that we had an emergency debate on that issue. I believe it was a little over a year ago that the overall issue of confidence in the public health care system was also deemed to warrant debate on the basis of urgency as a result of various and sundry allegations about engagement by political figures in the health care system. Regardless, because it dealt with health care and because it reflected and impacted on the public confidence, this Legislature determined that it was, in fact, urgent and warranted a vote.

As I've said before, there are alternative actions to resolving it, and those actions are things that are within the scope of this Assembly and this government as directed by this Assembly, so the mechanisms for resolving it are appropriately discussed in this setting. As I've said, it's not a matter that is being fully and appropriately adjudicated in a court of law. One element of it is, but certainly the overall urgent matters will not be dealt with at the Labour Relations Board today or anytime soon. So based on the clear examples given by the Member for Edmonton-Riverview of the specific threats to the health and safety of Albertans over the

course of the next five days, it seems very clear on the face of it that these matters warrant a finding of urgency on your part.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: I think we've had enough. We keep hearing these arguments about whether or not this is urgent. You never get to the question of if the Speaker actually declares that it is urgent. If you want to deal with a procedural argument for another hour and 20 minutes, I'm okay with that, too, but I think that we should have some prudence here in terms of what we're talking about.

I want all members to look at Standing Order 30, please, in their Standing Orders so that everybody is up to date on it and understands exactly what we're talking about. Standing Order 30(2) provides that a "Member may briefly state the arguments in favour of the request for leave and the Speaker may allow such debate as he . . . considers relevant to the question of urgency," and it is the role of the chair to rule on whether or not the request for leave is in order.

Hon. members, the chair is prepared to rule on whether the request for leave for this motion to proceed is in order under Standing Order 30(2). The Member for Edmonton-Riverview has met the requirement of providing at least two hours' notice to the Speaker's office by providing the required notice at 11:07 this morning. The motion reads as follows:

Be it resolved that this Assembly adjourn the ordinary business of the Assembly to discuss a matter of urgent public importance; namely, a work stoppage today by general support service workers at at least two Edmonton hospitals, work action threatening patient welfare and undermining public confidence in this government's ability to manage Alberta's public health care system.

It has been noted that the relevant parliamentary authorities on the subject are pages 689 to 696 of *House of Commons Procedure and Practice*, second edition, and *Beauchesne's*, paragraphs 387 to 390.

On the issue of urgency of debate the matter raised by the hon. member arose only this morning, so the member's request is timely. In addition, the chair notes that there will be no other opportunity for this matter to be considered in the Assembly as there are no items on the Order Paper under which such a debate could occur. And although the chair is not bound by precedent, the chair notes that there have been several recent emergency debate requests involving the health care system that have been found by the chair, in this case the same person, to be in order, including those on March 14, 2011; November 18, 2010; and October 25, 2010. In addition, the chair granted the request for leave in a matter involving a strike of health care workers on May 24, 2000. Accordingly, the chair finds that the request for leave is in order.

Now, the rules governing the procedure once the chair finds the request for leave to be in order are as follows. Standing Order 30(3) requires the question to be put to a vote of this Assembly. If there are objections to the question, then the chair will ask those members who support the motion to rise in their places. If 15 or more members rise, the debate will proceed, and each member who wishes to speak will have 10 minutes to do so until all who wish to speak have done so or until the normal hour of adjournment. If at least five members rise but less than 15, the question whether the member has leave to move adjournment of the ordinary business is put immediately and, if necessary, is determined by division. If fewer than five members rise, the motion will not proceed.

The question is: shall the debate on the urgent matter proceed? All those in favour, say aye.

Some Hon. Members: Aye.

The Speaker: Those opposed, say no.

Some Hon. Members: No.

The Speaker: Okay. I've heard both of them. Let's see how many will rise. Well, we certainly have that number between five and 14, so I will now put another question, a simple question, a majority decision. Shall the debate on the urgent matter proceed?

[The voice vote indicated that the motion lost]

[Several members rose calling for a division. The division bell was rung at 3:19 p.m.]

[Ten minutes having elapsed, the Assembly divided]

3:30

[The Speaker in the chair]

For the motion:

Boutilier	MacDonald	Sherman
Chase	Mason	Swann
Hinman	Notley	Taft
Kang		

Against the motion:

Ady	Klimchuk	Prins
Amery	Leskiw	Rogers
Berger	Liepert	Sarich
Calahasen	Lund	Vandermeer
Campbell	McFarland	Weadick
Elniski	McQueen	Webber
Goudreau	Oberle	Woo-Paw
Groeneveld	Olson	Xiao
Hancock	Ouellette	Zwozdesky
Horne		

Totals: For – 10 Against – 28

[The motion to adjourn the ordinary business of the Assembly to discuss a matter of urgent public importance lost]

Orders of the Day

Government Bills and Orders Second Reading

Bill 2 Education Act

[Adjourned debate February 15: Mr. Denis]

The Speaker: Are there additional speakers? The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar?

Mr. MacDonald: Yes.

The Speaker: On the Education Act.

Mr. MacDonald: You bet.

The Speaker: Proceed.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you very much. Certainly, we're getting another copy or another version of the Education Act. We had one which was distributed throughout our communities in the summer, and this version has come before the House now. There was a lot of work and there was a lot of effort put into the original act, or the original change to the act, I should say, by the former Minister of Education. There was considerable public expense and a lot of

public relations exercised regarding that former document. Now we have before us this afternoon the latest version.

[Mr. Zwozdesky in the chair]

It's interesting, Mr. Speaker, to go through this. We're talking about access to education, opportunities for learning, charter schools, private schools, responsibilities and dispute resolution – it's interesting to note that Bullying Awareness and Prevention Week is mentioned in this act; I don't think that applies to this government in their relationship with the AUMA, but that's another matter – student discipline, the student advisory board, complex education needs tribunal, the attendance board, board powers and elections. There was some concern in the past about section 51 here, the natural person powers. I understand that boards have been consulted widely and extensively and are now satisfied. At least, I hope they are; I haven't heard from them that they are not.

We can go on here about board procedures, investigations, elections and trustees, conflict of interest and disqualification, structure of school authorities, finance and property, the Alberta school foundation fund, the taxing authority, payment into the fund, default. There is another very important section on special school tax levy, collection of taxes, borrowing, and then we get to part 7, education professions and occupations.

I was reading last week, Mr. Speaker, about the problems in America. The Minister of Finance would be cognizant of those problems after his recent travels to New York and to Boston and to various other places. Certainly, I was surprised to learn in a policy paper what America has to do to solve some of its problems. One of the suggestions made was that they had to increase the education of their public school teachers. Public school teachers in some American states had difficulty providing sound or adequate science and math instruction to the public school students. I thought: "Wow, we certainly don't have that problem in Alberta. We have excellent, qualified teachers."

The author of this report went on at length to explain how the Americans could actually improve the next generation of American workers and at the same time American taxpayers by improving the education system. There are lessons in this for all of us, certainly, but I must say, after having three members of our family graduate from Edmonton public schools, that the teachers are well qualified and do an excellent job of helping our students out.

Mr. Speaker, this bill is extensive, but there are certain things that I think we should emphasize in the course of debate. Certainly bullying prevention: there are lessons for all of us on that. We must encourage partnerships between the parents, the trustees, and the boards. I think education professionals are included in that partnership. There have to be partnerships with postsecondary education institutions. We should focus the public education system on student success. That's certainly, I think, laudable from all sides of this House.

Now, there are some things in this bill that I haven't seen, and I spent some time reading it. We can go back to the Learning Commission. That was quite a document. For a while it was a guiding principle or guiding force for this government. This government worked very hard at implementing many of the recommendations from the Learning Commission, but it has recently failed particularly with working on the very, very important issue of class sizes and education funding.

I don't want to pull out the fiscal plan from this year's budget and remind this House of the additional money that is put aside to meet the requirements of small class sizes. Hopefully, it will be

used for that. We'll have to watch, and we'll have to see, but hopefully, Mr. Speaker, it will be used for that. We need to ensure that we remember the recommendations from the Learning Commission, particularly around class sizes and class size initiatives.

3:40

We need to ensure that there is stable, predictable funding for public education. We have to remember that public education is an investment. I heard members of this House say that as recently as this week. They are absolutely right. This is an investment in the future. It's not an expense. If we are to diversify our economy in the future, we're going to have to have a skilled, well-educated workforce that can compete in many, many different economic sectors. A public education system is the best way to lay that solid foundation.

I know there are those that think: well, let's let the private sector deal with this. But the public education system allows all families, regardless of family income, to get a good, solid, sound start. That's why public education is so needed and so necessary.

Over the years we have been told that particularly in central areas of the city, Mr. Speaker, we don't need all of the public schools, that we don't need them any longer, that we don't have a student population that merits keeping these schools open. Public schools are not factories. Public schools are not places that should be judged on the size of the student body. Public schools are part of a community. There are some small schools that work for families and for students.

I was surprised last spring, Mr. Speaker, to come to the Legislative Assembly, to the steps on a Sunday morning, and see a group of concerned parents from different rural regions of this province come down to let their opinions be known about what they thought of pending school closures in their districts. One group was from around Barrhead, and the other group was from around Lougheed. I had an interesting talk with them. I went over to the Annex, and I got them each a copy of the Education annual report. They were astonished at the information in there. They surprised me because as taxpayers they didn't realize that their government would provide this information to them.

It was a nice, sunny Sunday morning, and we had quite a discussion around the financial statements of their respective public school boards. They told me the importance of their local community school, their public school. That's in rural areas. Certainly, in central areas of Edmonton this has been an issue that's been going on for quite some time. We have closed dozens of fine public schools. The argument has been made that we don't have the students.

Well, Mr. Speaker, this province is a young province. We have 36 years as the average age of the population for the cities of Edmonton and Calgary. This is according to Statistics Canada. Saskatoon would be the youngest metropolitan area by average population in Canada, followed by Edmonton and then Calgary. Last year there were over 50,000 live births in this province according to the information from Alberta Health Services.

Mr. Speaker, we have a lot of students who are going to need a lot of classes and a lot of teachers at the front of those classes in the next few years across this province, particularly in Edmonton and particularly in Calgary. Whenever we look at this act, I hope we can have quite a discussion on it. But section 62, closure of schools: we have to have a good examination and debate on what is proposed here and how that will affect our communities and our constituencies for years to come.

Again, Mr. Speaker, a public school is part of the community. It's an investment in that community. When you look at some of

the education property taxes that are paid in neighborhoods, some neighborhoods are paying well in excess of a million dollars annually in their portion of the education property taxes on their houses, and they have no public school. They have come to our constituency office and pointed this out to me, and I agree with these taxpayers. Many of these taxpayers have children of public school age, and they do not think they have been treated fairly in this process. So when we discuss and we debate particularly section 62, let's make sure that we get it right.

Mr. Speaker, there are a lot of things that we can do to ensure that public education is not eroded and we go down the slope toward the American style of education system.

In conclusion, in another report I was reading, there was a school district in Florida where over 30 per cent of the students had no permanent home. The financial crisis had turned this particular neighbourhood upside down, and many students were in temporary shelters or living in campers or tents. The school system was the only stable thing in their lives.

We take a lot for granted in this province, but let's not take our public school system for granted. Let's make sure that this act is what we need not only now or next year but many years into the future. Thank you very much.

The Acting Speaker: Thank you very much.

Hon. members, five additional minutes are available under 29(2)(a) for any questions or comments pertaining to the previous speaker. The hon. Member for Fort McMurray-Wood Buffalo. Yes, please. You can ask a question.

Mr. Boutilier: Thanks, Mr. Speaker. To the hon. member. Obviously, I look forward to speaking about this issue as well. It really is interesting. I know the hon. member is certainly well studied when it comes to the importance of education. Actually, as a former teacher myself I have to ask him: as we go forward, are there any other suggestions that you think could be added to this bill to improve it even more in helping young Alberta learners when it comes to the importance of education and the foundation that we build our society on?

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

Mr. MacDonald: Yes. That's a very, very interesting question. Certainly, I would think that we have to have a stable funding formula for all public schools. I think that as we go forward we have to respect the historical traditions of this province and recognize the constitutional right for the separate school system. We cannot forget that. Specifically for Fort McMurray, we've got to make sure in fast-growing cities and communities, particularly in the north, that they're not ignored by this government.

I was astonished, hon. member, to hear from some residents of Fort McMurray that I know that they actually had to limit the number of family members that they invited to the high school graduation. Not all the brothers and sisters could go, the grandparents, the aunts and uncles. You had to be very selective with the invitations because it was a small facility. The graduating class was large. They even tried at one point, I was told, to go to a community hall. That wasn't big enough. That's an example of having, Mr. Speaker, the resources, the facilities where they are needed.

3:50

It puzzles me, particularly after I see the royalty projections that are going to come from bitumen production around the Fort McMurray area and there's going to be this potential billion dollar surplus – in fact, I think in two years it's projected to be \$5 billion

– that in a fast-growing city like Fort McMurray we don't have adequate education facilities for the students. If we want to permanently attract workers to cities such as Fort McMurray, we're going to have to make sure that there are public schools available for the younger family members of those workers.

Those are some of the concerns, hon. member, that I would like to see debated further with this Education Act, Bill 2. Thank you.

The Acting Speaker: Thank you.

Anyone else under 29(2)(a)?

If not, I have Calgary-Mackay, followed by Calgary-Glenmore, followed by Fort McMurray-Wood Buffalo.

Ms Woo-Paw: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It is with great pleasure that I rise today to speak to Bill 2, the Education Act, which was formally introduced in this House by the hon. Minister of Education. Before I begin, I would like to thank the Minister of Education and his predecessor, now the Minister of Human Services, for all their hard work on this proposed legislation.

Mr. Speaker, I'm truly impressed by these hon. members' dedication to a principled, learner-centred, and inclusive education system for all Alberta students. This is an absolutely fundamental piece of legislation before us. This legislation will govern all things within our K to 12 education system. Our government conducted extensive consultations with Albertans over the past three years driven by the government's desire and commitment to get it right with this bill, and I'm confident that this bill is getting it right.

The new legislation reflects the essence of the public interest in a strong education system and ensures that the rights, needs, and expectations of individuals and groups are in balance with the rights, needs, and expectations of society as a whole. The legislation recognizes that education is a shared responsibility of all partners in education, which occurs in an increasingly diverse range of learning environments and focuses on the concept of each student reaching their own potential.

There are a number of points, however, that I would like to touch on more closely with regard to how I see Bill 2 making a difference to students in Alberta in the pursuit of their aspirations and interests as well as in the nurturing of a passion for learning and a desire to be lifelong learners.

The first is my support for measures designed to improve the ever-critical issue of high school completion and making the transition from high school to postsecondary institutions as smoothly as possible by requiring school boards to collaborate with postsecondary institutions, high schools, and the community. To enable smooth transitions from high school to postsecondary, more students will be better supported in being exposed to and connected to postsecondary learning opportunities before graduation, and greater collaboration between high school and postsecondary may enable students to maximize their overall learning process.

One of these specific measures is raising the age of access to 21 years old, which broadens individual education opportunities by allowing more time and flexibility for completion of personal learning programs designed to meet personal needs.

Another policy shift found in Bill 2 is increasing the compulsory school attendance age from 16 to 17. These all signal that Albertans value high school completion and education in general. While we are making progress in increasing high school completion rates, I do believe more can be done. Mr. Speaker, in our fast-changing society it's no secret that those who complete high school have a much better chance of success in the workforce than those who do not, and today the value of a postsecondary education has never been greater.

The changes present in Bill 2 recognize the value of a high school education in preparing students for postsecondary education and informal education and are also strong signs that this bill fully supports high school completion and areas of postsecondary education.

Mr. Speaker, another key component of Bill 2 is the expansion of student responsibilities as part of the essential component of a positive learning environment and students' and boards' roles in developing that environment. Ultimately a welcoming, caring, respectful, and safe learning environment must be available to all students in all schools. Students, parents, teachers, and communities continue to stress the importance of this. Many of us within this House and beyond are deeply disturbed and saddened when we hear senseless and tragic circumstances of students being bullied. In the most extreme circumstances, yet becoming increasingly more frequent, some students have taken their lives as a result of bullying. This simply must stop. We must respond to the issue of bullying. In this bill we are.

Mr. Speaker, this legislation will provide direction to school boards to address both bullying and discrimination and identify them as important topics in addition to clearly establishing what is acceptable and unacceptable behaviour. These provisions will increase the safety and security of students across the province and confirm the importance of a learning environment in nurturing a sense of belonging and a positive sense of self that all children and youth are entitled to.

The physical, social, and psychological harms of bullying are profound. It can cause alienation, mistrust, depression, anxiety, and lead to low self-esteem. No student should ever have to endure these effects, which are quite often caused by bullying. Ensuring that schools are welcoming, caring, respectful, and safe learning environments is absolutely crucial, and I applaud the measures taken by Bill 2 to address such a serious issue.

Mr. Speaker, for the reasons I've listed, I fully support Bill 2, the Education Act. We have an opportunity before us to build on Alberta's incredible foundation of excellence established by the dedicated teachers, school support staff, and trustees of our existing world-class education system. I have no doubt that the proposed Education Act will provide a provincial framework and expectations for educational excellence in Alberta.

Again I would like to thank the hon. Minister of Education for bringing this legislation forward. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

I move to adjourn debate, Mr. Speaker.

[Motion to adjourn debate carried]

Government Bills and Orders Committee of the Whole

[Mr. Zwozdesky in the chair]

Bill 3 Appropriation (Supplementary Supply) Act, 2012

The Deputy Chair: Are there any speakers to this bill? The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Mr. MacDonald: Yes. Thank you again, Mr. Speaker. Bill 3. We've talked about the supply requests here earlier, but again we can say that all this money is needed and is necessary. You know, we can go through the fact that every year there seems to be a supplementary supply bill. Some years there are two. Most years there's one. When you go through this, you see, of course, the Legislative Assembly requesting \$3.1 million for the Senate election. We had quite a chat about that and quite a discussion in

the Standing Committee on Legislative Offices. I know it's against the conventions of this House and whatnot to talk about that, but I was surprised at how quickly the government members, without much discussion – and I'm sure the Minister of Finance would have been very disappointed, if he had an opportunity, because it was quickly passed.

Mr. Liepert: It should have been.

4:00

Mr. MacDonald: And he says that it should have been.

Well, I would take exception to that because whenever you compare the money that was allocated in the past, in 2004, for a similar election, it was a lot less. It's cavalier attitudes like that that have resulted in five successive budget deficits, some of them bigger than others, but for a government that maintains itself or promotes itself as fiscally conservative, that's quite a record. That's a track record. When you look at that track record, you look at some of those deficits, and you look at what's been proposed now with this new way of doing business, maybe we would not need to have any more sup supply budgets. If we look at what's on the Order Paper – Bill 1, Bill 2, and now Bill 3 – maybe we would not need any more supplementary supply estimates if we had Bill 1 and a rigorous discipline over on that side of the House.

Now, hon. members across the way have talked about Slave Lake and the disastrous fire. Certainly, no one would argue that you do not need to have money set aside, whether it's for pine beetles or for drought or for fire. These are things that need to be done, but do we need to fund them through this process, or should we have a separate, dedicated fund that can be drawn down as needed? Which would be better for the taxpayers?

Now, when we look at health care and health care budgets, they just seem to grow and grow and grow. When we look at Bill 3, we see the allocations for Seniors; we see the allocations for Justice; Municipal Affairs; Tourism, Parks and Recreation; Transportation; Human Services. We look at what was spent in health care, and we see that there was a surplus, a modest surplus. Others would say that it was about time. Others would say: well, much of the \$28 million for Justice is going to salary increases and pension contributions for judges in this province. We heard that earlier in question period today. That was one of the groups mentioned when the hospital support workers were not satisfied with 2 per cent and felt they should perhaps get 3 per cent, a modest request I would say, a very modest request, but for some reason or other it was deemed to be inappropriate or excessive.

When you look at the bill here, Bill 3, we are very generous with our esteemed judges. When we look at what's going on in Tourism, Parks and Recreation and we look at what's requested in Transportation, whenever you look at the big scheme of things, with a \$40 billion budget these are modest requests. But are they needed?

Now, getting back to this government's notion that they're going to have with Bill 1 a new way of doing business, a new way of doing budgets, it's sort of a shame that the current Finance minister wouldn't be part of the Treasury Board discussions because I certainly would like to be a fly on the wall there, he and the current Minister of Energy discussing what is needed and what is not needed in provincial expenditures. [interjection] It's interesting. The whip seems to think that everything is under control over there, so we'll have to accept his comment.

When you look at what is potentially to be saved in the fiscal plan for this year, Mr. Chairman, it is a lot less than what is

proposed and promoted with Bill 1. There were examples there – I could be wrong; please correct me if I am – of between 5 and 8 per cent where there would be efficiencies created. I did some rough calculations on this, and what is being proposed in in-house savings in the current budget is not even close to 1 per cent. So I'm going to do some more digging around and get some details on that.

I'm not certain that this current government will ever be able to manage this province's finances. I'm just not certain. With oil at a hundred dollars a barrel a lot of problems can be solved, but if oil was to go down in price, if the spread between west Texas intermediate and Brent North Sea crude was to get wider, then we could have some issues and some problems here.

Natural gas in America is another thing that we must follow with interest, and the production of shale gas. It's only six or seven years ago when 70 per cent of nonrenewable resource revenue was coming from natural gas, and that has gone down significantly. It's not in single digits, but it's close. It's close. We have to be very, very careful. We have to realize the volatility of these price swings for natural gas, conventional crude oil, and bitumen and synthetic crude.

Now, one of the things that was suggested to me – and perhaps the Minister of Finance has already been thinking about this – is separating, and it should be separated, the amount that we collect in drilling rights for oil and gas leases and for licences in the north to mine bitumen. Perhaps we should set that aside. It fluctuates, recently \$700 million to \$900 million. It has spiked up, and it's anticipated that at the end of March it will be well over \$3.4 billion this year, so it's a sizable amount of money. There are those that suggest that it should be invested, that it should be saved, and I certainly would agree with them.

This budget is just like Bill 3, Mr. Chairman. It's all about spending money. It has nothing to do about saving money for future generations. It's all about spending; it's not about saving. What this government, this Progressive Conservative Party does best is spend money. Does it spend it wisely? I would have to say no.

In fact, in the time that I have left – I'm really glad they're not on here: Horse Racing Alberta.

Dr. Taft: Yeah, \$26 million.

4:10

Mr. MacDonald: Yes, \$26 million. My math: over 10 years they have received over \$392 million in grants. These are grants. In the public accounts you can look at them. They're grants. They are classified as grants in the public accounts, so I'm going to accept them as grants.

As far as gaming revenue, the horse-racing industry is producing, I think, 2 per cent of total revenue. It used to be over 20 per cent. I don't think anybody subsidized buggy whips when they were in production. It was the market. The people decided whether they wanted them or not. The same thing applies with horse racing, you know, those blue and orange silks that are on these horses. I think the public is telling you something. They're not interested. They've moved on to other forms of entertainment, yet we persist. I would use this as an example of a government that loves to spend but has a hard job saving.

What could we use that \$392 million for? I can think of a lot of things that we could use that money for. We could use it for a school lunch program, not only for five or six schools in central Edmonton but schools across the province. How far on an annual basis would \$26 million go with a school lunch program? The

hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview has probably got that right at the top of his head or on the tip of his tongue.

Dr. Taft: It would eliminate school hunger.

Mr. MacDonald: It would eliminate school hunger. I'm confident that the hon. member is right.

For \$392 million how many long-term care beds could have been constructed over the last decade or at least created spaces where doctors, if needed, could transfer patients from the hospital to a long-term care facility, a public facility? That would be another example.

Four hundred million dollars would come in really handy for libraries. Four hundred million dollars would come in really well in Fort McMurray. Fort McMurray is the economic engine for the entire province and for a lot of places in the rest of Canada, but it lacks basic infrastructure needs. I'm told that there are still rush hour problems in Fort McMurray in the morning and in the evening that would rival both Chicago and New York. [interjection] This hon. member knows his community very, very well. In fact, that \$392 million: a wee bit of that would have satisfied the need for a long-term care facility in Fort McMurray.

The Deputy Chair: Through the chair.

Mr. MacDonald: Yes. And we're talking about elections. Mr. Chairman, it'll be interesting to see what happens in Calgary-West. I understand – and this is completely off the topic; I know that – there is going to be a hat with three names in it, and the Premier is going to draw one name out of the hat, and that person is going to carry the blue and orange colours.

Mr. Liepert: We'll see. We'll see.

The Deputy Chair: Hon. member, just to remind you that relevance is a long revered tradition in this House. Relevance.

Mr. MacDonald: Yes. You're absolutely right, and I stand corrected. Those hon. gentlemen across the way have been distracting me. I apologize.

Now, Mr. Hughes. If Mr. Hughes was the name of a horse and this horse was subsidized by an initiative from Horse Racing Alberta and the owner was an elite, glitterati Conservative . . .

The Deputy Chair: Hon. member, I hate to interrupt; however, pursuant to Standing Order 64(4) I am compelled to now put the following question forward: does the committee approve Bill 3, that being the Appropriation (Supplementary Supply) Act, 2012?

[Motion carried]

The Deputy Chair: The committee is now compelled to immediately rise and report.

[Mr. Zwozdesky in the chair]

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Calder.

Mr. Elniski: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The Committee of the Whole has had under consideration certain bills. The committee reports the following bill: Bill 3.

The Acting Speaker: Does the Assembly concur in the report?

Hon. Members: Concur.

The Acting Speaker: Opposed? Concurrence has been given.

Government Bills and Orders
Second Reading
Bill 2
Education Act
(continued)

[Adjourned debate February 16: Ms Woo-Paw]

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Member for Fort McMurray-Wood Buffalo.

Mr. Boutilier: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It's indeed an honour to speak to Bill 2, the Education Act, because truly it is the foundation of our province when it comes to the importance of educating our young people. I also say that as an educator, someone who has taught in the high school system as well as in the university system, but probably even more importantly speaking today to this bill as a father of a young son who is just four and will be going to kindergarten next year.

The importance of this bill. I want to say that in reading the bill, there are many things in the bill that I actually like in terms of not only thinking for the future – that is important, and it's something that I have not often seen from this government, certainly in other ministries like Finance and places like that, certainly in Health. But I do say that I commend the authors of this bill because I think it is important, and I say that first as a father of a youngster who will be going to kindergarten next year.

Now, I also would like to touch base on the importance of a Wildrose position on important initiatives because I believe that, as you know, Mr. Speaker, there's apparently going to be a provincial election within the next couple of weeks or the next month or so. I want to talk about our next generation. In terms of our next generation, as most teachers and parents well know, the traditional classroom model of teachers lecturing students of the same age is dated. This system often results in gifted students who have potential restricted by peers who may not learn as quickly while at the same time it has to be an inclusive system.

I do believe that, fortunately, emerging technologies in teaching methods – I certainly applaud the teachers within all of our schools across Alberta and specifically, of course, our teachers in Fort McMurray for the excellent work that they do in educating our youth. I'm very proud to say as the MLA for Fort McMurray-Wood Buffalo, the oil sands capital of the world, and also as its former mayor and city councillor that it's so important that all of us and our communities contribute.

Now, I find this interesting, though, that in a city of over 110,000 the former minister of health thought that someone that's 103 years old could wait till she's 108 years old, five more years, when he cancelled the long-term care facility. That was really unfortunate. In fact, I will say that I'm sad to report to this House that I was asked by the family to be a pallbearer at her funeral as she just had passed away recently, having, of course, lived a very good life of over 103 years, but she died in a hospital in an acute-care bed.

4:20

Of course, the things that I was fighting for with the then minister of health two years ago from the gibberish he was providing me was truly to say: let's honour our seniors; let's honour the people that built this province. I am saddened that I was not able to at that point provide this senior with the long-term care that many other Albertans do enjoy. Of course, there are many communities that still do not have a long-term care facility, and I'm saddened by the fact that our city of over a hundred thousand . . .

The Acting Speaker: Hon. member, I wonder if I could just remind you and other members that we're actually debating Bill 2, the Education Act. If you could please relate your speech to that. Just as a reminder.

Mr. Boutilier: Yeah. I'm so glad because I will now bridge it back to the future of our youth and the importance of the wisdom we learn from our seniors because that is life-long learning, learning with our seniors. Of course, I actually think our seniors in long-term care can even be enhanced teachers of building on that. To anyone in here who's laughing because of the fact that Fort McMurray doesn't have a long-term care centre, I can tell you that's an enhancement to the education of our youth, which is so important.

I would like to turn for a moment, though, Mr. Speaker, to something that is equally important, and that's children in our system who require special-needs support. The Wildrose on the Education Act believes that thousands of Alberta parents have children with special learning needs, and we believe as the Wildrose that it's absolutely critical that we ensure that these students and their parents are provided with the necessary funding to address these challenges as early as possible in a child's development. Failure to do so can really have catastrophic consequences for the child and the child's family and perhaps could result in even more massive costs to the Alberta taxpayer down the road.

That's why a Wildrose government takes the approach of not only being down the road, as I indicated earlier, on some of the things in this Education Act, but we want to be around the corner in terms of visioning for the future. Being around the corner, I know, is something that the Minister of Finance will never understand, but I will say that I am very pleased by the fact that so many people in here share my view of being not only down the road when it comes to education but also around the corner. That is futuristic. That is visionary. That's clearly something that we in the Wildrose believe is so important.

Often special-needs funding is difficult to assess, I think, with parents and teachers having a very limited say in how it's best utilized. In fact, in most cases parents will want to work with their child's school to include their student in a regular classroom when proper support is provided. Inclusive education: that's a term that I think perhaps members of this Assembly are not aware of. Not everyone; some are. But inclusive education is so important. It means that youngsters who have special needs are not put out in a portable at the end of the school, like 20 years ago. That is very important.

I will say that some parents may choose a different option, and this choice should be respected as well. Parents should be respected in the choices they make for their children. Each special-needs student is unique and should in partnership with parents and with our schools be considered and supported accordingly.

I want to be able to say here today that, you know, as we go forward, I believe that it's so important that we have new, emerging technologies. Something that in my community I'm very proud of, in fact, not only from an educational perspective but from the impact it rolls over on industry, is the technology of 30 years that has been grown in Fort McMurray in oil sands development, something that the Minister of Finance will benefit from in the future by the bitumen royalty, that will help continue to fund our education systems.

It's important, though, with that bitumen helping education that you continue to pay the goose that is laying the golden eggs. I do believe that from the goose in this situation, as indicated in the budget, came of course the golden eggs of the bitumen and what is

coming out of my community of Fort McMurray. I can say that the examples I've used from an education perspective as well as the wisdom of seniors, who have built this province in teaching not only your children but, actually, teaching other middle-aged and older people, is the wisdom that we want to continue to respect and something that the Wildrose will always respect.

Mr. Speaker, I believe and I know that those who are teachers in this Assembly, the Speaker himself, are very familiar with the importance of education as a building block of our society. That is so important. It's unfortunate that some members, not all – in fact, most of the members on the front bench I see are nodding in agreement. There's usually just one who is not, who's got his back turned to me. What a surprise in that. He clearly does not understand the value of education, but he's keen as the Minister of Finance to take the bitumen that will be the dollars that are necessary to be able to fund future educational projects. That in itself is something that is so important.

Certainly, I will say that there are some people I will miss, and there are others that I will never miss. I will not go into any other detail on that, Mr. Speaker, because we're talking about education, and education is something that is so important. Clearly, I can say that the more we grow our brain from the wisdom of seniors, the wisdom of our teachers, and the wisdom of our neighbours, it is so important as well.

Mr. Speaker, I think there are some things in this act that they are getting right, and the Wildrose has always said: we want to get it right, not the second time or the third time but the first time. I'm very proud of a Wildrose government, that would strengthen our K to 12 education system by implementing a variety of reforms that will enhance our Education Act, empowering individual public schools and Catholic schools and charter schools by implementing funding models that send per-student operational and maintenance funding directly to the school each student attends. Individual schools will then be able to determine how they allocate those resources most appropriately; for instance, having more teachers and new equipment to help our students and dealing with special needs so that there is the adequate support to go with students so they are included in our education system.

I also would like to say that the Wildrose on the education front wants to establish multiple pilot projects across the province where open enrolment in tuition-free public, Catholic, and public charter schools are permitted to opt into a competency-based learning and assessment education model. This is something that, clearly, is not just down the road; it's around the corner. We believe in that, and you'll be hearing more about that. We also believe that we want to reform and grant public, Catholic, and public charter schools more flexibility to offer specialized curriculum tracks in the trades, arts, music, physical education, and business.

Mr. Speaker, I believe that protecting a parent's right to choose what school their child attends is so important in public and Catholic as well as public charter, private, or home-schooling. We want to continue to ensure that the current Alberta education practice of permitting a fixed percentage of regular per-pupil funding to directly follow a student continues. It is so important. Again, that is a choice that should be determined by the parent as to where they believe it will help the students of Alberta. That is important.

Most importantly, to conclude, Mr. Speaker, as a teacher and someone who has taught with my wife at a college and at a university, we want to continue to work with our teachers. Truly, a teacher is one who is well qualified with the educational professionals to continue to replace the dated and inadequate provincial achievement tests with a new standardized assessment model. We the Wildrose believe that this is, again, being futuristic.

Mr. Speaker, I thank you for listening this afternoon.

The Acting Speaker: Thank you very much, hon. member.

Hon. members of the House, I want to wish all of you a very happy Family Day weekend.

Noting Standing Order 4(2), I now declare the House adjourned until Tuesday afternoon at 1:30.

[The Assembly adjourned at 4:30 p.m. to Tuesday, February 21, at 1:30 p.m.]

Bill Status Report for the 27th Legislature - 5th Session (2012)

Activity to February 16, 2012

The Bill sponsor's name is in brackets following the Bill title. If it is a money Bill, (\$) will appear between the title and the sponsor's name. Numbers following each Reading refer to Hansard pages where the text of debates is found; dates for each Reading are in brackets following the page numbers. Bills numbered 200 or higher are Private Members' Public Bills. Bills with lower numbers are Government Bills. Bills numbered Pr1, etc., are Private Bills.

*An asterisk beside a Bill number indicates an amendment was passed to that Bill; the Committee line shows the precise date of the amendment.

The date a Bill comes into force is indicated in square brackets after the date of Royal Assent. If it comes into force "on proclamation," "with exceptions," or "on various dates," please contact Legislative Counsel for details at (780) 427-2217. The chapter number assigned to the Bill is entered immediately following the date the Bill comes into force. SA indicates Statutes of Alberta; this is followed by the year in which it is included in the statutes, and its chapter number. Please note, Private Bills are not assigned a chapter number until the conclusion of the fall sittings.

1 Results-based Budgeting Act (Redford)

First Reading -- 4 (Feb. 7 aft., passed)

Second Reading -- 31-38 (Feb. 8 aft.), 125-34 (Feb. 13 eve., passed)

Committee of the Whole -- 124-34 (Feb. 14 aft.), 160-61 (Feb. 15 aft., passed)

Third Reading -- 164-65 (Feb. 15 aft., passed)

2 Education Act (Lukaszuk)

First Reading -- 115 (Feb. 14 aft., passed)

Second Reading -- 152-59 (Feb. 15 aft.), 187-88 (Feb. 16 aft.), 182-85 (Feb. 16 aft., adjourned)

3 Appropriation (Supplementary Supply) Act, 2012 (\$) (Horner)

First Reading -- 115 (Feb. 14 aft., passed)

Second Reading -- 150-52 (Feb. 15 aft.), 161 (Feb. 15 aft., passed)

Committee of the Whole -- 185-86 (Feb. 16 aft., passed)

201 Alberta Bill of Rights (Property Rights Protection) Amendment Act, 2012 (Hinman)

First Reading -- 69 (Feb. 13 aft., passed)

203 Tobacco Reduction (Protection of Children in Vehicles) Amendment Act, 2012 (Sherman)

First Reading -- 69 (Feb. 13 aft., passed)

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Province of Alberta

The 27th Legislature
Fifth Session

Alberta Hansard

Tuesday, February 21, 2012

Issue 8

The Honourable Kenneth R. Kowalski, Speaker

Legislative Assembly of Alberta
The 27th Legislature

Fifth Session

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Legislative Assembly of Alberta

1:30 p.m.

Tuesday, February 21, 2012

[The Speaker in the chair]

Prayers

The Speaker: Good afternoon.

Let us pray. As we gather to begin a new week in our Assembly, we are reminded of the blessings which have been bestowed upon Alberta, and we give thanks for this bounty. May we conduct ourselves in our deliberations in ways that honour our province and all of its people. Amen.

Hon. members and ladies and gentlemen, we'll now participate in the singing our national anthem. We'll be led today by Mr. Paul Lorieau, and I would invite all to participate in the language of their choice.

Hon. Members:

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

The Speaker: Please be seated.

Introduction of Guests

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

Mr. Xiao: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased to introduce to you and through you to the members of the Assembly a group of 37 students from Patricia Heights elementary school and their teacher, Keri Clifford, teacher assistant Margie Schneider, and René Allen. They are sitting in the public gallery. I would like to ask them to rise to receive the traditional warm welcome of this House.

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

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased to introduce to you and through you to all members of this House 34 brilliant young students from Norwood elementary school. They are accompanied by their teacher, Ms Judith Brouwer, as well as Jeanna Baty, Bernadette McMechan, and Ms Julie Walsh. I would ask them now to please rise and receive the warm traditional welcome of this Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Creek.

Mr. Zwozdesky: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I'm very humbled to introduce to you and through you some family members of Mr. Vern Davis, who passed away on February 1, 2012. As many here will know, Vern Davis was an Alberta hockey icon, which included being awarded the Guinness world record for the world's largest hockey tournament on ice, a legacy that I will expand on shortly. I will ask each family member who is seated in your gallery, Mr. Speaker, to rise as I call their names and to remain standing so that we can applaud them all as one: son Darrell and his wife, Karen Davis, son Brian Davis, and Vern's

ever-loving wife and companion of more than 62 years, Maria Davis. Please join me in welcoming this outstanding family.

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

Mr. Elniski: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I have two introductions today. The first one I'll do is a group called the Harmony Dialogue Group, who are certainly no strangers to us and have been here before. We have with us today Mr. Ibrahim Cin, Mr. Taner Tunali, Mr. Alim Koc, Saki Cansev, and Muhammed Cetin. I would ask them all now to rise and receive the traditional greeting of the Assembly.

My second introduction today is a group of 24 students and three adults from one of my favourite schools in Edmonton-Calder, l'École St. Angela. With us today is teacher Mrs. Carmel Perry and parents Mrs. Sofia Russo and Mrs. Videlyn Castro. I'd ask them also to rise now and receive the traditional greeting of the Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development.

Mr. Berger: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure to rise today to introduce to you and through you to all members of the Assembly five members of the Alberta Cattle Feeders' Association. They are seated in the members' gallery, and I would ask them to rise as I call their names: Brent Chaffee, chairman; Doug Price, past chair; Martin Zuidhof, director; John Lawton, director; and Bryan Walton, CEO. They're visiting here today to meet with members of rural caucus, and I would ask that they receive the traditional warm welcome of the Assembly.

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

Mr. Webber: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'd like to introduce to you and through you to all members of the Assembly a young man who is a friend of mine, Mr. Robert Sallows, who has come up here from Calgary. We met earlier today with the Minister of Health and Wellness regarding setting up an organ donor registry. Mr. Sallows was a recipient of a double lung transplant back in 2005, and he has been thriving ever since. He's a recent graduate at the University of Calgary in the commerce program. He is well known also in the political arena, and many of my colleagues will recognize him as a long-time member of the Progressive Conservative youth association. I'd ask that Robert Sallows please rise and receive the warm welcome of the Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Lethbridge-East.

Ms Pastoor: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'd like to introduce to you and through you to this Assembly a friend from Lethbridge. Phyllis Pylypow has been an acquaintance since the days I served on city council, not quite ancient history. Phyllis served as the administrative assistant for 19 years for the Green Acres Foundation, a foundation that is for seniors' housing which also provides care and personal service. She was also the administrative assistant in the central office of the provincial association for senior citizens' homes in Alberta. She served on many city committees and also regional boards such as southern Alberta water management and the sugar beet industry during their troubles in the '90s. She is now retired, and her wish is granted to visit this esteemed Assembly. I would ask Phyllis to stand and be recognized.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Highwood.

Mr. Groeneveld: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Today I'd like to introduce to you and through you to members of this Assembly three special guests from the Highwood constituency. Today I have two of my grandchildren visiting the Legislature, Quinn and Chloe Groeneveld. Quinn George, by the way, is a grade 6 student in Blackie school and plays hockey for the Blackie Tigers. Chloe also attends Blackie school and has spent most of her life at the rink either cheering on both of her brothers or participating in the CanSkate program. She is the ultimate rink rat. Today they are accompanied by Gramma Judy, who told me I was not to call her the love of my life or my best supporter or anything silly like that because after 47 years of marriage most people would assume that. I'm very proud that both Quinn and Chloe urged their grandma to bring them to the Legislature for a tour and question period before hitting the fun spots of Edmonton. I would ask my family to now rise and receive the traditional warm welcome.

1:40

The Speaker: Are there others?

Then join with me in wishing two hon. members a happy birthday: the hon. Member for Cypress-Medicine Hat and the hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods. Happy birthday to both of you.

Members' Statements

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Creek.

Vern Davis

Mr. Zwozdesky: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. As I mentioned a few minutes ago, Mr. Vern Davis was an outstanding hockey icon in our community. It was 50 years ago that Vern and Eric Reilly collaborated to create a new hockey tournament for kids in Edmonton, one that would allow young players in Edmonton to play teams from all over the city, including travelling to all four corners of Edmonton, something that was unheard of in the 1960s. Vern became a volunteer member of the tournament committee, a position that he served valiantly for 49 consecutive years.

This phenomenon, which we now know as Quikcard Edmonton Minor Hockey Week, is a week-long tournament that features over 700 games with more than 500 teams participating and over 6,000 young hockey players, boys and girls. Vern's and Eric's vision was that everyone would come out and support and volunteer for the kids, and they did. They also made special rules that ensured that every child played at least two shifts per period. The growth and popularity of this tournament is now legendary, and in 2003 Vern Davis was given the *Guinness Book of World Records*' award for helping organize the largest ice hockey tournament in the world right here in Edmonton.

Vern was also the sports director for the Westmount Community League and the bantam hockey director and secretary for the Northwest Community Athletic Association. He also helped form the Little Richard hockey league, the Edmonton Minor Hockey Association awards banquet, and the junior C hockey league. In 2008 Mr. Vern Davis was inducted into the Edmonton Sports Hall of Fame.

Mr. Speaker, I knew Vern Davis as a hockey associate and mentor. I credit him for helping to inspire my own involvement in hockey, and that includes my role as a hockey referee for many years. In fact, I recall refereeing seven games three weeks ago for Quikcard Edmonton Minor Hockey Week right here in town.

On behalf of all the members here and on behalf of hundreds of thousands of young hockey players, officials, coaches, other referees, and all the hockey moms and dads, many of whom you see right here before you, we say thank you, Maria, to you, to your husband, and to your family for the outstanding contributions that Vern Davis made on and off the ice.

Thank you.

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

Tribute to Staff

Mr. Taylor: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. This is one of those jobs that would be impossible to do without the support and assistance of a lot of unsung heroes behind the scenes, and I want to take this opportunity to publicly thank the people who have been so invaluable in helping me do my job since I first got elected in 2004.

First, thank you to all the volunteers and members of our constituency association. I guess I should say in this case "associations" as there have been three of them over the course of my political journey. While not every member and volunteer has followed me on that darn fool idealistic crusade, a surprising number have. I want to thank you all for your understanding and your support as I did what I felt and you agreed I must do in order to properly serve my constituents.

Thank you to the folks in my constituency office: my executive assistant, Michelle Bodnar; caseworkers extraordinaire Ruth Huber and Gwyneth Midgley; legislative assistant Jacquie Lycka and researcher Evan Galbraith in the Alberta Party caucus office for being my diggers, my doers, my frequent miracle workers, my eyes, my ears, my brains more often than I'd like to admit, and my counsel.

To those who have moved on almost always to better paying jobs, Amanda Kriaski, Terry Rahbek-Nielson, Evan Woolley, and Andrew MacGregor as well as summer interns Janet Hails, Ana Cleveston, Bil Hetherington, Jeff Homer and John Jay Atwood: it was a pleasure and an honour to have each of you along for parts of the journey.

Thank you as well to Glenn Hughes and Nik Atwal here in Edmonton for your help in years past. And thank you to the entire staff of the Legislative Assembly Office. To my two incredible campaign managers, Donn Lovett in 2004 and Barry Davidson in 2008, I have been very fortunate to have you both on my team.

To our kids, Scott and Jennifer, thanks for always being interested in what dad's been up to even as you've begun to make your way in and your mark on this world.

To Martha, who knocked me off my feet for the first time 29 years ago next month and who continues to amaze me, I don't think I will ever understand why you went along with this, but thank you for believing in me. I could never have done this without you. I would never have done this without your blessing, and I'm looking forward to being home.

Thank you.

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

International Mother Language Day

Mr. Xiao: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. [Remarks in Mandarin] I just said in my mother language, Chinese Mandarin, that I rise today to acknowledge an important occasion, International Mother Language Day. This event was proclaimed by UNESCO in 1999 to commemorate the deaths of students in Bangladesh in 1952

who were protesting to have Bengali accepted as an official language.

Today International Mother Language Day is celebrated as a day to promote the preservation and protection of all languages used by peoples of the world. Although this occasion originated in a country far from here, it has significance in every part of the world, including Alberta.

Language is an important part of any culture. It enables us to describe, discuss, and understand the world around us and to connect to our heritage and to others. While it may seem that languages can divide us, what this day seeks to demonstrate is that we can be united by our diversity and by our appreciation for the beauty and value that each language has to offer.

Mr. Speaker, preserving one's mother language is of the utmost importance, and through programs such as the aboriginal language program our government is working to ensure that this happens.

It is also valuable to learn other languages. In doing so, you open up new opportunities to enjoy literature, art, and music and to connect and share experiences with people from different cultures.

As Alberta continues to expand its relationships beyond our borders, our respect for and knowledge of a number of world languages will help us to build strong international connections.

On this day, International Mother Language Day, I want to say, Mr. Speaker, that I feel very fortunate to live in a province that respects and values the diverse languages of its people.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Fish Creek.

Health Quality Council Review

Mrs. Forsyth: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Tomorrow the Health Quality Council will deliver its much-anticipated report into the bullying and intimidation of health care professionals in Alberta, who, I've often said, are the glue that holds our broken health care system together. I take this issue very seriously as I have spoken with several doctors too afraid to go public about the despicable bullying tactics of this government and its health superboard.

A few brave souls like Dr. Tony Magliocco, formerly of the Tom Baker cancer centre in Calgary and now practising in Florida, who have been driven out of this province have come forward with their own personal stories of being threatened and bullied by this government.

I am optimistic that tomorrow's report from the Health Quality Council will shed even more light on this issue and further expose this government's shameful treatment of our health care workers. What I am less optimistic about, Mr. Speaker, is whether this defend-the-status-quo government will do anything about it.

This government has a dreadful track record of actually implementing the Health Quality Council recommendations over the years. For example, last year the Health Quality Council put forward 18 recommendations to improve critical medevac services in Alberta. After quote, unquote, accepting the majority of them, here we are nearly a full year later with none of them acted upon. Not only is this inaction a slap in the face to the Health Quality Council and the work they do to improve health care in our province; it continues to put Alberta families at risk. By refusing to act on these recommendations, our health care system is falling even further into disarray and dysfunction.

Mr. Speaker, tomorrow Albertans will hopefully find out the full extent of this government's bullying and intimidation of health care workers. They deserve to find out, but they also deserve action to fix the problems identified and concrete steps to

make sure they don't happen again. While I'm sure the Health Quality Council will come through for Albertans, I'm not counting on this government to do the same.

Oral Question Period

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

Health Services Labour Negotiations

Dr. Sherman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I hope you had a wonderful Family Day weekend.

Last week our front-line health care workers reached a breaking point and staged a wildcat strike after a year of being ignored in their request for a measly 3 per cent pay raise, which pales in comparison to the golden parachutes for dismissed AHS executives, who have run our health care system into the ground. Could the Premier please explain how this government has the money for payouts, cabinet tours, and caucus retreats but not the modest 42 cents an hour for some of the hardest working Albertans in our health care system?

The Speaker: The hon. the Premier.

Ms Redford: Thank you. Mr. Speaker, the incident last Thursday was certainly unfortunate. As a government what we are most concerned about is ensuring patient safety. What we know is that at the end of last week there was a resolution to that with respect to binding arbitration, which, as I understand it, at no point in time in the year previous had the negotiating table asked for. I understand that will now proceed, and we'll look forward to the outcome.

1:50

The Speaker: The hon. leader.

Dr. Sherman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Why is the Premier forcing one set of health care workers into binding arbitration while the government continues to stonewall other health care workers like the membership of HSAA and the Alberta Medical Association? Should we expect union-busting after the election?

Ms Redford: Mr. Speaker, we have a number of labour organizations in this province that represent different employees in health care and other places. As a government we are continually negotiating with all of those public-sector bargaining units in entirely good faith. Each of those negotiations are at a different point in time. There is certainly no intention to do anything other than bargain in good faith, and we are doing that.

The Speaker: The hon. leader.

Dr. Sherman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Why is it that the Premier talks about publicly funded health care but refuses to sign contracts with the hard-working men and women who publicly deliver health care? Is the government planning on privately delivering health care after the election?

Ms Redford: Mr. Speaker, as I said in my second answer, we are in the middle of a number of discussions with a number of public-sector bargaining units. This government is fully committed to publicly funded health care.

The other thing, though, that we have to do as a government is ensure that we are providing the best services possible to Albertans in a responsible way, representing the interests of taxpayers, and we will always do that.

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

Health System Reform

Dr. Sherman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The keys to health care are publicly delivering health care and publicly funding health care. The Health Quality Council of Alberta is set to release its report on this government's failure to address ER wait times, cancer care outcomes, and physician intimidation. The preliminary report that came out last summer was so scathing that instead of acting, the Premier made a deliberate decision to delay calling the public inquiry she had promised in order to protect her party's prospects in the upcoming election. Why has the Premier not kept her word by continuing to stonewall and delay a call for a truly independent public judicial inquiry?

Ms Redford: Mr. Speaker, my recollection is that last fall in this very Legislature we passed legislation that will ensure that there will be an independent inquiry. We have very clearly put on the record that we are looking forward to the report tomorrow so that we can set the terms of reference for that inquiry and get on with what we have fully committed to and which we intend to honour before the election.

The Speaker: The hon. leader.

Dr. Sherman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. In light of yet another dire warning by Dr. Paul Parks does the Premier actually believe that a couple of pilot projects and a whopping 30 long-term care beds in Strathmore and throwing a few million dollars at home care is going to fix our entire province's health care system?

Ms Redford: Mr. Speaker, the hon. member is making assumptions as to how we believe health care should be funded and supported. My understanding: we tabled a budget two weeks ago that had, as I recall, a 7 per cent increase in funding to health care. This characterization that there are one or two things that will fix health care is certainly not the case. We've never claimed that it would be, and that's not going to be the solution. Albertans know that, and that's why in estimates in this House on the 6th of March there will be three hours where we can have this discussion with the minister of health and the hon. member to determine that we know where to go with this.

Dr. Sherman: Mr. Speaker, this hon. member just asked legitimate questions on how to actually fix health care. Why won't the Premier own up to this government's abysmal record and admit that the minister and the cabinet have no clue how to fix our health care system and just ask for help from the very front-line experts that the government refuses to pay?

Ms Redford: Mr. Speaker, we have a system to administer health care in this province that is a partnership between health care professionals, health care administrators, and people that are involved in the public service in government. That is the partnership that will fix health care.

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

Electricity Prices

Dr. Sherman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The Premier recently said that she doesn't like to be lectured, but even the Premier must be

taken to school from time to time. The constant dodging of our questions about electricity deregulation shows that the Premier, clearly, has a lot to learn. The Premier has even started repeating the mantra of the Energy minister that regulated electricity prices in Alberta will somehow lead to massive public debt. Does the Premier realize that Alberta's regulated electricity system operated very well for decades without any public debt?

Ms Redford: Mr. Speaker, I'll tell you that when I look at the financial record of this government for the last 15 to 20 years, one of the things we can be most proud of is the fact that Premier Klein ensured that we didn't have public debt. Part of the decision that we made at that time was to move to a system that would ensure that we wouldn't continue to incur public debt with respect to electricity. As we move forward, that's one of the things that we can be the most proud of for future citizens of this province.

Dr. Sherman: Mr. Speaker, when I look at the government's record, the last I saw, it was \$100 oil, and we've got a social deficit and a financial deficit. Will the Premier admit that this government's decision to change the regulated rate option formula from a steadier one-year rolling average to a volatile monthly formula has resulted in hard-working Albertans being misinformed about their options, being gouged on their power bills? Come on, Premier.

Ms Redford: We have had a fair amount, a significant amount, Mr. Speaker, of public information, certainly, in more than the last month with respect to how people can make decisions with respect to their power prices. Now, there is no doubt that this is a difficult time, when consumers who aren't on contracts are paying higher power bills, and that's unfortunate. This is something that MLAs in this House, on our side of the House, have heard, and we are certainly concerned about this. We will be addressing this. As I said last week, part of what we need to do is to ensure that we're addressing this in a comprehensive way that allows consumers to have choice and to ensure that power prices can be reduced.

The Speaker: The hon. leader.

Dr. Sherman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. What the people of Alberta need are good decisions from this government. Why won't this Premier show leadership and stop trying to bamboozle Albertans into believing that corporate greed is good for them and actually protect ordinary Albertans, parents of these children in the halls right here today, from being gouged on their power bills?

Ms Redford: Mr. Speaker, last week received a report with respect to the importance of having an electricity grid that's going to allow our economy to develop. We very clearly said last week that we will be responding to that in a comprehensive manner forthwith, and we will.

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

Landowner Private Property Rights

Mr. Hinman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. For two years angry landowners have packed town halls and high school gyms across Alberta to voice their outrage over bills 19, 24, 36, and 50, laws that trample on their property rights and revoke their entitlement to full compensation and the courts. Most recently it was this government's own Property Rights Task Force that heard from the landowners. At one particular hearing attendees chanted: repeal these bills. Today we learned that the government's response to

these landowners is to improve engagement. That's insulting. To the Premier. Your task force was a sham. Why won't you do the right thing and repeal these bills?

Ms Redford: Mr. Speaker, there's been some very good public discussion right across this province with respect to what has to happen in relation to land-use planning in this province. Certainly, very important to this government is to ensure that people's property rights are protected. We've said all along that we have to be very clear with respect to consultation, with respect to compensation, and with respect to access to the courts, and we will ensure that happens.

Mr. Hinman: It's not true, Mr. Speaker.

Again to the Premier: given that the January 16th edition of the *Rocky View Weekly* reported "the call to repeal the four land bills was 'the overarching piece of advice'" that the Property Rights Task Force heard, how can you possibly claim to be listening to Albertans? Why do you refuse to listen to Albertans and to repeal these damaging and destructive bills?

Ms Redford: Mr. Speaker, there are a number of reports with respect to discussions that have taken place across this province. I'm not minimizing the fact that there are Albertans who do believe that it's appropriate to repeal the legislation. But one of the things that we will have seen already from the report that was released today is that there are also Albertans who understand the importance of integrated land-use planning, of balancing the interests of all Albertans, and we will ensure that that happens.

Mr. Hinman: This adds a whole new meaning to in one ear and out the other. I can't believe it.

Again to the Premier: given that you're clearly going to keep ignoring landowners, who overwhelmingly want you to repeal these bills, will you at least apologize to landowners for wasting their time and to taxpayers for wasting their money on this utter sham of a task force? It's insulting to them.

2:00

Ms Redford: Mr. Speaker, it's fascinating to me that when we look at the public discussion around this issue, when we even look at some of the legislation that's being brought forward by other parties to perhaps try to correct the situation, what this hon. member is proposing in his private member's bill isn't even what he's advocating today.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands-Norwood. [interjections] The hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands-Norwood has the floor.

General Hospital Long-term Care Centre

Mr. Mason: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. This morning a senior named Bev Munro told a story of neglect and maltreatment, of living in an endless construction area with leaky roofs and dangerous elevators. She told a story of a government that talks about helping seniors but ignores them instead. To the Premier: why have you left Bev Munro and thousands like her in such deplorable and appalling conditions?

Ms Redford: Mr. Speaker, with respect to specific cases I think it's very important that we understand that as government moves ahead, we will do everything that we can to ensure that vulnerable Albertans are protected. In this House we have to know that while there are people who sometimes end up in unfortunate circumstances, we have to ensure that we can determine why that is the

case. I am not going to presume that we can generalize with respect to the comments the hon. member has made. I'm certainly very concerned about the fact that anyone might be living in difficult circumstances, because in this province it's not necessary. I'm sure that in the supplementary the hon. minister will be able to provide more information.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Mason: Well, thanks, Mr. Speaker. Let's get specific, then. Given that Bev Munro and the other residents of the General hospital long-term care centre were supposed to have been moved to the Villa Caritas facility but could not be because the government pulled the rug out from them at the last minute, will the Premier explain why this government has denied Bev Munro and her fellow residents a safe and comfortable home?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Horne: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. While I'm not familiar with the specific case that the hon. member has raised, if he would care to forward the particulars to me, I'd be very pleased to investigate it and get back to him.

What I will tell you, Mr. Speaker, is that no government has a bigger capital infrastructure program for health than the province of Alberta. We have a commitment of \$5 billion. Much of this money is going to build continuing care facilities. We are well on track to meet our target of 5,300 spaces over five years. I'll tell you, Mr. Speaker, that the residents that use geriatric mental health care at Villa Caritas need that service, too.

Mr. Mason: Well, Mr. Speaker, this government's wilful ignorance of this situation is disgusting. The serious problems at the General long-term care facility were first made public over a year ago, and at that time residents and the public were told the problems would be fixed in a couple of days. The seniors have been waiting ever since. Why does this government allow our seniors to live in such deplorable conditions? It's a shame.

Mr. Horne: Mr. Speaker, the facility in question is actually a facility operated by Covenant Health under contract with Alberta Health Services. I have no difficulty in conceding that it is one of the older long-term care facilities in Alberta. In addition to building new spaces, we have invested heavily in refurbishing old spaces. We will continue to open spaces, and we will continue to ensure that those seniors who are waiting in old facilities or acute-care facilities have the first opportunity to move to those new spaces.

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

Government-owned Infrastructure

Mr. Snelgrove: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. As the Alberta government continues to build much-needed infrastructure across Alberta, I've been approached by contractors who suggest that many of the specs, or guidelines, that we use in designing these buildings are far above what the industry standard would be. In fact, they're saying that the specs may be being developed by companies who have an interest as they work on a percentage. My question is to the Minister of Infrastructure. Can he assure us that this is not the case and what steps he may be taking to ensure that we're really getting what we need and not what someone else would want?

Mr. Johnson: Mr. Speaker, that's a very good question. What I can tell you is that, of course, when we do projects like long-term care facilities, the functional plans are done through Alberta Health Services and the health care providers. My ministry delivers the building of those facilities. Through our technical services branch we ensure that those buildings and the specifications fully comply with today's building codes and the building codes for health facilities.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Snelgrove: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. We also seem to be in a bit of a hurry to demolish some of the old buildings we have as a government when, in fact, they may not be appropriate to be used as they were, but they may have an appropriate use other than that. What policy can the minister update us on with regard to demolishing current government buildings?

Mr. Johnson: Mr. Speaker, another good idea. I think that any time we have the opportunity to leverage existing infrastructure, we need to be looking at that. My department works with Alberta Health Services with respect to long-term care facilities, in particular, but with Education for education facilities and Justice for courthouses, et cetera. Any chance we have to make sure that we're utilizing existing infrastructure and finding other uses for it, we want to make sure we're doing that.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Snelgrove: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Then I would like to invite the minister to meet with a group of very concerned citizens in Lloydminster who would like to certainly get their opinion to him on the future of the existing Dr. Cooke. Would he commit that he would meet with them before it is demolished?

Mr. Johnson: Mr. Speaker, I'd be happy to do that. You know, since I became Minister of Infrastructure, I've travelled across the province and visited many facilities, and I'm getting a handle on what we're building and how everything is progressing. I'm happy to arrange for my department to meet with the folks out there, the stakeholders, or to make the trip myself.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Mountain View, followed by the hon. Member for Grande Prairie-Wapiti.

Review of Medical Examiner Cases

Dr. Swann: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Medical pathology in Alberta appears to be suffering from general problems both in Alberta Justice and in Alberta Health. Several reviews and investigations in Calgary and one in Edmonton concerning both medical-legal autopsies and cancer diagnoses have been raised. Last week it was announced that pathologist Dr. Evan Matshes' homicide autopsies are being reviewed for quote, making unreasonable conclusions, end quote, in very serious medical-legal cases. To the minister: why are not all of his case files, including the autopsies he conducted at Calgary Lab Services since leaving the medical office, being investigated?

Mr. Olson: Mr. Speaker, I'm happy to address that question. Of course, the work of the Chief Medical Examiner's office is very important. It's integral to the administration of justice in Alberta. Whenever a question arises, we take it seriously and we investigate. That's all that's happening here. No conclusions have been reached.

We're very deliberate and determined that we're going to maintain the integrity of this system, and that's why the investigation is ongoing.

Dr. Swann: Mr. Speaker, he didn't answer the question. I'll try it again with the health minister. The quotation from the consultants is that this man made unreasonable conclusions. End quote. Why is Calgary Lab Services, a wholly owned subsidiary of Alberta Health Services, hiring somebody Alberta Justice is reviewing?

Mr. Horne: Well, Mr. Speaker, I'm sure the hon. member will understand that I'm not at privilege to discuss the specifics of an individual pathologist's case on the floor of the House. I'm sure he would not want me to do that.

What I can tell you, Mr. Speaker, is that I have inquired, and I have been assured that the physician in question is not involved in any activities that would jeopardize the quality or safety of the services he's providing.

Dr. Swann: Well, that's interesting, Mr. Speaker, because when pathologists do their job, they're making diagnoses. Is that what you're saying? He's not making any more diagnoses?

Mr. Horne: Mr. Speaker, same answer. I'm not going to stand on the floor of the House and discuss the particulars of the professional practice of one pathologist. Quality and patient safety are not at issue.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Grande Prairie-Wapiti, followed by the hon. Member for Calgary-Buffalo.

Property Rights Public Consultation

Mr. Drysdale: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Today the government released its report Engagement with Albertans with the comments and feedback received by the Property Rights Task Force through online submissions, e-mails, and province-wide open houses. My question is to the Minister of Environment and Water. What were the biggest concerns related to property rights that were brought up by Albertans?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mrs. McQueen: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I first want to start by thanking all the Albertans who were part of the consultation process. It was wonderful to be able to go to their communities and hear directly from them the main issues that were of concern to them. There were four main areas that were of concern. Albertans wanted to make sure that we develop legislation that relates to property rights, that there was good consultation. They wanted to make sure that there's access to the courts for them if that's so needed. They wanted to make sure that if we need to use their land for the greater good, they're fully compensated. The other thing that they told us is that they wanted to have someone that was there for them and that would advocate for them.

2:10

The Speaker: The hon. member, please.

Mr. Drysdale: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My first supplemental is to the same minister. Now that the government has received feedback from Albertans, what are the next steps for the government?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mrs. McQueen: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The next step is that we will be putting legislation here in the House that will deal with a property rights advocate and will deal with the issues that have been raised by Albertans with regard to compensation, access to the courts, and how we consult with Albertans.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Drysdale: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My second supplemental is to the same minister. What exactly will the property rights advocate do?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mrs. McQueen: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The advocate is there to do exactly what Albertans asked us to do. They asked us to be able to have someone there to advocate with them and for them, to talk to them when we talk about legislation, that would be there to help them on education but also if there were issues with regard to compensation or land issues that they would have someone that they felt they could go to to help them through the process. That is exactly what this legislation will do.

Funding for Private Schools

Mr. Hehr: Mr. Speaker, with the recent education consultations and initiatives as well as the controversies regarding some new school board policies the minister has reiterated numerous times his desire to improve openness and transparency at school board operations. To the Minister of Education: since private schools receive public funds, will the minister require private schools to follow the same rules that he institutes for our public school boards?

Mr. Lukaszuk: Mr. Speaker, most definitely. If the member cares to read the bill that's in front of this Legislature right now, the Education Act, it clearly speaks, actually, to the minister's overview of the business of private schools.

Mr. Hehr: It needs to be more clear on that, then. You're directing the school boards to put their stuff online in an open and transparent fashion. Will that be the same for private schools in this province?

Mr. Lukaszuk: Mr. Speaker, private schools are duly accountable. They're accountable for the Alberta Education dollars that they receive and how they expend them during their programming and any and all other monies that they may be raising. They are also registered as not-for-profit or for-profit agencies, so they are accountable in that way and transparent on both ends.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Hehr: Well, thank you. That was a little bit of a strange answer, so I'll ask the question again. The minister is directing boards like the Calgary school board to put their stuff online in an open and transparent way so that parents can take a look at what the board is actually spending their dollars on. Is he going to require private schools to be open and transparent in the same fashion by posting their information online?

Mr. Lukaszuk: Mr. Speaker, private school boards receive 70 per cent of the funding of public school boards. They will be equally accountable for that 70 per cent of dollars that they receive from taxpayers.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Strathcona, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Impact of Oil Sands Development

Mr. Quest: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. A recent article published in a prestigious scientific journal concludes that the impact of burning all of the economically viable proven reserves of Alberta's oil sands, all 170 billion barrels, would be negligible. Some critics might find this to be a hard pill to swallow. A question to the Minister of Environment and Water. Can she tell us how much of our total global emissions the oil sands currently emit?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mrs. McQueen: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. First and foremost, the study is certainly welcome news because it is an independent and objective study by a world-leading climate scientist. As we know in this House and as we've said before – and I thank the hon. member for the question – one-tenth of 1 per cent of global emissions come from the oils sands. Although we know that still is a very small amount, we also know that we need to continue to do what we're doing, to continue on the path that Alberta is on with regard to the reductions in emissions.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Quest: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. My first supplemental to the same minister. This author also concluded that notwithstanding the scientific findings, the report should not be considered a get-out-of-jail-free card as it relates to future development. To the same minister: does she take this to be a get-out-of-jail-free card in respect to oil sands development?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mrs. McQueen: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Absolutely not. We know that we are committed to making sure that we develop our oil sands in an environmentally responsible manner. We will continue to do that. We know that we will be a global energy leader, but we'll be a global environmental leader. We're committed to reaching our reductions.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Quest: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. My second supplemental is for the Minister of Energy. How much coal and unconventional gas does Alberta have, and what's being done to ensure these resources are being developed responsibly?

Dr. Morton: Mr. Speaker, I'm happy to report that we have literally hundreds and hundreds of years of supply of both coal and unconventional gas. That's good news. It means energy security for Alberta, energy security for Canada, and energy security for all of North America. The other piece of that is the news that we are developing those resources in a very responsible and sustainable way. When it comes to coal, our coal plants are critical, supercritical. Now carbon capture and storage: we're setting a North American standard in that respect.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar, followed by the hon. Member for Calgary-Foothills.

Problem Gambling

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you. Three years ago the projected number of problem gamblers here in Alberta was over 72,000. Over 19,000 wanted help for their gambling problems, but

unfortunately less than 2,000 received treatment for their gambling problems. My first question is to the Minister of Finance. What happened to the other 17,000 problem gamblers who wanted help in Alberta?

Mr. Liepert: Well, Mr. Speaker, first of all, I think it should be pointed out that in about 45 minutes we'll have three hours to kind of have that discussion back and forth with the hon. member. I'm not going to answer the question that he asked because I cannot confirm that the preamble had any substance to it because this particular member happens to find a study somewhere that may or may not be relevant. We'll have that discussion in about 45 minutes.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. For the minister's information this study, which you should read and all hon. members as well, was funded through Alberta Gaming Research, and you cannot weasel away. Why is this government failing to help the over 17,000 problem gamblers who are looking for treatment, but none is provided? Why are you failing them?

Mr. Liepert: Mr. Speaker, I think we have to ensure that we clear the record here. I don't know of any particular instance where if someone has an addiction to gambling and seeks help, somehow we'd turn that individual away. We have some hundreds of millions of dollars in addictions funding in the ministry of health, and if the minister would like to supplement, I'd be happy to have that.

Mr. MacDonald: That, Mr. Speaker, is simply not true. Does this government consider a budget of \$6 million adequate to meet the needs of 19,000 problem gamblers when . . .

The Speaker: Hon. member. [interjection] Hon. member, the camera is on me; it's not on you. Any questions dealing with the budget – and we did venture into dollars – will be dealt with at 3 o'clock this afternoon, which has been well advertised for a long period of time.

The hon. Member for Calgary-Foothills, followed by the hon. Member for Airdrie-Chestermere.

Organ and Tissue Donations

Mr. Webber: Mr. Speaker, in the past five years 214 people have died waiting for organ transplants here in Alberta. This is the third-highest number amongst provinces. Organ and tissue donations are down, yet the need has never been higher. To the Minister of Health and Wellness: why does this province not have an organ and tissue donor registry?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Horne: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker, and I thank the hon. member for the question. It is true that across Canada organ and tissue donations have been in decline for the last few years. Here in Alberta we have raised this issue on several occasions. There have been reports produced, and the Alberta government until now has been working very closely with Canadian Blood Services to support them in the development of a national organ donor and tissue donor registry. CBS has provided the province with some very specific recommendations around the establishment of intent-to-donate registries, and we're in the midst of reviewing their recommendations.

Mr. Webber: Okay. Well, also to the same minister: while the national registry is being negotiated, what is being done here in Alberta to support organ and tissue donation in transplant surgery?

Mr. Horne: Mr. Speaker, we budgeted \$3 million in 2012-13, \$8.2 million in 2013-14, and \$9.6 million in 2014-15 to contribute to the national registry once the Canadian Blood Services' recommendations have been reviewed and adopted. What I will say is that I am concerned that Alberta also is doing everything we can within the province to get an online donor registry established. I'm committed to working with the hon. member to raise further awareness about this and to take some immediate steps to position Alberta to be able to take advantage of the national registry once it's operational.

2:20

Mr. Webber: Well, thank you, hon. minister. That's great news.

My final question to you is: what can Albertans do, what can we do to make sure that our wishes or Albertans' wishes to be donors are fulfilled?

Mr. Horne: Well, currently, Mr. Speaker, when a family or an individual is in a situation and they wish to make clear their intent to donate, they may sign the back of their Alberta health care insurance registration card. That said, I think we do need to do more in order to promote both the need for organ and tissue donation and to further the work to develop an electronic registry for this province that will better equip us to take advantage of those who are willing to make the sacrifice in a time of need.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Airdrie-Chestermere, followed by the hon. Member for Calgary-McCall.

Blood Alcohol Driving Sanctions

Mr. Anderson: Mr. Speaker, I hold in my hand a coaster that is being handed out to hundreds of restaurants and pubs around Alberta in protest of this Premier's poorly thought out .05 drinking legislation, which registers and seizes the vehicles of law-abiding Albertans but does nothing to punish those who are legally impaired. On one side it says: no to .05, repeal Bill 26, and drink responsibly.

The Speaker: The use of props in the Assembly is not appropriate.

Mr. Anderson: Okay. On one side it says to repeal Bill 26. On the back it says: say no to the PCs, no to the Premier, and vote responsibly. To the Solicitor General: why are you delaying enforcement of this law until after the election? Is it because the vast majority of Albertans don't want it?

Mr. Denis: Mr. Speaker, I'll let the Minister of Transportation comment on that, but it really saddens me that this member trivializes the lives of 300 Albertans who have died since 1998 as a result of drivers between .05 and .08. Shame on him.

Mr. Anderson: A point of order on that disgusting answer.

To the minister. Given that the federal gun registry, which also attacked law-abiding Albertans, cost taxpayers billions to create and maintain and given that under your new drinking law you will have to likewise register thousands of law-abiding Albertans in a similar database, accessible by all of the different law enforcement agencies of this province, tell us, Minister: how much do you estimate your new .05 registry is going to cost taxpayers?

Mr. Denis: Mr. Speaker, this member talks about the gun registry. I want to talk about it as well because this government has a long history of opposing the gun registry, unlike their leader. I quote from September 24, 2010: "Smith Wants Provincial Registry." Shame on you.

An Hon. Member: You're a disgrace.

Mr. Anderson: You really are a disgrace, Member.

Mr. Denis: Point of order.

Mr. Anderson: Final question. Given that your government has not done any homework on this bill before passing it and given that the majority of Albertans don't want it and given that the .05 registry, like the gun registry, will do nothing to save lives but will instead punish law-abiding Albertans, will you adopt the Wildrose policy on this issue, repeal Bill 26, scrap the .05 registry, and use those savings to increase checkstops and prosecutions of those that are actually killing people on the street? Will you actually do something to save lives instead of sitting in that chair and doing jack squat?

Mr. Denis: Point of order.

Mr. Danyluk: Mr. Speaker, it's absolutely unbelievable that the hon. member opposite has sat through the discussions of three readings and one Committee of the Whole and still does not know that .08 is still .08, .05 is still .05. There is no difference. It is irresponsible of an hon. member to stand up and say to Albertans and, really, what I would consider confuse the position of what this bill is.

The Speaker: We have three points of order arising out of that last exchange.

The hon. Member for Calgary-McCall, followed by the hon. Member for Little Bow.

Canada-European Union Trade Negotiations

Mr. Kang: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Countless times this government has allowed water markets to grow in Alberta. After failing to protect our most precious resource at home, this government is also failing to protect it on the world stage, leaving our water vulnerable to foreign investment. To the minister of intergovernmental affairs: given that the scarcity of water is a concern for all Albertans, especially in the south, how can the minister justify that the sale of water is part of the ongoing negotiations with the European Union?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Dallas: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I can assure the hon. member opposite that there's no discussion with respect to the sale of water, certainly with respect to any agreement in Europe. I know the Minister of Environment and Water is going to have a conversation with Albertans about water, but we're certainly not involved in negotiations over water.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Kang: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I will be tabling some documents to that effect later on.

To the same minister again: given that CETA will have significant impact on all Albertans for years to come, why did this government not get Albertans' input in regard to the impacts of this agreement?

Mr. Dallas: Well, Mr. Speaker, as I've outlined earlier in this Assembly, we've been engaged in negotiations with the federal government right from the beginning of these discussions. We've had nine rounds of those discussions. They've been very productive. We've made no commitments to this point in terms of what Alberta would sign off on or not sign off on, and I'm very encouraged by the negotiations to date.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Kang: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. To the same minister again: will this government step up the Premier's promise of more transparency in the government and make the Canada-EU trade agreement negotiations it has taken part in public?

Mr. Dallas: Well, let's be clear, Mr. Speaker. This is a negotiation between the European Union and the federal government. Obviously, we're delighted that we've been involved and asked to be at that table, as have all the provinces across Canada been involved in those negotiations. As I said, we've been very pleased with how those have progressed.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Little Bow, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

Education of Mennonite Children from Mexico

Mr. McFarland: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Southern Alberta has seen a very significant growth of students from out of country. The Mexican Mennonite student population in zone 6 school districts has bloomed to over 10,000 students, many of whom don't attend school on a regular basis. My question is to the Minister of Education. How long is it going to be before a regulation gets put in place that will prevent the congregation of dozens or hundreds of school-aged children in a home-schooling program where they are supervised by unqualified teenagers or in some cases by young mothers?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Lukaszuk: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Let me be perfectly clear. Every child in the province of Alberta not only deserves but has the right to quality education, and that does not exclude any group. As a matter of fact, the situation that has been brought to my attention not only by this hon. member, although I know he has been a strong advocate, but by others is being reviewed by my department as we're speaking. We are looking at strengthening policies and regulations to make sure that every child in every corner of this province, no matter who they are, receives the same internationally renowned high quality of education.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. McFarland: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. A supplementary to the same minister: in order to supervise these students, does the department regulation require that the supervisor be at least functionally literate?

Mr. Lukaszuk: Mr. Speaker, there are visits from the department from time to time as per the regulations, but as I said earlier, I find that the policies and the regulations that govern these types of institutions or schooling set-ups need revising, and I am currently looking into it.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. McFarland: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Will the minister undertake to work with his federal colleagues to ensure that funding for programs such as ESL begin to follow these students into our system, the same as non-Canadians receive?

Mr. Lukaszuk: Mr. Speaker, many of these students fall into a very peculiar group because they are technically Canadian citizens even though most of them have not either resided or been born in Canada. They came here from Mexico. At the end of the day those are intergovernmental issues that we can resolve with the federal government, I'm sure, but in the meantime my number one priority is to make sure that these children receive adequate education.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre, followed by the hon. Member for Lesser Slave Lake.

Alberta Works Program On-site Support

Ms Blakeman: Thanks very much, Mr. Speaker. For many years Alberta Works has supplied an income support worker who worked directly out of various inner-city agencies but currently out of the Herb Jamieson, but that worker is to be moved any day now. The loss of this localized outreach worker will severely affect people needing medical SFI, and as we know, without intervention the costs really mount up. To the Minister of Human Services: why would this minister move a worker whose accessibility is key to assisting people who have issues due to poverty and homelessness, including chronic illness and addiction?

Mr. Hancock: Well, Mr. Speaker, as this hon. member knows, ministers don't actually engage in day-to-day management at that level, so this minister would not be moving that particular individual. However, this issue was brought to this minister's attention, and this minister is very interested in the same questions that the hon. member is asking so has asked management why this change would be proposed, if it's being proposed, and what the outcomes are that we are trying to achieve for those people and how we are going to do a better job of achieving those outcomes for those people.

2:30

Ms Blakeman: Well, I'll suggest another couple of questions for you. How does removal of an on-site worker relate to an integrated poverty reduction strategy, which, as the minister explained to me a week ago, you definitely had in your department?

Mr. Hancock: A very good question, Mr. Speaker, and one that I, in fact, have asked about this particular situation. It was brought to my attention last week that it was purported that there was a movement of this worker. I asked exactly the same question: should we not be putting people right in the front line, right in the place where you can help people, and if there's a change being made, what's the rationale for the change, and how are we going to provide a better service?

Ms Blakeman: I'd be interested in the answer.

My last question is to the Minister of Health and Wellness. Now, how does this action fit in with the government's mental health strategy, which was from September of 2011? In the media release I read this morning to refresh my memory, it talked about how being community oriented and being accessible for mental health services was particularly important and was one of the five major directions of the strategy. How would moving this worker fit in with that mental health strategy?

Mr. Horne: Well, Mr. Speaker, my answer is going to be the same as the Minister of Human Services' first answer to this question. Management makes the decisions about the deployment of workers in these programs and in these facilities. If I can get some more information from management at my end about the implications for mental health, I'd be happy to answer. In the meantime we remain committed to expanding community mental health services through primary health care, through community general hospitals, and through many other programs in the community offered in conjunction with others.

High Prairie Hospital Construction

Ms Calahasen: Mr. Speaker, people in High Prairie were so pleased and so excited to see that their new hospital was moving ahead, and then Budget 2012 happened. Funding available for our project was much less than what we were originally promised. My constituents are naturally worried, confused, and in fact some are angry and want answers. To the Minister of Infrastructure: please tell me why Budget 2012 for the new High Prairie hospital has changed from \$90 million to \$73 million.

Mr. Johnson: Mr. Speaker, this project is vitally important to the community and to this government, so I want to assure the member that the total cost of this project has not gone down from \$90 million to \$73 million. As a matter of fact, it's still at \$90 million. It's just that not all the funds are expected to flow within the three-year budget cycle that we forecast in the budget that we just tabled.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Ms Calahasen: Thank you. I'm sure my constituents are listening ardently.

To the same minister: when will we finally begin construction of this much-needed facility, this hospital? When?

Mr. Johnson: Mr. Speaker, construction has already started on the services for this building. The land was cleared; services were put in. They've stopped for the winter, and they'll start back up in the spring. I think the thing to make sure is that we're building the right facility. I know more functional planning work is being done with Alberta Health Services. Once that is finally signed off, we'll have a much better idea of what programs are going to be in this facility, and the facility will be built. But rest assured that it is a \$90 million facility as it sits today, and there are some funds expected to be spent in the fourth year.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Ms Calahasen: Thank you. Then to the minister of health: given that we've been planning forever, surely to God we can move forward with completing the work needed, including the addition of the renal clinic, the cancer clinic, and the CT scan. My constituents want to know whether or not that functional plan will continue to include these facilities.

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Horne: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. As the hon. Minister of Infrastructure said, this project is going ahead at the same level of total provincial support. As he also said, we're in the final stages of completing the service plan for this facility, that will detail the specifics of programs and services that will be there. The CT scanner, the chemotherapy, and the renal dialysis

are part of the plan for the future, and we'll continue to work with the local community and the hon. member to finish up this work as quickly as possible.

Thank you.

Electricity Prices

(continued)

Dr. Taft: Mr. Speaker, Alberta's PCs consistently and deliberately spread misinformation about electricity deregulation. For example, they say that residents in Quebec, B.C., Manitoba, and New Brunswick pay higher taxes to subsidize electricity when the truth is actually quite the opposite. The Crown-owned power companies in these provinces actually pay dividends to governments, that help push taxes down. To the Minister of Energy: why does he persist in misleading Albertans about the truth concerning electricity deregulation?

Dr. Morton: Mr. Speaker, I tabled in the House last week the study by London Economics International that showed that, in fact, other provinces do have hidden costs precisely because they have debt. The numbers again – I don't know how many times I have to say this to the hon. member – \$32 billion in Quebec, \$64 billion in Ontario. If that's not enough, there was another report, tabled just last week by Don Drummond, one of the most respected economists in Canada, that pleaded with the Ontario government to quit hiding the true cost of electricity from consumers.

Dr. Taft: Well, given that this minister likes to hide the truth, Mr. Speaker . . .

The Speaker: I may get a comment a little while later about this intemperate language. This is not becoming of certain members in this Assembly.

Dr. Swann: Even if it's true?

The Speaker: Oh, get off it. Sit down. Sit down.

Dr. Taft: I didn't say anything.

The Speaker: That was you?

Dr. Swann: That was me.

The Speaker: Well, you should have been quiet because you were not recognized.

You've got to question with – let's try and find some civility, okay?

Dr. Taft: Okay. Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Let's compare apples to apples, and let's look at the Alberta situation. Again to the Minister of Energy: is this minister aware that Alberta's regulated electricity system functioned very successfully for eight decades without requiring any provincial debt because it was a system of private and municipally owned corporations?

Dr. Morton: Mr. Speaker, again, I'm a little surprised that the hon. member wants to turn the clock back – what? – 20 or 30 years, to when the province had half the number of people here, not nearly the industrial consumption. This is the 21st century. The 21st century, particularly in this province, with the exciting future we face in terms of economic development, needs an electricity system that can respond to those challenges. That's what we're putting in place.

Dr. Taft: Mr. Speaker, given that Alberta's regulated electricity system functioned very successfully for eight decades without requiring public debt, will the minister admit that this government could return to a regulated system, where the interests of ordinary people are protected, without incurring any debt?

Dr. Morton: Mr. Speaker, that's the back-to-the-future question that I just answered, so I don't see any point in repeating the answer.

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

Charter Schools

Mr. Amery: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Charter schools have a proud record in Alberta of providing innovative education choices to parents. The government has said over and over again that it supports charter schools and that they are here to stay. My questions are for the Minister of Education. If this commitment to charter schools is real and the government does want to support educational choice for parents, will the minister commit to providing more permanence to charter schools?

Mr. Lukaszuk: Mr. Speaker, I think that, undeniably, parents have voted with their feet. Charter schools in by far a majority of cases have proven themselves to be a viable option to which many parents choose to send their children, and that, frankly, is one of the pillars that makes Alberta education so strong, this child-focused, constructive, pedagogical competition among a variety of service providers of this high quality of education that we have. I can tell this hon. member to stay tuned because, indeed, this government wants to preserve what is constructive.

The Speaker: The hon. member, please.

Mr. Amery: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Given that charter schools say that their temporary status restricts their ability to finance and limits them to leasing arrangements that aren't always ideal, what is the minister doing to address the barriers charters face when it comes to getting decent learning spaces?

Mr. Lukaszuk: Well, Mr. Speaker, when initially instituted, some form of time caps had to be put in place in order for these institutions to prove themselves and to find out whether parents indeed make them schools of choice for their children. Time has passed. In most cases charter schools have proven themselves to be great contributors to the whole mosaic of service providers in education. I know that infrastructure issues need to be resolved. That's why again I would tell this member to stay tuned because we will be looking at that as well.

2:40

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Amery: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Almadina charter school academy in my constituency is an excellent school, serving students from 39 different countries whose first language is not English. However, their enrolment cap of 600 means they cannot properly serve our growing community. Will the minister consider raising this cap so that more families can benefit from the unique opportunity that this school offers?

Mr. Lukaszuk: Mr. Speaker, that is one of the aspects of operations of charter schools that I have been asked to look into not only by the operators of charter schools but by parents who choose to send their

children to these public charter schools. That is something that will be unrolled in the near future.

The Speaker: Hon. members, that concludes the question-and-response period for today. Nineteen members were recognized, with 113 questions and responses.

In a few seconds from now we will continue with the Routine, which is Members' Statements.

Members' Statements

(continued)

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Strathmore-Brooks.

Alberta Works Program

Mr. Doerksen: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. There are nearly 60 Alberta Works centres throughout our province. Every day thousands of Albertans walk through their doors and access the services of Alberta Works. The goals of Alberta Works are to help unemployed people find and keep jobs, help employers meet their needs for skilled workers, and help Albertans with low incomes cover their basic costs of living.

Alberta Works achieves these goals through its four programs: first of all, employment and training services, income support, health benefits, and child support services. These services are provided through our Alberta Works centres. These centres help Albertans reach their full potential. They help us develop our workforce and help businesses find the employees they need for continued success. Mr. Speaker, Alberta Works centres are strategically located, situated throughout the province, to make a difference in the communities in which they're located.

Alberta Works is not just for job seekers, nor is it just for employers. It benefits our communities. When we help Albertans reach their full potential, get access to work and the assistance to stay employed, all of these things are benefits that we all appreciate. When Albertans walk through the doors of an Alberta Works centre, the staff are there to help them get back on their feet and regain their independence.

Sometimes, Mr. Speaker, we all need a little help. It may be making those important employment connections or finding the right program or service in the time of need. Either way, it's good to know that there is help there for those people who need it. Alberta Works is a service to Albertans.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

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

Eid Milad un-Nabi Celebration

Mr. Kang: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. On February 12 I attended the Eid Milad un-Nabi celebration at the Jack Singer Concert Hall. Muslims around the globe celebrate this day as the birthday of Muhammad, the last prophet of Islam. It was delightful to hear hon. MPs Ralph Goodale and Jim Karygiannis, who talked about the beauty of our diverse and tolerant Canadian society. It was also a pleasure to listen to Brigadier-General Paul Wynnyk, who was proud to say that men and women of all faiths, including Muslims, stand shoulder to shoulder in the Canadian Forces to hold our flag high.

Muslim scholars such as Professor Syed Soharwardy and Dr. Munir El-Kassem stressed Muhammad's message of peace and harmony. They were eager to convey that Islam stands completely against violence and that those calling themselves Muslims and

encouraging hatred have completely deviated from the message of Muhammad. Dr. Kassem especially quoted Muhammad's last words before he passed away. His last message was: be not harsh with your women, and treat them with love and care.

It was also brought to the audience's attention that Muhammad built the first modern society where Muslims, Jews, and Christians lived in harmony, with complete freedom to live by one's religion, in Medina over 14 centuries ago. Syed Soharwardy said that Prophet Jesus and Prophet Moses are respected no less in Islam than in Judaism or Christianity and, above all, that we are all sons of the same father, Adam. It also comes down to humanity, which is the essence of Islam.

I'm proud that my party, the Alberta Liberal Party, is in sync with these great ideologies of religious freedom, respect for others, and multiculturalism. Multiculturalism and diversity are the basis of our beautiful society, and the ALP is committed more than ever to nurture and promote them. We as Canadians are known as a society that respects, accepts, celebrates, and embraces people from every culture. This is what my party and I stand for. It all comes down to humanity, Mr. Speaker. Long live humanity.

Thank you.

Notices of Motions

The Speaker: The hon. Government House Leader.

Mr. Hancock: Yes. Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise today to give oral notice of a motion for leave to introduce a bill being Bill 6, the Property Rights Advocate Act.

Tabling Returns and Reports

The Speaker: The hon. Solicitor General and Minister of Public Security.

Mr. Denis: Thanks, Mr. Speaker. I referred to an article during question period today from the Red Deer *Advocate* – it's entitled Smith Wants Provincial Registry – in which the Wildrose leader talks about her advocacy for a provincial gun registry. I table five copies.

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

Mr. Kang: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I would like to table five copies of annexes I and II of the comprehensive economic trade agreement that show that water is being negotiated as part of the agreement.

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

Mr. Mason: Thanks very much, Mr. Speaker. I have a number of tablings today. First of all, I'd like to table the appropriate number of copies of documents from January 2011 describing the problems at the Edmonton General continuing care centre, where tarps and plastic buckets are used to contain leaks in the roof; a complaint from a resident of the Edmonton General to the Alberta Health Facilities Review Committee showing that the problems identified publicly a year ago still exist; photos taken of the situation at the Edmonton General; and the government's online advertisement about caring for Alberta seniors.

Mr. Speaker, I also have some electricity bills to table. I have a bill from Mary Anne Predy for \$613.13, and she said to us: "We are already using much less electricity than last year yet our bills

continue to increase. Deregulation has not worked for the advantage of Albertans.”

I also have one from Mabel Cymbaluk who sent us a bill for \$230 with Direct Energy. She says, “For many seniors, it’s getting difficult to stay in your own home in ‘small town Alberta.’” I’ll table that.

Mr. Speaker, also a letter and a bill from Heather Arseneault, who says, “I would love to know how the Government thinks people can afford to pay their electricity bills!” Her EPCOR electricity charge for January 2012 was \$471.04. I’ll table that.

I have also a power bill from Royleen Kumar for \$136.34. She says, “Even companies like Enmax and Direct Energy . . . seem to be gouging the average consumer . . . It really does seem like the rich are getting richer and the poor are getting poorer.”

Finally, Mr. Speaker, Peter Milot sent us his Enmax bill for December 2010 for \$102.90 and his Enmax bill for December 2011 for \$194.46 with the remark “No X-mas lights next year.”

We have also a bill from John Thorson of Calgary for \$344.93, and Earl Riste of Iddesleigh, Alberta, sent his EPCOR bill for \$632.92.

I have copies of all of those, Mr. Speaker.

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

Dr. Swann: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I am tabling five letters from the president of the Alberta Medical Association in response to some of the comments of the Premier regarding negotiations. It says: “We have asked the Court of Queen’s Bench of Alberta to appoint an arbitrator” to come to an agreement. “Alberta Health and Wellness and Alberta Health Services have opposed this. In our view . . . the Canada Health Act and other considerations support our request.

And another 10 copies of individuals who themselves or their families have been inadequately, inappropriately, and dangerously treated for their mental illness, and it resulted in complications.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Anderson: Mr. Speaker, I’d like to table five copies of the document, or document/prop as you pointed out, that I had referred to in my question about the .05 registry of the PCs.

2:50

The Speaker: Are there others? Hon. Member for Calgary-Currie, you have a tabling?

Mr. Taylor: Yes, Mr. Speaker. I have three tablings today: five copies of a letter from Lynn Whittingham of Calgary and also five copies of a letter from Marie-Andrée Ménard from Calgary, both calling for a halt before it gets under way to the plans by Spray Lake Sawmills to log 700 hectares of trees in the west Bragg Creek area of Kananaskis; also, five copies of a letter from Barbara Boettcher of Calgary to the Premier, asking for clear-cutting not to proceed in the Castle wilderness special place.

Thank you.

Statement by the Speaker

Parliamentary Language

The Speaker: All right. Hon. members, we have three points of order, and I’m going to deal with these three points of order very, very quickly. I, in fact, stood in this Assembly last Thursday, if all hon. members will recall, and last Thursday I asked hon. members to think and rethink and look at the letters that have been sent and

the guides that have been provided in the past about parliamentary and unparliamentary language and about temperate and intemperate responses and how one responds.

Over the weekend we spent a little time, Parliamentary Counsel assisting me, in finding some words that I was going to use today at 1:50, but when I stood in the Assembly at 1:50, I looked out and I saw a fairly relaxed group of people. I said: my, I may not have to say what I have to say because I think that there’s going to be a good tone in the Assembly today. So here’s what I didn’t say at 1:50 but what I’m going to say now at 2:52.

Hon. members, the chair would like to comment on an unfortunate trend in the use of language in this Assembly this sitting. In the chair’s view the language spoken has become increasingly intemperate. For instance, in recent sitting days members have used words accusing other members of not being honest, of being untrustworthy, shifty, misleading, corrupt, and the list goes on. And we could add the words that were used today as well.

The chair is well aware that there is a certain event to be held before May 31 which may be causing members to use more intemperate language. The chair is well aware that this is a place of strong emotions. That is as it should be as members should be passionate about what they believe. However, the institution of Parliament has existed for centuries, and members have been subject to the rules to ensure that civility is maintained. This is not a new institution that just started three weeks ago. Centuries have gone into the development of a place that should require civility.

Erskine May, 24th edition, at page 444 states the standard.

Good temper and moderation are the characteristics of parliamentary language. Parliamentary language is never more desirable than when a Member is canvassing the opinions and conduct of his opponents in debate.

Another authoritative statement is found in *House of Commons Procedure and Practice*, 2nd edition, at page 618.

The proceedings of the House are based on a long-standing tradition of respect for the integrity of all Members. Thus, the use of offensive, provocative or threatening language in the House is strictly forbidden. Personal attacks, insults and obscenities are not in order. A direct charge or accusation against a Member may be made only by way of substantive motion for which notice is required.

Finally, as members you realize that it is your role to ensure that this institution retains the respect of the people that we all serve. If we don’t respect one another, nobody out of this room is going to respect anyone in this room. Intemperate remarks and unparliamentary language do nothing to maintain that respect. All of us must take seriously the role of ensuring that the Assembly operates with civility, order, and decorum. I wonder if I’m asking too much if I also suggest an addition to civility, order, and decorum. I suggest that it’s always timely for politeness and respect.

Okay. We’ve got three points of order today. I’m not dealing with any of them. They’re all being upheld as a point of order.

We’re moving on to Orders of the Day.

Orders of the Day

Committee of Supply

[Mr. Zwozdesky in the chair]

The Deputy Chair: Hon. members, I’d like to call the Committee of Supply to order.

Main Estimates 2012-13

Finance

The Deputy Chair: The hon. Minister of Finance, please.

Mr. Liepert: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair. Taking into account the Speaker's good words, we'll try and do this with all of the civility and good conduct that is becoming in this Assembly.

How many minutes do I have?

The Deputy Chair: Ten minutes.

Mr. Liepert: Okay. Then we'll talk faster.

It's my pleasure this afternoon to spend the next three hours with members of the Assembly talking about the estimates of the Department of Finance. Before we get into the estimates, I want to pay some thank yous. Now, there was a large amount of work that went into the preparation of this particular budget, Mr. Chairman. We had what I've referred to on several occasions as a hurry-up offence. We had the leadership, and by the time the leadership had concluded, we were well into what would be our traditional budget preparation time. So with a lot of good work by both the folks in my department and the Department of Treasury Board, we had a budget that was presented some 12 days ago that I would say has been widely accepted in this province and will lead us to what I think will be a tremendous future for Alberta.

I want to acknowledge and introduce the staff that are with me here today. To my right is the Deputy Minister of Finance, Tim Wiles. To his right is the assistant deputy minister for strategic and business services and senior financial officer within the department, Darwin Bozek. To my left is Gerry McLennan, the chief executive officer of the Alberta Gaming and Liquor Commission. Like myself, Gerry is soon going to be moving on to bigger and better things. This will be the final set of estimates, I guess, for Gerry as head of the AGLC. There is currently a search under way for Mr. McLennan's replacement, and if I could just put it on the record, I think all Albertans would like to thank Gerry for some – what? – 28 years of service with the AGLC.

We also have a number of other officials who are seated in the gallery. I'll name them, and maybe I could at the end ask them to stand and be recognized by members. We've got Gill Hermanns, Bruce Boychuk, Robyn Cochrane, Ian Ayton, Dennis Stang, Richard Isaak, Frank Potter, Shakeeb Siddiqui, Craig Johnson, John Ryan, and Wendy Joyner. If I could ask them all to stand and be recognized, I would appreciate that.

I guess before I get into the specifics of the Department of Finance, because, really, Mr. Chairman, our department is one of people and keeping everybody else in government honest when it comes to finances I think is the best way to put it, I want to talk a little bit about the broader finance and this particular budget that, as I mentioned, we introduced some 12 days ago. It's a budget that invests highly in Albertans' priorities. The President of the Treasury Board and I travelled this province extensively last fall, and what we heard time and time again was that priority spending had to be on health, education, and human services, and 80 per cent of this operating budget goes to those three areas. Yes, we will show a small deficit in this coming fiscal year, but we are positioning ourselves to have surpluses of close to a billion dollars the following year and over \$5 billion the following year.

3:00

Now, I know there have been some questions asked about those so-called rosy projections. In fact, I think our group of friends over here have called them Alice-in-Wonderland projections.

They said that \$108 oil was too optimistic. Well, this afternoon the last time I checked, Mr. Chairman, oil was trading at \$105 a barrel. I would suggest that if that's too optimistic, then I'll gladly accept that criticism.

What we have done in this particular budget, as we always do when it comes to projecting our revenue forecasts, is take an average of what the international forecasters, the private-sector analysts, are saying. Then we take that number, we sit down with producers, we listen to what their views are on production levels, we multiply the two, and that's how we come up with those numbers.

One of the other things that this particular group of individuals over here was predicting prior to the budget was that there were going to be tax increases in this budget. Well, guess what? There were no tax increases, so the predictability of our friends is not very good. In fact, it's zero right now. If we're going to be talking about taxes in this budget, that there were none, then why are we talking about taxes in the next year? The next year is basically what our budget is about.

I want to get back to spending a few minutes on our particular business plan. Goal 1 of the business plan is about providing economic, tax, and fiscal advice that supports strong and sustainable government finances. That's a big job, Mr. Chairman. It's going to be a big job in 2012 because we have committed that in 2012 we're going to do an overall review of our fiscal policy, our fiscal framework, and our savings strategy. Reaching this goal will involve an important discussion with Albertans about where we are now and where we want to be in the future.

During that consultation we're also going to be talking to Albertans about the heritage savings trust fund and what role it plays because I think one of the things that we hear from Albertans is that we've lost the attachment to that heritage fund.

Other goals in our business plan include ensuring that revenue programs are administered fairly, efficiently, and effectively; that we provide policy and regulatory oversight for the financial, insurance, and pension sectors; and that we also show leadership in sound investment, treasury, and risk management.

The last point that I mentioned includes providing our investment manager, which is AIMCo, with strategies for achieving optimal performance in that \$65 billion in investments – pension, heritage fund, and sustainability fund – that AIMCo invests on behalf of the government of Alberta. You know, despite uncertain global market conditions AIMCo continues to get investment returns at a prudent level of risk.

We also, as I mentioned, are responsible for the Alberta Gaming and Liquor Commission. Besides the revenue that's generated through the commission, there are a number of social responsibility programs that are undertaken, including the voluntary self-exclusion program, online training for gaming venue staff, and mandatory Smart training for liquor industry workers.

The final goal of our business plan deals with accessible financial services for Albertans, and that really comes down to our Alberta Treasury Branches, or what's now known as ATB. We're operating in close to 250 communities across the province, serving over 680,000 Albertans. It's a valuable part of Alberta's network of financial institutions. We need to keep ATB strong not only for their clients but for Albertans as taxpayers.

I've gone over our business plan. This is a budget, Mr. Chairman, that has a little bit of revenue. We're forecasting an increase of about \$1.3 billion from Budget 2011, and that's largely due to corporate and personal income taxes as our economy continues to strengthen.

On the expense side department expenses have decreased by, I guess, \$32 million over Budget 2011, and this is primarily in an

area of debt-servicing costs. We also have in our budget to enhance the scientific research and experimental tax credit and some increases in program expenses, primarily around the area of technology.

I guess what I'd like to say in conclusion is that I believe I've demonstrated our commitment to achieving the goals in our business plan, and I've explained some of the reasoning behind our estimates. I'm also confident that I've demonstrated how our government through Budget 2012 and by supporting the success of Albertans is helping to keep Alberta strong now and into the future. I look forward, Mr. Chairman, to the next two hours and 50 minutes of dialogue with not only government members but our friends across the way.

The Deputy Chair: Thank you.

Just before we get into the debate, I just want to remind all members here that Standing Order 59.01(4) and Government Motion 6, that was passed on February 8, 2012, do apply. We've heard the opening comments of nearly 10 minutes from the minister. Now for the next one hour only members from the opposition party may engage with the minister, speaking not more than 10 minutes per person at a time. Following that, 20 minutes will be given to the third party and, following that, another 20 minutes to the fourth party and so on as per the standing order and Government Motion 6.

With that having been said, I would recognize the Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Mr. MacDonald: Yes. Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. I listened with interest to the hon. minister's opening remarks. Certainly, there have been changes made to Alberta Finance since the last budget, and it seems to be the same old same old in this House.

I think it would be better, Mr. Chairman, if we clarified this right off the start. Would the hon. minister prefer just a Q and A for the first hour?

Mr. Liepert: Whatever works for you.

Mr. MacDonald: Whatever. Okay. Let's try that. It's not what works for me, hon. member; it's what works for the taxpayers. This process, as you know, doesn't work for the taxpayers. It works for the public relations department of the government, no one else.

Now, gaming research. We're going to look at element 6.1, gaming research, which, Mr. Chairman, is an amount of \$1.6 million. We look at the lottery estimates, and we realize that mostly through VLTs and slot machine revenue you're going to anticipate \$1.3 billion plus in revenue from that. One of the research projects where the \$1.6 million is used, of course, is at the Alberta Gaming Research Institute, this project last year, *Gambling in Alberta: History, Current Status, and Socioeconomic Impacts*. It was there in question period today, where I was interrupted.

I would like to ask again: whether you're looking at AADAC, which is roughly \$6 million for addictions, or at the fact that we have only \$1.6 million going into Alberta Gaming Research to look at the problems and the issues surrounding VLTs and slot machines and their use throughout the province, does the minister consider – and you can pick either budget or both, and I would remind you that three years ago of the \$6 million that was used in AADAC, half of that went to treatment of people with issues or problems – these budgets adequate to meet the needs of the 19,000 problem gamblers who have been identified? You've got to remember that a small number of gamblers are putting a large amount of money into those machines on an annual basis which is going to generate revenue of up to \$1.3 billion plus this year.

Thank you.

3:10

Mr. Liepert: Well, I think there are a couple of things that need to be addressed. I know the member had asked the question in my absence a little earlier in the month. Again, I'm not sure where he got the statistics from. My recollection is that the assertion was made by the member that 75 per cent of the dollars that come in through VLTs come from, in his words, problem gamblers. Now, I'm not sure where those numbers come from. It's difficult to identify who's a problem gambler and who isn't a problem gambler, Mr. Chairman.

The other thing that I think needs to be pointed out is that the member talked about the 1 and a half million dollars going into research. I think he's confused or is trying to leave the impression that that million and a half dollars is what is being used for addictions treatment. That's not what's happening. Much of the addictions treatment, Mr. Chairman, is in my colleague the minister of health's area.

It's difficult to assess in the addictions area. There are a whole bunch of factors that go into addictions, and that's one of the reasons why we moved AADAC into the health system. Quite frankly, sometimes in addiction there might be multiple issues at stake. So it's really hard to pinpoint exactly which dollar is going specifically just to gambling addictions. There may be other addictions involved. I know that in the department of health there is a significant amount of money that's allocated to – and I don't want to leave the wrong impression here – the area of mental health and addictions.

I know that the member would like us to be very specific relative to every dollar that's channelled and then sort of divide by the number of so-called problem gamblers and come up with a number. It's simply not that easy, Mr. Chairman.

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

Mr. MacDonald: Yes. For the minister's information – and I'm going to ask that he does his homework. I don't want to sound like the Speaker, but I'm going to ask him, and not over a long weekend, to do his homework and report back to the House tomorrow.

Certainly, this report, and it's a very good one, the final report to the Alberta Gaming Research Institute from last year, got its data from the Alberta Gaming and Liquor Commission, Alberta Alcohol and Drug Abuse Commission, Alberta Health Services, the office of the Chief Medical Examiner – we know what that's about – the Medicine Hat Police Service, and Lethbridge Regional Police Service among others. This information was provided. There is a breakdown of Alberta's expenditures on problem gaming, or gambling. I think gambling is a much better term, unfortunately. I'm sure the ministry has this. We do know that this ministry sets the standard for all other departments, including Health and Wellness. It specifically indicates that of the \$6 million that's set aside, \$3 million is used for the treatment of problem gambling.

There is a lot of information available through Alberta Health Services on the issue of problem gambling. It is reported that there are up to 55 suicides a year in this province as a result of problem gambling. If that is true, that is one a week. This is a serious problem that we have here.

Now, I'm going to ask the hon. minister – he was doubting my facts, but these are from a publication that was funded by the government. It deals specifically with who uses VLTs and who does not. I'm going to read it into the record so the minister can understand and respond, Mr. Chairman. This is from a report,

again, funded last year by the Alberta Gaming Research Institute. "The proportion of game-specific expenditure accounted for by problem gamblers is as follows: 86% for Internet gambling, 77% for VLTs, 72% for slot machines."

This is information that is publicly reported, and this indicates that we have a serious problem. We have big spenders. In fact, Mr. Chairman, we have 5.8 per cent of gamblers accounting for 75 per cent of total reported gambling expenditures in 2008 and 2009, and I'm requesting now from the minister: in this year are you going to increase the funding that is needed to help problem gamblers, or are you just going to pretend the problem doesn't exist?

Mr. Liepert: Mr. Chairman, it would be very interesting to hear from this member what he describes as a problem gambler because maybe everyone who spends – I don't know; pick a number – a hundred bucks on a VLT is a problem gambler in his mind. I don't know.

All I can say is that we do constant research. We have a budget. It's before the House. We also have additional funds that go through Alberta Health and Wellness for addictions treatment and counselling. Those are the estimates we're going to be dealing with. If the question is, "Am I going to change my dollars in this budget estimate," the answer is no.

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

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you. Of the 19,436 problem gamblers who wanted help for their gambling issues, we had a budget that allowed fewer than 2,000 of them to get help. You are telling this House and the taxpayers that you're going to forget about it, you're going to ignore the problem, and we're not going to try to help these folks out.

Mr. Liepert: Mr. Chair, I challenge that member to show me where I said that. That isn't what I said. I would challenge the member to tell me where he's getting those numbers from that say that we're leaving those people out. I don't believe that to be the case. I want him to show me the data that says that the numbers he's stating are not being treated if they're asking for the treatment.

There's also a difference here. You could be a problem gambler and not seek counselling. We can't treat someone who doesn't want to be treated.

But if this member has hard facts and data that show that whatever the number he says were turned away from counselling and treatment, I want him to put it on the table.

Mr. MacDonald: For the record on pages 176 and 177 – and I'm asking you to do your homework and do it tonight. Don't be watching any television. You just do your homework, hon. minister. On page 176, table 46 of the gambling history report, problem gamblers projected in the Alberta adult population in 2008-09, over 72,000; wanted help for gambling problems, 26 per cent of them, or 19,436; sought help for their gambling problems, 8,330. The ones that were helped: unfortunately, in that year it was 1,893.

We can do better than this. I'm sorry; the facts are here. You have lots of staff. You have a communications team. You have a research team. You introduced staff up in the government gallery there. Put them to work to get the information for you. You should fix this problem and fix it right now.

Now, again I'm going to ask you – and I've given you the information; I've told you where it is – are you going to fix the problem?

3:20

Mr. Liepert: I am amazed that this party is focusing on this one particular issue in this entire budget. Mr. Chairman, I have said that I want him to show me specific cases of someone that didn't receive help when they sought it. I'm not going to go to any particular research document. Those are general comments that may have been made in a research document. If he has a specific case of someone who is not getting help that wants help, then he owes it to this Assembly to bring it to our attention. You can't just make these wild comments out there and then try and lay it on staff in the department. If there's something specific, bring it forward and we'll look at it.

The Deputy Chair: Before we proceed, hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar, would you mind just telling me if the document you're referring to has already been tabled in this Assembly? Is it available to everyone?

Mr. MacDonald: It's in the public library. It's a big document. It's in the Legislature Library and it's in the public library and it's on the Internet. Every member, hon. Mr. Chairman, who has their computer on can google it, and it'll come right up.

The Deputy Chair: Thank you. Just to conclude, because the chair is searching for the tie-in between what document you're referring to and the actual estimates that are before us at the moment, perhaps you could just loop the two together, and we'll continue on.

Mr. MacDonald: Mr. Chairman, I'm not going to waste my hour of time verifying where I've done my research. This document is available. I was clear from the start.

The minister is ignoring his duty, which is to fix the problem that we have here. Unfortunately . . .

Mr. Liepert: Give us the instance. Give us the instance.

The Deputy Chair: Through the chair, please.

Hon. member, all the chair is asking for is the correlation between what is on the floor of the Assembly right at this moment – and that is the estimates, the main estimates for the department – and the report that you're alluding to. If you could just tie the two together, we could proceed.

Mr. MacDonald: For the minister's information there would be one specific case. I would refer the hon. member to a case that was cited in Public Accounts on November 30, and I will just leave it at that. Again, as part of your research, sir, you can check that out. It was brought before the Public Accounts Committee.

Now, I'm going to continue with this document. There are many, many questions there, and they centre now on lottery funding and the lottery estimates. We do have, you know, the details of the lottery fund estimates, and I have questions. How exactly are the lottery fund estimates allocated? I see a chart here on pages 116 and 117 of the government estimates. Who decides where that money goes? Is it Treasury Board or is it the Minister of Finance?

Mr. Liepert: It's Treasury Board, Mr. Chairman.

The Deputy Chair: Thank you.

Mr. MacDonald: So if Treasury Board decides this, does the Minister of Finance ever think about where the money goes geographically across the province, and is the distribution of that revenue fair?

Mr. Liepert: I haven't heard that it isn't, Mr. Chairman.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. member.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you very much. So the minister hasn't heard that it isn't. Well, again I'm referring to Gambling in Alberta: History, Current Status, and Socioeconomic Impacts from 2011. I'm looking at table 28 on page 128, and this shows Alberta lottery funds received 1998 through 2010 as a function of census division. There's a long list of census divisions, 1 through 19, and then there's a column on Alberta lottery funds per person and total Alberta lottery funds received. My question would be: if you haven't done the analysis to see that this distribution is fair, why, for instance, would Alberta lottery funds in Camrose-Lloydminster average per person \$1,179 over that period of time, and in Fort McMurray the Alberta lottery funds per person is \$385? There is a significant difference in these amounts, with Camrose-Lloydminster being three times higher than Fort McMurray. Why is there such an uneven distribution geographically on lottery funds distribution?

Mr. Liepert: Mr. Chairman, I'm not exactly certain what the member is referring to, but I'm assuming he's referring to the community facility enhancement program, those two programs that actually fall under the Minister of Culture and Community Services.

Mr. MacDonald: No, no. You can't get away that easily. This lottery fund estimate is in your ministry, sir. I want to know if you have taken a look to see if this lottery fund money is evenly distributed on a per capita basis across this province. I could put it to you another way. Given that there is a lot more money coming out of Fort McMurray on average per VLT than, say, there would be out of Camrose, why do the citizens of Fort McMurray get so much less in lottery funds received than, say, the good people of Camrose-Lloydminster, St. Paul, Hanna, Athabasca, or Slave Lake? These are the five census divisions where the Alberta lottery funds per person exceed \$1,000.

Mr. Liepert: Mr. Chairman, I'm not exactly certain which particular document the member is looking at, but when we – our lottery estimates as part of the Department of Finance are allocated to the various departments of government. Those dollars are then allocated to programs within the various departments. I have no idea why particular dollars might be less in one part of the province than another. I think that if this particular member is really interested in talking about the estimates of the department, he might want to stay on a broader scale instead of drilling down into some particular report that he's found and trying to somehow say that a particular part of the province isn't getting as much funds as the other part of the province.

I'm not exactly sure what he's referring to in this particular effort.

Mr. MacDonald: Well, these certainly are your lottery fund estimates, and these are the funds that have been distributed. Now, not only is Fort McMurray, in my view, getting shortchanged on a per capita basis over a long period of time, so is Edson, Red Deer, Rocky Mountain House, Grande Cache, Lethbridge, and Medicine Hat. There doesn't seem to be any reason for this. My question to you is: when you determine what amounts are distributed, how is that done? Is it on a political basis? Is it on a needs basis? What exactly is the formula used to distribute this funding?

Mr. Liepert: Mr. Chairman, we work with all the departments in government to assess what their particular needs are and how they relate back to lottery funding and the general broad principles of

how lottery dollars are allocated. Some might go to Health. Some might go to Education and various departments. When they go to those particular departments, it's not up to the Department of Finance to track those dollars, which geographic area they end up in.

For him to stand here and try to make the allegation that there's political interference in this, I think that's just going a little bit too far.

Mr. MacDonald: I think the minister is very sensitive, hon. chair.

Now, in the last 10 years the lottery fund has provided \$391 million to horse racing, and this year we are seeing a slight increase.

Dr. Swann: He wasn't listening. You'll have to repeat that.

Mr. MacDonald: That's okay, hon. member. I don't think it would matter.

The horse-racing and breeding renewal program is, well, almost a 10 per cent increase, \$26 million this year. That will bring the total up to close to \$400 million in a period of time when we could have used the money for a much wiser purpose. The proportion of gambling revenue derived from horse racing has declined significantly since the 1980s, when it was as high as 21 per cent, and now only constitutes about 2 per cent of revenue. Why if horse racing constitutes about 2 per cent of gambling revenue are you continuing to subsidize horse racing? It doesn't make sense.

3:30

Mr. Liepert: Well, Mr. Chairman, there is an agreement in place with Horse Racing Alberta. This particular government honours agreements – not so sure that particular member would honour an agreement if it were in place – and we have an agreement in place. The reason that agreement was signed in the first place by this government a number of years ago was because the economic benefit to this province was estimated at some \$300 million annually and employing some 8,000 Albertans. If this particular member wants to go out there and talk to those 8,000 Albertans and tell them, "We're going to fire you if you elect us as government," let him go ahead and do that. I'd like to see his response when he goes to Grande Prairie, as an example, and makes that case or goes to Lethbridge. I challenge him to go do that. That's exactly what would happen.

Mr. MacDonald: That's already been done.

Speaking of honouring agreements, I would have to remind the hon. minister at this time that this is a government who saw an agreement between the EUB to share the bill for transmission upgrades or expansions, 50 per cent with consumers and 50 per cent with generators. That agreement wasn't honoured. No, that agreement certainly wasn't honoured; it was overturned. [interjections] It was overturned in a ballroom in Banff, of all places. That's one example. The agreements that have been made lately on the transmission lines, the Premier's office not knowing what the Minister of Energy's office wasn't doing – hon. member, your government and your party have a long history of not honouring agreements. Wow. What a statement.

Mr. Liepert: In a couple of months we'll see.

Mr. MacDonald: Yeah, we will. We certainly will. And I have no idea where you will be.

Now, hon. minister, some people say the fifth and other people say the fourth consecutive year of deficits in Alberta since 2008. The deficit projected for this year – and the minister mentioned it

– was \$886 million, and this is from a government that sells themselves as prudent managers.

Mr. Liepert: You betcha.

Mr. MacDonald: Yeah, you bet. Yeah.

The track record, hon. minister, is not there. In 2010, only two years ago, the government was projecting the year we are in now, 2012-13, to have the first surplus since the recession. I don't see the Minister of Finance in a black suit. In fact, I don't think I've ever seen the hon. gentleman in a black suit. He's got one, but it's in the closet, for sure, and the dry cleaning bill on that suit would never be high because he can't use it.

For 2012-13 we were projected to have the first surplus, and it was targeted to be \$505 million. This obviously didn't happen, which is just one example of the many unrealistic messages that are emitted from this government through their public relations department. The government of Alberta news release states that the savings set aside in the stability fund will be used to off-set this \$886 million deficit, and we do know where the sustainability fund came from. Now, this government was projecting a return to surplus in the 2010 budget by this year, yet that has not happened. Why? How can taxpayers expect credibility on budgeting when the deficit position, your track record, is so poor?

Mr. Liepert: I'll take a few minutes on that one, Mr. Chairman, because this particular member is making some outlandish comments here. I look, as an example, at the Liberal government of Ontario. Let's talk about Liberal versus Conservative when it comes to who has a better track record.

I think that it's important to state on the record that since last fall, after the leadership, we have a new Premier, and we started to do things differently. In this particular case, when it came to budget preparation, we went out and consulted with Albertans. Albertans told us in no small number that we needed to ensure that spending on health and education was a priority, and that's what we've done in this particular budget. They also told us that the Premier's commitments around human services were important to them, so those dollars are also in the budget. Mr. Chairman, we could have balanced the budget this year by slashing social spending. I know that he'd be the first member to stand up in this House – and if not him, it'd be the one next to him – talking about how we're spending less on human services, how we're spending less on education, how we're spending less on health.

We are in a fortunate position. This member talks about mismanagement. What actually happened over the past seven or eight years was that we had excellent management in this province that created the sustainability fund so that when we need to progressively move back to a balanced budget, we've got the sustainability fund to draw on. What was it there for, hon. member, if it wasn't to ensure that services could continue to be provided to Albertans? That's exactly what we're doing with this budget.

We are projecting in an orderly way to get back to a surplus position in '13-14. If you take a look at the revenue streams that are coming from the oil sands in '14-15 and the years beyond, Alberta is going to be in a very strong financial position, far better than any other province in Canada, far better than any Liberal-managed government in Canada. I think, Mr. Chairman, that this particular member is really stretching it when he's trying to suggest that somehow this province hasn't had good fiscal management over the past number of years. It's put us in the strong financial position we're in today. No sales tax, no payroll tax, the lowest fuel tax: I could go on here for my full 10 minutes

if I wanted to, hon. member, but I'll give you the chance to respond.

Mr. MacDonald: Wow. Now, talking about fiscal management, let's have a look at the deficits that were racked up here: 2007-08, \$682 million; 2008-09, \$928 million. No; these are the cash transfers. I'm sorry about that. Here are the deficits. I'm going to just mention one: 2007-08. We could also go back into 2008-09.

We're talking about prudent fiscal management. This is a government that fired the regional health authorities, created the superministry – the minister would know something about that – set aside \$80 million for transition costs from the nine health regions to the one superboard. In those transition costs were severance payments, pension top-ups, and whatnot for senior management, including one, a \$22,000-a-month pension – a month – for Jack Davis, who was the chairman of the Calgary regional health authority. This is really sound fiscal management, hon. members. A \$22,000-a-month pension was just one item, but it illustrates the poor financial management that this group has allowed to happen.

Then we fast-forward. We're talking about good management, yet health care workers in hospitals throughout the province had to have a wildcat job action to get this government's attention. You don't treat them the same way you treat your hand-picked government managers. Hon. minister, that's an example of how this government manages its money, and it's also an example of how you waste money. Please. Your track record is not what you think it is. It may be in your mind, but it's not a very stellar track record.

To the minister: how much longer do Albertans have to wait before the government actually puts forward a comprehensive fiscal strategy that includes a long-term vision for savings, controlled spending, and a reduction in reliance on nonrenewable resource revenue to fund core programs? Your budget right now, for this year – and I recognize there's an election coming up – is all about spending, nothing about savings.

3:40

Mr. Liepert: Well, finally we got a question that relates to the department out of all of that, Mr. Chairman. We've been pretty clear with what the plan is despite that some of the opposition can't quite figure it out. We have said that we're going to engage with Albertans over the next year in a conversation about the right fiscal framework. Of course, there are some who try to portray that as tax increases. We'll see. Their record isn't all that good. Their projection record right now is standing at zero because they were wrong on the taxes in the budget. But we're going to have that conversation.

Of course, the Liberal opposition wouldn't know what that's all about, Mr. Chairman, because they don't consult with Albertans. They just kind of ramble on whatever study they might happen to dig out of the library or whatever is in the newspaper on a daily basis. In the year forward this government is going to consult with Albertans to look at what the right fiscal framework for the province is. That's going to include a savings strategy. That's going to include what the right tax structure is and how we ensure that we don't ride that roller coaster of nonrenewable resource revenue to the point where we have in the past.

Now, the member also asked about cost savings. Well, I hope he was sitting in this Legislature and participating in the debate on Bill 1 because it was clearly laid out. That's how we're going to ensure that Albertans are getting good value for every dollar that we spend. It's all in front of them, Mr. Chairman.

Chair's Ruling**Relevance****Addressing Questions through the Chair**

The Deputy Chair: I just want to take a moment to remind ourselves again that we're debating the estimates of the Ministry of Finance – just that one ministry, not all of government, hon. members – as found on page 109 of the estimates through to about page 144. That having been said, we're going to pay even more careful attention here to the substance of the debate.

Could I also ask that the debate occur through the chair. It's been my observation after many years in this Chamber that when members start to spark across the aisles, that's when points of order start to fly. So I would ask the hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar to please pick up on that tone and carry on.

Debate Continued

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you. My next question would be to the hon. minister regarding the fiscal plan. He gave the speech. If he can't defend his budget, that's not my problem. If he doesn't understand it, that's not my problem. You're talking about Bill 1. What are your anticipated savings on an annual basis that will occur as a result of streamlining the government efficiencies that are in your fiscal plan? What is the number?

Mr. Liepert: Mr. Chairman, we have made it very clear – and if this member would have participated in the debate, he probably would have known – that what we're talking about is zero-based budgeting, results-based budgeting, that starts at zero. Now, how could you possibly stick a number out there to shoot at? What we need to ensure is that every dollar that is spent by this government is spent the most efficiently on behalf of taxpayers. The higher the amount of savings, the better off Albertans are going to be. That's the only answer I can give at this stage.

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

Mr. MacDonald: Yes. Well, I think the anticipated savings would be around \$360 million, and that's considerably less than the public relations spin put on Bill 1 prior to the start of the spring session. Again, the hon. minister has a lot of homework to do there, and I'd encourage him, as soon as the budget debate this evening is over, to get started at it.

Now, according to the government of Alberta strategic plan Alberta Finance will expend \$1.1 billion to achieve the government's goal of securing Alberta's economic future. How exactly will this \$1.1 billion be spent? How will the expenditure of the money improve Alberta's economic future? What direction has the Premier given the Finance minister? I know the Premier – the Finance minister, Mr. Chairman, is quite sensitive about this – has really put the Finance minister on a short rein. He can't sign an expenditure unless he gets the okay of the Treasury Board president, and that's a change in government rules. So I can understand why the Minister of Finance is sensitive. But I would like to know what direction the Premier's office has given the Finance minister regarding this expenditure.

Mr. Liepert: Well, the short answer, Mr. Chairman, is none. You know, I think we need to go back and clarify just to make sure that this hon. member is not under a misapprehension, believing that in the budget process prior to the adoption of Bill 1 in-year savings in the budget were some \$360 million. That is a standard process that we have gone through in the past number of years. We would hope that under the Bill 1 process we're going to far exceed the \$360

million, but those were the numbers that were put in the budget without the idea of Bill 1 and what that might uncover. There are a number of things that factor into that, everything from dollars that are lapsed from one year to another – those are called in-year savings. I don't think he should be tying the \$360 million of in-year savings into the good work that's going to come out of Bill 1.

Relative to his final question, the numbers he's looking at, that's our department in terms of our work that's going to be required as part of this process. That's the funding that comes to our department.

The Deputy Chair: Thank you.

The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you very much. Now, in 2009 the Fiscal Responsibility Act was amended to allow for deficits. The limit of \$5.3 billion for how much nonrenewable resource revenue can be spent before it has to be transferred to the sustainability fund was eliminated as well as the clause legislating that \$2.5 billion must be retained in the sustainability fund for natural disasters and other emergencies which could happen. The only limit now on the deficits in drawing from the sustainability fund is that the fund can't be drawn below what is in the account, meaning that the government can spend every penny – every penny – in the sustainability fund and can spend every penny of nonrenewable resource revenue without any of it having to be put into the sustainability fund.

Since these amendments, Mr. Chairman, the government has used the sustainability fund to offset deficits or other cash requirements when the general revenue stream was insufficient. The current reported balance of the sustainability fund is \$3.7 billion, but the investment income earned on this fund was only \$165 million this year compared to \$495 million earned last year because of the withdrawals to offset the deficit and cash requirements. The investment income projected decreases even further over the next few years. To the minister: what is the government's plan if the money in the sustainability fund runs out? What happens to all the spending that is reliant on the sustainability fund if the economy doesn't recover and if your projections for the price of oil are like your projections were seven years ago for the price of natural gas, off base and totally wrong?

Mr. Liepert: That's a pretty easy question to answer, Mr. Chairman, because on about three occasions the three questions in there started with "if," which is a presumption of: well, hypothetically, what if? We can't answer those kinds of questions because those would be the worst-case scenario. What we've done is that we've taken what is a realistic projection going forward. I outlined in my opening remarks – I'll be happy to take another 10 minutes if the member would like me to take the time to tell him – how we came up with the projections that are there.

I'll repeat. If you look, hon. member, at what we're projecting for the price of oil three years out, \$108, and check the price of oil today – it's \$105 – if you want to call it unrealistic for a \$3 increase in the price of oil over the next three years, well, go ahead, but those are realistic projections. I'm not going to get into debating about: well, what if? Those are projections based on, standing here today, the best information we have, and on that best information we won't reach the scenario that he's trying to paint, Mr. Chairman.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. member.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. After that non answer I'm confident taxpayers will be very relieved whenever

they look at the history of this province, the history of this Legislative Assembly, and those who came before you and sat in the Finance minister's chair. I don't have the details or the history, but I'm confident taxpayers will be very relieved that you, hon. member, are one of the shortest serving Finance ministers.

3:50

Now, Budget 2010, page 14 of the fiscal plan, stated that the sustainability fund "will be replenished beginning in 2012-13, as the first plank in Alberta's savings policy." Mr. Chairman, you will recall that earlier I said that this is a budget that's entirely about spending. It's about spending money to try to get re-elected. It has no pause or thought for a good savings plan.

Now, again, I'll point out that this is just another commitment from a government that has failed to meet its previous commitments regarding fiscal policy. Another example of the lack of credibility in this budget is the fact that just two years ago it was stated that the sustainability fund would be replenished in 2012-13 as part of a savings policy. What happened to this claim, why was it not maintained, and how can we believe that this claim now is any different?

Mr. Liepert: Well, I think we've spent a fair bit of time on that, Mr. Chairman. We've talked about what's going to happen over the course of the next year relative to savings as it's tied into the fiscal framework. I can't elaborate any more on that because we're going to listen to Albertans. We have as part of our three-year business plan, contrary to what the member has just stated, made a commitment that the sustainability fund will start to be replenished in year 3. We can't do any better than that right now because we need to reach a certain level of surplus before we can start to put money back into the sustainability fund. We've made that commitment for year 3, but in the interim we're going to go through this process over the next year, and we're going to go through the process of Bill 1 over the next three years. My only answer to the hon. member is to stay tuned.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. member.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you. There is currently a push to diversify Alberta's exports into Asian markets as seen through the proposed Northern Gateway to Kitimat – or now it might proceed to Prince Rupert – and the Department of Energy's development of a clean energy to Asia strategy. This is, again, in the fiscal plan on page 69. There is a report and a caution about the slowing down of economic growth in both India and China in the second half of 2011 – this is the previous fiscal plan – "and a further cooling would hurt world growth prospects." Further, on page 88 of the fiscal plan it highlights the risks of possible asset price bubbles in China and the undervaluation of the Chinese currency, which could disrupt the Chinese banking system and disrupt global trade. How are these risks being incorporated now into Alberta's fiscal strategy? What steps are being taken to avoid exposure to the possibility of the bursting of the asset price bubble and the problems of the undervaluation of the Chinese currency? Are there other markets outside of Asia that the government is looking at at this time as well?

Mr. Liepert: Mr. Chairman, this is really your area to rule on, but we are talking about the estimates for the Department of Finance. The questions that the member has raised are a number of questions relative to the strategic plan of the Department of Energy. I'm happy to spend some time talking about Northern Gateway and the opportunities that we have in Asia. It doesn't quite fall within the Department of Finance's estimates, but we

can have that discussion. Clearly, we have seen that we can't rely on one customer. The hon. member knows that. He would be the first to admit that. This is a vital effort that Alberta is leading to get new markets developed, and it's part of our fiscal plan.

I think that within what we're presenting to the House today, this year's budget and the three-year fiscal plan, obviously any access to Asian markets doesn't factor into that. We also know that in our province our oil production, primarily because of the increase in production from the oil sands, is going to reach some 4 million to 5 million barrels by 2020, and we know that we need to have that additional market access, but that doesn't factor into the three-year business plan and the department estimates that are before the House today.

Chair's Ruling Relevance

The Deputy Chair: Thank you. Yes, the chair is acutely aware of some meanderings that occasionally occur when we're debating in this Assembly. The chair is quite prepared to let a little bit of it occur if it can be tied back into the main estimates that are, actually, technically on the floor of the Legislature right now, and that would be the Ministry and the Department of Finance.

Proceed.

Mr. MacDonald: I'm not being disrespectful, but I would remind the chair and all hon. members of this Assembly of the fiscal plan presented by the Minister of Finance just recently, and I was locked up. On page 69 of this document there are three bullets titled Clouds of Uncertainty Loom. We're talking about the European debt crisis, we're talking about economic growth slowing in China and India, and an economy heavily reliant on trade and commodities. These questions certainly are relevant to this ministry, and I expect answers on behalf of taxpayers.

The Deputy Chair: Hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar, I appreciate the point you're trying to make, and there is nothing wrong with you referencing what you're referencing as long as you can tie it into the estimates, the actual estimates. That's what we're debating, one department at a time. You'll have other, ample opportunities to debate estimates for Health, for Education, for Environment, and so on, but today we're dealing with the department, the Ministry of Finance, and their estimates specifically.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you. The minister is responsible, whether they like it or not, for these questions. Now, if they cannot or will not answer, I'm certain some taxpayers are listening, and they can draw their own conclusions, Mr. Chairman.

Debate Continued

Mr. MacDonald: In the time that I have left, the heritage fund is a very important fund that has been neglected, that has been, in my view, abused by this government for a number of years. The estimated value of the heritage fund for the 2012-13 year is \$14.9 billion according to page 126 of the ministry estimates. This is an increase of over \$306 million from the previous year's forecast. The fund was valued at \$17 billion in 2008, the fund was valued at \$12.4 billion in 2004, and if we go back to 1988, the fund had a value of \$12.5 billion. Now, in 2008-09 the fund saw a loss, of course, of \$2.5 billion in investment income, and that wasn't the minister's fault. We had a financial crisis; we recognize that. The crisis that the gentleman was involved in at that time was with Alberta Health, not Finance. How can the minister justify to Albertans why the heritage fund is only worth \$2.4 billion more,

nominally, than it was 24 years ago? This government has failed with the savings plan.

The Deputy Chair: Well, I do note that the Alberta heritage savings trust fund is actually referenced in your estimates on page 113.

Mr. Liepert: He actually did it. You're right.

The Deputy Chair: Proceed, please.

Mr. Liepert: Yeah. But I am going to challenge him. He used two words that I think are inappropriate, "abused" and "neglected." That's just foolishness, Mr. Chairman. There's a very simple answer to what the hon. member's question was. Why is it only worth whatever the number is? Because there's no additional money going in other than inflation-proofing in several years, and the interest from the fund primarily is coming into general revenue to pay for a number of the services that Albertans are asking for. You don't have to have a degree in economics to figure out the answer to the question.

What we have said is that the heritage fund, not just how big it is but how the heritage fund relates to Albertans, is part of that fiscal review that we're going to do, actually, this year. I have to keep coming back to the fact that we've committed to this, that we're going to hold to that commitment, and I can't prejudge what Albertans are going to tell us, the direction of the heritage fund. It's all part of that fiscal framework review.

4:00

The Deputy Chair: Thank you, hon. members. We have about seven minutes left in this session.

Mr. MacDonald: Yes. Again to the minister. I know there is a large contingent in the government caucus of Norwegian ancestry. I believe there are nine. One of them has got his thumbs up behind you, hon. minister. I know that a former Minister of Finance went to Norway at one point to look at what they're doing. I would sincerely hope that you could listen to that Norwegian caucus in there and perhaps try to develop some of the saving strategies that the fine people of Norway have. It's surprising, but we know there is well in excess of \$540 billion in their savings plan from their nonrenewable resource revenue. Not only does Norway produce conventional crude oil from its offshore platforms but also a considerable amount of natural gas into the European markets.

Again, why is the minister letting the heritage fund lay stagnant with no annual contributions, however small they may have to be? Why are you just letting this stagnate?

Mr. Liepert: I think we have to get a couple of things on the record, Mr. Chairman. The analogy with Norway is always thrown out by members like this gentleman, but we have to remember two things. Number one, Norway is a country; Alberta is not a country. We as Albertans pay a significant amount into equalization in this country, which is a big chunk of money. If we were a country, it would be going into something like the heritage fund. But, no, we're Canadians. We pay towards the equalization benefit of all Canadians.

Number two, I'd ask the hon. member to take a look at – he's always throwing these barbs across the way about research. I'd ask him to google, as he said earlier. Get on your computer when it's not your turn to ask questions and google what the tax rates are in Norway, hon. member, and see whether or not their tax rates

compare to Alberta. I know the answer; he doesn't. So I'd ask him to look at what the tax rates are in Norway.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you. I would suggest to the hon. minister that perhaps he should do the same with royalty rates since we have the same investor-owned energy companies willing to invest in Norway with the rules that they have. The same companies. In fact, the state-owned oil company in Norway, Statoil, is actively engaged in Fort McMurray.

Mr. Liepert: What's your point?

Mr. MacDonald: The point is that you should check out just exactly what the rules are in both Alberta as a province – you are right – and Norway as a country. You just can't dismiss that so easily because, certainly, citizens of this province question all the time why the Norwegians have been able to set aside so much in such a short period of time and why we in Alberta have set aside so little over a much longer period of time.

Now, there are many, many important issues, including AIMCo. We've got to get to AIMCo in the ministry here. I'm not going to save it for question period. I'm going to ask the minister: was he invited – yes or no – to the AIMCo Christmas party that was held at the Sutton Place Hotel in early December 2011?

The Deputy Chair: Well, hon. member, I think this is the fourth time now that I'm asking for relevancy in the most polite way I can.

Mr. Liepert: Well, I'd be happy to answer.

The Deputy Chair: Well, if you wish, hon. minister, but please make it brief. I don't know how you're going to tie it into your estimates. Let's try and stay focused here. We've got two and a half minutes left in this section.

Mr. MacDonald: We certainly are focused, Mr. Chairman. I take it that the answer was no? It was quite a party. I was provided the details of that party, and wow. The point in all of this is that they didn't have a very good year. They were like the Edmonton Oilers. They didn't make the cut. But there was quite an elaborate Christmas party, and I'm glad for your political career that you weren't there.

Now, what does AIMCo do and why does AIMCo continue to fail to meet the target rate of return for the heritage fund? What value is AIMCo bringing to Alberta's investments if it continues to fail on this front among others?

The Deputy Chair: Hon. minister, you have about a minute and 45 seconds left.

Mr. Liepert: I stand to be corrected, but I think the member is wrong. I don't think that we've been failing.

Mr. MacDonald: Well, maybe we'll get to that one in question period down the road because that hasn't been a stellar, stellar performance whatsoever.

Now, pensions. Line 5.3 on page 110 of the ministry estimates reports a decrease in expenses for public-sector pensions of \$53,000, or 4 per cent. Why? In comparison, line 5.1 on the same page shows a \$485,000, or a 43 per cent, increase for the expense of the deputy minister's office. Why are these differences happening?

Mr. Liepert: I will provide the answer shortly, Mr. Chairman.

The Deputy Chair: Thank you.

Hon. member, we have about 50 seconds left in this section should you wish to use it.

Mr. MacDonald: Okay. Again to the minister: why is there almost no mention of pensions in the budget documents except for a brief reference in one of the priority initiatives? What has been done to ensure Albertans have access to pensions either publicly or privately? That's under your charge.

Mr. Liepert: Well, I'm not sure I understand the question. Everyone who works for the government of Alberta has access to the government pension plan. We administer four pension plans. There's the local authorities pension plan, which is the municipalities and a number of other entities. We have the special forces pension plan. We have the management pension plan. Every employee within those organizations has access to a pension plan, so I'm not sure what the question is about.

The Deputy Chair: Thank you, hon. members. That concludes the first hour of debate.

We're now proceeding to the next section of the debate, again pursuant to Standing Order 59.01(4) and Government Motion 6, passed earlier this year. For the next 20 minutes the members of the third party who wish to speak with the minister may engage in an exchange, a combined 20 minutes. Do we have somebody from the third party? Yes, please, hon. Member for Airdrie-Chestermere.

Mr. Anderson: If we could go back and forth, that would be great.

The Deputy Chair: Yes, you may.

Mr. Anderson: I want to thank the hon. member of the opposition there with his last estimates for the Department of Finance. He's been very dutiful, I know, as chair of the Committee on Public Accounts. He's been very thorough in that job, and we thank him for it.

[Mr. Lund in the chair]

I also want to thank the hon. minister. He truly is a treasure trove of love, hope, and happiness. As he retires, the people of Alberta and this province want him to know of their great love and admiration for him. Although he is sometimes prickly and sharp, we all know that those sharp nails and that little bit of a prickly disposition are really just his passion for the province and for its people, for democracy, truth, and fairness. It just comes across a little harsh, but really it's only because he cares so much about these people.

We will miss you, Minister, and we thank you for all the work that you do in the Legislature.

Mr. Liepert: We'll miss you, too.

Mr. Anderson: I feel so much love coming from that side that I'm brought to tears sometimes.

If we could talk a little bit on taxes to start. I know that the word "fearmongering" is going to be used – I don't know whether projections are going to be used and all that sort of thing – but hopefully we can get a couple of answers here.

Minister, you have been somewhat confusing to some folks, certainly to me and to many Albertans that I talk to and that we talk to. Several times you've said, for example on CBC Radio, where you were quoted, that you think we should be talking about all kinds of taxation and what's fair for the province when referring to your fiscal framework idea, that you're looking into after the election. You said on November 16 on the Rutherford show, quote: all I'm saying is that at some point in time and

probably sooner than later Albertans have to have a conversation about our tax structure.

4:10

Then, of course, in several columns recently he's been very clear. I think he's been very truthful in saying that. For example, in two *Sun* articles his friend Rick Bell, who I know thinks highly of him, said that he was talking with the minister face to face, and taxes were on the table. Okay? So that's why Albertans are a little confused right now. I'm glad and happy – and I agree with him – that there are no tax increases in the pre-election budget. I think we should all give the minister a hand for that if we can. No? No hand? Okay. Yeah, I didn't think so. It's not that big of a deal because it's a pre-election budget.

Now, what we would like to know is if there are plans after the election to talk about whether or not we need to have tax increases. The reason I ask is because, obviously, there are some very healthy projections. He's very excited that oil is at \$105 a barrel today. That's great. It was at \$140 a barrel in 2008, and a couple of weeks later it was at \$35 dollars a barrel. You know, that was just four years ago.

We have a financial crisis on our hands right now in the world, the world financial crisis. The price of oil could go down tomorrow to, God forbid, \$80 a barrel, which would blow a hole through our entire budget. I guess all I'm asking is that if that scenario happens and, say, oil goes down to \$80 – let's just say \$85 and be really wild with our projections – in order to make up the difference that will occur there, is there a scenario where your government talks about the need to raise revenues through increased taxation? Is there a scenario out there when that happens, or is that not the case?

Mr. Liepert: Well, I hate to repeat myself, Mr. Chairman, but this particular member asked the same question that this member asked, and both times prefaced the question by saying: if, if, if. Well, we don't draw a budget based on if. We draw a budget based on what the international forecasters say is going to be the price of oil. Then we sit down with industry, and we go over their three- to five-year projections. At the end of the calendar year you multiply the two together. You also extrapolate out some adjustments for corporate and personal income taxes as a result of those higher prices. That's how you come up with the numbers.

If this particular member doesn't believe – obviously, he doesn't – the projections that are in the budget, then what he's doing is challenging all the international forecasters, he's challenging industry, and he's challenging those professionals who work in our department who then project what the tax revenues will be. This isn't something that, you know, the President of the Treasury Board and myself made up over a beer one night. This is how we come up with these particular numbers.

I think I also want to address the issue around taxes, and this member will probably actually agree with me on this particular case. When we talk about a fiscal framework and the tax structure – you can't talk about a fiscal framework without talking about the tax structure – it could just as easily go down in some areas to generate a bigger economic pie. This member will remember when we adjusted the royalties a few years back because the member sitting behind him was trumpeting: oh, if you raise royalties, we'll get an extra billion dollars into the treasury. Well, we didn't get an extra billion dollars into the treasury. We adjusted the royalty rates, and guess what? We got 3 and a half billion in land sales. This is a discussion we have to have about the fiscal framework. It has nothing to do with raising taxes. That's the discussion we're going to have with Albertans, and

we're going to listen to Albertans. Albertans will tell us what that fiscal framework will look like.

The Acting Chair: The hon. member.

Mr. Anderson: Okay. All right. Well, then, let's back up. We don't want to talk in ifs. All right? If this minister is so confident in the projections, which include a 24 per cent increase in overall revenues in a two-year period, including an over 40 per cent increase in resource revenues, if those are the projections you're going with – and I would dispute when you say that all economists and all industry experts say that. I've seen multiple, multiple reports that say otherwise. In fact, one of the main folks from one of the major pipeline companies in Alberta called us and said that the projections they were using on the resource revenues were hallucinogenic, in his language.

But let's say that we use those things. If you're so confident of these projections, Mr. Minister, why will your government not just make the promise, in this Assembly or somewhere else, that you're not going to raise taxes of any kind? Just make the promise. You call it. You draft it. Don't sign our pledge; make your own pledge. Make a pledge to Albertans that says: we are not going to raise taxes of any kind or create new taxes of any kind because we are so confident that the numbers we have forecasted here are true. Can you make that promise to Albertans?

Mr. Liepert: Mr. Chairman, we've made that pledge. It's called budget 2012-13. Every minister has signed the estimates in this particular budget document. I don't know what further we could do. In addition to that, we have said that we're going to listen to Albertans, that we're going to engage Albertans in the discussion over the next year, and if this particular party doesn't want to – well, actually, it's not a party. It's a collection of four individuals. If they want to not listen to Albertans, well, that's a risk they're going to take. If that's the way they want to go, then fine. What we're going to do – we've made our pledge. It's called budget 2012-13. There are no tax increases in it. Then we're going to talk to Albertans about what the future looks like. I'll take that to the polls any day, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. Anderson: Well, that's the point right there – you hit it right on the head – that we're going to the polls right away. What Albertans are asking: they want to know from this government what they're voting on. By the time we go to the polls, Budget 2012 will be voted on and will be law. We'll go forward with Budget 2012. They want to know what's happening going further, and I don't see how it's an unreasonable request for the people of Alberta to know what this government's plans are for bringing in future revenues.

It's pretty simple. Elections are about putting your vision on the table. They've had years, 40 years, to come up with a long-term fiscal framework, yet they need another year? I mean, how many task forces and road shows do we need? How many closed-door budget consultations or open-door budget consultations do we need before this Premier and this party decide what the long-term fiscal framework is for this province?

I don't understand. Again, we're going to the polls. Why won't you tell Albertans what your plans are? What are you going to do? Let them vote on it. What if they don't like the plan that you come up with should you be re-elected in the next election? What if they don't like it then? Well, you've taken away their opportunity to pass judgment. If you're so confident on your plans, put them in front of Albertans, and if you're not going to raise their taxes, just say it. Just say: "Absolutely, Alberta. Under no circumstances are

we going to raise taxes on you." It's very simple to do. We would hold you to it, obviously, but I hope you'll decide to do that.

I'll give you one last try. Will you commit to this House that your party is not going to raise taxes after the election, in that four-year term, at any time for any reason, or are there scenarios where you're planning to raise taxes?

Mr. Liepert: Well, I can only repeat what I said earlier, that this particular member especially and those individuals have been out trying to conjure up an image in this province prior to the delivery of the budget that somehow this budget was going to have a tax increase in it. We can show you the quotes if the member has a short memory. Well, he was proven wrong. We said that we're going to bring in a budget based on what Albertans told us. We delivered that. We aren't running out to have an election based on the delivery of this budget so that when we get re-elected, we can change it again.

We're sitting in this House right now passing this budget, and this will be the budget for the next year. We will then engage in a conversation with Albertans about our fiscal framework. I don't know how much more clear you can be, Mr. Chairman. If this particular member wants to campaign on that, I say: go at it. We're laying our budget in front of Albertans, we're passing it, and then we're going to probably have an election.

4:20

Mr. Anderson: All right. Well, I guess you did answer the question, that clearly tax hikes are not off the table. I'm glad I came today so that we know that. Tax hikes are not off the table.

You were castigating the member of the opposition there, the Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar, on how Liberal governments spend in Ontario, yet our spending in Alberta under your government is \$2,000 more per person than the McGuinty Liberals in Ontario. I wish I could say that that was the worst of it, but actually your spending is the highest in the country per person by far. You spend more than the NDP government in Manitoba, you spend more than the Liberals in Quebec, you spend more than the Liberals in Ontario and the Liberals in B.C., and you spend more, obviously, than the Saskatchewan Party in Saskatchewan, who have actually balanced their budget with no oil sands to do it with. I'm looking across the country, and I'm seeing all these Liberal governments spending like drunken sailors, yet the PC government here is spending more than any of those groups.

This goes back to what the minister said when he was away in Ontario recently. He was quoted in the *Globe and Mail* as saying, "Clearly we're spending too much." Now, I don't know. Was that out of context, or are you finally admitting that you are spending too much? If you are spending too much, in what areas are you spending too much? Where do you think that we can turn the taps down just a smidge so that we don't bankrupt ourselves?

Mr. Liepert: Mr. Chairman, this particular member trotted out all the statistics at the beginning of his remarks, but what he didn't mention was that we are the fastest growing province in the entire country. In fact, we're growing so much that we need schools. You know, I remember several occasions when that member stood in that chair and asked the Minister of Education when he's getting new schools in his fast growing community. We have a whole bunch of communities like his. He doesn't seem to recognize it – it's only about his community when we listen to him over in the corner there – but we're one of the fastest growing provinces in the country, so our costs are obviously going to go up. We have the highest paid in the country, Mr. Chairman,

whether they're nurses, teachers, bankers, or welders, so we, obviously, face higher costs.

Can we spend less? I think we can, and that's exactly what Bill 1 is going to do. As we go through over the next three years, we're going to see, in my view, a number of situations where we can do a lot better than we've done, and that's the process that we've committed to undertake.

Mr. Anderson: Yes, indeed, we are the fastest growing province in the country. That's why I used per capita, because per capita, for those at home wondering what that means, means per person. Necessarily, we take all the people that moved here, including all those new people that he's talking about, and we divide it by the total amount spent, and that gives you your per person amount. Again, the question I have is: why does the province of Alberta spend 20 per cent more per person – per person – taking into account all the growth, than the next-closest Liberal tax-and-spend government, being Ontario and Quebec? It doesn't add up. Why would you increase program spending by 7 per cent year over year when population plus inflation was almost half that amount?

There's a disconnect here. I know they love to think they're conservatives over there, yet everything they do and say is the opposite of that. Maybe "conservative" has lost its meaning. Maybe that's not what it means anymore, and I just missed the memo. Maybe it means: spend as much as you possibly can to buy as many votes as you possibly can as fast as you can before an election. Maybe that's what it means to be conservative in their minds over there.

I would like to know how a government that's spending the most money of any province in the country per person can honestly come into this House, plop down a 7 per cent year-over-year program spending increase, say that that is fiscally responsible to do, and then rely on \$108 oil and 40 per cent increases over two years in resource revenues and a 24 per cent increase over two years in overall revenues to balance their budget. How is it even rational, Minister, to come in here with a budget that says that?

Mr. Liepert: Well, Mr. Chairman, the member is incorrect. Our overall spending in this budget is 3.3 per cent higher than it was last year. That's 3.3 per cent, and that includes our capital plan, where we are going to try to build some schools for the particular member in his constituency.

You can't have it one way one year and say, "Well, you're spending more because it's all in capital" and the next year, when you manage to spread your capital out – they're the ones who have stood up in this House and said, "If we were the government" – and again that "if" word at the front of their question – "we'd cut back on capital spending." Well, that's exactly what we did in this particular budget. We didn't cut back; we stretched it out a little bit. As a result, Mr. Chairman, we have a 3.3 per cent increase over last year. That is less than growth plus inflation.

The Acting Chair: Hon. member, I would remind you that you have about one and a half minutes left.

Mr. Anderson: Okay. Well, then, really quickly, I was referring, of course, to program spending, which I said. It went up by about 7 per cent.

I'm glad that they stretched the capital budget a tad. That's good. It shows how much you can still get done with it if you're just willing to prioritize. [interjection] That's right. Maybe they can put the \$70,000 that they spent in Jasper towards something useful.

I would end off with a quick question here. The heritage fund is now worth less today, when adjusted for inflation, than it was in 1976, when Premier Lougheed established it. The sustainability fund, which was at a high of \$17 billion during 2008, is now according to this rosy-projection budget going to be roughly 3 and a half billion dollars at the end of this year. It seems to me that we have completely blown through another boom. In fact, we've blown through two booms now, and we have almost nothing to show for it for future generations. Now, in fact, we're talking about a possible tax increase.

I would just hope for whoever succeeds this minister, should the government be elected, for whatever Finance minister succeeds this minister, that he or she starts thinking about the future of our children and starts thinking about them more than themselves and their political fortunes.

The Acting Chair: Thank you, hon. member.

For the next 20 minutes we'll have a member of the fourth party, the NDP. Go ahead. Are you going to do the back and forth?

Mr. Mason: I think we can go back and forth with the minister.

The Acting Chair: Okay. Proceed.

Mr. Mason: If we can have an actual conversation rather than a sparring match, I would appreciate that. We will respectfully disagree and urge people to vote for us instead of you, but other than that, we can all be friends.

Mr. Chairman, I'd like to start by asking the minister what his projections are for wages. I'd like to know how much of the provincial budget is composed of wages, and I would include in that not just direct provincial employees but employees of Alberta Health Services, for example, of school boards, and so on, those employees where the provincial government is going to be left to pick up the tab, basically. That's the relevance to the budget. We have to negotiate an agreement with doctors and teachers and so on as well as health professionals as well as those members that are directly employed by the government. If the minister can just answer that to start, it would be great.

Mr. Liepert: I'm assuming, Mr. Chairman, we're talking only about public-sector or quasi-public-sector wages, that we're not talking about private-sector wages. Okay.

Well, I think there are a number of answers to that question. We have a budget in front of us. Whether it's Education, we're going to live within that budget. Whether it's health care, we're going to live within that budget. You know, there are always things that we have to adjust for. As an example, we just entered into binding arbitration with the health care workers late last week. Binding arbitration says that it's binding on both sides, so we're going to have to make those adjustments. I can't predict what those will be, but we know that we've got a contract with the UNA for the nurses; we know that we're into contract negotiations with the ATA for the teachers; we know that we're in discussions with the Alberta Medical Association relative to their contract. Beyond that everything is pretty much public knowledge as to where we're at. I think that there's a recognition in Alberta at the public-sector level that we are amongst the highest paid in most professions in the country and probably pretty fortunate for that.

4:30

I don't know that I can add any more than that, but I want to add two things if I could, Mr. Chairman, to earlier answers, and

that was to the Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar. He asked some questions around pensions.

Mr. Mason: What about my time?

Mr. Liepert: I'll use yours on somebody else.

That's an internal transfer of staff, member for Gold-Bar.

I want to answer the Member for Airdrie-Chestermere. He talks about: what are we leaving as the legacy for our children? We're leaving them with the most modern infrastructure in hospitals, in schools, in highways. That's what we're leaving for our children.

[Mr. Zwozdesky in the chair]

The Deputy Chair: Go ahead, hon. member. The hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands-Norwood.

Mr. Mason: All right. Thanks very much, Mr. Chairman. Well, I want to come back to this question because I think that if the minister would give us some actual estimates, he would admit that his budget has included nothing for a settlement with doctors and about 1 per cent for teachers. I know that Alberta Health Services was expecting the health workers to take 2 per cent over a three-year contract. There was a lump-sum payment in there, and there was a COLA clause in the third year, but basically the only increase was 2 per cent. We didn't hear the actual percentage of the budget that is made up of salaries, but I would venture it's around 80 per cent. It usually is in most public-sector budgets, most organizational budgets for the public sector.

I'm wondering why the minister expects us to accept the cost projections for the government that they put forward in this budget when they have such unrealistic assumptions. I don't think the doctors are going to take no increase. You've already said that the binding arbitration with AUPE members that has been entered into by Alberta Health Services is binding, so they're going to get a settlement there. You're going to have to pay the bill; that's going to be more than 2 per cent over three years, I'm quite sure. And the teachers sure aren't going to take 1 per cent. That has not been the history. So I would challenge the minister to demonstrate that his cost projections in this budget are reasonable and accurate.

Mr. Liepert: I would challenge the member on a couple of fronts. Number one, our increase to Alberta Health Services, Mr. Chairman, is 6 per cent. There's certainly some leeway in there relative to salaries. Number two, the overall increase to Alberta Health and Wellness, I believe, in my recollection, is 7.9 per cent. There's some flexibility in there.

I'm not so sure that the member is correct when he says that teachers aren't going to take 1 per cent. I don't know that. That's a discussion that's under way, but we have just come off a very generous contract, as it turned out, with Alberta teachers, and I think they'll admit that. They've been well treated in the last five years. I know there are some discussions under way there. The Minister of Education's budget I think is in the range of – I can't recall off the top – 3 or 4 per cent, so there's some flexibility there.

What I do know is that we committed in our budget to meeting the 4 per cent increase that we gave to Alberta Union of Provincial Employees for the government of Alberta because I think this will be the first time in three years that they'll receive an increase in pay.

So I think we've been very realistic in our budget projections. We're not going to throw budget numbers out there that allow for large increases because I think, realistically, Albertans recognize we're in a very good position right now in Alberta. In fact, the

number one comment that I heard after delivery of the budget was not "What's in it for me?" but "We are lucky to be living in Alberta."

Mr. Mason: Well, we are, but that's not an answer to the question.

Let me move on a little bit to nonrenewable resource royalties. Nonrenewable resource revenue is estimated at \$11 billion for 2012, a decrease of \$79 million. Bitumen royalties are estimated to increase by \$1.3 billion in 2012, but Crown land lease sales are expected to decrease by a similar amount. Revenue from nonrenewable resources "is forecast to increase an average of 19% over the next two years, reaching \$16 billion by 2014-15, the highest on record, due mainly to increasing bitumen royalties" according to the fiscal plan at page 52.

A study that was done by the Parkland Institute shows that since 1997 the oil sands have generated \$205.5 billion, of which the government collected \$19.1 billion in royalties and land sales. So it generated over \$200 billion, and our share was less than \$20 billion. The government's share of oil sands revenue over a longer period of time has averaged 8.1 per cent. My question is: does the government have a target for the share of the nonrenewable resource revenue that it aims to collect, particularly from the oil sands but also in general, and is the royalty program meeting those targets currently?

Mr. Liepert: I'd like to answer it this way. We have a fiscal framework in place relative to our royalty structure. I can take some time and explain what it is, but I think the member knows what it is. There are two or three factors that come into play. Number one is reaching payout. I think the member knows what that means. We have ensured that in order to encourage an investment – and we can philosophically disagree in this Assembly relative to how much we should tax and gouge industry. I know that's what that particular member would like to do, but we don't philosophically on this side of the House believe in that approach, Mr. Chairman. What we do believe in is creating an investment climate so that money will come to Alberta. It's been coming in droves. I think the last number I saw was \$70 billion in 2010.

We create the environment where the investment comes. We have a royalty structure that does not penalize industry until they reach their capital payout, and then a higher royalty system kicks in. One of the things that is leading to those higher revenue projections in year 3 is that a number of these projects are reaching payout earlier than had been anticipated primarily because of the price of oil.

So it's not so much a target; it's that we have a regime in place. It would be hard even for that member to argue that it's not working.

Mr. Mason: It's working for the companies just fine, Mr. Chairman.

I did want to ask about the postpayout stage. One of the reasons that the government has given for the projected increase in bitumen royalties is that a number of oil sands projects will be reaching that postpayout stage. The prepayout royalties are 1 to 9 per cent of gross revenue, and the postpayout is the greater of 1 to 9 per cent of gross revenue or 25 per cent to 40 per cent of next revenue. That's from the fiscal plan as well. The question is: since the postpayout royalty rate will be an increasingly important part of government revenues, does the government have targets for the share of revenue it expects to collect from postpayout projects? Are we meeting those targets, and if not, will the government adjust royalty rates?

4:40

Mr. Liepert: Well, there's an easy answer to that last question. The answer is no. We have a system in place that the member says is working just fine for companies. You're darn right it is, and we don't apologize for that. That's why companies invest. That's why this province is doing so well. It's also working very well for Albertans.

You know, we could follow the philosophical belief of this particular member and have absolutely no investment in this province. We believe that what's happening in Alberta today – Alberta is seen as a beacon in the world, and this member would go in there and beat it up and chase everybody away. Then where would we be?

Mr. Denis: Socialism.

Mr. Liepert: That's right. Socialism. But that's not what we strive for, Mr. Chairman. What we strive for is to create an investment climate where companies will come here and invest, and the returns are obvious.

I know that the member is on our estimates, but in some of these instances there's a fine line between the energy projections that come to us. There is some difficulty in being specific for some of his answers because I know it's in the Finance projections, but we effectively take our projections from the Department of Energy.

The Deputy Chair: Hon. member, we have about seven minutes left.

Mr. Mason: Thanks very much, Mr. Chair. It's beyond me how the projections from Energy, which are quite specific, in specific questions engender an anti-socialist rant from the minister when it was a clear question.

Since the postpayout royalty rate will be an increasingly important part of government revenues, does the government have targets for the share of revenue it expects to collect from postpayout projects, and are we expected to meet those? I'm repeating the question. It's actually a fairly capitalistic-style question, so maybe the minister could just give us a straight-up answer.

Thank you.

Mr. Liepert: Well, I did give a straight-up answer. In a capitalistic way we set a royalty structure. The investor takes a look at that royalty structure and says: "Yes. That's a regime I can invest in." The projections are based on our royalty projections. I don't know how I can be any more specific, other than it's built into our royalty structure.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. member.

Mr. Mason: Thanks very much, Mr. Chair. What I'm really trying to get at here is: is the government's budget estimating costs accurately, and is it projecting revenues as accurately as possible? So far I'm not given comfort by the real lack of specificity in the minister's answers.

Now, this one will really get him going, Mr. Chairman. This one's going to get him going because I'm going to ask about corporate taxes. There are two provinces, according to the fiscal plan – well, let me go back a little bit because the fiscal plan talks about the government's aim to reduce reliance on nonrenewable resource revenue to fund programs. We agree with that. I think it's about 30 per cent of program spending that is now funded from nonrenewable resource spending, and that's, I think, considered by

many, including the Premier's own economic council report a few months ago, as too high and not really sustainable.

I think the minister is getting at that when he talks about the review of the fiscal framework. So there are two approaches. There's the scenario preferred by the Wildrose, which is to cut program spending with no change to the taxes at all, assuming that the tax structure is perfectly fair as it now stands. That's their position. On the other hand, we would want to look at whether or not the tax structure as it now exists is fair before determining whether or not we have a spending problem or a revenue problem. One of the things that we could look at, I guess, is the general rate on corporate income tax.

Now, I was there as a brand new MLA at an Edmonton Chamber of Commerce luncheon when Steve West was the Finance minister and he announced plans to reduce the corporate tax from what was then 16 per cent down to – I think he set a target of about 8 per cent. We're now at 10, and there are only a couple of provinces that match that rate. Most provinces range from 12 to 16 per cent.

Given that the absence of a sales tax already gives Alberta a significant tax advantage, is it reasonable – well, I won't ask if you think it's reasonable. Has the government given any thought whatsoever to reviewing the general tax on corporate income tax so that we would remain competitive with other provinces? We believe Alberta should be competitive, Mr. Minister. We don't want to run the economy into the ground. But on the other hand, we also want to make sure that the tax structure is fair and the government has the revenue it needs in order to support program spending without getting into the kind of cuts that would be inevitable in the Wildrose scenario. If you have an answer, that would be great.

The Deputy Chair: Hon. minister, about two minutes on the clock.

Mr. Liepert: Mr. Chairman, I have a great answer, and that is: neither one of those scenarios is reasonable, and that's why they are sitting over there. The member does a great job as the MLA for Edmonton-Highlands-Norwood, by the way, but that's why there are just two of them over there, and that's why there were just four before and two before that. He talked about when he was first elected and his opposition to the flat tax. You know, all I can say is that we have a tax regime in this province which has served us well. We are, as I said earlier, the beacon when you look worldwide as to regimes that are doing well in this economy.

That being said, we have committed – and I'll repeat it I think for probably the eighth time here this afternoon – that we are going to do a review. We are going to consult with Albertans. We are not going to take some philosophical view that that member has or a philosophical view that somebody else has. We're going to talk to Albertans, and we're going to work with Albertans to develop the right fiscal framework for this province. That may include changes here or changes there. I don't know. That's the discussion we're going to have with Albertans. That's the best answer I can give that member right now.

The Deputy Chair: Thank you.

Hon. member, 30 seconds.

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair. The minister may be surprised at how many of them and of us are sitting over here or over there after the next election.

I do want to thank him for that evasive answer, which confirms in my mind the conclusion that the government has no intent to bring about a fair tax system and will instead cut programs after

the next election. I think that's what's most likely to come down the road.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Deputy Chair: Thank you, hon. members. We will proceed to the next section.

Hon. Member for Calgary-Currie, you have 20 minutes in conjunction with the minister.

Mr. Taylor: Sure, and the minister and I will go back and forth as has been going on all afternoon.

Minister, what's on the table with this review that is coming after the election? When you have this province-wide, genuine conversation with Albertans about the fiscal framework, what are you going to talk about? Give me the full range of what's up for discussion.

Mr. Liepert: I don't know how I can be any more specific, Mr. Chairman. We have said that we need to do a review of our fiscal framework. We've been very clear that taxes are included in that. We've been very clear that we want to include our savings plans, the heritage fund, the sustainability fund. Is that the right way to save? Should we be saving more, saving less? Those are the kinds of discussions that we will have. There will be parameters developed and set up for this discussion with Albertans. I know the member won't be here, nor will I, but we'll be watching from the outside and maybe participating.

4:50

Mr. Taylor: We may well be. We will be watching from the outside, and we'll be watching with interest because I think there's a need – and it sounds as though you're moving in that direction – to put some pretty clear questions to Albertans that boil down to this. Now, there may be a whole bunch of subquestions in this, but it's basically: what do you expect from your government in the way of programs and services? How much of our nonrenewable resource revenues do you want to save for the future and in what fashion? How much are you willing to pay in taxes or other fees to cover the costs of what you expect from the government? If those numbers don't add up, if they don't come out equal on each side of the ledger, then what are you as the people of Alberta prepared to do about that to make up the difference?

I know this is a stretch because the minister is not going to be here when this conversation takes place. Can the minister commit on behalf of this government, if it gets re-elected, to making sure that all those areas of the conversation are in fact covered?

Mr. Liepert: As this member said, I can't commit to that. The way he framed it, I would say, is probably going to be very close to the questions that will be asked. The reason it is is because those were the same questions and discussions that the President of Treasury Board and I had with Albertans when we went out on this budget consultation. We have to recognize that this was a consultation about budget 2012-13. What we want to do is have a much broader conversation about the next decade or three or four decades. I would think that the member is very much on stream with what that framework should look like for the discussion.

Mr. Taylor: Absolutely. As the minister is well aware, we've been talking about what's going to happen for the next year or the next three years for far too many years now, and we've seen a lot of potential slip through our fingers as we've done that, as we've spent nonrenewable resource revenues. You only get that dollar once. When that barrel of oil or that gigajoule of gas is burned, you don't ever get it again. Once it's spent, it's gone.

We have not had a long-term generational plan going in this province. To throw the minister's own words back at him about Alberta being the beacon in the world, the planetary lighthouse . . .

Mr. Liepert: Name me somewhere better.

Mr. Taylor: We could have done better, and we need to do better going forward.

I mean, the budget says this right on page 66 of the fiscal plan.

Alberta is not immune to global risks, which remain elevated due to uncertainty around the Eurozone debt crisis. An escalation in the crisis could result in the global economy slowing further, and may strain the global financial system. Moreover, a slowdown in the emerging markets would undermine demand for commodities, putting downward pressure on oil prices.

Far be it for me to pour cold water on the fires of the beacon, Minister, but that's only in the short term.

In the long term we have – and the minister used to be the Energy minister; the minister has, I know, some awareness of this – some more fundamental issues that we're grappling with: the, I believe, unfair reputation that our bitumen has been allowed to get around the world. The fact that we are grossly outnumbered: if you put us together with all the other producing jurisdictions of the world, we're grossly outnumbered by consuming jurisdictions, which is great when we've got the product to sell and they need it, but at \$105 a barrel the consuming jurisdictions around the world and even in other parts of this country are starting to look really, really hard at alternatives to what we have to sell them. Not only are they doing that on price point, but they're doing that because of the awareness that climate change is a very, very real challenge and a very real threat going forward and that we have to lower our carbon footprint, the we being all of us around the world.

Again this is going to sound very doomful, but I don't know how else to put it. We run the very real risk of running out of customers for our oil and our gas and our bitumen and our coal and anything else that we have to sell in its raw form long before we run out of any of those resources. So it would seem to me that it's incumbent upon us to have a very adult conversation province-wide about how we are going to save and safeguard the money we make off those resources while we still have it coming in. Comment?

Mr. Liepert: Well, I'm not sure there was a question there, but I wouldn't mind commenting on the comments. A couple of things. I think I would disagree with the member relative to running out of customers before we run out of oil. Who knows when we're going to run out of customers, and it looks like we're going to have oil for hundreds of years. You know, I think the numbers that I've seen globally are that the development of renewables is only keeping up with growth, and the demand for oil continues to grow.

It's funny, Mr. Chairman. I'm glad I had the opportunity to serve as Energy minister because you can't go anywhere and get in a conversation as Finance minister without talking, basically, energy. That's just the way Alberta is. So I actually believe, hon. member, that I don't share the same view that you do relative to renewables.

Now, I think another area we need to have this discussion with Albertans is that we don't know where the price of oil is going, but there are those who will draw up the doomsday scenario of \$70 oil. My goodness, 10 years ago we would have thought that was a pretty good price. It could just as easily go to a hundred and fifty bucks a barrel as it could to \$70. In the event that does occur, we have to have some savings strategies in place, but I think we also have to have a strategy where we need to show the rest of

Canada that the country does well when Alberta and the west do well. How that could take form I don't know. That's a conversation, again, that I think will be good to have with Albertans.

The other comment I would make is that I really believe strongly – and I don't think the member and I would disagree on this – that we have to bring the heritage fund back so that Albertans feel like they have some attachment to the heritage fund. We all know in Calgary the development of Fish Creek park, the Kananaskis, Capital City park: all of those things people relate to the heritage fund. We've had two generations now almost pass in Alberta where we've had a lot of new people come into Alberta, and all the heritage fund has been, really, is just an investment fund out there. In my view, bring it back so that Albertans who have an attachment to that heritage fund can see that the savings that are accumulating to some degree are going into improving the quality of life in Alberta as well.

Those would be the comments I would make in response.

Mr. Taylor: I'll agree with the minister up to a point as long as he's not suggesting that we take the money that's in the heritage trust fund right now and spend it all on projects and programs and parks and feel-good initiatives that Albertans feel they could have a sense of ownership in without first developing a plan for how we're going to replace the money in the heritage fund that we're going to spend on any of those things and, quite frankly, how to grow the heritage fund to a much, much bigger level than it is now.

There are a thousand and one ways to skin a cat, right? Perhaps we're not going to put it all into the heritage fund. Perhaps we're going to develop a basket of different endowment funds that we want to invest in. I'm certainly open to that discussion.

One of the things that is really, really key here, it seems to me – and I'm very open to the idea that while we have this discussion about the future of the heritage savings trust fund, part of that discussion deals with what we are going to do with it that's in the public interest and has public value and something that the public can get a real sense of ownership of. We also need to commit to a savings and investment strategy and commit to it in a way that, frankly, locks future governments into doing at least as much of that saving.

I'm probably setting off some alarm bells there because the minister is probably thinking: "Well, hold on. Until such time as we get some magic amount of money into the heritage savings trust fund where we can use the income, then, from the heritage savings trust fund to replace the nonrenewable resource revenues that we spend on the province's day-to-day operations today, we've got to be mindful of the fact that we live in a boom-and-bust resource-based economy and times are not always so good that you can afford to be throwing huge chunks of money into the heritage fund."

We need a plan here. As oversimplified as this may sound, I think it's not a bad idea that we view this as a very large extension of a family budget.

Families need to meet the monthly expenses, including deregulated electricity bills. They need to set aside a little bit of money that they're just going to have fun with and go blow on a VLT or a bottle of Scotch or a movie or a hockey game or something like that. They need to also have a plan to pay down whatever debt they have, and they need a plan to save for the future: for junior's education, for mom and dad's retirement, that sort of thing. So it's not an either/or situation; it's both/and all the time. Again, a comment?

5:00

The Deputy Chair: Hon. minister, just before you comment, I need to extend a courtesy to the independent, the Member for

Vermilion-Lloydminster, just in case he wishes to address the budget estimates at the moment. We have about eight minutes left.

If not, then we'll continue on with the members that are engaged at the moment. Okay.

Mr. Liepert: Well, we could certainly carry on this debate for some time. I think one of the things that we have to remember is that we are a province in the country of Canada. We have seen in the past what happens when certain central Canadian-based federal political parties decide that they can use Alberta's wealth to generate votes in other parts of the country. I think those are all the kinds of discussions we have to have about how much you save, how much you invest. You know, we've done a very good job in the last half-dozen years in rebuilding our capital infrastructure.

I want to just make one point clear. When the member started his last set of comments, he inferred that somehow I was suggesting that we spend the heritage fund. That was not what I said, and I don't want to leave that impression. What I said was that I believe we need to look at going back to the original concept of the heritage fund, and that's different than what I heard the member say. That's the discussion we need to have with Albertans.

Mr. Taylor: That was exactly the clarification I was looking for. I wanted to make sure that I understood precisely what the minister meant when he said that, and now I feel that I do. Thank you very much for that.

The question, though – and I'll try not to dwell on this too long – is of Alberta's relationship vis-à-vis the rest of the country and vis-à-vis certain central Canadian political parties or movements who, you know, have evil designs on our heritage and our wealth and all the rest of that. The minister also commented just a couple of minutes ago that it's necessary to tell our story to the rest of Canada and get the rest of Canada to realize that when we do well, they do well. I want to caution the minister not to try and argue that one both ways. I mean, if when we do well, the rest of the nation does well, sir, then when we do well at saving and investing our money and putting it into infrastructure programs or research programs or whatever it is that benefits Albertans, there's a spillover effect to all of Canada. That's the story that we need to be telling, not just: this is our money, and you can't have any of it.

Maybe there's a real public relations job to be done there, but I would argue that in addition to just marketing and communication of the message, there's also some real doing that has to accompany the talking. In fact, maybe the doing is more important than the talking. Maybe leading by example is more important than just saying: aren't we a wonderful bunch of cowboys out here in the west; you know, we have all your best interests at heart. Let's show that.

In this budget I'd like to see more commitment to such things as greening our energy, whether that's in terms of research into renewables or whether that's in terms of the research that we do, that we don't always talk about to the fullest extent that we should, that we should probably be doing more of as well to make sure that we get bitumen to the point that it is the cleanest oil in the world. It means things like looking very seriously – and I know these are conversations I should maybe more appropriately be having when we debate the estimates of the Energy department than the Finance department, but there's a crossover there. There's a crossover. We maybe need to be having some very serious conversations about getting off coal and onto natural gas or something else.

The thing that drives me – it's not just that I want to go out and hug a big old tree. Okay? I do like hugging trees as long as the bark is not too rough and the sap isn't coming out and making you too sticky. There's nothing wrong with hugging a tree, but I like there to be a practical purpose to this as well. It comes down to this. When I see the work that other consuming jurisdictions are doing to try and figure out how to build those batteries that will store wind power and solar power, when I see them trying to figure out how to build a transportation fleet that will run on some alternative to fossil fuels, when I see them trying to put distributed electricity generation to the fullest work, when I see them talking about these things and see the opportunity for innovation and research and development and so on and so forth, and I see that it's happening in other jurisdictions and not here, I wonder whether we're just too smug that the money is coming in.

The way we're doing it is that we punch a hole in the ground, we scoop a bunch of dirt out, we run it through the upgrader, we get the oil apart from the sands, we refine it, maybe, or maybe we just put it into the pipeline as crude, we sell it, and we make the money. Life is good. Ain't it sweet? The future is so bright that I need to wear shades. Someday we're going to wake up and discover that the rest of the world has passed us by.

These are the sorts of things that I don't see. Should this government get re-elected, I would urge this government to put on the table in the big conversation with Albertans later this year or next year these things that I don't see in this budget. I don't see a commitment to covering all of our bases.

Mr. Liepert: I need to get in before the bell goes here. Oh, my God. How wrong that member has to be. Two billion dollars for carbon capture and storage, \$2 billion for GreenTRIP, an announcement by our Minister of Environment and Water relative to monitoring the oil sands, bioenergy credits was on the front page of the *Journal* two days ago: I mean, I could go on and on and on. I don't know what world this member has been living in when he makes these comments. No jurisdiction on a per capita basis has committed what we have committed in this government to ensuring that we have not only talked but that we walk the walk when it comes to renewable, when it comes to clean energy, Mr. Chairman.

The Deputy Chair: Thank you.

Hon. member, there are about 45 seconds left.

Mr. Taylor: Then I will finish simply by saying that – and I will get in the last word – perhaps we can continue this conversation postelection over a beer, sir. I look forward to seeing the fruits of your labour. I haven't seen them yet.

Thank you.

The Deputy Chair: Thank you.

No one else at this point? Then we can conclude this section.

I have a government member listed to speak next. I don't see that member in the Chamber, so I'd be happy to recognize the hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you very much.

Mr. Liepert: I'll try and do a little better this time.

Mr. MacDonald: I hope you can do a little better. You've had a little bit of time, and you've got three experts there to provide you with notes.

Now, we have been listening with interest to other members and their questions and to the hon. minister's responses. There have

been good questions on revenue. I also have some additional questions at this time, Mr. Chairman. Page 8 of the fiscal plan states:

The funding and investments in Budget 2012 are directed at growing the economy to support a sustainable future. Going forward we will examine, in consultation with Albertans, our revenue sources and how the revenue is used so that Alberta can reduce its dependence on volatile revenues associated with energy.

We will develop a fiscal framework that contributes to building a predictable, sustainable revenue base.

My question at this time goes like this. How many reviews are really necessary? This statement in one form or another has been in every budget document since the hon. Member for Fort Saskatchewan-Vegreville took over in the Premier's office. This is a delaying tactic. Nothing ever changes. How is this statement or this review any different than previous claims that have been made by this government?

5:10

Mr. Liepert: Well, I will give this member the same answer I gave the Member for Calgary-Currie. He and I will be on the outside looking in, and I say: stay tuned. We have a new Premier who has committed to this, Mr. Chairman. You can drag up all of the old reviews that you might want to drag up but, in my view, there has never been anything anywhere near as comprehensive as what is being proposed in the next year.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. member.

Mr. MacDonald: Yes. I'm not saying getaway cars shouldn't have rear-view mirrors, but the one you're in obviously doesn't.

Now, further to this, on page 15:

By 2014-15, it is projected that about two-thirds of current non-renewable resource revenues will be needed to fund current expenditures. The remaining one-third, or more than \$5 billion, will be either saved or invested for the province's future needs.

Since this problem is explicitly stated throughout the budget, why are real commitments to action not being made now?

Mr. Liepert: Unlike some members across the way we want to have the discussion with Albertans. We listen to Albertans, and we will act based on what we hear from Albertans. For us to prejudge what Albertans want us to do I think would be inappropriate. I will repeat it. I think this is now – I don't know – nine, 10, 11 times that I've said that.

Mr. MacDonald: Now, total revenue is estimated to be \$40.3 billion this year, which is a 4.6 per cent, or \$1.8 billion, increase from the previous year. Page 52 of the fiscal plan states an average 10 per cent growth for the next two years.

The five-year trend in percentage of total revenue from nonrenewable resource revenue is this, Mr. Chairman. In 2008-09 nonrenewable resource revenue was \$11.9 billion, which was 30 per cent of total government revenue. In 2009-10 nonrenewable resource revenue was \$6 billion, which was 18.6 per cent of total government revenue. In 2010-11 nonrenewable resource revenue was \$8.4 billion, which was 24 per cent of total government revenue. In 2011-12 the forecast for nonrenewable resource revenue was \$11.3 billion, which was 29 per cent of total government revenue. The 2012-13 estimate for nonrenewable resource revenue is \$11.1 billion, which is, again, 28 per cent of total government revenue.

These are the stark examples, Mr. Chairman, of the danger of relying so heavily on resource revenue for core program spending. What is also interesting to note is that the only year in which

reliance on nonrenewable resource revenue fell below 20 per cent was the year following the recession. My question is: has the ministry developed a target percentage for reliance on natural resource revenue? If so, can you explain how this target was developed, and if not, why not?

Mr. Liepert: Well, Mr. Chairman, I have to repeat that that is exactly what we are going to be undertaking in the next year, and I would encourage the member as a private citizen to be involved.

The Deputy Chair: Thank you.

Mr. MacDonald: Now, earlier we heard questions about corporate income tax. Before I get to that, in the economic outlook on page 72 there are a lot of interesting charts which are contrary to the optimism that's displayed by the hon. minister in the government's projections. There is a chart which is titled *With So Much Uncertainty, Businesses Are Hoarding Cash* – and you can't blame them for doing that – Cash Reserves of Non-financial Corporations. It is a Canada and U.S. comparison chart. If we were to go back to 2007, we can see that there has been quite an interest among Canadian corporations to stash some cash for some troubling economic times or some rough financial waters. This is for Canada. Could the minister or his officials give us a breakdown? Does the same apply for corporations that are doing business in this province? Are they setting aside a modest amount of cash in case there is further economic uncertainty?

Mr. Liepert: Well, I'm not sure that I can answer that question. What I would suggest is that we'll take that away and respond to the member in writing.

Mr. MacDonald: I can appreciate that.

Now, page 52 of the fiscal plan shows that corporate income tax revenue for 2012-13 is estimated to be \$4.4 billion, which is \$461 million, or 11 per cent, more than was collected last year. The government is projecting that corporate income tax revenue will increase to \$5.6 billion by 2014-15. Is this increase in corporate income tax from more businesses investing in Alberta or from current businesses becoming more profitable?

Mr. Liepert: Mr. Chairman, it would be kind of a combination of all of those. As I said earlier, you have to remember that we've got a changing situation in the oil sands, where a number of companies are reaching payout. That probably would impact their corporate tax position. We also know the growth in this province, so you're going to have some new corporations that are going to be paying corporate tax. I think the right answer is that it's a combination of both of what the hon. member had alluded to.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. member.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you. Now, also, on page 52 of the fiscal plan it is reported that personal income tax revenue for 2012-13 will be about \$9.3 billion. This is a 9 per cent increase, or an increase of \$793 million, from the previous year. Where does the majority of personal income tax growth come from? Is it higher wages? Is it more people involved in the workforce? Is this growth in income seen equitably across the income tax brackets, or is this growth from higher wage earners?

Mr. Liepert: Again, Mr. Chairman, it's a combination of all of those things. I mean, our population is growing. Workers are coming into this province and paying income tax. Corporations are doing better. Thereby, employees are doing better and paying more income tax, those that are here. I think there's a number. I

need to find one particular number, and I'll respond to the member with that information here in a couple of minutes.

Mr. MacDonald: Okay. Now, another significant source of revenue has been bonuses in the sale of Crown leases. Pages 55 and 56 of the fiscal plan forecast \$3.3 billion in revenue from this source. This is a lot higher than was budgeted. Last year's revenue included a historic sale date on June 1, that brought in \$842 million in revenue in a single sale. Revenue from bonuses and sales of Crown leases is expected to fall to \$2 billion in 2012-13. Why was the budgeting for last year's sales totals from bonuses in the sale of Crown leases so inaccurate, what led to this drastic increase, and how does the government know that this year's revenue forecast will be any more accurate than the previous year's?

Mr. Liepert: Well, that's actually a very good question, Mr. Chairman, because we don't. Who could have predicted an \$840-million land sale? You couldn't have, and I couldn't have. You know, this is one of those situations where industry believes that the investment is worth it in the long term and makes those decisions. That's why it's called a land auction. We have to at the beginning of the year take our best judgment in consultation with industry as to what we think and what they think is going to happen over the next 12 months and make our projections accordingly.

5:20

If you look historically over our land sales, they move somewhere in the range from a low of under a billion dollars to the \$2 billion range. Then we've had two or three really good years. I'm told that the reason for these two or three good years is primarily around the new technology which is allowing horizontal drilling, allowing going back into existing fields. Shale gas has had a lot to do with that. Again, we use the Department of Energy's projections – and I'm going from some memory here – and we see a levelling off in those land sales to a point where the projections this year of about \$2 billion is closer to where we think, realistically, they will be.

I want to refer the hon. member to page 99 of the budget document. There's a chart in the upper right-hand corner which shows where personal income tax revenue comes from. Basically, the top 10 per cent of income earners pay 54 per cent of the income tax, and the bottom 50 per cent pay 3 per cent of the total income tax.

The Deputy Chair: Thank you.

The hon. member.

Mr. MacDonald: Yes. Now, sticking to the discussion on Crown leases and bonuses, has there been any consideration given to taking this total amount that's generated on an annual basis and dedicating it to savings; for instance, putting it immediately into the heritage savings trust fund?

Mr. Liepert: I would encourage this member as a private citizen to make that submission next year to the committee.

Mr. MacDonald: Now, since there's been this spike in land sales – and the minister alluded to the fact that horizontal drilling is one of the driving conditions or forces in this rather robust sale – since we've had the change in the royalty format and we see the spike in our land sales and we see some of the incentives that have come off in northeastern British Columbia, for instance, on natural gas drilling, has there been a study done to see how our royalty regimes and the various holidays we now have in place, when you

compare them to other jurisdictions, are reflective of the increased activity at the bimonthly land sales?

Mr. Liepert: Well, Mr. Chairman, we really are into the Department of Energy information here. I would only respond by saying that we don't need to study. Just watch what's going on out there. I mean, with the investment that's taking place, industry is speaking with their feet, so we don't need to go hire a bunch of people to do a bunch of studies. It's all there.

The Deputy Chair: Thank you.

The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar on the estimates of the Department of Finance.

Mr. MacDonald: Yes, and that's precisely where we are, Mr. Chairman. In fact, we're on page 110 of the ministry estimates, line 2. Why was there an increase in fiscal planning and economic analysis in the amount of \$248,000, or 4 per cent? Is this part of the initiative to review revenue streams?

Mr. Liepert: You know, the member referred to this earlier relative to the pensions. There are situations that develop where you might be transferring staff to do various projects. I think that if we're going to get into the tens of thousands of dollars in expenditures, I don't have that answer at my fingertips, Mr. Chairman.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. member.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you. Now, the hon. Member for Airdrie-Chestermere asked some very good questions about the spending habits of this government. Certainly, the hon. Member for Calgary-Varsity over the years has asked a lot of very good questions also about the spending habits of this government. On page 21 of the fiscal plan operational spending is increasing by 6.9 per cent, or \$2.4 billion, this year.

Another example of the failure of this government to maintain its budgetary commitments comes from the fiscal plan for Budget 2010, page 11, which projected government spending to rise to \$39.7 billion by 2012-13. In reality, spending for 2012-13 is projected to be \$41.1 billion. That there's a provincial election looming is just a coincidence. Now, this means that since 2008-09, when expenses were \$36.7 billion, this government, this group of fiscal conservatives, has increased expenditures by \$4.4 billion, or 12 per cent, in four years. Perhaps instead of going to Jasper on some kind of taxpayer-funded retreat, you might have gone to the cinema in the Eaton Centre and watched the Margaret Thatcher movie. Perhaps that would have been a better use of your time, and we would have saved a lot of money. [interjection] This is a Liberal from Saskatchewan talking here. Wow. Mr. Chairman, they're distracting me again.

The Deputy Chair: It would be wonderful if this debate occurred through the chair, as is the custom and tradition here.

Mr. MacDonald: Yes. In comparison, revenues in 2008-09 were \$35.8 billion and are forecast to be \$40 billion in 2012-13. This is a \$4.5 billion, or 13 per cent, increase in revenue. Again to the minister: how will the minister sustain these spending increases if nonrenewable resource revenue doesn't increase as projected? What's the backup plan? How can these spending increases be maintained over the long term? Or after the provincial election will we see more unannounced changes like we did with Alberta Health Services immediately following the 2008 provincial election? We know what kind of a disaster that's turned out to be.

The Deputy Chair: Hon. minister, there's one minute left in this section.

Mr. Liepert: Mr. Chairman, I'm not going to fall for the trap. The member referred to fiscal conservatives. I consider myself a Progressive Conservative, and we will run as Progressive Conservatives in the next election. If we have significant growth needs that we need to address, we will address them. I will challenge that member every time he stands up in his spot in question period asking questions about why we're not spending money on this and why we're not spending money on that and why we're not spending money on that. I will remind him of this conversation today because you can't talk out of both sides of your mouth.

You know, these folks over here are very good at sucking and blowing at the same time, Mr. Chairman, because you have that member over there talking about fiscal conservatism, and then he wants schools in Airdrie. We've got this particular member, who now sees himself as a fiscal liberal.

The Deputy Chair: Thank you, hon. minister.

We are now at that unique stage where any member who wishes to may engage with the minister on the estimates for the Department of Finance. Anyone, typically, from the government side would go next.

If not, then we'll recognize the member who has not yet had a chance, the hon. Member for Calgary-Varsity.

Mr. Anderson: It goes to the Wildrose first. That's the rule.

The Deputy Chair: Was there a list that I didn't see?

Mr. Chase: I'm quite willing to have the hon. member . . .

The Deputy Chair: I'm sorry. The Member for Airdrie-Chestermere is correct. He is next on the list. My apologies. You'll be after that, Calgary-Varsity.

Mr. Anderson: I almost lost my opportunity to talk with this minister one last time. I mean, this could be it. I'm sure we'll, you know, grab a coffee one day, Minister. I'm sure you'll want that. Very clearly, it's something you'd want to do. If that doesn't happen, I want to make sure that we at least have one last opportunity to talk with this pillar of fiscal conservatism, the hon. minister and Member for Calgary-West.

Very interesting that this minister talks about progressivism. He may not know this because I think he might think in his mind that progressivism means progress, but in the political realm that's not what progressivism means. Progressivism means big government solutions, big spending solutions, to try to interfere in the lives of people, to try to be all things to all people and interfere in various ways. That's what progressivism is.

5:30

The Deputy Chair: Hon. member, if you could just get on with the estimates part of the debate so that we don't get relevance calls.

Mr. Anderson: Absolutely.

The Deputy Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Anderson: The fiscal policies of Barack Obama, for example, are progressive. He's a self-prescribed progressive. So it's very interesting to see how progressive this person wants to be who is in our Finance minister chair.

You know, he is always asking us: where could we find savings? So I'm going to ask the minister whether he honestly thinks that given the report – let's just take the environment report that your government was touting today, showing that the CO₂ from our oil sands projects in northern Alberta would not in any way, shape, or form contribute to any kind of substantial global warming even if you took it all out of the ground and burned it all, that it still would be just a fraction.

If that's the report, then surely the \$2 billion we're spending to pump CO₂ into the ground off a fraction of those projects – a fraction of them – you would think that this member would think that that might not be a very good use of taxpayers' money, especially when we are in deficit up to our eyeballs, almost \$17 billion by the end of this year in deficits over the last five years. Not only do we have that much deficit to deal with, but just think of the schools and all of the things he's talking about; you know, the schools, the roads, and all these important things that Albertans want.

Yet \$2 billion for carbon capture and storage: why, Minister? Why do we need to spend \$2 billion on something when the report that you're trumpeting right now says that CO₂ from the oil sands is simply not a problem, that CO₂ from Alberta sources of energy are simply not the problem? Why \$2 billion? Why should the taxpayers of Alberta have to pay for your little public relations stunt?

Mr. Liepert: Well, Mr. Chairman, I think appropriately that question should go when the Department of Energy is before the House. I would encourage the member to ask those questions when that particular set of estimates comes up. But I'll take the opportunity to talk a fair bit about carbon capture and storage. Since he raised it, we may as well have the discussion.

The Deputy Chair: Please tie it to your estimates.

Mr. Liepert: I'll try, but he raised the question. I'm answering his question, Mr. Chairman.

The Deputy Chair: I'm prepared to allow a little latitude on this, but I will remind the hon. Member for Airdrie-Chestermere of what I reminded the hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar about.

Mr. Liepert: If you want, I'll justify why we've committed over a period of time to this particular program. It's part of the various estimates that are before the House. As you well recall, we had that discussion in this Assembly.

We have now commenced three separate projects around carbon capture and storage. If you travel anywhere around the world, they look at Alberta as the leader on this particular process, as a beacon when it comes to carbon capture and storage. That is only one part of what we're doing to ensure that we can stand up on the world stage anywhere and talk about what we're doing to clean up the environment.

You know, the member can refer to this particular study that comes out today, or there will be another one tomorrow, or there was probably one yesterday that said something different, but we have a plan. It's laid out clearly. We're going to stick to that plan when it comes to ensuring that we can prove on the world stage that we are doing everything possible to ensure that we walk the talk, Mr. Chairman.

The Deputy Chair: Thank you.

The hon. Member for Airdrie-Chestermere.

Mr. Anderson: Okay. Well, I guess we won't talk about places where we can save money in the Finance minister's budget because that's

apparently not in the purview of this questioning today. Enough said.

On page 8 of your fiscal plan it talks about your deficit. Where's the deficit number here? It's roughly \$800 million. There it is, \$886 million. That is your stated deficit. Then underneath, line 14, it says that "capital investment (not included in expense)" is \$2.2 billion. Then, of course, it goes on to show that the sustainability fund has fallen over \$3 billion. If you add the capital investment not included in it as an expense and your deficit number, it comes out to over \$3 billion.

This is a constant issue that we've been trying to point out to folks, and we're happy to see that finally the folks in the media picked up on what we call the true cash deficit: how much more money is flowing out of Alberta's coffers than is coming in in receipts? I just want to have the minister confirm for me that the true cash deficit, meaning the money that we're taking out versus the money we're taking in, is actually a deficit of well over \$3 billion and is not \$800 million. That's the actual cash deficit, not your accounting deficit, your cash deficit. Why isn't that number more clearly stated, the actual amount of money that's going out more than we're taking in?

Mr. Liepert: Well, again, the member is quite incorrect. What we have stated in our capital plan – we have two different segments of capital. One is government capital. If we were to build a road, for instance, that theoretically the government owns going forward, we amortize that out over I think it's 20 years. Those dollars are below the surplus deficit line, and the amortization is above the line. That's common practice when it comes to corporate accounting. This member may not be aware of that because I don't think he has ever sat in any kind of a corporate operation in his lifetime, Mr. Chairman. What we do account for, though, as dollars straight out the door are those that go out to municipalities, municipal sustainability money. If money goes out to Alberta Health Services, those are dollars that the government no longer holds, so those are above the surplus deficit line.

For this member to sort of somehow indicate that they're not properly stated is incorrect, and that will be justified through the Auditor General, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. Anderson: Well, I found that last comment a little bit rich coming from someone who has either worked in government or as a GR spokesperson his entire career. I actually have run a couple of businesses, successful ones, including one we're just starting up. I'd be glad to show him what a budget sheet actually looks like in the real world, where you have to make sure that the money that's going out is equal or greater than the amount coming in because if you don't, you go bankrupt. That's what bankruptcy is. Most people don't have a little surplus or a little nest egg saved away to deal with that type of eventuality. Maybe after he's actually been in a business for some point of time, he'll actually understand what that means rather than being on the government payroll his entire career.

With regard to his little figure on how they're accounting for the \$2.2 billion in infrastructure that's not included as an expense, I guess I would ask this question, then. By your logic, then, Minister, if we spent \$20 billion next year – let's just throw a number out there – on infrastructure, brand new infrastructure of bridges and roads and hospitals and new everything, \$20 billion of new infrastructure, wouldn't it be that we could do that and the budget deficit wouldn't go up 1 cent? In fact, I think we could actually spend a hundred billion dollars on infrastructure, and under your accounting the budget deficit would still be \$886 million because you wouldn't be counting that as an expense. So

why don't you do that? Why don't we get rid of this infrastructure deficit right away? We can blow through a hundred billion dollars in infrastructure spending and not add a nickel to our deficit number. That's the logic if we followed your logic on that.

5:40

The reason is pretty simple why that's absurd. It's because you actually do have to pay for this. When you're talking about provincial infrastructure, you can't sell a bridge. You can't sell a road. You can't sell a hospital. You can't do it. So those are not your typical assets. When you're a company, you buy an asset, you buy a piece of land, and it goes on your balance sheet. Great. You can sell that asset if you get into trouble, if you needed to sell it. Government can't do that. We don't have that ability. There's a small fraction of the assets where government has that ability.

I guess I would say, then, that if you know that you can't, unless you're intending to sell these bridges down the road, why on earth would you not tell the people of Alberta the true cash deficit, meaning the true amount of cost, more dollars being spent than are being taken in in a year, and just admit that the budget deficit this year on a cash-cash basis is over \$3 billion? If it isn't, why is over \$3 billion coming out of the sustainability fund this year if your deficit is only \$886 million? Can you explain that?

Mr. Liepert: This member is really quite incredible. He challenges international forecast prices for oil. International forecasters: he says that they're wrong. He challenges industry on their production numbers. He says that they're wrong. He challenges the Auditor General on our accounting procedures. He says that they're wrong. Man, this guy is brilliant. He is brilliant. All of these other people in the world are wrong. He's the only guy who knows, Mr. Chairman. I'm amazed. I'll sit down.

The Deputy Chair: Is there anyone who wishes to rise?

Mr. Anderson: It only took the member four years to figure that out. That's so good of you, hon. member, that you figured out that I can actually add. Maybe one day you'll be able to add, too.

The number on here says \$2.2 billion plus an \$886 million deficit. That equals an over \$3.1 billion cash deficit. Why is it so hard for you to admit that you're spending over \$3 billion more than you're taking in? If not, let's just simplify the question since you like simple questions. If it's not \$3 billion, why is the sustainability fund going down from \$7.4 billion to \$3.7 billion? Where is that money going? If the deficit is only \$886 million, why is the sustainability fund going down by 3 and a half billion dollars? Can you explain that?

Mr. Liepert: Nobody is hiding anything. It's all there. It's in the consolidated financials if he would read it, but it's not the deficit/surplus line. Why doesn't he go have a conversation with the Auditor General, then?

Mr. Anderson: It would warm my heart. It would be such a good gift from this minister if he would just say to the people of Alberta that there is over \$3 billion in cash deficit that we have this year as a province. Why won't he just say it? How is it so hard to admit? The sustainability fund is going down by 3 and a half billion dollars. That's where the cash is coming from. Why can't you say it, Minister? The \$3.1 billion: is that not the cash deficit?

Mr. Liepert: Because, Mr. Chairman, that's not what we talk about. I will leave it up to the member to go have the debate with the Auditor General on our accounting model. It's been confirmed by the Auditor General every year. The books are there to look at.

He can communicate how he wants. We'll communicate the right way, and then we'll see what happens.

The Deputy Chair: Thank you.

The hon. Member for Airdrie-Chestermere.

Mr. Anderson: All right. With regard to long-term savings can you share with us, Minister, given that the heritage fund when adjusted for inflation is now worth less than it was in 1976, why that is the case? Why has the policy of this government constantly been to drain money out of the – every cent of interest that is made in the heritage fund every year you take out and you spend it. Why for the last however many years has that been your policy, and will you ever change it?

Mr. Liepert: Well, I'll repeat again: that's the discussion that we should all have over the course of the next year relative to our fiscal framework. What do we spend on program delivery? What do we spend on capital? I would suggest, Mr. Chairman, that this province now has the most modern infrastructure, the most modern hospitals, schools, the best roads and highways of any jurisdiction in North America. That is a heritage for our future. If we want to change that fiscal framework, the opportunity will be there over the course of the next year.

Mr. Anderson: If the infrastructure is so good, Minister, then why are you spending 50 per cent more than the next closest jurisdiction on infrastructure? I mean, you can't have it both ways. Either you have an infrastructure deficit, or you don't have an infrastructure deficit. Everything you say is a contradiction. You can't say, "Oh, well, we've got this wonderful infrastructure to leave to our kids," and then in the next breath spend 50 per cent more than the next closest province on infrastructure, including tax-and-spend jurisdictions, Liberal jurisdictions like B.C., Ontario, and Quebec. You can't have it both ways. Either you're just wasting money because you've already made – you just said that we have a world-class infrastructure second to none in Canada, yet you're spending way more because you say that we have the biggest infrastructure deficit in all of Canada, or you don't.

Now, I happen to think that our infrastructure is good. I agree with you. It is second to none. There are places where we need more schools, and there are places where we need more seniors' care facilities and so forth, but by and large we have very good infrastructure here. That is why we have proposed in our plan, since we have this wonderful infrastructure, that we don't need to spend 50 per cent more than B.C., Ontario, and Quebec. We can actually spend just slightly more than B.C., Ontario, and Quebec average and actually maintain and build the new infrastructure we need while making sure that we have enough money left over at the end of the day to save some dollars.

So which one is it? Do we have an infrastructure deficit and need to spend 50 per cent more than the next closest province or not? Why did you feel the need to spend that money?

Chair's Ruling Relevance

The Deputy Chair: Hon. minister, I'm sorry. I have to interrupt again. You know, we're creeping into an area of discussion about the main budget motion, listening carefully to those previous comments from Airdrie-Chestermere. That might be appropriate at another time, but what we're trying to debate today is specifically the Ministry of Finance and the estimates as printed from page

110 forward in the main estimates book. That's, really, technically what we're here to discuss.

Out of tradition the chair has allowed some discussion on the three-year fiscal plans because that has been a long-standing unwritten tradition of the House. However, when we get into the specifics of ministries such as has been alluded to by various members, including the previous speaker, then I just want to take a moment and remind you that if we want to change the rules, we can certainly at some point look at doing that. But today the rules are the way they are, hon. member.

Now, Mr. Minister, there's about a minute and a half left. If you wish, I'll allow this one, but that will be the end of the discussion in terms of stuff that pertains to other specific ministries, not specifically the estimates of yours.

Debate Continued

Mr. Liepert: Well, thank you, Mr. Chairman. I think that the way I would respond to this particular tirade is that we went out and talked to Albertans before we started to prepare this budget. As I said earlier, there were several things that Albertans said were their highest priorities. They were health, education, and ensuring that those who are vulnerable in society are looked after. Clearly, they also commended what we had done on infrastructure but gave us direction that there's still more to do.

Now, what we have done is that we have slightly throttled back on the infrastructure budget and spread it out in some cases over an extra year on some of the health projects, as an example, while the minister of health is undertaking a review to ensure that the project as proposed is going to meet the needs of that community.

I don't think we cut back on the schools in the member's constituency, but if he wants us to do that, we could do that. If he wants to go to the doors in Airdrie-Chestermere in the next election and say, "Our party is suggesting that we do not build any more new schools," I encourage him to go ahead and do that.

This government is committed to ensuring that we have the most modern infrastructure probably in North America. There's still work to be done, and we're going to continue to do it, Mr. Chairman.

The Deputy Chair: Thank you.

The hon. Member for Calgary-Varsity.

5:50

Mr. Chase: Thank you. I just want to begin by correcting some of the statements that the hon. Finance minister made. When he was Minister of Education, he should have been aware during his tenure that the average age of schools is 40-plus years. So when we talk about our admirable school infrastructure, that's a false discussion.

In terms of acute-care bed infrastructure we have approximately 800 seniors questionably benefiting from a thousand-plus dollars a day in those beds.

Maybe I'll state my premise, and if I'm wrong in my premise – is the Finance ministry not responsible for doling out all the dollars to the other ministries?

Chair's Ruling Relevance

The Deputy Chair: Hon. member, they certainly work with the Treasury department. I'll have someone from government comment if they wish, but please don't misunderstand here. We do have a big-picture, main-budget motion, which you will have an opportunity to discuss, debate, question, and so on. But today, as with previous

days, we're going department by department. There is a department and a ministry specifically called Finance, as enunciated on page 110 and going forward in this big, thick book, and that's what we're technically supposed to be debating here. I have allowed some discussion on fiscal plans, as I indicated earlier, because out of heritage and tradition and respect for this House that has been allowed in the past. I didn't mind a little bit of that. But when you're getting into specific ministries, there are other ministry estimates coming, there's question period, and there are other sources for you to tap.

Proceed.

Debate Continued

Mr. Chase: Okay. I appreciate that clarification, and I'll try and use a .22 approach as opposed to a shotgun approach.

There is a very definite difference in this particular budget, which allows voters to delineate where the various parties stand. The Wildrose has asked this government to commit that there will be no tax increases over the next four years because they say that if we have a Wildrose government, they commit to no tax increases.

Now, this minister has accused the members on this side of the House of sucking and blowing, but to use the language of the street, the Pollyanna budget that this minister has tabled sucks because it projects such a favourable image going forward that everything is going to be solved because of the global market set prices for nonrenewable resources. The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar asked a very important question, and that is: what if this plan doesn't take place? What is the fallback position? Now, the hon. Minister of Finance didn't provide an answer for that. [interjections] I'm not sure if he's hearing my question. I realize it's at the end of the three hours and people are getting restless. I appreciate that.

An Hon. Member: Is there a question?

Mr. Chase: Yeah. The question is the difference in the rosy picture. The Liberals are not painting a rosy picture. We're saying that for 90 per cent of Albertans we'll stay with the current flat-tax rate. But we're saying that in order to have sustainable funding going into the future, we have to have a tax increase of 2 per cent for those earning over \$100,000. We have to have a tax increase of 5 per cent for those earning between \$150,000 and \$250,000, and for those over \$250,000 the Liberals are saying that for a sustainable economy we would raise theirs by 7 per cent.

Now we have the Wildrose saying: no increases. We have the Conservative government saying: well, we're not going to talk about any increases in taxes prior to the election. Then we have a very definite Liberal platform. So, for the electorate that gives a very clear choice of A, B, or C.

Back to the question from Edmonton-Gold Bar that the hon. member did not answer, and that is: Mr. Minister, if these rosy global projections of nonrenewable resource revenue do not pan out, how are you going to finance this province going forward over the next year or years?

The Deputy Chair: Hon. minister, I know that there was a comment earlier about speculation, and you have about two and a half minutes to speculate back if you wish, but I wish you would tie it back to your estimates so that the chair stays in order.

Mr. Liepert: You know, I know that this particular member is wanting us to get into the what-if, just like the Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar and the Member for Airdrie-Chestermere. What-if? Well, what if the sky falls? We don't budget based on:

what if the sky falls? We budget based on the best information. That information comes from – I'll repeat it again because the member wasn't here when I laid out how we come up with these numbers. First of all – and it's in the book – there are international forecasters for the price of oil. We take the average price. It's in the book right there. They're projecting upwards of \$108 a barrel for oil. Today it's \$105.

An Hon. Member: A hundred and six.

Mr. Liepert: It closed at \$106, I'm told. You can call that rosy. You can call it pie-in-the-sky projections. I call it realistic, Mr. Chairman. We go based on international forecasters.

You know, the Member for Calgary-Varsity, when he retires, and the Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar, when he retires, and the Member for Airdrie-Chestermere, when he gets defeated in the next election, should all go out there and form an international forecasting company, and maybe they could compete with all of the people who actually get paid to know what they're talking about, Mr. Chairman.

To go on a little further, Member, then at year-end we sit down with industry, and we find out what their projected production levels are. You multiply one by the other, and you kind of come up with a number which is in the book. Then our professionals, who are sitting in the gallery, I'm sure, shaking their heads listening to this kind of interrogation – what they do on a daily basis has nothing to do with anything we've heard here today. Absolutely nothing. So those folks then take what we have in the book and project corporate and personal income taxes out of that. That's how we come up with our budget. Those are the best numbers we have here today. They are not pie in the sky. We don't pick them out of the air. As I said earlier, the President of the Treasury Board and myself don't go have a beer and say: well, what number are we going to plug in this year? No, we don't. You may think we do, but we don't.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I successfully wore out the clock.

The Deputy Chair: I hesitate to interrupt the hon. minister; however, pursuant to Government Motion 6, that was agreed to on February 8, 2012, the Committee of Supply shall now rise and report progress.

[Mr. Zwozdesky in the chair]

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Member for Leduc-Beaumont-Devon.

Mr. Rogers: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The Committee of Supply has had under consideration resolutions for the Department of Finance relating to the 2012-2013 government estimates for the general revenue fund and lottery fund for the fiscal year ending March 31, 2013, reports progress, and requests leave to sit again.

The Acting Speaker: Thank you.

Does the Assembly concur in the progress report and in the request?

Hon. Members: Concur.

The Acting Speaker: That, then, is concurred with. Thank you. So ordered.

Well, hon. members, it's been a very invigorating afternoon of discussion and debate. I would invite the hon. Government House Leader now to do the honourable thing.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I understood when you got up that you were seeing the clock at 6 o'clock and just assumed that you would be adjourning.

The Acting Speaker: Well, it looked close.

Mr. Hancock: I would now move that we adjourn until 1:30 tomorrow.

[Motion carried; the Assembly adjourned at 5:59 p.m. to Wednesday at 1:30 p.m.]

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Province of Alberta

The 27th Legislature
Fifth Session

Alberta Hansard

Wednesday, February 22, 2012

Issue 9

The Honourable Kenneth R. Kowalski, Speaker

Legislative Assembly of Alberta
The 27th Legislature

Fifth Session

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Legislative Assembly of Alberta

1:30 p.m.

Wednesday, February 22, 2012

[The Speaker in the chair]

Prayers

The Speaker: Good afternoon.

Let us pray. Author of all wisdom, knowledge, and understanding, we ask for guidance in order that truth and justice may prevail in all of our judgments. Amen.

Please be seated.

Introduction of Visitors

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

Mr. Elniski: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I don't often have visitors sitting in your gallery, but today I am particularly pleased to introduce to you and through you a man familiar to many of us, the former Edmonton-Calder MLA and current Member of Parliament for the Edmonton-St. Albert riding, Mr. Brent Rathgeber. Brent and I have known each other for a long time. He was instrumental in my decision to run in 2008, and he holds, in my mind, one of the greatest bits of folk wisdom I have ever heard. As tough as it is to make a law, it is even tougher to unmake one. But the gun registry as we know it is history. Thank you, Brent, I would ask you to rise and receive the traditional warm greeting of the Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Municipal Affairs.

Mr. Griffiths: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's a distinct pleasure of mine to rise today to introduce to you and through you to members of this Assembly the Hon. June Draude, Saskatchewan's Minister of Social Services. Minister Draude was a founding member of the Saskatchewan Party in 1997 and has served as a minister since 2007. Like me, she grew up on the farm and continues to have strong roots and ties to rural communities. The minister is taking some time here in Alberta to learn more about our 10-year plan to end homelessness and the housing first model, but we managed to discuss much more than that. I look forward to many years of working with the minister as we build great partnerships. She met with Susan McGee of Homeward Trust this morning and toured some housing projects here in Edmonton.

Today I had the pleasure of joining Minister Draude for lunch along with the president of the Saskatchewan Housing Corporation, Mr. Don Allen, and her assistant, Mr. Theo Bryson. All of us agreed that the future of Alberta and Saskatchewan and particularly the New West Partnership working together are incredible. I'd ask all three of them to please rise – they're seated in your gallery, Mr. Speaker – to receive the traditional warm welcome.

Introduction of Guests

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

Mr. Elniski: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I have two introductions today.

An Hon. Member: It's all in Calder.

Mr. Elniski: Thank you. It is indeed, hon. member.

I'd like to introduce to you, first of all, Mr. Speaker, three of the founding members of the Bust a Move breast cancer fundraiser group, and I'll be talking more about this group in a moment in a member's statement. First is my eldest sister and undoubtedly my strongest supporter, my sister Susan Norum; her daughter, my niece, Melissa Norum; and the president of Airco air charters, Mrs. Mary Anne Stanway. Now, my wife, Barb, who is actually the one who founded this, couldn't be here because, thanks to a robust Alberta economy, she's out, actually, closing a house deal. I would like them all now to please rise and receive the traditional warm greeting of the Assembly.

My second introduction, Mr. Speaker, is a school group near and dear to my heart as well as to my home in Kensington, the class from Kensington elementary school in the Edmonton-Calder constituency. We have with us today 27 students and teacher Miss Jaelene McEwen and student teacher – I think I've got that right, Stephanie – Miss Stephanie Gruber. If you could all rise and receive the traditional warm greeting of the Assembly. What a great-looking group.

Thank you.

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

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I have two classes from Riverview visiting today, so it's a double-the-pleasure kind of day for me. The first is a class from St. Martin Catholic school, which is a wonderful, wonderful school. They are accompanied by their teacher, Ms Harasymiw, who invites me out year after year to speak to the grade 6s about government and always makes sure that her students are incredibly well prepared. She's one of the really wonderful teachers in Alberta's school system. I'd ask St. Martin to rise and receive the warm welcome of all MLAs.

The second class is another great school from my constituency. It's a school that has produced a number of MLAs over the years, Mr. Speaker, including the Member for Edmonton-Centre, the former Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie, and me. You know, anything can happen. This school is called McKernan elementary school. There is a large group here, actually, 47. There are teachers Miss Sackey, Ms Kinjo, and Miss Lassouani – sorry about the pronunciation – and the parents are Ms Bergman and Mr. Ley. I would venture to guess that there might be a future MLA among this class as well. I'd ask them to rise and receive the warm welcome of the Legislative Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Education.

Mr. Lukaszuk: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I have two fine groups today to introduce to you and through you. I am pleased to introduce to you very special guests who are in attendance today to witness the tabling of Bill 4, the St. Albert and Sturgeon Valley School Districts Establishment Act. These groups worked collaboratively to respond to an issue in their school jurisdiction, and I am proud to introduce legislation later on today, as you already know. We have Sturgeon school division chair Terry Jewell, vice-chair Tracy Nowak, and superintendent Michèle Dick as well from the greater St. Albert Catholic regional division, chair Lauri-Ann Turnbull, trustee Dave Caron, and superintendent David Keohane. Please rise and receive the warm welcome of this Assembly.

Also, Mr. Speaker, a very enthusiastic team of students that I met earlier today: they are known as the robotics team from l'école Maurice-Lavallée school here in Edmonton. I met with them earlier. They are travelling to St. Louis, Missouri, in April to compete in the FIRST Tech Challenge World Championship, building robots. This group is one of two teams representing

Canada in that particular competition. This is an international competition where students design and build robots that must perform tasks for points. They are either self-controlled or they are controlled by students who are operating them. Simply phenomenal.

Today from that school we have 11 grade 10 students, and they are Yves Dempsey, Emanuelle Dubbeldam, Sean Fisher, Cameron French, James Hryniw, Alain Letourneau, Nathan Liebrecht, Yannick Plamondon, René Yvan Lucas, Marcel Schneider, Nicholas Westbury, and they are accompanied by adult members Michel Gariépy, teacher; Vlad Pasek, principal; and Philippe Manseau, adult mentor. I would ask them all to rise, and I thank you for representing Alberta and Canada.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Transportation.

Mr. Danyluk: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I would like to introduce to you and through you to this Assembly two very special ladies from my constituency of Lac La Biche-St. Paul. They are Mrs. Eveline Luce and Mrs. Kathy Kutryk. Eveline and Kathy both provide exceptional support to me and the people of Lac La Biche-St. Paul. Eveline is my constituency assistant, and Kathy provides support to her when needed. They are seated in the members' gallery, and I would ask them to rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of this Assembly.

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

Ms Blakeman: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I received word today that some good Albertans are here in the Assembly, and I'd like to introduce them to you and through you to all members of the Assembly. They are Arlin Biffert, who is a real advocate for change in the relationship between aboriginal communities, the province, and the federal government, and with him today, I hope in one of the galleries, are Tammy L. Rain-Dellaire and Darlene Rain. They are both advocates for change for treatment of aboriginal children in child welfare. If they're joining us in either of the public galleries, I'd ask them to please rise and receive the warm welcome. There they are. Thank you very much.

1:40

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

Mr. Bhardwaj: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It's an honour for me to rise today and introduce to you and through you Mr. Satnam Singh Khalon, visiting us from the beautiful province of Punjab, visiting us for the first time. Joining him today are three very good friends and supporters: Gurbhalinder Singh Sandhu, editor for *Des Pardes Times*, as well as Satwinder Singh Khalon and Jaswinder Singh Dhillon, both local businessmen. I ask my guests to please rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of the Assembly.

The Speaker: Are there others? Then please join with me in congratulating the hon. Minister of Transportation, who is today celebrating his arrival into the world many years ago.

Members' Statements

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

Bust a Move Breast Health Awareness Campaign

Mr. Elniski: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It feels like I got a hat trick today.

As I indicated in my introduction, I'm here today to talk about the Alberta Cancer Foundation's latest fundraising event and breast health awareness campaign called Bust a Move. A thousand women from across the city are going to spend March 24 at the AgriCom doing six hours of cardio exercise to raise funds for breast cancer research and breast health awareness. While in the past we have mildly poked fun at the things we do for prostate cancer fundraising, every person here knows someone who has been stricken or otherwise affected by some form of the disease.

This is the inaugural year for Bust a Move's event, and some interesting people have signed on. Richard Simmons of *Sweatin' to the Oldies* fame will be there to offer his encouragement to the participants during the last half-hour of their six-hour exercise marathon. Yes, Mr. Speaker, six hours of cardio is being performed by teams with such creative names as the TaTas, the Breast Friends, and – I could not make this up, I swear – Handfuls of Happiness.

Getting involved is easy. Register, donate money, and take the pledge.

- I will dance, sing, and laugh my way to better health.
- I will celebrate the choices I make to stay healthy . . .
- I will not let the fear of silliness or sweat stand in the way of healthier breasts for all of womankind.

Then after agreeing to all of this, they do six hours of exercise, including something called zumba.

Mr. Speaker, it's serious business. One in eight women will be affected by breast cancer, and this inaugural year of Bust a Move needs to be a success. Thank you very much to my wife, Barb, my niece Melissa, Rita, Mary Anne, Sue, and Merie for entering the team Breast Friends. So far they're the third-highest grossing team, having raised \$2,080, on the way to \$5,000. It's a lofty target, but if you're going to have a goal, you may as well aim high.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Airdrie-Chestermere.

Patient Advocacy by Health Professionals

Mr. Anderson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Welcome to Alberta, a First World province with Third World politics. My next remarks are all direct quotes from the just-released Health Quality Council report on physician intimidation.

More than half of physicians who responded . . . feel their ability to advocate had been limited in the past year . . . Twenty per cent of physicians who advocated experienced "active harmful obstruction."

Four hundred and seventy-eight respondents made comments such as:

- Advised to "not continue speaking"; "labelled negative, misinformed, or speaking out of turn."
- Several were threatened with loss of privileges, having their mental competency questioned, and being "fired" for advocating.
- "Intimidation is real but subtle"; "It's extremely difficult to advocate due to undertones of intimidation and being told to stop being so outspoken."
- "No matter what anyone says, a culture of fear, intimidation, apathy, elitism, inequality, and manipulation exists and has existed for some time."
- "Obvious systemic harassment and intimidation that [affects negatively] on patient safety."

It goes on.

Many interviewees identified, through their own personal experiences or experiences of others, disturbing situations where leaders . . . had attempted to 'muzzle' or intimidate physicians to prevent or cut short their advocacy. In some cases,

this was attributed to leaders being ‘directed’ from external sources, such as politicians [in] the government, to stop the advocacy . . .

These experiences caused significant stress for some of the individuals involved and, in some instances, were life-altering, resulting in career changes or a move out of the province. These situations were seen to have sent a clear message that “if you speak up, this is what can happen to you.”

Premier, call the public inquiry on physician intimidation and get to the bottom of this outrage. Your government’s treatment of our health professionals borders on criminal.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Stony Plain.

Fallen Four Memorial

Mr. Lindsay: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. March 3 marks seven years since four brave young RCMP officers full of promise and hope were shot and killed near Mayerthorpe in the Whitecourt-St. Anne constituency. It was a terrible tragedy that took the lives of constables Peter Schiemann, Leo Johnston, Anthony Gordon, and Brock Myrol.

The volunteer, nonprofit Fallen Four Memorial Society in Mayerthorpe was established and determined that these communities will neither be defined nor defeated by the killings and with determination built a six-acre Fallen Four Memorial Park, which is a fitting tribute to these fallen heroes. Every year they organize a memorial candlelight ceremony around four lifelike bronze statues of Anthony, Leo, Peter, and Brock and a centre obelisk to honour all uniformed police officers, peace officers, soldiers, sheriffs, and first responders who have died in the line of duty across Canada.

On behalf of my neighbours in the Whitecourt-St. Anne constituency I ask that you join them either in thought or in person at the Fallen Four Memorial Park in Mayerthorpe at 7 p.m. on March 3, 2012. Mr. Speaker, joining this proud community to light a candle gives everyone a moment to reflect and remember with dignity those who serve and protect.

To the families of Peter, Brock, Anthony, and Leo, and to all of those who have lost a loved one who wears a uniform, I assure you that the brave are never forgotten.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker. [applause]

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

Problem Gambling

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. This government owns or leases over 13,000 slot machines and up to 6,000 VLTs. It is estimated that they will generate for the province \$1.3 billion next year.

A report from last year indicates that a small percentage of people currently account for the bulk of reported Alberta gaming expenditure. In fact, 75 per cent of reported gaming expenditure comes from roughly 6 per cent of the population. Yesterday the Minister of Finance rejected the research, which states that the proportion of game-specific expenditure accounted for by problem gamblers is 77 per cent for VLTs and 72 per cent for slot machines.

What happens when problem gamblers seek help in our province? Over 72,000 problem gamblers were recently identified; 19,000 wanted help; 8,000 sought help; less than 1,900 received treatment for their gaming problems or addictions from AADAC. Very little money is spent for treatment of problem gambling.

Alberta’s per capita expenditures on problem gambling lag far behind those of other provinces.

This government is very pleased to collect all of the profits from VLTs and slot machines but pretends that problem gambling is not a big issue. We can do better. We certainly must try. First, this government must recognize that we have problems and that they have to be corrected. We must dedicate more of the gambling revenue collected to help those with a gambling habit that is out of control.

We also need to change this government’s shady accounting system, which inflates the revenue figures for VLTs and slot machines. The government is taking a larger percentage of cash played by Albertans in VLTs and slot machines as revenue than it claims.

Thank you.

Oral Question Period

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

Health Quality Council Review Report

Dr. Sherman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. With today’s report the Health Quality Council has walked right up to the Premier and pinned a gold star on her lapel and completely sidestepped the most serious claims that doctors made about patient safety. What else but a whitewash can we expect from a PC-appointed group just weeks before the Premier calls an election?

1:50

Ms Redford: Mr. Speaker, the report, that we just received today, I think from what I’ve seen so far is a very good review of the state of health care at the moment in the province. It’s quite interesting to me that depending on what an hon. member’s perspective may be, it may be considered to be praising the health care system or perhaps criticizing it.

The point is that having just received this report, as we have said, we are looking forward to reviewing it fully, and the minister of health will respond in due time, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: The hon. leader.

Dr. Sherman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Given that the report doesn’t change the facts I know of, that we know doctors are willing to tell under the right circumstances, will the Premier ignore the whitewash and call a proper inquiry that compels doctors to testify and protects them at the same time?

Ms Redford: Mr. Speaker, my recollection of my review of the report so far is that, in fact, one of the things that the Health Quality Council did with respect to doctors that wanted to come forward was to offer them blanket immunity with respect to information that they might provide. My understanding as I go through this is that the Health Quality Council has made some recommendations with respect to whether or not some issues need to be pursued and have in many cases said that they don’t.

The Speaker: The hon. leader.

Dr. Sherman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Given that the report confirms that many, many aspects of the health care system are very sick – and the government has known about this for years – when will the Premier commit to doing the single most important thing so that she can fix it, and that’s double home-care spending to get

seniors out of acute-care beds? Premier, when will you fix the system?

Ms Redford: Mr. Speaker, we have a budget before the House right now that's going to do exactly that. We've been talking about doing that, we'll continue to do that, and we will continue to improve the health care system.

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

Comments at Airdrie Council Meeting

Dr. Sherman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. A news release issued by Airdrie Alderman Allan Hunter, a former lifetime PC supporter, outlines his futile quest for an apology from the Finance minister for his rude and offensive behaviour during this government's infamous pre-election cabinet listening tour. During this so-called listening tour Mr. Hunter expressed his concerns about the government's land-use bills, but instead of listening, the Finance minister started yelling profanities at Mr. Hunter. To the Premier. For the second time in two weeks Albertans are talking about the PC government bullying municipal officials. When will this stop?

Ms Redford: Mr. Speaker, there were very good discussions in January with respect to a number of elected officials and issues across the province. I do understand that there was a conversation that took place. There were a number of people who witnessed that conversation. A frank exchange of views is just fine. It's important discussion. It's important to ensure that we're airing views, and we have nothing else to say on the matter.

Dr. Sherman: Mr. Speaker, it's hard to believe there could have been a good discussion when a minister is yelling profanities and another one is boycotting meetings.

Given that there is nothing the Premier can say about this event that a decent Albertan would believe and trust, why won't the Premier own up to it and say that she and her government are sorry for their government's insufferable arrogance and mistreatment of elected officials in Alberta?

Ms Redford: Mr. Speaker, allegations as to whether comments were or weren't made that are entirely unfounded: we're not going to respond any further to that.

Dr. Sherman: Mr. Speaker, leadership is about taking personal responsibility. Given that the Premier personally shrugged responsibility and lacked leadership in her apology to AUMA last week, will the Premier find the courage this week to order her Minister of Finance to say to Alderman Hunter that he's sorry so that Alderman Hunter can retire gracefully from public service?

Ms Redford: Mr. Speaker, the Minister of Finance has responded as he chooses to respond, and I completely respect his position.

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

Electricity Prices

Dr. Sherman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Yesterday this Premier blamed consumers, hard-working Albertans, for not locking themselves into complicated long-term electrical contracts knowing full well that the regulated rate option was never intended to be a stable option for the lowest prices. Why would this government

make the default option the one that forces Albertans to pay higher prices? Why, Premier?

Ms Redford: Mr. Speaker, at this point in time we know that the prices people are paying for electricity are slightly higher, but we also know that in the past two years those prices have been significantly lower than the national average. What we will say is that it's important for us to ensure that we are protecting consumers from the ups and downs of these variations, and as part of what I said yesterday, the work that we will do in response to some of the policy documents that are currently in the public domain is to have a comprehensive approach. I've directed the Minister of Energy to take a look at these issues, and we will respond in due time.

Dr. Sherman: Mr. Speaker, I wonder if the Premier has checked her electricity bills lately in saying slightly higher.

Given that the PC government keeps repeating that Albertans have options, something consumers in other provinces don't have, options to pay a heck of a lot more, what good is it to have all of these options if they don't include the option of actually paying an affordable price for electricity so that we can heat our homes?

Dr. Morton: Mr. Speaker, I'd like to relay to you a call I had from a senior when I was in my office last Friday. She wanted to know if I had the fixed-rate contract. I said that I did, and she thanked me very much. She said it was a little confusing, but if I had one, it gave her the confidence to go out and do it.

I'd like to ask this MLA and all the people over there: when will you stop trying to scare your constituents and start helping them get the 8-cent rate?

The Speaker: The hon. leader.

Dr. Sherman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The question was to the Premier, not to the wannabe Premier.

Given that the fact is that this PC government made the system so complicated that Albertans need an economist, a lawyer, and a fortune teller to figure it out, why does the Premier refuse to simplify the system for our seniors, for our working families, for these children's parents, a system that reeks of flim-flammy, jiggery-pokery, and corporate profiteering? Why, Premier?

Dr. Morton: Mr. Speaker, once again I'm happy to inform the members and inform all Albertans that there are 11 different companies with programs out there. I am on a program. I'm happy to repeat it: 8 cents a kilowatt hour guaranteed for the next five years, and I can get out of that contract with one month's notice.

Why don't you start helping people instead of trying to scare them for short-term advantage?

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Fish Creek.

Alleged Intimidation of Physicians

Mrs. Forsyth: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Everyday Albertans, our families and seniors, have watched their health care system deteriorate for the past several years at the hands of this government. Today's scathing Health Quality Council report confirms what we've known for years: physicians have been muzzled and intimidated against advocating for their patients. More than half of the doctors surveyed said that advocacy is limited, and 1 in 5 reported active, harmful obstruction of patient advocacy. Will the Premier, then, finally do the right thing and fulfill her promise and call an independent . . .

The Speaker: The hon. the Premier. [interjection] The hon. the Premier, please.

Ms Redford: Mr. Speaker, what we have been saying in this House and the legislation that we passed in the fall will do exactly that.

Mrs. Forsyth: You're a lawyer. You know better than that.

Given that today's report from the Health Quality Council confirms that there have been several instances of doctor intimidation and given that we know there are many more physicians out there who won't give their testimony unless they are given the full protection of a judge and given that you yourself, Premier, said in June that only an inquiry with subpoena powers can give us the real answers, when will you admit that your inquiry legislation is nothing but bad medicine and finally call a judicial . . .

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Horne: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Well, as we've said, the government has just received the report. We are going to take the time over the next few days to review the recommendations in detail, and those recommendations will greatly inform the development of terms of reference for the inquiry that has been promised by the Premier.

I might also say to the hon. member, Mr. Speaker, that this report makes several recommendations about things that can also be done outside of an inquiry process to improve the relationship and advocacy opportunities for physicians and other health providers. We're committed to that. We'll continue to work with the AMA to make sure that happens.

2:00

Mrs. Forsyth: That's a cop-out, Minister. The health professionals in this province do not trust you.

Given that Albertans have a right to know the full nature of this government's record on health care and given that this Premier has known since June that with the allegations of a culture of intimidation there is a reason for a full judicial inquiry, why, Mrs. Premier, have you sat on your hands for the past four and a half months with broken promise after broken promise while Albertans have been waiting for an answer? Call the full judicial inquiry today.

Mr. Horne: Mr. Speaker, I don't know how many times we have to repeat the same answer in this House over and over. The government is committed to calling the inquiry. We will take the opportunity to review the recommendations in the report to inform the terms of reference.

If the opposition wants to dismiss the contents of the report, 10 months of work and 21 recommendations, and think that they have the answers, they're welcome to express those to Albertans. This process is not about individual members of this House, the government, or the opposition. This is about Albertans and their experience in our health care system and how we will work to improve that.

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

Health Quality Council Review Report (continued)

Ms Notley: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. A year after being elected, this government broke the Conservative election promise to build

more long-term care beds and then threw our health care system into chaos with dramatic reorganization. Now, given the clear connection between these actions and today's documented crisis in our emergency rooms and around physician intimidation will the Premier take a modicum of responsibility and ask for the resignation of the Member for Calgary-West?

Ms Redford: No.

Ms Notley: Hardly a surprise, given their record so far.

Given that the Health Quality Council report documented that half of the physicians felt constrained in their ability to advocate for patients and a third felt that they had been subjected to retribution that was related to political interference, will the Premier call a public inquiry that specifically examines political interference in and around intimidation of the operation of our health care system?

Ms Redford: Mr. Speaker, some of the recommendations in this report are quite interesting. In fact, one of the recommendations in this report is that, let me see – the Health Quality Council is further recommending that the time and money that would be needed for a public inquiry into intimidation and advocacy should instead be devoted to other things. However, this government passed legislation in the fall that fully committed to a judge-led inquiry once the report was released. We said we would consider the report, establish terms of reference, call the inquiry, and we will.

Ms Notley: Well, Mr. Speaker, I hate to break it to you, but no one trusts this government on any of these issues anymore.

Now, given that the report outlines that the ER crisis is a result of the long-term-care bed failure and given that the report identifies reorganization with no rationale as a huge problem, an explanation for all of the problems, will the Premier at the very least in her next press conference look Albertans in the eye through the camera and apologize to them for the outrageous record of this government in health care over the last three years?

Ms Redford: Mr. Speaker, we are committed to expanding long-term-care beds in this province, and we will. The other thing that we have said is that there will be no further reorganizations of the health care system. We have a health care system that needs to provide public health care to Albertans. We have a minister in charge of this department who works with Alberta Health Services to do just that, and we'll continue to do that.

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

Health Services Labour Negotiations

Ms Blakeman: Thanks very much, Mr. Speaker. Not until 800 of them took to the picket lines last week did Alberta Health Services finally agree to go to binding arbitration to settle its contract dispute with this province's hard-working hospital support staff. Meanwhile AHS's contract with Alberta's licensed practical nurses and nursing aides is up at the end of the month. To the minister of health, who's not having a good day: will the LPNs and nursing aides also have to walk off the job to get this government to bargain in good faith?

Mr. Horne: Well, Mr. Speaker, as a matter of fact, I am having a very good day, thank you very much.

What I will tell you, Mr. Speaker, with respect to the hon. member's question is that, yes, there are a number of labour organizations in the province at the moment that are in negotiations

with government or with arms of government such as Alberta Health Services. We will continue to negotiate fairly and openly. We all want to see these issues resolved through the process of negotiation, but we will not dictate to the people doing the negotiation nor will we debate on the floor of this House the terms of those agreements.

The Speaker: The hon. member, please.

Ms Blakeman: Thanks very much, Mr. Speaker. Well, I'd very interested in hearing how the minister is having such a good day when we have labour negotiations in such disarray.

Mr. Horne: Mr. Speaker, the labour negotiations process includes opportunities for negotiation, obviously. It also includes provisions for when negotiations fail. The particular dispute to which the hon. member refers is now in a process called mediation/arbitration. It's being led by a highly respected mediator in Alberta. The terms of the process were defined by the parties involved in the agreement, and I think Albertans and all members of this House should have every confidence that that process will conclude fairly.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Ms Blakeman: Thanks very much, Mr. Speaker. Well, back to the same minister. I'd be interested in knowing how it is in good faith or good management to oppose the request for an arbitrator to settle the lengthy contract dispute with the province's physicians.

Mr. Horne: Mr. Speaker, I have no idea about the issue the hon. member is referring to. We are in active negotiations with the Alberta Medical Association at present. I'm not going to disclose the details of those discussions. I will tell you that they are productive, that they are positive, that the current president of the AMA is a family physician and is uniquely positioned to understand one of this government's top priorities in health care, access to family physicians and other primary health care providers.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Strathcona.

European Union Fuel Quality Directive

Mr. Quest: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Tomorrow members of the European Union are scheduled to vote on the proposed fuel quality directive that discriminates against Alberta oil. Many of my constituents are very much reliant on the energy sector. To the Premier: can I honestly tell my constituents and can we tell all Albertans that we've done everything possible to see that our oil is not unfairly labelled?

Ms Redford: Mr. Speaker, the first thing we're going to do and have been doing in Europe for the past year through many visits by ministers of energy and our minister of international relations as well as our office in London and working with the federal government is to make sure that people know the truth about oil sands product.

We believe that the FQD does unfairly discriminate against our product as a source. We've made that case. We don't know what the result of the vote will be tomorrow, Mr. Speaker. We've advocated; we will continue to advocate regardless of the outcome.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Quest: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My first supplemental to the Minister of Intergovernmental, International and Aboriginal Rela-

tions: we've got two international offices in Europe, yet it doesn't seem like we can get our message across. Are these offices really effective?

Mr. Dallas: Yes, they are, Mr. Speaker. Our Alberta United Kingdom office, led by Jeff Sundquist, has been spearheading our efforts to provide the European Union with facts – facts – about Alberta's responsible development.

We've been meeting with Members of Parliament, government officials, industry, and influencers right across Europe. Albertans can feel very confident that we are doing everything that we can in this matter, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Quest: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My final supplemental to the same minister. The federal government has indicated it may challenge the FQD to the World Trade Organization if it is passed tomorrow. What is Alberta's position on this?

Mr. Dallas: Mr. Speaker, we work closely with the federal government on matters relating to the oil sands, and certainly this is no exception. I can't speculate on which way the decision will go; however, I can say that we will take the appropriate action necessary to protect the interests of Albertans and all Canadians. Our oil sands hold economic significance not only for our province but right across this country, and we'll take all of the steps necessary to defend them on the international stage.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre, followed by the hon. Member for Bonnyville-Cold Lake.

Diagnostic Billing Code for Sexual Orientation

Ms Blakeman: Thanks very much, Mr. Speaker. In December of 2010 the minister of health agreed with my constituent and I that doctors' diagnostic billing codes listing sexual orientation under mental illness was unacceptable, but those billing codes are in use in exactly the same place and say the same things today. All that happened was that the reference to them was removed from public websites and information. My question to the Minister of Health and Wellness: tell me why those exact same diagnostic billing codes are still in use in this province today, listing sexual orientation counselling under mental illness.

Mr. Horne: Well, Mr. Speaker, I thank the hon. member for the question. While I won't have a lot to offer in terms of a detailed answer – and I would be happy to look into it and get back to her – what I can tell the hon. member is that government does not on its own set billing codes. There are a variety of factors that come into play, including the role of our physicians, including research that informs these decisions. However, I do want the hon. member to know that I have a significant degree of sympathy for the concern that she has raised, and I will look into it.

2:10

Ms Blakeman: That's what the last minister said, but we'll give this one a chance.

Even given the laborious process, I'm sure, to work this out with the Alberta Medical Association and other physicians that use the billing codes, shouldn't the government show leadership and do the right thing: change those building codes?

Mr. Horne: Well, Mr. Speaker, as I said, I would like the opportunity to look into this in a bit more detail and get back to the hon. member. There are a number of ways that new billing codes or

amended billing codes can be initiated in the system. It is not a decision that the government makes on its own. Physicians have an opportunity to influence new and modified billing codes, as do other entities. I'd be pleased to look into this process and get back to the hon. member.

Ms Blakeman: Okay. Well, back to the same minister. What I am seeking here is a commitment to action. Perhaps the minister could comment on whether removing the diagnostic billing codes from public view solved the issue of the government and physicians coding sexual orientation as a mental illness. I don't think it did. It was just hidden. The minister's response?

Mr. Horne: Well, Mr. Speaker, I don't have any knowledge of how or when the billing codes appear in the public domain and when they don't. What I will tell the hon. member is that I would agree with her that simply changing where the billing codes are publicly available does not address the issue that she has raised. I'd be pleased to look into it.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Bonnyville-Cold Lake, followed by the hon. Member for Calgary-Buffalo.

Oil Sands Transportation Coordinating Committee

Mrs. Leskiw: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Oil sands are very important not only to Wood Buffalo but to my constituency of Bonnyville-Cold Lake. A day does not go by without somebody bringing transportation issues about highway 63 or highway 55. My first question is to the Minister of Transportation. I understand the oil sands transportation advisory committee met for the first time yesterday in Fort McMurray. Can you help explain to this House how we can ensure that this committee provides real solutions that support oil sands growth?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Danyluk: Well, thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. The coordinating committee includes representatives from municipalities, from the industry, and from the province. The discussions that took place yesterday reflected the needs of Albertans in the area. By having these players at the table, priorities that they recommend will reflect the transportation needs of those Albertans in that area.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mrs. Leskiw: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My last question is to the same minister. Was anything actually accomplished at this first meeting? Are we actually going to see some changes in our highways up in the north?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Danyluk: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. In fact, the discussions of the first meeting were very productive. They set priorities and reviewed the CRISP report. Also, if I can say, what I understand is that there was unanimous focus that the east corridor would be preferable as far as the transportation corridor or, let's say, a relief route, a multipurpose corridor. They also discussed ways to fund these projects. It's definitely off to a good start.

Funding for Private Schools

Mr. Hehr: Yesterday we learned that although the minister will make public school boards disclose financial information online for

public scrutiny, he will not impose the same principles of openness and transparency on private schools that receive taxpayer dollars. To the Minister of Education: where will the information regarding private schools be available for the public to see online? Will this be in the same format required for our public school boards?

Mr. Lukaszuk: Mr. Speaker, either this member did not listen to my answer yesterday or he is purposefully changing my answer for the purposes of this forum. I have been very clear that I will have the same expectations for private school boards as I have for public school boards relevant to the portion of dollars that is appropriated to private schools from the public purse, being from the government of Alberta.

Mr. Hehr: Well, Mr. Speaker, let's call a spade a spade here. All the money that goes to these private schools is put into a pot, and then they provide their services from that. I think the public has a right to know what services are being provided in these private schools, and that should be available online.

Mr. Lukaszuk: Well, Mr. Speaker, this member wants a very simple answer to a very simple question, but the answer, unfortunately, is more complex. Private schools are funded up to 70 per cent by the government of Alberta, and the remainder of the funding is money raised by parents and by those who support the school. They have to be accountable for the 70 per cent that they receive from the government of Alberta, but the 30 per cent that they raise within their own means by way of tuition or donations is something that they have to be accountable for to the donors or whoever supplies them with that 30 per cent.

Mr. Hehr: The hon. minister knows full well that the 70 per cent of the money that he receives from taxpayers goes into a big pot of money, and they provide services from that pot. We want to see what that 70 per cent is augmenting for the services that are provided at the school. I think the public has a right to know what is going on in our private schools. Will that be online?

Mr. Lukaszuk: Mr. Speaker, the reason we pride ourselves in this province on having one of the best education systems in the world is because of the choice. This member and, frankly, the Liberal opposition have been harping for months already to close down or get rid of private schools. This government will not do that because they provide a viable option to parents, and obviously parents choose to exercise it because they're sending their kids to public schools, which makes our private schools and public schools and charter schools and home-schooling that much more viable.

Home-schooling

Ms DeLong: A number of my constituents currently choose to home-school their children and provide them with the upbringing that they support as a family. Along this same vein the Minister of Education just a few moments ago even suggested that one of the greatest strengths of Alberta's education system is choice of a variety of educational programs. My questions are to the Minister of Education. Can the minister assure me and these parents that this government continues to support the choice of home-schooling within our education system?

Mr. Lukaszuk: Mr. Speaker, the simple answer would be yes. This government is committed to choice, and that is why in this province we have Catholic education and nondenominational

education, private education, home-schooling, charter schooling, and the list goes on and on. Whenever bona fide home-schooling takes place, we are very supportive of that because it has proven itself, again, to be a viable choice for parents who choose to take that option. This government has historically been supportive of it, and there is no reason to believe that anything in that realm will change.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Ms DeLong: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. To the same minister: since you're such a strong proponent of choice, how are you ensuring that all home educators in this province will continue to be able to determine what their children learn?

Mr. Lukaszuk: Mr. Speaker, home-schoolers are no different from any other parent in the system. Parents under the current legislation, being the School Act, and the proposed legislation on the floor of the Legislature will always have the choice of opting out of certain aspects of programs or education that they feel are not appropriate for their own child.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Ms DeLong: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The home-schooling parents that contacted me are highly invested and proud of the exceptional educational standards that their children are attaining. But what about others where home-schooling is maybe just a default decision? What minimum accountability provisions are included for educational programs in this province?

Mr. Lukaszuk: Mr. Speaker, by and large home-schooling has worked quite fine for children, and that is because we have committed parents not only in the home-schooling community but, frankly, in the entire Alberta education community. That is another pillar that makes our education so strong. We will be looking at situations where, perhaps, this home-schooling clause is utilized for purposes other than home-schooling, which perhaps results in the education being inadequate, but that does not pertain to traditional home-schooling families that choose to educate their children at home.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona, followed by the hon. Member for Calgary-Buffalo.

Long-term and Continuing Care Beds

Ms Notley: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The Health Quality Council report identifies that at the heart of this government's failure to address ER wait times is its inability to create adequate numbers of long-term care and continuing care spaces in the community, spaces that people need to be able to be moved out from the hospital into the community. Given that will the Minister of Seniors explain to Albertans why, after three years of being asked, his ministry is unable to report on the number of continuing care spaces created by category of care level offered?

Mr. VanderBurg: Well, thank you for that question. Mr. Speaker, last night in estimates I attempted, attempted poorly, to explain the situation. There has not been a decrease in long-term care facilities or beds in this province. There's been a slight increase, probably not enough, but there's been a slight increase. I explained last night that I will definitely have a full report back to the chairman for everybody to review, class by class, number by number, and that will be given next week.

2:20

Ms Notley: Well, Mr. Speaker, given that an SL 1 unit presumes that a senior lives independently, requires no care of any kind, and lives in a unit that requires no wheelchair and an SL 4 unit presumes the senior has complex medical needs that may require built-in mechanical lifts, tube-feeding capacity, and 24-hour care, will the minister admit that his ministry's and his government's inability to report on the number of units by type throughout the province, given what we've just had described by the Health Quality Council, is nothing short of negligent?

Mr. VanderBurg: Again, Mr. Speaker, as I explained to this member last night, one of the issues that I found frustrating in the past four months is the designation that we have for our different types of seniors' facilities. To me it would be simple to have a classification 1, 2, 3, light, medium, heavy. These classifications that we've got have to be straightened out, and it's a commitment that I've made to all of you that we will over the next 12 months have a review of those classifications.

Ms Notley: Well, Mr. Speaker, given that you can't ask somebody to move out of an acute-care bed until you can describe the type of bed you're asking them to move into and given that over half a billion dollars of taxpayers' money has been spent in the last four years on these so-called continuing care spaces, why does the minister of health, perhaps, not believe that Albertans have a right to know exactly what kind of continuing care units their tax dollars have been building over the last four years?

Mr. Horne: Mr. Speaker, what Albertans have a right to is to know that the government will continue to fund affordable living spaces for them that provide a level of health care that will meet their needs. I wholeheartedly agree that we need a range of spaces available that provide very light care to very heavy care, including palliative care, I might say, for people who are in need of that type of service. But what we will not do is return to the continuing care model of the 1970s, where we typed people by beds instead of by their health care needs.

Bullying in Private Schools

Mr. Hehr: This government is taking a hard line against bullying in public schools, a move that I applaud, but they are intentionally excluding children who attend private schools from protection against bullying. Time after time this government bends the rules so that private institutions can have their own way. To the Minister of Education: can the minister agree that the same set of rules respecting bullying policies should apply to both public school boards and publicly funded private schools?

Mr. Lukaszuk: Mr. Speaker, I think I just said in one of my recent answers that this member will find any angle he possibly can to shut down private schools in Alberta. I would strongly encourage this man to just stand up and say, "Please get rid of private schools in Alberta" because this is where it's heading.

To answer your question, I expect any and all learning institutions in Alberta to provide a nurturing, welcoming, and respectful environment.

Mr. Hehr: Please, Mr. Education Minister, stop publicly funding private schools.

Nevertheless, if this government is so committed to protecting kids in Alberta, why won't private schools be required to provide the same protection against bullying as is required in our public schools?

Mr. Lukaszuk: Mr. Speaker, I know that the Sikh community in Alberta, for example, is very supportive of private schools, so I'm wondering if he is speaking on behalf of his entire Liberal caucus. Having said that, I will tell you that my answer is clear and simple. I expect any and all learning institutions in the province of Alberta, be they private or public, to provide a nurturing, welcoming, and respectful environment not only for students but also for staff.

Mr. Hehr: I will ask the minister if he finds it good practice to have one standard for one school jurisdiction and another standard for other publicly funded school systems.

Mr. Lukaszuk: Mr. Speaker, I don't know how many times and how differently I can say that. I expect the same standard of respect and a welcoming and nurturing environment to occur in all learning institutions. Whether children are attending a private school or a public school, there is no difference. As a matter of fact, we will have legislation that will be speaking to bullying, and I'm glad that the member is supporting it.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Hays, followed by the hon. Member for Fort McMurray-Wood Buffalo.

Supply of Skilled Tradespeople

Mr. Johnston: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Alberta's economic growth is in danger of being stunted by a drastic shortage of skilled workers. One forecast suggests that our province will be short 40,000 tradespeople in the construction sector alone by the end of this decade. The numbers vary from forecast to forecast, but the real question is: what is Alberta doing to try and reverse this trend? My questions are all to the Minister of Advanced Education and Technology. What is your department doing to open up training spaces to try and make up the difference?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Weadick: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. As we've heard, this is a significant issue across the province. This government is committed to training and educating our future workforce. To that end we've improved the apprenticeship ratios across the province and we've maintained seats through some very difficult financial times in the apprenticeships. Our partnership with our employers is important. It's hard to apprentice if you don't have a job, so we're asking our employers to please step up and hire an apprentice so that they can begin that very necessary training.

Mr. Johnston: Mr. Speaker, my second question is to the same minister. Alberta has over 60 trades in occupation, yet only four are available online. Why aren't all trades available via e-learning?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Weadick: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. This is something fairly new. We have four of our most sought-after trades online, and we're working as we speak to look for opportunities to allow training online. The reason for this is so that tradesmen can stay at home during their education process or stay in their places of employment to provide support to their employers, to ultimately get that training online and not have to leave home and leave their families. So we're going to move and continue to move more of our training online as it's appropriate.

Mr. Johnston: My final question to the same minister. Foreign workers represent another potential solution to the labour

shortage, but are Alberta's credentialing and validation requirements strong enough to make sure that our province gets the workers that we need?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Weadick: Well, thank you. We're very fortunate that each and every year people move to Alberta, 80,000 or 90,000 last year from across Canada and around the world. Mr. Speaker, they don't just bring their families; they bring their skills and their trades, so we must work closely with them.

We currently have 22 practical exams in 15 trades. We're working on practical assessments to ensure that our tradesmen are capable of doing the job. We don't just want them to be able to do their job on paper; they have to be able to do it on the job site.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Fort McMurray-Wood Buffalo, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Creek.

Health Quality Council Review Report (continued)

Mr. Boutilier: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Dr. Cowell from the Health Quality Council said today that Albertans should not – and I repeat: should not – be satisfied with its findings. Albertans want to know what the heck is going on within their health care system. Will this minister call a public inquiry within the next week, well before we go to a provincial election?

Mr. Horne: Well, Mr. Speaker, I'm not sure what specific comment the hon. member is attempting to attribute to Dr. Cowell. What I can say is what the Premier of this province has said repeatedly and I have also echoed in this House. This government is committed to a fully independent inquiry. We will take the necessary time to review this report and its detailed recommendations, that will inform the terms of reference for the inquiry, and we'll have more to say about this in the coming days.

Mr. Boutilier: Given, Mr. Speaker, the Health Quality Council's indictment of this government and this minister's watch not only as the minister of health but also as the junior minister of health will he call a public inquiry within the next seven days?

Mr. Horne: Mr. Speaker, I'm aware of no personal indictment directed either at me or at any other member of this House, so I'd be very interested to know where the hon. member gets substantiation for that statement.

What I will say, Mr. Speaker, and we will continue to say is that our commitment to a fully independent inquiry continues. What we will not do is play politics with this, and we will not schedule inquiries in order to suit the political timetables of other caucuses in this House.

Mr. Boutilier: Mr. Speaker, given that this is nothing but politics and given that the government appointed the very superboard that is under your watch with Alberta Health Services, will you now call a public inquiry within seven days so that Albertans can get to the bottom of what is going on within their hospitals? Or are you trying to hide something before an election?

Mr. Horne: Well, Mr. Speaker, the hon. member is welcome to his fixation on political cycles and his own political timing. If the hon. member has somehow been able to read through, analyze, and reach a determination and concrete opinion on a 420-page report in a little more than a couple of hours, then I'm certainly amazed at his abilities.

We are committed to the process of the inquiry. We will make an informed decision about appropriate terms of reference, and we will bring them forward to Albertans.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Creek, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

2:30 Online Camping Reservation System

Mr. Zwozdesky: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Alberta's parks and recreation areas are world renowned for their beauty, their serenity, and their exquisite amenities. They're truly marvellous, and that's largely thanks to the very dedicated parks personnel who care for them and for our visitors on a regular basis. Now, many of my own constituents are very excited by the prospect of the upcoming camping season, which is just around the corner, but they've experienced some difficulties with the online booking process. My questions are to the Minister of Tourism, Parks and Recreation. Mr. Minister, can you please explain to my constituents why so many of them were left on hold for over half an hour and then abruptly cut off, it seems, when they were trying to do some early registrations over the past couple of weeks?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Hayden: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker, and thank you to the member for the question. First of all, it is appropriate that I apologize. We have actually been caught by surprise this year at the success of our online booking. To give you an indication of what has happened, last year we took bookings for over 300,000 sites through the season. Yesterday alone we opened up bookings for the May long weekend, and we booked 2,500 spots in one day, half of our available spots, which is 5,000. So I apologize.

Mr. Zwozdesky: Well, that'll be refreshing news to my constituents, who were just looking for answers. Thank you.

Now, my second question is to the same minister, Mr. Speaker. Since many campers actually start planning their summer holidays and their work schedules and so on in January and February, I wonder if you could open up the registration process so that they could start booking far earlier than just 90 days ahead of the traditional time that they want booked.

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Hayden: Well, thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. In fact, I would love to be able to do that, but that wouldn't meet the needs of all Albertans. Not all Albertans know exactly when their holidays can take place. If we went all the way through the season and opened up those bookings, those Albertans that can at the last minute get away with their families wouldn't have the options. That's why we've chosen this system.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Zwozdesky: Okay. Thank you. Given that several camping areas are contracted out to capable private operators, could you look into whether or not you can institute a policy that would somehow allow these private operators to be around and more available during January and February? Apparently, some of my constituents have tried to book some of these contracted-out sites, but there was no answer and no response. I'm not faulting anyone. I'm just wondering if you could look at your policy to fix it.

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Hayden: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. We can take a look and see if there are other options, but the private operators, in fact, don't start until May 1. It's just not a viable business option for them to be in there at other times. We can take a look as we develop our booking system further. There may be some opportunities for us to be of assistance.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre, followed by the hon. Member for Red Deer-North.

Bear Management near Work Camps

Ms Blakeman: Thanks very much, Mr. Speaker. It turns out that this government is the single biggest killer of bears in Alberta. What else could we expect since it is the government that allows increased human-bear interaction by approving camps and oil development in bear habitat. Bottom line: this government could be insisting on rules on where to allow dump and how to discourage bear entry, but it doesn't. My questions are to the Minister of SRD. What is the reason the government is not taking the proactive steps to ensure the best possible protection for the bears at these sites, from location to proper fencing around dumps, to litter pickup, and food storage?

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Sustainable Resource Development.

Mr. Oberle: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise today to share, actually, the concern of the hon. member. I'm very troubled by the report that I saw in the paper today. As a result, I have already this morning ordered a review of where our rules and regulations around camps stand with best practices in kitchen and camp management and refuse management on-site and how our department stands with monitoring and inspections of those same rules.

Ms Blakeman: Well, I can help the minister with that. Following the Conklin bear kill in 2009, where the fence was in such bad shape that it was easier for the bears to just walk through the fence than go around to the open part of it, an internal e-mail recommended that an SRD committee be set up to minimize bears killed at landfills. What happened to this committee and its risk mitigation for bears?

Mr. Oberle: Well, indeed, Mr. Speaker, we have been doing exactly that work, and we have had some success. Unfortunately, last year because of a combination of environmental factors, weather and berry crop, we had an unbelievable number of bears coming into populated areas. [interjections] They apparently don't want to hear the answer, but just in the northeast of Alberta 530 human-bear interactions. When the fish and wildlife officers attend, they have to act in the interests of human safety. I'm more interested in the protection then, and I'm going to do what I can to resolve this.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Ms Blakeman: Thanks very much, Mr. Speaker. Back to the same minister. I think that the government would agree that much has changed in northern Alberta since 1993. Yes? Yet this department continues to use an old management plan for black bears written in exactly that year. Now, why is that? You're still using a 20-year-old management plan. Why?

Mr. Oberle: Mr. Speaker, as I said, I'm reviewing what our department is doing, and I will move to act.

I will say, though, that I'd be deeply, deeply disappointed if we have to establish rules and regulations to get companies to do what I think they should be doing in the interests of the safety of their own workers. I'm very disappointed. At the same time, I will say that many of the companies have been extremely co-operative, working with industrial BearSmart and other training programs, and we are making progress out there.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Red Deer-North.

Labour Mobility Barriers

Mrs. Jablonski: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Under the agreement on internal trade Manitoba recently challenged Ontario for failing to license certified general accountants from outside of Ontario who served Ontario-based clients. They put roadblocks up against hard-working Albertans and other Canadians. To the Minister of Intergovernmental, International and Aboriginal Relations: how is your ministry going to ensure that Alberta's goal of free-flowing labour mobility continues for Alberta workers?

Mr. Dallas: Thanks to the hon. member for the question. Mr. Speaker, we were very involved in supporting Manitoba's challenge. Along with B.C. and Saskatchewan we acted as an intervenor and presented a very strong case before the dispute panel on behalf of Alberta's CGAs. This is an example of why I requested additional funding in Budget 2012, to address these kinds of specific issues. We'll continue to break down barriers to labour mobility and trade in Canada.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mrs. Jablonski: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. To the Minister of Human Services: why is Alberta in favour of any agreement that could make it easier for our professionals such as accountants to leave this province and go to Ontario?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Of course, labour mobility goes two ways. We support the idea that there should be free trade within the country. We want people to be able to come to Alberta and supply us with services, but we also want Albertans to go elsewhere. It was very important for us. This time it was accountants going to Ontario, but next week it could be workers coming to Alberta. Labour mobility barriers need to be reduced, and Alberta will continue to advocate for this to make it easier for workers to go where the jobs are.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mrs. Jablonski: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My last question, again to the Minister of Human Services. I continue to hear concerns about a possible labour shortage. Why are we not doing more to recruit workers from across Canada?

Mr. Hancock: Well, Mr. Speaker, I can say that these days Alberta is gaining much more than it's losing when it comes to labour mobility. By the end of the third quarter last year almost 24,000 people had moved to Alberta from other parts of Canada. We welcome these people. We need them to help continue to grow our labour force, and quite frankly we're very positive about the fact that Canadians from coast to coast recognize the great opportunities that are here in Alberta. Supporting labour mobility

is a two-way street, and I'm confident that Canadians seeking good opportunities will find that all roads lead back to Alberta. In short, we're going to be short 114,000 workers over the next 10 years.

The Speaker: Hon. members, that concludes the question-and-response period today. Eighteen members were recognized today. There were 106 questions and responses.

We'll continue the Routine in a few seconds from now.

2:40 Members' Statements (continued)

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Red Deer-North.

Scotties Tournament of Hearts

Mrs. Jablonski: Thank you. Mr. Speaker, Canada has long distinguished itself as the number one curling nation in the world. Nowhere else is the competition as keen and the path to the top so difficult as it is here in Canada. That's why I'm so excited to welcome the 2012 Scotties Tournament of Hearts to Red Deer.

Curling is one of the major sports in this country, with over 1 million Canadians taking part every year. It's also popular among television viewers, with a reach of more than 3 million for the Scotties championship final.

Major events like the Scotties tournament bring thousands of visitors to our province and help continue to build Alberta's reputation as a world-class tourism and sport destination. Red Deer is the sports capital of Alberta, home to the Alberta Sports Hall of Fame. This is the fifth time that the Canadian women's curling championship has been held there. The 2004 championship in Red Deer had a total attendance of 112,866, and that's second only to Regina in 1998.

Mr. Speaker, I'm pleased to recognize the many volunteers who worked tirelessly to make this event a success, including chairperson Sherri Ryckman; vice chairs Tracy Bush, Lyle Treiber, and Bob More; director of ticket sales, Andy Metzger; director of security, Ivan Simon; Doug Marchment, director of transportation and team services; and all the 520 other volunteers whose hard work and commitment make this event a success.

I would also like to congratulate all the teams for their tremendous achievements, and I wish them all the best of luck. I was pleased to meet all of the teams on Friday night, and I was really pleased to have dinner with Team Canada, represented by curlers from Saskatchewan.

The 2012 Scotties Tournament of Hearts is continuing in Red Deer at the Westerner Park until Sunday, and I encourage everyone to come and enjoy some exciting curling. Mr. Speaker, as the curlers would say, hurry hard.

Thank you.

The Speaker: And no update today on the *Dancing with the Stars* program?

The hon. Member for Calgary-Lougheed.

Harley Hotchkiss

Mr. Rodney: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Yesterday on behalf of our Minister of Health of Wellness and with our Minister of Advanced Education and Technology I had the great pleasure of attending a wonderful tribute to the late Harley Hotchkiss during which our government joined the University of Calgary in launching the Campus Alberta neuroscience international scholars program. Our \$5 million investment will help to build Alberta's

strengths in neuroscience research and address critical needs of Albertans, leading to improvements in their quality of life and in our health care system.

Mr. Hotchkiss made important contributions to our province and our nation, particularly in his contributions to health research right here in Alberta. As the founding donor of the world-renowned Hotchkiss Brain Institute Harley greatly increased attention to neurological and mental health care issues. He knew that addictions and chronic diseases affect thousands of Albertans and, because of that, our government partnered with him in the international scholars program, which will strengthen neuroscience research and one day lead to new treatments.

The new scholars program will support Alberta universities by helping them to attract the world's best neuroscientists to our province so they can exchange ideas and knowledge with Alberta students and researchers. With this new government support the universities of Calgary, Alberta, and Lethbridge will also jointly host an annual neuroscience symposium to showcase research breakthroughs.

This investment will not only improve our research capability. It will also serve as a lasting, fitting legacy honouring Harley Hotchkiss, a visionary leader with a generous spirit who made outstanding contributions to health research in Alberta. I believe Harley would like me to end this member's statement with: go, Flames, go.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Introduction of Bills

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Education.

Bill 4

St. Albert and Sturgeon Valley School Districts Establishment Act

Mr. Lukaszuk: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Today I request leave to introduce Bill 4, the St. Albert and Sturgeon Valley School Districts Establishment Act.

This legislation ensures that the residents of St. Albert and the Sturgeon Valley have access to the same education opportunities that are offered elsewhere in the province. Let me be clear. There is no question about the quality of education currently being offered in these communities. What we are ensuring is choice and voice for parents, the choice of a public education or a separate, Roman Catholic education and voice in choosing or running for the position of a school board trustee.

Mr. Speaker, Greater St. Albert Catholic schools, St. Albert Protestant schools, and the Sturgeon school division worked hard to identify ways to find the right balance between recognizing community history, supporting choice, honoring students' and parental rights, and collaborating across communities to meet students' needs. The proposed solution reflects much of their work, and I am proud to present it to the House.

With that, I move first reading of Bill 4.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

[Motion carried; Bill 4 read a first time]

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Environment and Water.

Bill 6

Property Rights Advocate Act

Mrs. McQueen: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. I request leave to

introduce Bill 6, the Property Rights Advocate Act.

Bill 6 will establish the property rights advocate office as part of the Ministry of Justice and Attorney General. The proposed legislation supports the government's position that landowners must have recourse to an independent tribunal, the courts, or both for the purpose of determining full and fair compensation for access to their land.

The office will share independent and impartial information about property rights and help people determine the appropriate resolution mechanism, including the courts. This office will be required to table an annual report on the office's business each year in the Legislature to help instill landowner confidence that the government is transparent and accountable for its record on respecting property rights.

Therefore, Mr. Speaker, I move first reading of Bill 6, the Property Rights Advocate Act.

[Motion carried; Bill 6 read a first time]

Tabling Returns and Reports

The Speaker: The hon. Solicitor General and Minister of Public Security.

Mr. Denis: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I'm rising on behalf of the hon. Minister of Finance, who's asked me to table five copies of RBC's budget 2012, key indicators. To quote from the document, it talks about the budget having "conservative assumptions for key economic indicators," indicates that they're "confident that the fiscal plan will allow the Alberta government to return to budget balance on schedule."

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre on behalf of the Leader of the Official Opposition.

Ms Blakeman: No. Just myself.

The Speaker: Go ahead. Proceed.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I'm tabling the document that I referenced today in my question to the Minister of Sustainable Resource Development in which an internal memo recognizes that the minister of the environment was writing to the Minister of SRD regarding the establishment of a committee to minimize black bears killed at landfills.

Thank you.

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

Mr. Chase: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I am tabling a further 20 e-mails and letters out of the hundreds I've received from the following individuals who are seeking the preservation of the Castle wilderness, many of whom have personally visited the Castle and all of whom believe clear-cutting will damage the ecology, watershed, wildlife, and natural species and must be prohibited at all costs: Barbara Collier, Susan Sargent, Marcus Peterson, Hans Buhrmann, Diane Beckett, Jessica Hein, Deanna Renyk, Kristin Cavoukian, James Ramsay, Richard Mertl, Margot Boyd, Marcel Roberge, Doug Alton, Ann Truyens, Adam Grickites, Andrea Hawkes, Shelagh Emmott, Twyla Douaire, Ian Whyte, and Mary Furlong.

Thank you.

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

Ms Notley: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I have the appropriate number of copies of a letter from Jens and Ulla Hansen of Bonnyville, who wrote to us, "Thank you for standing up for the Grass Root people of Alberta," and enclosed a copy of their utilities bill from January, \$227 more than it was the previous year.

I also have a letter from Eric Latter of Hill Spring, and he writes about how his bill this year is a 58 per cent increase over last year's bill. He wrote to tell us how difficult it is to make ends meet as a low-income senior.

I have a letter from Brian Stalder of Lloydminster, who sent us a note saying that he switched to Direct Energy in December 2011 and that the bill still climbed. He enclosed his bill of \$303.

2:50

I have a letter from the Descheneaux family of Spruce Grove, who told us that as a low-income family they cannot afford the utility costs. They said that their bill in January 2012 was \$924.44.

Finally, I have a note from Valerie Thomsen from High River, who sent us a note saying that her bill for January was \$193.10, and she says that last year at the same period it was \$88. "Outrageous!"

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Government House Leader.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Yesterday under tablings the Member for Airdrie-Chestermere tabled five bar coasters which had a symbol on them which could only be encouraging people to drink. I would like to table today five responsible bar coasters which say: "Pregnancy and Alcohol? Not Worth the Chance." I'll send a copy of the responsible bar coaster to the hon. member, but I think it's important to table these to highlight the fact that drinking while pregnant, drinking while driving, all of these are a danger to society.

The Speaker: Hon. Member for Airdrie-Chestermere, you popped up here about 30 seconds ago on a point of order. Please proceed.

Point of Order Imputing Motives

Mr. Anderson: Yeah. I would cite Standing Order 23(h), (i), and (j). Mr. Speaker, the member clearly stated that the coasters that we tabled yesterday were inciting people to drink. I don't even know what to say to that other than to say that that's obviously unbecoming language. It's obviously giving false motives to another member.

I mean, coasters are something you put a beverage on. Now, clearly, they are to protest the .05 legislation, which is an attack on people's civil rights, with a whole bunch of other things wrong with it. It will divert resources and probably cause more people to die of drinking and driving because of the resources that we diverted to it, but that's a political protest. Certainly, to somehow say that handing out these coasters, which is a protest of a very poorly drafted bill, is somehow asking people to go out and drink and drive is repugnant language for this House, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: The hon. Government House Leader.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I would enjoy the opportunity to respond to that. A bar coaster, a very simple device used to protect the table from a glass of, presumably, alcohol, and in this case one that's labelled with a line across .05, can only suggest to somebody that it's okay to continue past .05, that it's okay to drink. Coasters are used where people are drinking, so one would assume, then, that it's encouraging people to drink and then

perhaps to drive. I think it's a very reasonable assumption that that bar coaster is an irresponsible methodology to protest a bill.

Mr. Speaker, what I tabled today is a far more responsible thing, and I'm more than happy to provide that hon. member and every member of the House with these bar coasters, which allude to the fact that drinking while pregnant causes physical problems, brain damage, dependency for life, and other things. If the hon. member wants to deal with issues about drinking, I would suggest he deal with them responsibly, and this is a very responsible way to do it.

The Speaker: Well, we've reminded the Assembly in the past that points of order should not be used to extend debate and that they should not be used for amplification of position. I think we've got a clarification here as a result of this recent exchange, and we're now going to move on.

Orders of the Day Committee of Supply

[Mr. Cao in the chair]

The Chair: The chair would like to call the Committee of Supply to order.

Main Estimates 2012-13

Executive Council

The Chair: Before I recognize our hon. Premier, I would like to remind the Assembly of a few points here about the speaking order. The Premier will have 10 minutes for opening. That will be followed by an hour with the opposition and the Premier. Then the 20 minutes after that are reserved for the third party, the Wildrose Alliance, and the Premier. The next 20 minutes are for the fourth party, the NDP, and the Premier. For the next 20 minutes after that members of any other party represented in the Assembly or any independent member may speak with the Premier, and thereafter any member may speak.

I'm also reminding hon. members that from Standing Order 59.01(4) and reinforced by Government Motion 6, agreed to on February 8, we have a minimum of two hours. At that time the chair will call the two hours.

Hon. Premier, you have the floor for 10 minutes.

Ms Redford: Well, thank you, Mr. Chairman and hon. members. I'm pleased to appear before this committee to discuss the 2012-2013 Executive Council budget estimates and the 2012-2015 business plan. I'd like to begin by introducing the staff who are with me on the floor. They are Peter Watson, Deputy Minister of Executive Council; Dwight Dibben, deputy clerk of Executive Council; and Elaine Dougan, executive director of corporate services.

This is the first time that I've been before this committee as President of Executive Council, and I want to begin by saying what a pleasure it has been to work with such a group of talented and dedicated people these past four and a half months. They've worked very hard in the time since I was sworn in as Premier to implement what I am the first to admit is a very ambitious agenda, and we're just getting started.

Two weeks ago our government laid out a plan for moving forward with the Speech from the Throne and Budget 2012. This is a plan that is based on all the optimism we feel and that Albertans feel for where our province is going and what the future holds for us. We know there are challenges ahead, and we are

prepared to meet them boldly and to provide the leadership that Albertans expect from their government.

The Speech from the Throne and Budget 2012 will be the foundation for engaging with Albertans to determine what their priorities are and what outcomes they want to see from us. Instead of telling Albertans what government is doing, we will ask them what they want from government. We will listen, and we will deliver. The outcomes that Albertans identify will drive everything that we do and every decision that we make. Part of this work includes a commitment to results-based budgeting to ensure that all our program decisions and dollar allocations are being properly scrutinized, and that's why I welcome the opportunity to come today before this committee.

I want to assure all members of the committee that Executive Council will take its turn under the microscope, just like every other department will, to rebuild our budget from the ground up and make sure that we're getting the best results. In Executive Council and across government we will deliver the outcomes that Albertans want in the most effective, responsible, and sustainable way possible.

I begin with an overview of the Budget 2012 allocation for Executive Council. Overall, it is \$31.5 million, an increase of \$1.4 million, which is 4.7 per cent, from the last fiscal year. This increase is due almost entirely to staffing costs, including funding for the 4 per cent salary adjustment and benefit increases that apply to all government staff. There is also a one-time allocation of \$100,000 for Alberta events and programs to mark the Diamond Jubilee of the reign of Queen Elizabeth II. I will also note that the Regulatory Review Secretariat was transferred from Finance to Executive Council along with a budget of \$952,000 and six FTEs, or full-time equivalents, Mr. Chair.

3:00

I turn now to a review of Executive Council's program areas and priorities as outlined in the business plan. Executive Council includes my offices in the Legislature and in McDougall Centre in Calgary, the deputy minister's office, the cabinet co-ordination office, policy co-ordination office, the Regulatory Review Secretariat, the protocol office, the Public Affairs Bureau, and administrative support for the office of the Lieutenant Governor and the Alberta Order of Excellence Council, Mr. Chairman.

Our 2012-15 business plan lays out the following priority initiatives for Executive Council: ensuring that government policy and planning are co-ordinated and effective, co-ordinating government strategic planning, continuing to implement a strategic communications plan, and co-ordinating with ministries and organizations to promote Alberta's energy, immigration, employment, investment, and tourism potential to the world.

Mr. Chairman, I want to take a moment to put the work of Executive Council in the context of the new way that this government is doing things. I spoke earlier of my expectation that government will move to a more outcome-based orientation. To accomplish this, I expect government to function as a single team, not as individual bureaucracies within departmental silos. We need to work together, and I will be looking to Executive Council to facilitate the shift that needs to happen within government. This will involve building clarity on the right things and providing advice and strategic direction to ensure that everyone is aligned around the same goals. This will involve getting to good outcomes by following good process.

We will engage Albertans in an ongoing dialogue that asks them what they want from government and deliver on those outcomes. I expect our staff to support strong regulatory review, policy development, decision-making, and strategic planning processes. I expect

them to ask critical questions about emerging directions and policies.

As government it is important to have a dialogue among Albertans and stakeholders and to gather and represent divergent perspectives to decision-makers. I expect thorough research and analysis to inform the decision-making process, and I want to see capacity-building within ministries and within our partners to deliver on the government's commitments.

One of those commitments is ensuring that our regulatory system is doing its job effectively and efficiently. I noted earlier that the Regulatory Review Secretariat was moved from Finance to Executive Council, and this is an area where I expect to see leadership and results. Linking the secretariat to the policy co-ordination office will help ensure that our regulatory systems are focused on the policy objectives that we're trying to achieve as a government.

We're building from a strong base, which is looking at how we can ease the regulatory burden on small business. We've already mandated regular reviews of regulations to ensure their continued effectiveness and relevancy. We need to ensure that our regulatory systems are doing their jobs in the best way possible. We do this by recognizing that the regulatory system has a role to play in developing positive economic, environmental, and social outcomes for Albertans. But there are also costs to be borne, both by government and by industry. For our province to enjoy robust and sustainable growth, we need to keep the two in balance, and our government will.

Executive Council will also be charged with establishing clear measures of performance and clarity on issues, outcomes, and deliverables under the mandates that I've set for each member of the cabinet team. Part of my commitment to Albertans is that we will measure our performance as government and report on it regularly to Albertans. By doing things in better, smarter ways, we will deliver better services to Albertans.

I'll stop there, Mr. Chairman, and am now prepared to take questions from the committee members. Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Premier.

The next hour will be for the opposition and the Premier. The chair would like to make sure that we have 20 minute chunks so that the hon. member will have dialogue with the Premier, or do you prefer your 10 minutes and the Premier 10 minutes?

Dr. Sherman: We'll go back and forth.

The Chair: Twenty minutes back and forth. Okay. The hon. Leader of the Official Opposition.

Dr. Sherman: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I welcome the Premier to her first Executive Council estimates. I'm also proud to say that this is my first time as Leader of the Opposition.

Albertans do want leadership from their government. They want good policy, they want their government to manage their hard-earned tax dollars wisely, and they want to hear the truth from their leaders. In spite of what the Speech from the Throne may say, we know that this is an election year, and everything must be taken with a grain of salt, especially the budget. The main role of Executive Council is to be the head and to provide direction, strategic direction, to the rest of the government body, but this government department has just become a talking head. Here's why: Mr. Chairman, the Speech from the Throne was the most uninspiring Speech from the Throne in the last few decades. It didn't really tell us who we are as a people, where we're going, where we need to go, and how we're going to get there. It had no vision.

On the budget, Mr. Chairman, this government continues down its path of addiction to nonrenewable energy resources. We have major addiction problems in this province, and the biggest is this government's addiction to nonrenewable resources to fund our basic, core programs. We have a deficit after five successive years of deficits. Oil is at a hundred dollars a barrel, every Albertan is working and paying tax, we have so much industrial investment here, and we have a deficit. This is as good as it gets. We should have surpluses in the bank, money going into a savings account for children for tomorrow.

We have a fiscal deficit, but we also have a social deficit. I do want to talk about outcomes. Here are the outcomes. We have the lowest high school graduation rate in the nation. We have the lowest postsecondary participation rate in the nation. We have amongst the highest fees in the nation.

We have the biggest spending health care system with amongst the worst performance in the nation. Once you get into care, it's world-class care, but getting in is the big problem. In fact, the Health Quality Council report today said that there's a culture of fear and intimidation for physicians. The hospital and acute-care system has been in crisis year after year after year despite the multiple reports, the number one spending issue in the country. The Health Quality Council report also says that the AHS experiment hasn't worked. Physicians don't know who to turn to when there are problems and solutions.

Our seniors are getting nickelled and dimed. They built this wonderful province and this wonderful nation. They worked through tough times, through wars, through lean times. They paid their taxes, and they paid their dues, yet they're being separated under involuntary separation. They're having to get divorced because they can't afford this private care.

These are the outcomes. To suggest that we're going to focus on outcomes, does that suggest that we actually didn't do it before, that we didn't measure our performance? This is the performance of a government that once was a source of good. It was a source of solutions, Mr. Chairman. It is a government that is now a source of our problems.

With respect to the estimates of Executive Council there's very little detail included in the estimates, the breakdown of funds allocated to this ministry. For example, line 1.1 on page 104 of the estimates states that the Premier's office has an annual budget of just shy of \$11 million, but no breakdown is provided. My question to the Premier: will you provide a detailed description of how these funds are allocated? Tell us how many airplane flights you've been on for campaigning, whether that's included in here, and tell us how you're enjoying the fleet of four executive vehicles.

Thank you.

The Chair: The hon. the Premier.

Ms Redford: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. The numbers that are included on page 104 are, particularly, detailed in the way that we have conventionally reported. I can certainly provide the hon. member with more detail, and if he'd like me to do that now, then I will.

3:10

First of all, Mr. Chairman, we have the office of the Premier and Executive Council, which, as I said before, includes the Premier's offices in Edmonton and Calgary, including correspondence and communications. It includes the deputy minister's office; the cabinet co-ordination office, which provides organizational and administrative support to cabinet and to key committees; the policy co-ordination office, which supports decision-makers in ministries by

facilitating a collaborative approach for strategic planning and policy development across government; the Regulatory Review Secretariat, which leads government's regulatory reform agenda and provides oversight for the ongoing review of provincial regulation, which, as I said before, was transferred from the Department of Finance; the protocol office, which provides co-ordination for visiting foreign delegations and government ceremonial events and management of Government House operations and funding for the Alberta Order of Excellence.

As I said, Mr. Chairman, the Regulatory Review Secretariat, which was just transferred from the Department of Finance to Executive Council, represents a budget of \$952,000 and six full-time equivalent positions. There was an administrative transfer of \$556,000 and three full-time equivalent positions, existing resources from Treasury Board and Enterprise for three positions in the policy co-ordination office that were previously funded through the corporate human resources executive mobility program; as I said before, an increase for a 4 per cent salary adjustment, which was standard across the board in government this year, standard wage increments and changes to benefits; and a \$100,000 one-time funding for Alberta's Diamond Jubilee celebrations in 2012, for a total of \$10.9 million, which is an increase of 6.5 per cent, keeping in mind that that increase is partly connected to existing resources that were transferred from the Department of Finance for work that was previously being done in another ministry.

There is the office of the Lieutenant Governor, Mr. Chairman, which represents an expense of \$514,000 projected in the estimates, which provides administrative planning and communications support to the Lieutenant Governor. Of course, the Lieutenant Governor's salary is paid by the federal government, and the work that is done for the Lieutenant Governor with respect to much of his ceremonial protocol is also covered by the federal government.

We have a department of corporate services, which represents a budget of \$2.4 million, which sees an increase of 6.7 per cent, Mr. Chairman, which includes the office of the managing director of the Public Affairs Bureau. It manages the human resource, finance, and administrative needs of Executive Council; it manages IT support and development for Executive Council; and it's responsible for business plan and budget preparation, performance measurement co-ordination, annual report developments, records management, and FOIP administration. It includes the central budget for administrative costs; for example, Service Alberta support services, training for all Public Affairs Bureau staff, general office equipment, and supplies. Again, that increase of 6.7 per cent included a 4 per cent increase with respect to the standard wage increments.

We also account in this budget for corporate communications to a value of \$12.6 million, a 4.6 per cent increase, which supplies professionals to ministries to support two-way communications with Albertans by planning and implementing communications initiatives that deliver important information on government programs, services, and policies.

Mr. Chairman, I don't think that we can overestimate the importance of that work right now. We know that the issues we're facing as Albertans are all about building for the future, being optimistic, knowing that we need to build our economy, and a very big part of that is continuing to export our resources.

Now, we know from the discussions that we've had in this House and across the province in the past three to four months, since I've been Premier, that the work that has to happen with respect to the Keystone pipeline and the Gateway pipeline is critical for Alberta's economic development. We also know, Mr. Chairman, that one of the things that we need to be talking to

people about in those jurisdictions is the importance of oil sands not only for our own economic development but in terms of strong economic partnerships with the United States and opening up our markets to Asia.

When I think about that, Mr. Chairman, and I think about some of the trips that I've been taking, to Washington in particular and to Ottawa, to talk about the work that we're doing in Alberta, the message that we're delivering is critically important in terms of what our product is, how we're extracting that resource, what our record is with respect to greenhouse gas emissions, and to make sure that people know that in Alberta we're very proud of not only our economic development but our environmental stewardship. It was very clear to me, when I was in Washington, that being able to deliver that message makes a difference to decision-makers.

Now, there is no doubt, Mr. Chair, that due to the circumstances we're seeing around some political developments in the United States right now, there has been somewhat of a delay with respect to the decision around Keystone. But it's just as important for us to be able to discuss with decision-makers who will ultimately be involved in making those decisions exactly what our record is. They are very open to that, and our message is very clear. We believe that Keystone matters because we need to ensure that we have a strong economic partnership with our closest neighbours and some of our most longstanding trading partners, and for the United States it matters.

One of the things that our corporate communications department does is actually speak to the issues surrounding energy security, environmental sustainability, and long-term economic development. So when I think about the work that we're investing through our Public Affairs Bureau in the messages that are telling the good story about Alberta products, that's a very important connection for us to make, and it's a commitment that this government is very committed to do.

Today in question period, Mr. Chair, there was a question with respect to the vote tomorrow at the European Union around the fuel quality directive. Again, we have offices and we have ministers who are spending time, working with our Public Affairs Bureau, to tell that good story in terms of the importance of not discriminating against our resources in the fuel quality directive decision. That means that we do spend money on communications, we do spend money on our international offices, and we ensure that we're investing the time to tell that story.

That department also plans and co-ordinates our government-wide internal communications to employees. It provides advertising consultation, which I spoke about before. It manages the government of Alberta website, which, again, tells that story, and co-ordinates our crossgovernment standards for all ministry websites. And it provides technical support for major government news conferences. Again, Mr. Chair, we know that we see a 4 per cent increase as a result of staffing changes.

The other area that the hon. member asked about was a breakdown with respect to those numbers. Part of the work that we do through those numbers is involved in promoting Alberta. That estimate is a \$5 million estimate, and there's no funding change for 2012-13. Again, Mr. Chair, that promotes the province of Alberta as the best place to live, to work, to invest, and to play within the country and around the world. It focuses on the portfolios of work and investment to attract the labour, which we know is so important, and the capital that will allow the province to continue to thrive so that we know that we can rely on the projections that we see in this year's budget.

In conjunction with other ministries, as I talked about, we initiate and co-ordinate energy advocacy and communications efforts across Canada, across the United States, and globally, and

we support outreach via the web and, through other communications strategies, everything that we need to do to be telling the good story about Alberta. When I think about the work that we're doing with respect to something like the Gateway pipeline, it's very important, Mr. Chair, for us to know that that story with respect to what's good for economic development in Alberta will also be very important in terms of the Canadian discussion with respect to a Canadian energy strategy. The oil sands are not only a resource that's available to benefit us as Albertans, but it has tremendous economic benefits across the country, and it's important for us.

One of the things that I've done since I became Premier is to talk with Canadians, with other Premiers, with people in Ottawa, Quebec City, and in Toronto, about the emotional connection to what these resources can mean for Canadians across this country. We know that in Alberta we are very much the economic engine of the country, but we don't want to just say that; we want to demonstrate the fact that we want to work in partnership with industry across this country. We want to ensure that we're working in partnership with respect to the extraction of resources. If there's research that's being done here, Mr. Chair, that we can share with other jurisdictions, we want to be able to do that.

3:20

We're seeing some very good examples around how we can cooperate with other jurisdictions. There's some work that we're beginning right now that will take place between the University of Alberta, the University of Calgary, and the University of Cape Breton with respect to coal gasification. We know that because of the resources that Nova Scotia has and their opportunity and their desire to be able to develop their economy, we've done research that can be helpful to them. Now, some of that research will be part of proprietary interest that industry has. So as we build those partnerships around what a Canadian energy strategy can mean, it will also include partnering with industry so that people right across this country can see that the resources that we have here that have allowed us to invest in research will continue to allow us to build strong Canadian partnerships and to build a strong Canadian energy economy.

As we move ahead with those discussions, what we're seeing from Premiers right across the country is a true understanding and acceptance that it's important to work in partnership. You know, it's interesting. We have a very interesting relationship with the province of Quebec, a province which, of course, just like Alberta, very particularly guards their provincial jurisdiction. When we talk about a Canadian energy strategy, one of the qualifications always with respect to a Canadian energy strategy is to ensure that our primary objective is to ensure that we are protecting our provincial jurisdiction. It's quite interesting, as we go across the country, to see that that's of primary importance to all provinces. As a result of that, we have to ensure that the partnerships that will take place will be between provinces with support from the federal government and not be part only of leadership coming from the federal government.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: The hon. Leader of the Official Opposition.

Dr. Sherman: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Speaking of a talking head, I actually hoped to engage the Premier in a discussion, not a diatribe.

Mr. Chairman, how much time do I have?

The Chair: Just before you go on, I asked earlier if you wanted to combine the 20 minutes together, dialoguing, talking, or have 10

minutes each. You said 20, so you're going to get 20 minutes to have a dialogue.

Dr. Sherman: Mr. Chairman, we'll go at it. I didn't know the Premier was so long winded. I enjoy her enthusiasm for Alberta.

Mr. Chairman, a couple of questions I have. I'd better lump a couple of them into my few minutes because we're going to get another 20-minute diatribe. The Premier made a decision to add the Regulatory Review Secretariat to the purview of Executive Council immediately after being elected leader. There are a number of questions. What was the government doing with respect to regulatory review for the last four years, or 40 years for that matter? Is that to suggest that they weren't doing any regulatory reviews? The question has to be asked: what was the rationale for this move? Was it an effort for the Premier to have full control of the process? Was it just politicking? Is she saying that the government and the cabinet – most of the cabinet members she was a colleague of. Who was in charge of this? What were they doing for the last four years?

Let's talk about the other half of the budget of Executive Council. It goes to the propaganda bureau, or should I say the Public Affairs Bureau. Fifty per cent more than the office of the Premier, which is responsible for all activities relating to policy. If we add promoting Alberta, that budget line, which is also a communications function – I believe the way to promote Alberta is that the proof should be in the pudding, Mr. Chairman. The proof should be in the pudding. That's how you promote Alberta. Have others brag about us after they see the diversity of this province.

The Chair: You're in the second 20 minutes now. Do you still want to have dialogue?

Dr. Sherman: Thank you.

Mr. Chairman, the government spends double on spin than it does on policy development and co-ordination. The PAB is spin machinery to suit, before the election, the political aspirations of a political party. How much of that is related to investments just before an election to make Albertans perceive that you're doing the right thing when, clearly, we've stated the outcome of this government: the worst performing health care system in the country, five successive deficits with oil at \$100 a barrel, seniors getting nickelled and dimed? How much of this political spin does this PAB do?

Can the Premier explain why, out of all the roles the Executive Council might take, it has chosen to make PR its most significant role? The most significant role is decision-making, leadership, and vision, not PR and spin. Albertans are sick and tired of being lied to.

Mr. Rodney: Language.

Dr. Sherman: I withdraw that, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. Rodney: Thank you.

Dr. Sherman: Thank you to the hon. member.

The PAB introduced its social media program in the 2009-10 business plan. We now have the government of Alberta on YouTube, Flickr, Facebook, Twitter, and the blog, where entries are often signalled by PAB staff. Do Albertans need to be told how the health care system is fantastic, or do they need to just experience it and realize it? Mr. Chairman, I believe they need to experience it and realize it. Once they do get into the health care system, it's actually world class, but the experience of trying to get into the system is devastating on families. People are suffering, as was

tabled in the Health Quality Council report. My question is: how much money will be spent trying to spin that report, which tells us we're still in crisis?

Can the Premier discuss the government's risk avoidance or risk mitigation strategies when using third-party social media sites, the methods used to ensure compliance with social media policy and to address noncompliance and any plans to deal with the consequences of changes in policy by the third-party sites such as sale of data? How does the PAB staff report on social media to program staff in ministries? Is the government actually using any of the feedback received, or is it purely a public relations, PR, spin exercise?

I have a question. It's interesting. I was looking at a report on the computer the other day, and actually in the last few weeks every time you look at the newspapers and every time you click on it, the Premier appears on the advertisement, amazingly. The question is: is this a PC Party advertisement, or is it the Public Affairs Bureau, government tax dollars? The timing is amazing, Mr. Chairman. You should check this out. There's no acknowledgement of who paid for this. Is it the PAB, or is it the PC Party? Why is the Premier ashamed of admitting it if it's party dollars? If it's not party dollars, if it's taxpayer dollars, why is the Premier wasting taxpayer dollars on advertising? How much money are they wasting for pure partisan, political purposes heading into an election?

I ask these questions. What portion of the PAB budget is allocated for advertising, be it on radio, television, billboards, and these ads? What is your expenditure in relation to the election cycle? Is the spending heavily weighted just before the election?

Mr. Chairman, this is about honesty, transparency, and trust. This Premier was supposed to be about real change. She promised change. This is worse than the old. I want the other Premier back. Many Albertans want the other Premier back. This was supposed to be a good change. This isn't the change people voted for. It's more of the same.

I've asked many questions. I look forward to the Premier's answers.

Thank you.

3:30

The Chair: The hon. Premier.

Ms Redford: Thank you, Mr. Chair. As I said in my opening comments, we have right now an Executive Council, a Regulatory Review Secretariat, which, as I mentioned, was transferred from the Department of Finance. I'm surprised that the hon. member would ask the question with respect to what that was since he has been in this House for as long as I have, and even before I had this job, I was very aware of what that role was. That was a role of an office within the Department of Finance that was charged with ensuring that on a regular basis regulations within government were reviewed to ensure that we weren't standing in the way of good public policy.

The reason that I thought it was important – and it is change, Mr. Chairman – to bring the Regulatory Review Secretariat to our office, to the office of the Premier, was to ensure, as I said in my opening comments, that we were actually co-ordinating the work. What we know is that the way the government has worked in the past – and change is very important and very good, and we're making a lot of it, and I said in my opening comments that it was important to do that, to begin to co-ordinate approaches to these issues. What I decided was that the work that was happening in Finance was becoming too isolated with respect to the work of people who were charged directly to the Department of Finance.

Since 1999 our regulatory reform agenda was overseen by that secretariat, and the addition to our policy co-ordination office, as I said, reinforces the importance of effective and efficient regulatory systems that are co-ordinated across the government of Alberta. The system works with all ministries now to support the development of quality regulations by directing regulatory reform initiatives, of course eliminating superfluous regulations and ensuring that any regulations that are in place are actually necessary, Mr. Chair.

We have, with respect to social policy, very strong internal policies on web-based security which are led by Service Alberta, and we actually have a social media policy, Mr. Chair, which really ensures that it can apply broadly to the use of social media when we're providing information and government announcements, programs, and policies. The feedback that we get from Albertans on our communications efforts matters. It's not about advertising; it's about communicating and dialoguing with Albertans.

There's no doubt that there's going to be a provincial election. We actually passed legislation to ensure that that's going to happen. But we're here today in this Legislature discussing a budget because the world does not stop simply because there is going to be a provincial election. The business of government must continue, and the business of government continues on an ongoing basis. So today we're discussing budget, and I've referred to the throne speech. We communicate with Albertans with respect to those issues because those are issues that matter to Albertans.

We know that it's important to have policies with respect to social media, and our policies outline how social media will be used when communicating with Albertans. We ensure that staff are not doing anything else except representing the views of the government of Alberta to Albertans, and that is very important in terms of engagement.

Very often in this House, Mr. Chair, we'll hear from parties on the other side that it's important to consult, that it's important to engage. We even, surprisingly, will hear the accusation that we are not listening to Albertans. We listen to Albertans, and one of the ways that we do that is that we communicate information to them because we want to ensure that the dialogue we're having with Albertans is an informed dialogue about the future.

It's been pretty exciting in the past five months and for the year before that, when I was running for leadership of my party, to know how excited Albertans were about wanting to communicate, to see change, to see integrated long-term planning, and to ensure that we were connecting decisions that government was making directly to their lives. It's very important to us as a government that we're ensuring that people feel that government is accessible. We have a front bench of ministers that spend their days communicating through their communications officers and directly with Albertans.

I'm going to go back, Mr. Chair, to something that I said earlier, which is that our future economic opportunities will come from being able to communicate around the world the good stories about what's going on in Alberta. Frankly, standing up and saying that the proof of the pudding is in the tasting is not a compelling message that sends any signal to the rest of the world as to how wonderful Alberta is, what a unique jurisdiction it is, how much we care about our communities and our environment, and why they should be attracted to come here to work, to invest, and to even come as tourists.

When I think about the work that we will continue to do in terms of developing a communications plan and talking about our successes, I'm actually very proud every day of the work that the Public Affairs Bureau does. What I've heard and what I think

many of my colleagues have heard in the past year is that Albertans are tired of the negativity. They're tired of the cynicism. They're tired of the pessimism. They're proud Albertans, and they want a government that's proud of Alberta.

That's what we're doing, Mr. Chair. We are travelling the country. We are in the United States. We have international offices that are talking about our successes. They're talking about our accomplishments. We know, not because we're members of government but because we live in this great province, that this truly is the best jurisdiction to live in in the world. Albertans want us to talk about that, and they want us to deliver those messages in a way that will improve our economic benefits.

I know that when I first became Premier and was first sworn in, one of the first things that many members of this House suggested that I do was exactly what I did, travel to Washington and talk about Alberta's story. In fact, Mr. Chair, there was criticism from some members of this House that I didn't go soon enough. So it seems a little inconsistent to me that today those same people would stand up and suggest that that isn't important work to be done.

I know from the response that we were able to see in Washington, Toronto, and Ottawa and from some of the success we've had in working with our federal government partners that it's worth while to do it. Albertans know that we can't live in isolation. They know that we need to be partners in Canada, we need to be partners around the world, and we have to understand that we're international citizens.

Many people who are living in this province have come from other places, Mr. Chair. They've come here to retain their links with their home countries but to ensure that they're part of our great economic success. That's important because we actually need them to be here to do the work. There's no doubt, if we look at some of the issues that have come up in the last three or four months, that we have to ensure that we're attracting people with skills in order to do the work that needs to be done.

We're a province right now of 3.7 million people, and that's wonderful. We're going to be 5 million, 6 million people in the not too very distant future. It's interesting to look at some of the projections because some of the projections that we see could have us at 10 million people by 2050. My sense is that we're probably going to be there, and we're going to be there sooner than we think. That is a tremendous blessing for us, to know that we are fundamentally changing the character of our province, our economy, the way we work, the way we live, and what we do every day. When that starts to happen, being able to talk about our story and to talk about our success is going to be very important, Mr. Chair.

So the work that we're able to do through Executive Council to advance that agenda is terribly important, and Albertans know that.

As we move ahead and we take a look at some of the issues that are involved, we know that we're going to have to continue to be strong environmental stewards, and we're going to have to reach out to people that have concerns with respect to economic development and what development looks like in the oil sands.

3:40

When I think about that work and the ongoing work of government and the way that we tell our story to Albertans and the way we tell our story to Canadians and to people around the world, we're going to have to continue to support on an ongoing basis the work of the Public Affairs Bureau. We haven't seen increases in spending in that shop. We haven't seen increases beyond the 4 per cent salary increase. So to suggest that there's

fluctuation in election years and nonelection years simply isn't the case, Mr. Chair. We consistently do the work. We consistently tell the story. We have strong policies in place that allow for social media to be used.

I have to say that I'm a little surprised by the hon. member suggesting that it's not important to be on social media, to suggest that it's odd for the government of Alberta to be on Facebook, to be on YouTube. What we believe is that people around the world and people in Alberta that are making decisions about policy and deciding what they want for the future of this province are accessing communication in a way that's entirely different from the way that we've done it before. We're operating in a sphere that's changing by leaps and bounds every month. The fact that we're able to respond and to tell that story in some cases to much younger audiences, where we know that sometimes there's a preoccupation with issues, particularly around environmental sustainability, is critical to the way that we deliver that communications message.

When I think about the innovative thinking, the work that we're doing to support our offices around the world, the consulting work that must be done if we're concerned about issues like the fuel quality directive that's going on right now in Europe, we have to ensure that we have smart people who are communicating and developing a story that connects to people. When I think about what we will do and what we will continue to do, it's to use the resources that we have in the Premier's office to develop that policy and to ensure that every opportunity to tell our story and to build our economy will be taken advantage of, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: The hon. Leader of the Official Opposition.

Dr. Sherman: Thank you, Mr. Chair. The Premier is right. Albertans are tired. They are tired of the same old same old. In fact, in order for Alberta to go to the next level, to go to heights never seen before – and I believe we are a great place to live. That's why we're all here. But I believe Alberta is capable of so much more, so much more than we're actually getting right now.

We need to attract engineers, hard workers with dreams and ideas, teachers, doctors, nurses, health care workers, but when people get here – a report just came out today, a report commissioned by the health minister's Health Quality Council, that reports to him, saying that there's a culture of fear and intimidation of doctors in this province, and this culture is pervasive. Twenty-five per cent of the physicians were brave enough to report these issues; 75 per cent were scared. Yes, we are the bright hope for the world, but people should not fear their government. When people fear their government, there is tyranny. When the government fears the people, we have liberty. That's the Alberta that I want to see, where their government fears its people. Yes, Premier, a government that truly fears its people.

This Premier: we thought there was change. How did the change start off? It started with your Minister of Finance swearing at somebody, an elected representative. It started off – I'm not sure if this came . . .

An Hon. Member: How about the estimates?

Dr. Sherman: This pertains to the estimates of the PAB because there's spin required, spin from the PAB required to manage the message from the Premier's office on this issue.

The question is: is it the Minister of Municipal Affairs who unilaterally boycotted a meeting, or did that directive come straight from the Premier's office? Social media was used by the Premier's chief of staff to intimidate another elected member, to slander and libel her.

The Chair: Hon member, we are now on the third 20 minutes, so the last 20 minutes for you, sir.

Dr. Sherman: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

One of the Executive Council's main roles is to provide policy planning to all government ministries, not the least of which is the Ministry of Health and Wellness. On page 32 of the Executive Council 2012-15 business plan under Priority Initiatives it says:

- 1.1 Provide advice and analysis to support policy development that aligns with government priorities and ensures that decision-makers have the best possible information with which to make decisions.
- 1.2 Coordinate the government's strategic planning process, support the development of the Government of Alberta Strategic Plan and report on the progress of government priorities.
- 1.3 An enhanced focus and engagement by the public service on integrated public policy analysis and innovative and efficient service delivery. Ensure quality interaction between the public service, government and society as a whole.
- 1.4 Work collaboratively with ministries to improve the quality of Alberta's regulatory systems and oversee the ongoing review of regulations so that policy outcomes can be achieved effectively and efficiently.

Mr. Chair, this is interesting with regard to the way that health policy has developed over the last several years. There continue to be questions raised about who is actually developing health policy. Is it Alberta Health Services, is it Alberta Health and Wellness, or is it the Premier's office? What measures have been taken through Executive Council to improve and increase the policy development capacity of Alberta Health and Wellness now that they have been charged with the responsibility of province-wide decisions as well as for Alberta Health Services?

What influence does Executive Council have with health policy decisions? Is Executive Council briefed on all policy decisions before they're made, announced, or implemented, or does Executive Council make those decisions?

On page 32 of the Executive Council 2012-15 business plan strategy 1.1 is to "provide advice and analysis to support policy development" and ensure "that decision-makers have the best possible information with which to make decisions." What extra support has Executive Council provided to the Ministry of Health and Wellness to cope with the monumental task they have of reining in Alberta Health Services, an organization with \$9.6 billion in spending, an organization about which the Health Quality Council report today, commissioned by this government, says that the AHS experiment has been a failure, that it does not provide Albertans the necessary care and that lives have been endangered, that physicians have been intimidated, that the ERs are still in crisis. The government's own report.

Page 32 of the Executive Council 2012-15 business plan has a performance measure that is a percentage for "satisfaction of Policy Coordination Office clients with products and services." The last actual number for this measure is 93 per cent while the target for the next three years is 85 per cent. Can the Premier explain how this measure is actually taken and which clients this measure refers to, or is it the arm's-length government agencies, boards, or commissions? Or does this measure refer to government ministries? If this is referring to government ministries, is this measure not misleading? Surely, government ministries will not show dissatisfaction with the Premier's office.

Mr. Chair, there are many questions that need to be answered: policy and delivery and the outcomes and the outputs of our government and our government system. The number one

expenditure of any government in this nation is health care. This report today was so damning – so damning – of the government's performance on health care.

I'd also like to put into the record a graph from the Institute for Public Economics from the University of Alberta, the historical expenditure of the big two, Alberta Health and Education, absolute expenditures.

3:50

The Chair: Hon. member, the chair should remind you that we have the Health estimates coming up on March 7.

Dr. Sherman: Mr. Chair, I'll bring it back to decision-making and health care policy decision-making.

There's a lot of money being spent here in the Premier's office on policy. Premier, you gave a speech, a vision for this province. You tabled a budget. You set the direction for this province. You set policy, and then we were talking about outcomes. Mr. Chair, this has all to do with estimates. There's 30-some million dollars here being spent. Here is the outcome.

I have a question about policy set by the Premier's office. Alberta's Health Legislation: this is a policy document that was presented by the current minister of health to government caucus. It was presented. It pertains to privatization of health care, and the government spin machinery has to make this story go away.

Point of Order Relevance

Mr. Ouellette: Mr. Chairman, point of order. We've got to have some relevance here, *Beauchesne's* 459. I don't think that has anything to do with the estimates of Executive Council.

The Chair: Hon member, I remind you that we have March 7 for the health care estimates, so stay on the estimates of the Executive Council if you will.

Dr. Sherman: Mr. Chair, it is about the estimates because of the policy direction.

Debate Continued

Dr. Sherman: The question is on who's in charge and on the lack of performance of a government. Resources in Executive Council, in the Public Affairs Bureau, need to be used to sell a story that Albertans aren't buying.

Albertans deserve the truth. This is an amazing province. The people who comprise this province are amazing people, and they deserve nothing but the best from their leadership. They deserve honesty, the truth, world-class health care, world-class access to health care, world-class access to education, and they don't deserve the Public Affairs Bureau selling them a bill of goods that isn't true.

Premier, please, just tell the truth.

Ms Redford: Well, I have to say, Mr. Chair, that I'm a little confused because I was standing in this House an hour and a half ago, and the hon. member told me that the Health Quality Council report was actually a whitewash and a gift to the government because it didn't criticize the government. An hour and a half later the hon. member tells me that this is an absolute indictment of the health care system. I guess one of the things I'd ask is: where is the spin actually coming from?

The role of Executive Council – maybe we'll make up a little brochure for next year – is to actually do what our priority initiatives

are, and that's to co-ordinate decision-making in government to ensure that the right information is brought to the table so that the government, that's elected by Albertans, is able to set a direction for the future that responds to the needs of Albertans. When I look at those initiatives, Mr. Chair, I know that we do all of those things.

I won't go on any more about the Regulatory Review Secretariat. I'm very proud of the work that they're doing. What I will say is that within Executive Council we co-ordinate the work of ministers, we co-ordinate the work of cabinet, and through the policy co-ordination office we support and co-ordinate the roles of ministers and deputy ministers to ensure that the right people are at the table to make decisions that are going to matter for Albertans. We need to align the work that departments are doing, and we need to ensure that all of the agendas are actually integrated in a way that allows for long-term policy planning.

Mr. Chair, that is one of the things that Albertans told us they wanted to see, and we're happy to be able to change the structure of what we're doing to ensure that that alignment is happening. We have the ability through the Department of Human Services, which is a new department in government, to bring together a number of departments that needed to be better aligned. In that department we were able to bring together mental health initiatives, employment training, children and youth services, and to deal with people who are very vulnerable in our community.

Mr. Chair, you'll know that before this, I was Minister of Justice, and through the safe communities agenda we were able to do the same thing. What that allows us to do is to not only be reactive. It allows us to anticipate what's coming and to ensure that we're building and planning for the future, whether we're talking about health care or education or whether we're talking about economic development. So when I think about the work that's done through the Executive Council office, it's fundamental to long-term policy planning for government.

We do have, as these initiatives say, an enhanced focus on engagement. We're engaging with our own members in the public service, with members of the public at large, with stakeholders, with parents, with patients to ensure that information is coming to the table when we make decisions so that they will be made in the best interests of Albertans. Whether we're talking, as I said, Mr. Chair, about health care or whether we're talking about education, we're integrating the input of that information.

Now, I know that there will be another opportunity in the next two hours to talk a little bit more about performance measures, and I'm happy to do that. We have very particular performance measures for the Public Affairs Bureau, for the policy co-ordination office. What we know is that if we take a look at the customer satisfaction surveys and the client satisfaction surveys from people that are interacting with these departments and with our office, they're seeing significant progress. Ninety-three per cent: we're very proud of that; 85 per cent is a very lofty goal. I believe that we'll exceed that.

But, you know, what we're prepared to say, Mr. Chair, is that sometimes things don't always work out exactly as we want them to, and I'll tell you that that's honesty. It's honest and it's truthful to say that we make decisions that we believe are in the best interests of Albertans after co-ordinating the information and bringing the perspective into place and ensuring that the programs are integrated in a way that's actually going to make sense.

You know, Mr. Chair, one of the things that we did do in this budget as it was tabled was really listen to what Albertans were telling us about community and about vulnerable Albertans. One of the things that was very important, that we've had tremendous feedback on, was the decision to actually increase AISH payments

for vulnerable Albertans. That was a great example of an integrated approach to policy that's allowing us to make decisions that reflect the way that Albertans feel about their community.

As we go ahead and take a look at the performance measures for the policy co-ordination office, we can say that we conducted a survey, the survey where we saw a 93 per cent result, between February and March of last year, and it was a web-based survey, so people were not being spoken to directly. They were entirely entitled to express their opinion as they felt it was most appropriate to do, and that's the result that we got.

We're going to continue to aspire to do better because we can always do better, and that's what Albertans are asking for right now from government, excellence. We will continue to achieve excellence if we understand the importance of integrating the work that we're doing in our offices.

The Chair: Hon. Leader of the Official Opposition, you have about six minutes.

Dr. Sherman: Mr. Chair, am I done at 4 o'clock?

The Chair: No. You have six minutes.

Dr. Sherman: Six minutes.

Mr. Chair, I can appreciate the challenges the Premier has. Upon her shoulders is tremendous responsibility, a responsibility that I as the Leader of the Opposition must question. She is charged with leading this province. She has been elected by her party to lead Alberta on a path that's best for Albertans. The question is if many of the decisions and the resources in the Premier's Executive Council are being used efficiently and responsibly, leading this province on that path that Albertans truly deserve.

4:00

Mr. Chair, we have a difference of opinion, and that's a wonderful thing about a democratic province and a democratic country. We can express our differences. We can question government on legitimate policy issues, on legitimate expenditures of taxpayer dollars. I believe in the people of this great province. That's why I ran, to serve. I believe in the seniors who built this province and the people who are currently building this province. That's why I stand up and fight for them, to be honest and truthful to them, especially when I was on that side of the bench.

Albertans have known for a long time that they deserve better. Sixty per cent didn't vote last election. They didn't vote. Despite the resources of the governing party they didn't want to get out and vote, while our young men and women are fighting for others to have the right to vote, so I believe they've lost trust, and that trust must begin in the Premier's office and Executive Council.

I thank the Premier for doing her best to answer the questions that were posed. I thank her for taking the position of Premier. It's a very honourable position to have. I just ask her to use Albertans' taxpayer dollars wisely. I ask her to address the two deficits that we face, the fiscal deficit and the social deficit, which some may question as a moral deficit in leadership.

I ask the Premier and the government to provide world-class health care to Albertans where and when they need it. I ask the Premier to offer every child the opportunity for a world-class education. I ask the Premier to lower tuition fees. I ask Executive Council to make these priorities, to lower tuition fees for postsecondary students so that our young people can be the best that they can possibly be, so that our industry may be afforded the labour workforce it requires to meet its needs so that we can take Alberta to a new level. I ask the Premier to lower tuitions and completely delink parental income from postsecondary students.

I ask the Premier and Executive Council to have a strategic policy direction not to nickel and dime our seniors, to have a strategic policy direction to get our seniors out of health care facilities and keep them in their own homes, where couples can stay together with dignity and honour until their last day. I ask the Premier and her Executive Council to spend these resources that they have, millions of dollars in their office, to balance the books, to talk about fair taxation and fairness. I ask the Premier to put our money away for the future in endowment funds for arts and culture and for amateur sport for our children, for municipalities.

I ask the Executive Council to cut the Public Affairs Bureau in half so that we don't need to advertise. I ask the Premier and Executive Council to use their resources, that they're given by the people, in their office to have policy and direction and vision to save for the future.

Mr. Chair, I think that enough has been said. I thank the Premier and I thank the Executive Council for doing their best. It's an honour for me to have an opportunity to question them.

Thank you.

The Chair: The hon. Premier.

Ms Redford: Well, thank you, Mr. Chair. I find the hon. member's comments quite interesting. There's no doubt that those are the issues exactly that Albertans are concerned about, and they're well reflected in our budget and our throne speech.

The Chair: We have finished the first hour. The next 20 minutes will be reserved for the Wildrose and the Premier. We have an arrangement here. Ten minutes each or a combined 20 minutes?

Mr. Anderson: We're going to try to combine it for 20 minutes. Is that okay?

The Chair: A combined 20 minutes back and forth.

The hon. Member for Airdrie-Chestermere.

Mr. Anderson: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I want to welcome with me today Bill Bewick and James Johnson. They're two outstanding researchers that we have working in our office. They're, obviously, very clean-shaven and well-kept individuals. Sometimes they don't shower or shave for weeks we work them so hard.

I would hope that as we go back and forth here, Premier, I'll keep my questions short and that you would keep your answers short. I think that respect is two-way and that communication is two-way. I'm willing to ask the questions in a respectful manner, and I hope that you won't try to run out the clock because you're afraid to answer them, and I'm assuming you won't be afraid to answer them. [interjection] I hope she won't be afraid to answer them. That's why I'm saying this, so that we get the short answers.

First I want to talk about the fiscal leadership of your department. Obviously, it's going up \$1.5 million. Part of that's due to salaries. There's also the issue, of course, that you participated, while you were a cabinet minister at the time, in increasing your own salary by 30 per cent as your first act as a cabinet. There was, obviously, the Jasper junket that we've heard about to the Jasper Park Lodge for the caucus, the prebudget tour conducted for about \$100,000 after the budget was essentially agreed to and printed. In other words, it wasn't. It was a public relations campaigning situation. And, of course, there was a 7 per cent increase in program spending and so forth.

Then there are others. You went forward with the \$2 billion carbon capture and storage. There's the \$300 million for MLA

offices. We could go on and on and on, but let's just stick to your department and stuff that you have direct control over now.

Why have you not spent more time in these first few months of your premiership setting a tone? Now, let's not count Bill 1 because Bill 1, I'm assuming, your government is doing anyway. Who doesn't believe in results-based budgeting? Why wouldn't you come in and roll your own salary back 30 per cent, and why wouldn't you freeze your department's spending? Why would you go on the Jasper junket, and why would you go on the nonbudget tour for \$100,000? Why would you do these things? How is that setting a tone for fiscal austerity, Premier?

Ms Redford: Well, Mr. Chair, I think it's fascinating that we're talking about budgets that aren't part of my budget, but I guess I'll just clarify that first of all. The work that is done by any caucus in this Legislature is funded through the office of the Leg. Assembly, the LAO. The LAO provides a budget to all caucuses, and that budget is used, as I understand it, for caucus business. I'm very pleased to have had a report from our whip that through the process that we will go through this fiscal year, we will in fact be returning \$1.5 million to the LAO out of our caucus budget. I think that's a pretty good signal with respect to fiscal restraint.

I think it's also quite interesting to think about whether or not the budgets that are being expended by caucuses are being expended for political purposes, and it's a very important question, Mr. Chair. I know that from our perspective as a caucus we follow the rules, and I would hope that all caucuses would do the same thing. I also know, with respect to accounting for our funds, that not only do we follow the rules that are set out with respect to the LAO and reporting on expenditures but in many cases and in that particular instance have provided far more detail, that's been provided and filed with the LAO, to ensure that there's not even a slight hint of anything inappropriate having happened or any money having been spent with respect to our caucus budget as Progressive Conservatives.

4:10

I certainly would welcome other caucuses, including this hon. member's caucus, doing exactly the same thing, to go above and beyond with respect to reporting on caucus budget expenditures to ensure that it's not being used for political purposes and probably also, because I'm sure this is something this hon. member cares about, thinking about returning some of that budget, Mr. Chair.

In terms of fiscal definitions, in terms of how we will define our fiscal process, we are going to continue to ensure that we're being accountable.

Mr. Chair, I'm not going to not talk about Bill 1. Bill 1 was a piece of legislation that was passed in this House that committed this government to reviewing a third of government program spending every year, and we're proud of that. We're doing it by legislation because we think that that's the commitment that Albertans want this government to make, and we're prepared to make the commitment.

It's awfully easy to be casual and say: oh, well, we'd do it. Well, we put our name on the line, Mr. Chair. We said that we would do it. We are committed to doing it. We will be involved in both zero-based budgeting and results-based budgeting because we want to ensure that the programs and the services that we are delivering to Albertans are the services that Albertans want to have, that they're being delivered in a way that is having the impact that Albertans want them to have on their life, and that they're being delivered in a cost-effective manner.

We're going to do that through all government departments over a three-year period and then renew the cycle. The reason

that's important is because we can't go on budgeting the way that we have in the past, and I'm proud of the fact that this government has signalled that change. It's a key change, Mr. Chair. It's a key change not only because it signals to Albertans that we're committed to that change, but it also says to our public servants: "Let's think differently about the work that we're doing within the public service. Let's think about the programs we're delivering, how we're delivering them, whether or not they'll have the impact, and therefore ensure that we're delivering services that make sense for Albertans."

What I heard from Albertans in the last year – well, now more than a year; February 15 is when I resigned as Justice minister – was that they want to make sure that government is working smart and that it's working effectively and that it's investing in their families' future. When I think about the budget that we tabled two weeks ago, what we reflected in that budget was what Alberta families care about. They care about the future of their children. They care about education. They want to make sure that their children are going to have the quality of life that they hope all children in this province will have.

That's why, when we take a look at the approach that we need to take with respect to the Speech from the Throne and with respect to the budget and with respect to results-based budgeting, we will not fall into ideological doctrine that simply says that there's a bottom line that must be met because, Mr. Chair, the political discussion that has been part of public dialogue in the last two to three weeks has all been about ensuring that we can have fiscal discipline.

I'll tell you that fiscal discipline also includes investing in Albertans. If you take an ideological approach to it, Mr. Chair, you cut schools, and you cut hospitals. Then when you become a province of 6 million people, you don't have the infrastructure in place to allow for communities to thrive. We're not going to do that. We're going to make sure that we're putting the long-term planning in place that Albertans have asked us to put in place. These are not simplistic conversations. They're complicated conversations, and they're conversations that Albertans want us to have.

Mr. Anderson: For those keeping time at home, that was a six-minute answer to a three-minute question. I just would hope that she would try to keep the answers a little shorter than that as we go forward because I've got a whole 11 minutes left for this huge budget.

I guess I would question what this Premier – she talks a lot about that she doesn't like ideology. Okay. Fair enough. I guess what some people would call ideology, others would call principles. I know that as a father of four children, who I have a very active relationship with and worry about and save for every month in their little RESPs and so forth and do my best, put my \$50 a month into each of them – hopefully, it'll be more one day. One thing that I worry about as a father is a bunch of spendthrift liberals in the government spending my children's future and mortgaging my children's future to pay for their vote-buying schemes, including these estimates right here.

I get really tired of that, and I get tired of the excuse that I keep hearing from that side that if we show any kind of fiscal responsibility, that is somehow ideological, and we're shutting down hospitals and shutting down schools. That's something that I expect to hear from Barack Obama. It's something I'd hear from Jack Layton when he was still alive. It would be something I'd hear from current New Democrats in this House, from Michael Ignatieff, and from Stéphane Dion, but I sure as heck never thought I'd hear it from a Conservative Premier of Alberta. It's wrong.

What I want to hear from this Premier and what I'd like an answer on is: how in the heck are you going to do right by our kids, by my kids and my neighbours' kids, and all the folks in Airdrie and all the folks around Alberta who are concerned that you're spending them into oblivion, that you're piling up debt, that you're piling on deficits, and that you're giving us no way out? Please stop the fearmongering about cutting schools and cutting hospitals. You know full well that we spend 20 per cent more per person than the next closest province. Twenty per cent more.

An Hon. Member: We have 20 per cent more people who . . .

Mr. Anderson: No. It's per capita, hon. member. It's per capita. Per capita we spend 20 per cent more than the next closest province.

Why on earth can we not balance the budget at a hundred dollars a barrel for oil? Why do you keep mortgaging our children's future in your little fulsome discussions and your commitments to Albertans in your budget? Balance the budget. It's not ideological. It's principled. It's common sense. We've been doing it for over a decade here until the last four years. Will you commit to balancing the budget, Premier?

The Chair: The hon. Premier.

Ms Redford: Thank you, Mr. Chair. Here's some fearmongering for you. "We're building debt." No, we're not. We have no debt. We have no debt, and we have no debt under a Progressive Conservative government. Our commitment is to the budget that we tabled two weeks ago, and in that budget we have very sensibly set out a set of priorities that matter to Albertans.

I'll give you some principles, Mr. Chair. We're going to support vulnerable Albertans, and we're going to educate all kids, not just the hon. member's kids. I don't stand in this Legislature and talk about the best interests of my child. I stand in this Legislature, as do my government colleagues, and talk about the best interests of all children. The best interest of all children so that every child in this province can excel to the best of their ability is to make sure that we're investing in public health care and that we're building schools and that we're educating kids.

I know from the work that we do on this side of the House in speaking to our constituents and to people in communities that they want to ensure that everyone in our communities is taken care of. I think that's something that all Albertans can be proud of, and it's certainly something that I'm prepared to go to an election on. That's why we're going to pass this budget before we go to the polls.

I will say that it is simplistic to stand up and say, "Balance the budget." Tell me what you're not going to spend on. The hon. member knows that there are new schools going into his communities, three new schools, I think, going into Airdrie.

4:20

An Hon. Member: Four.

Ms Redford: Great. Four. It's fantastic. That's how we invest in kids, and that's how we build community.

I'll tell you that when you have to make those choices – I don't know if the hon. member would make a decision to only build schools in his constituency, but when you're on the government side, you don't have that luxury, Mr. Chair. You don't get to arbitrarily decide. You have to make principled decisions and balance the interests of everyone in this province.

I do think it's interesting that when the hon. member stood up to ask a supplementary question, his first comment was that to a three-minute question he got a six-minute answer. I guess, Mr. Chair, he didn't listen to the answer because part of what I said

was that Albertans understand that these are complicated issues and that simplistic answers aren't going to work. In fact, whenever we've had those simplistic answers, that is when we've gotten into trouble. That's when we haven't had the facilities and the infrastructure that we needed to have in place for a growing population.

As a province of 3.7 million people we're going to have a lot of complicated issues. We're going to have big cities, with people that need supports. We're going to have people who want their children to get new sorts of education and new kinds of jobs that we can't even imagine yet. You know, the job of government is to think long term and to know that when we're investing and we're spending money on infrastructure and on social programs, that is what's going to allow the Alberta economy to continue to thrive.

What we've heard from Albertans is that they have confidence in the future of this province. They know that if we make smart decisions that are strategic and we actually understand the implication of bringing them together and having a long-term plan, that is when we'll be able to excel. When we take a look at how people in Alberta need to be supported and encouraged, we are going to, as we've seen in this budget that's tabled in this House, that we're talking about today, continue to invest in those programs that matter to kids and families. The hon. member refers to the fact that he's able to put away \$50 a month in an RESP for his children. That's great. There are a lot of families in this province that can't do that. I want to make sure and our government wants to make sure that all kids in this province are able to have the same opportunities.

So we're going to ensure as we move ahead that we continue to make decisions that are based on principles. We're not going to pick winners and losers. We're going to ensure that all children in this province can be excellent.

Thank you.

The Chair: The hon. member.

Mr. Anderson: Thank you. How much time do I have left?

The Chair: You have a minute and 51 seconds.

Mr. Anderson: A minute and 51 seconds. Awesome. That's fantastic. I'm glad I have a minute and 51 seconds left to hear more of your complicated answers.

You know, I obviously, like everyone in this Legislature, I would hope, care very deeply about the future of our kids. My kids, actually, go to public school, so I care very deeply about that. I would like to make sure that we continue to build those schools for all Alberta children, but I would say that we've got to make sure that when we build these schools, we're doing them where there is the highest need and that there's no political interference.

I would ask the Premier – and I don't know. I mean, there's only a minute left. People in Alberta are hoping – were hoping; I think they're past the hope of it now – that you would bring in a new era of transparency in government. You had an opportunity to call a full public inquiry and show from your office that leadership of transparency from the top. You had the opportunity to call that public inquiry in October. You had another in December when you passed that wonderful piece of legislation that really gave you the power to do what you could do right now. We're almost at the end of February, and you still haven't called it.

People are asking. They want to know what has happened in health care, why these physicians have been intimidated, why they're scared, why our system is on the brink of collapse with

regard to health care. They haven't gotten the answer. Please, Premier, call the public inquiry. Call it tomorrow, and let's get started on this process.

The Chair: The 20 minutes for the Wildrose Party has ended.

Any other members wishing to speak? You have 10 minutes each. The hon. Member for Airdrie-Chestermere.

Mr. Anderson: I'd love to chat some more.

The Chair: We haven't terminated two hours yet, so hon. member, you have the floor for 10 minutes. Do you still want to share 20 with the Premier?

Mr. Anderson: Nah. Can we do five, five, five, and five? Would that work?

The Chair: We have 10 minutes each to the maximum, and if you sit down, the Premier can answer.

Mr. Anderson: Can we do it five and five just to make sure that we actually get some time? Is that okay? No? Ten and 10?

The Chair: Ten and 10 or 20 combined.

Mr. Anderson: All right, all right. We'll do combined, then. She can talk for another 15 minutes while I talk for five.

Let's talk again about transparency. One of the things that is really bothering a lot of people in Alberta – and we just did a poll on this, actually. We polled roughly 42,000 Albertans on the question of Bill 24.

The Chair: Hon. member, excuse me. I have a note for an introduction of guests in the Speaker's gallery, so may we revert briefly to Introduction of Guests?

[Unanimous consent granted]

Introduction of Guests

(reversion)

The Chair: The hon. Member for Bonnyville-Cold Lake.

Mrs. Leskiw: Thank you. Thank you, hon. Member for Airdrie-Chestermere. I'd like to introduce to you and through you to all the members of the Legislature a group of people from the north-central Alberta child and family services board that are here to meet with the MLAs and ministers. This is zone 7. I'd like to introduce them, and I'd ask them to stand as I call their name: co-chair Audrey Franklin from Ardmore, one of my constituents; co-chair Brian Broughton, Edson; Florence Gladue, Slave Lake; Wendy Huggan, Slave Lake; Caren Mueller, Vimy; Pat Palechuk, Smoky Lake; Claudette Sheremata, Athabasca; Trevor Thain, Whitecourt; Penny Vasseur from Bonnyville; and Elden Block, acting CEO. If you would please stand, we'll give you the traditional welcome of this Assembly.

Executive Council

(continued)

The Chair: Hon. member, please proceed.

Mr. Anderson: Thanks. Welcome, to our guests.

I guess now that we have a little bit more time, with regard to leadership at the top and transparency and all those great things I really do want to know what goes on from your perspective in the Executive Council with regard to how you set policy. We're

spending a lot of money on it; that's for sure. Your budget went up in that regard for the Executive Council.

With regard to physician intimidation you've managed to run out the clock almost to the election period here, Premier. You made the promise during the PC leadership – was it June? – I think it was in June that if elected Premier, you would call a public inquiry into physician intimidation, et cetera. You were elected in October, the beginning of October. You said: no; we've got to wait to pass legislation, different legislation. So you waited, and we got into December, and you passed some piece of legislation that empowered the Health Quality Council to do the public inquiry.

4:30

Now we're at the end of February. Still no public inquiry. One has to be a little suspicious that, potentially, we're not going to have a public inquiry before the next election. I don't know if this is the policy coming out of the Executive Council office, if you feel that it's just too damaging to have such an inquiry, but I would ask: is it your plan to call the public inquiry immediately so that we have public hearings starting in the next couple of weeks, or are you going to delay and delay and delay until after the election before Albertans get any answers or hear any testimony in this public inquiry? Albertans would like a public inquiry, at least starting one, before they go to the polls, not after. Would that not be the transparent thing to do, Madam Premier?

The Chair: May I just interject here a bit before I recognize our Premier? We are talking about the estimates of the Executive Council, so please focus on that.

Now, Premier, if you wish to answer.

Ms Redford: Sure. Thanks, Mr. Chair. I find it quite amazing sometimes to stand in this House and to think about the experience that I have in this House and what I say in this House versus how very often this is reported back, somehow thinking that if it's created as revisionist history, it won't be on the record what this government stands for.

So the first thing I'll say is that we have been committed to an independent judicial inquiry with respect to health care from the first day that I was elected leader of this party and was sworn in as Premier. In fact, I was committed to it well before that. Mr. Chair, what we have said we needed to do is exactly what we've done. We needed to introduce legislation that would actually allow for an independent judicial inquiry. We passed that legislation in the fall.

The next thing that I said – and I said it during the debate with respect to the legislation – was that we then wanted to ensure that we had the report from the Health Quality Council on the work that they were doing because there were a number of allegations made with respect to the health care system, and it was important to ensure that that work was done and that we saw the results from that work before we started to launch into another process.

Today we have now received the Health Quality Council report, and as the minister of health has said in this House and as we said during the debate with respect to the legislation, we will review that report, and we will then use that legislation to call an independent judicial inquiry. Again, I was standing in this House two hours ago and was asked exactly this question and answered the question very specifically. There is no doubt that this will proceed and, in fact, receiving the report today will now allow us to review the report and to proceed with respect to the inquiry.

Now, I've heard people try to lecture on what that means with respect to timing. Here's the word: independent. We have made a

commitment to proceed. At the point that we proceed, there will be an independent inquiry that will be established under the legislation that was debated and passed in this House. That's something that Albertans can have complete confidence in. It is fully transparent. We have been fully transparent with our approach, and we'll continue to be, Mr. Chair. This is work that matters to Albertans, and to even insinuate that we as a government would change direction with respect to this I don't think is appropriate language for this House, and I also don't think it's appropriate language outside of the House.

We are committed to what we said we would do. We said that we would put this plan in place, and events are unfolding as they should. As we've said, we would ensure that we would follow.

Thank you.

Mr. Anderson: According to your Executive Council business plan, goal 1, government policy and planning are co-ordinated and effective. So let's talk about how that's happening with regard to your policy to have a health care inquiry. You have just said that you want an independent public inquiry. Great. Now, it's a little hard for us for you to stand there and say that it's fully independent since you're determining the terms of reference. Your own minister said that earlier: determining the terms of reference for the public inquiry. You are determining the timing of the public inquiry. Basically, you could tell them to examine anything. You could say: well, we're going to do an inquiry into the ER crisis, but we're going to leave out the intimidation scandal, and we're going to leave out some of these other things that have been alleged, the queue-jumping, for example. So that's not all that independent.

That will take leadership. You will have to show leadership at some point on this issue. It's on the side of your bus, I think: real-life leadership. So why don't you show some real-life leadership right now and commit not only to having a public inquiry on the intimidation scandal and the queue-jumping and the ER crisis but to call it now and to have it started within the next couple of weeks?

I mean, it didn't take long to turn around what happened with regard to the pay and perks committee. That got turned around quick by the Speaker. Surely the Premier of Alberta can make this happen in the next couple of weeks and get it started so that Albertans have some ability to know what has gone on in their health care system before the next election, because if you do not do it, if you do not call this inquiry before the next election, you are going to be painted not just by this caucus but by Albertans and, certainly, by other caucuses as being someone that says one thing and does another. You promised a public inquiry. You said it would be started before the election. Will you do that, Premier? Will you call the public inquiry into physician intimidation within the next couple of weeks so that before we go to the election . . .

The Chair: Hon. member, I reminded you earlier that this time is for the estimates of the Executive Council.

Again, if the Premier wishes to speak, please reply.

Ms Redford: Sure. Thanks, Mr. Chair. You know, as I said when I got up to answer the question the last time, I'm absolutely amazed by the characterization and the revisionist history. We've been very clear with respect to what we will do. We actually passed legislation to ensure that this is done. So to suggest for some reason, for any reason, that we would go back on our word is entirely inappropriate.

You know, Mr. Chair, one of the things that's great about democracy and great about elections is that people get to decide

whom they trust. In the past four and a half months every single commitment that we have made as a government we have honoured.

What I would say, Mr. Chair, is that what we hear in the public debate is an awful lot of fearmongering and suggesting that things are different than they actually are and innuendo that somehow conduct isn't appropriate. Yet at the end of the day every single time the accusations come up short.

4:40

As we think about the next three months and we think about the really important discussions that Albertans are going to want to have with respect to the future of this province, we as government have every confidence that we can have conversations with our constituents and be proud of what we've committed to that's been positive, that's been constructive, that's been forward thinking, and that's been honest. That's going to be a really important time for Albertans because what Albertans want and what Albertans have said they expect is an honest conversation about the future of this province based on a government that is setting a direction and keeping its commitments.

I think that on this side of the House, Mr. Chair, we are all proud of the fact that through the throne speech, through the budget, through legislation that was passed last fall, and through Bill 1 as well as the Education Act in this session we have honoured our commitments. We haven't done it in isolation. We've done it based on consultations with Albertans, reflecting on the values and the issues that Albertans care about.

I believe that when these suggestions are made that things are other than they actually are, Albertans will have a decision to make with respect to what the dialogue should be, who is acting appropriately, who is consistent, and who they can trust, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Airdrie-Chestermere.

Mr. Anderson: Thank you, Mr. Chair. They sure will have that opportunity very soon.

So the non answer seems to be that there's not going to be a health inquiry before the next election. She won't answer it, so I'll move on.

Again referring to goal 1 of your Executive Council plan: government policy and planning are co-ordinated and effective. That's goal 1 of the Executive Council. We have said over and over again in this House and outside this House that under no circumstances will we as a Wildrose caucus ever support in the next four years a tax increase.

Now, is it this Executive Council's policy that should your targets not reach the projections that you're projecting – let's say they fall short a tad. Let's say it's \$85 a barrel or something like that, and you fall short a couple billion dollars or \$3 billion or \$4 billion or \$5 billion. Jack Mintz just today, for example, said that your projections are a fantasy. That's Jack Mintz today in the *National Post*. If that is true, if Jack Mintz, the well-respected economist, is correct and your projections are a fantasy and you come in below, will you increase Albertans' taxes to pay the difference, or will you not?

Will your Executive Council or will you as leader of the Executive Council unapologetically and without any of this waffling that we keep hearing say that your government, if re-elected, will not raise taxes or create new taxes? Will they, or will they not? Will you take the pledge to not raise Albertans' taxes? [interjections] That seems to get them riled up on the other side, doesn't it? Will you commit to not raising taxes for the next four

years regardless of what happens? Yes or no. Is that the policy of Executive Council, or are you too scared to answer it, like your caucus seems to be?

The Chair: Hon. Premier, if you wish.

Ms Redford: Absolutely, Mr. Chair. I'm looking at the projections, and what we see is oil at – what is it? – \$106 a barrel. Then I look at oil price benchmarking and the work that has been done by the Department of Finance on an ongoing basis that actually has numbers higher from Credit Suisse, Deutsche Bank, CIBC, Toronto-Dominion Bank, and RBC.

I'll tell you that the work that we do in government, Mr. Chair, is not based on speculation and innuendo. This hon. member knows better than that. This hon. member needs to understand that building a budget is a little more serious than theorizing about what he thinks may or may not be appropriate in the next two or three years.

Mr. Chair, we tabled a budget in this House that has reasonable economic forecasts, and quite frankly I think Albertans and, certainly, we as a government have an awful lot of confidence in turning to international financial institutions that have professionals and teams of people that are working on this on a daily basis, much more than the suggestion from this hon. member that he knows best. Frankly, I'm not going to rely on that hon. member's advice or projections when we're building a budget that's as important as the budget for the province of Alberta.

What we see in our projections is a significant surplus in the following years. In the two out-years there is no doubt that we are going to continue to be able to thrive and to succeed. Mr. Chair, the reason we're going to be able to do that is because Albertans understand that if we make the right decisions now, that are informed and smart and based on evidence, we will have put this province into a fiscal situation where discussions about raising taxes, which are not included anywhere in our fiscal plan, don't have to be part of the discussion.

Mr. Chair, we do know that the other thing that Albertans have said is that we need to be able to have a conversation about what our fiscal framework will be, and part of that must include how we define what revenues will be. I've said that simply because there is a reference in the throne speech to taxation should not mean to anyone that there's any anticipation of increasing taxes. As I've said, it's just as likely in that conversation that we could decide to eliminate small-business taxes. There is no doubt that if you want to have an intelligent conversation that's not ideological about the future of this province, you have to bring everything into the mix.

Today we hear of one expert who has commented with respect to budget projections. You know, I'll tell you, Mr. Chair, that that same expert three months ago was actually advocating for tax increases himself. So exactly which of that expert's comments does the hon. member want to rely on? Does he want to have an intelligent conversation where we think about integrated public policy planning, or does he want to do what he's doing now, which is simply pull the quotes, speculate, fearmonger, and not act responsibly with respect to the future fiscal forecast for this province?

The Chair: Hon. member, you have 21 seconds.

Mr. Anderson: Twenty-one seconds.

Well, I certainly hope that the projections are right, and I certainly hope that we have huge surpluses for a long time. If we have surpluses, that's fantastic. It's amazing to me that this Premier still will not commit to not raising taxes. That says it all.

The Chair: On my list, the hon. Member for Innisfail-Sylvan Lake.

Mr. Ouellette: Well, thank you, Mr. Chair. It's been kind of a little bit of an interesting afternoon so far. We've heard a lot of negative stuff going on in here today. That seems to amaze me because I honestly believe – and I guess everybody has been saying their opinions today, so I'll say mine – that we actually live in the very best province to work, to raise our families, to play. What more can we ask for? Really, when you read 90 per cent of the newspapers around, we are the envy of the world because of the good governing this province has had for the last 40 years. Today we have a Premier that's working very, very hard to do all the things that I just said. She wants to make health care the best, and our whole government wants to work on that. She wants to make education the best, and our whole government is working on that. Yet the other side just keeps talking negatively about those things.

4:50

Mr. Anderson: Relevance.

Mr. Ouellette: It was my turn, Mr. Chair.

I have to say that promoting our province as an energy leader, as an important global trading partner, and as a must-see tourist destination are all key initiatives of this government. I know that Executive Council's mission is to ensure effective strategic planning and policy co-ordination across government and to increase awareness of Alberta as an innovative global leader. On that note, Alberta's oil sands continue to attract international attention, and much of it is initiated by groups that are focusing on the negative. So I'd like to ask the Premier: what has the government been doing to increase understanding and awareness about the oil sands?

Ms Redford: Well, thank you for that question, hon. member. You know, the oil sands will be critical to our future. It's interesting today to see that so much of the discussion in terms of our long-term projections does rely on our nonrenewable resource revenue. What we know is that our customers are in the United States, they're in Asia, and that while we're not exporting an awful lot of resources to Europe, the public profile with respect to our resources is important in Europe. So the work that we need to do as a government, as ministers, for me as Premier, for all of us as MLAs is to work with our international offices and communicate effectively with respect to the real story around our environmental record and the fact that we as Albertans are true environmental stewards.

We need to talk not only about what our successes have been and the fact that we're one of the only jurisdictions in North America that has a tax on carbon, a price on carbon, that we're investing in a technology fund that's allowing for new technological innovation that will reduce greenhouse gas emissions with respect to the oil sands, that we've invested in carbon capture and storage, and that we're ensuring that we're doing upgrading with innovative technologies that also have an environmental impact, but we've done some very good work just in the past month with our Minister of Environment and Water and an announcement that I made jointly with Minister Oliver last week around joint monitoring and continuing to invest in research and innovation around tailings ponds and, again, around new technologies for extraction of the resources.

What we know from all of this is that when we tell that story through our emissaries around the world, through our international offices, through the work that's being done in Washington with our representative, Dave Bronconnier, and also with our representative in London, Jeff Sundquist, we're getting effective resonance. The hon. member is absolutely right. The reason we need to be able to talk about these issues and to really robustly

communicate them is because we do get such criticism from environmental groups.

You know, when I was in Washington, there was a reporter that asked me a question. It was right after the President had decided to delay the Keystone pipeline the first time. This reporter said: we were talking to this environmental group, and this environmental group said that they were really pleased with the Keystone decision because they knew that we in North America could now be off oil in two years. Well, it's a ridiculous proposition. As he was saying that to me, I looked out the window, and there was a person walking along the street. I thought, "That person doesn't honestly believe that the North American economy is going to be off oil in two years," nor, Mr. Chair, would I suspect that they want to be off oil in two years.

So when we're having a conversation with respect to what our environmental record has been and how we need to communicate that, a really important part is to be able to say, "Let's know who our critics are, and let's ensure that everyone understands what their political motivation is," because that's an absurd proposition. If we have environmental groups that have that as their starting base, I don't think that most people in Canada and in the United States would presume that it's possible to have a sensible discussion with those people, Mr. Chair.

When I think about the number of applications, the number of interventions that are being made at the National Energy Board with respect to Gateway, it's important for us to talk about what the motivation is for many of these interventions. Now, there are certainly people intervening that are passionately committed to environmental sustainability, just as we are as Albertans, and we need to be able to talk about what we want for better environmental outcomes.

However, we know as a province and we know as a government that when we talk about these issues, we are completely transparent with respect to what our objectives are, that we want to ensure that we're balancing environmental sustainability and that we're encouraging economic development. Other interests aren't always held to the same scrutiny. So an important part of what we need to do through Executive Council is ensure that we're having real conversations with decision-makers and with average citizens in North America about what motivations are in place around environmental activists.

We have some fantastic organizations that care an awful lot about environmental sustainability, and very often we can find areas of mutual interest to agree on. We can work with stakeholders and industry who are working with organizations like the Pembina Institute on what sustainable energy can look like in the future. That's a really important conversation for us to have because it's not only about our existing resources; it's also about talking about what an energy economy looks like in Alberta that allows us all to feel proud of what we have.

We do need to ensure that we're greening the transmission grid. We need to make sure that renewables and sustainables are part of what we're doing with respect to an energy economy, and those are investments that Albertans are prepared to consider. Our job as government has to be to introduce the policy choices that allow Albertans to make those decisions, and part of that also impacts what we're able to do with respect to greenhouse gases.

As we move ahead, we know that we can have tremendous success in talking about our record, communicating that we'll continue to do better, developing new technologies, and talking about who we are as Albertans and why we're proud to be Albertans. At the end of the day, Mr. Chair, I believe that that is

going to allow the oil sands to continue to be an important resource for our province.

Thank you.

Mr. Ouellette: Mr. Chair, I think that the Premier gave just some excellent answers. I'd like to add one more thing. The other side had been mentioning today also about how she enjoyed her plane rides or where she went. I would like to add that, you know, most Albertans I've talked to want to see the Premier at venues in other countries to open marketplaces – and I believe she would be the best cheerleader Alberta has – whether it be to represent our oil sands industry or our agricultural industry.

With that, she's done such a great job. I would like to move that the committee rise and report, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: We've just terminated two hours of the committee, and we have a motion to rise and report.

[Motion carried]

[The Deputy Speaker in the chair]

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Dunvegan-Central Peace.

5:00

Mr. Goudreau: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The Committee of Supply has had under consideration resolutions for the Department of Executive Council relating to the 2012-13 government estimates for the general revenue fund and lottery fund for the fiscal year ending March 31, 2013, reports progress, and requests leave to sit again.

The Deputy Speaker: Does the Assembly concur in the report?

Hon. Members: Concur.

The Deputy Speaker: Opposed? So ordered.

Government Bills and Orders Third Reading

Bill 3

Appropriation (Supplementary Supply) Act, 2012

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Government House Leader.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I move Bill 3, the Appropriation (Supplementary Supply) Act, 2012, for third reading.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Buffalo on third reading of the bill.

Mr. Hehr: Certainly. I became very aware in the course of time that appropriations seem to happen on a regular basis and are needed by the government to do ongoing business and to continue with the day-to-day existence of providing what would likely be in most cases responsible government. I believe that it was the hon. Minister of Human Services, when he was talking about appropriations and the amounts that were needed and the like, saying that: well, we needed more money because of this reason and the number of people who had applied to a certain program, and denying those individuals the ability to get access to the help they need would have been unfair. I think that is an appropriate use of government appropriations and of a bill in that matter.

I see my hon. colleague. I'm glad he's not leaving at this point in time.

Appropriations are essentially a way that the government continues to go about running its business. Like I say, I think sometimes, at least from our side, some of the numbers reflected in appropriations could have been better planned for at the beginning of the budgetary year. In our view, there appear to be some instances when the government could have foreseen these circumstances arising and a need to go back to the table and to then again renegotiate their position or come forward and ask for more money from the hon. House. In those instances it becomes concerning to us that these mechanisms weren't planned for.

I think that if we look at that and if we can dovetail sort of to this year's budgeting process and whether there is going to be a need for appropriations, we can look then, if these budget numbers don't hold, which many pundits out there are saying will not hold – I, for one, hope they will. It means Alberta's doing well and that we're headed in the right direction, and we can go forward from there. But if they don't and we continue to have people who require government services, government assistance, provision of public health care, the provision of police services under the Solicitor General's faithful watch, then we'll need to continue to do those services and go on from there.

I see more than ever the need to appropriately budget. That has to be done and, to use a term that I've increasingly become confused at, to be fiscally conservative in doing so. I will be frank. I'm not sure what that word essentially means anymore. It's not just applied to this House but anywhere, frankly. When someone says, "I'm a fiscal conservative," I generally ask them, "Well, what the heck does that mean?" Does it mean that we only use the money that we have? I guess that could be one definition. Another definition might be: do we only use the money that's predictable and sustainable? Well, that might be another definition.

Another definition, one that I've sort of come to adopt, would be: does fiscally conservative mean that we are paying for what we use right now? By right now, what we as a society use right now. Are we paying what we owe for health care as a society? Are we paying what we owe for education as a society? Are we paying what we owe for environmental protection as a society? Because we, in the main, the people living, should be the ones paying for those services, not the future generations, not the people who are coming long after us.

So if you're really looking at a fiscal conservative, it can be, in my view, two ways. One, if you were to adopt my reasoning that we should pay for what we use, you would simply run those services that the dollars we bring in can afford and not necessarily augment it totally with fossil fuel allocations. I consider the 22 to 23 per cent of fossil fuel resources, or nonrenewable resources, that currently come into the coffers as being part of that equation that shouldn't be spent as a matter of course. It shouldn't be spent to pay today's bills because, in my view, that's unsustainable in the long term. You are actually letting people off the hook for paying for what they use, and I don't think that would be a conservative principle to adopt, that we should spend every last dime of fossil fuel resources that come into the coffers.

I guess that's where I was somewhat glad when I heard the throne speech. We were going to look at all revenue streams that come down the pike to get a handle on, what I believe, paying on what we use, a theory that I think is far more conservative than simply reducing taxes to the lowest level possible and then spending all this nonrenewable resource revenue, which after it's gone, it's gone.

It would be like a farmer who has 10 children, five girls and five boys. He loves them very much, and they grow up, and they have families. But he really doesn't like to ask them to contribute;

he likes being the father that they all know and like. You know, dad handles everything. But this guy can't pay for it all, so he sells off a piece of the family farm every year to pay today's bills so he doesn't have to ask his children to pay for some of the services they use. At the end of the day, you know, 25, 30 years later, that large family farm is now nothing – okay? – because he didn't ask people to pay as they go, to contribute to what they were using on the farm. That to me is not conservative. It would have been much more conservative to ask these children to pay for some of the things that were utilized on the farm. Then the farmer wouldn't have had to sell off piece by piece the family farm. That to me is a lot more conservative.

5:10

I use that parable – I don't know if parable is correct but Aesop's fable or something to that effect – to say that what we've done in the last 25 years is essentially said that we are going to spend every last dime of the fossil fuel resources that come into the public purse. In my view the analogy is the same as the farmer selling off pieces of the family farm one at a time to pay today's bills. Some day the farm runs out. Some day the oil sands run out. To me that wouldn't be a very conservative principle to go by.

[Mr. Zwozdesky in the chair]

Those are my thoughts on appropriations. I wasn't sure what I was going to talk about, but I'm glad I got a chance to speak on appropriations in third reading. I know that maybe someone else would like to speak on appropriations and go from there; otherwise, we're going to revert to business and go from there.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Acting Speaker: Thank you.

Are there any other speakers to the Appropriation (Supplementary Supply) Act, 2012, Bill 3? The hon. Member for Airdrie-Chestermere.

Mr. Anderson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I've spoken a couple of times on different aspects of Bill 3. It is a frustrating process watching how we burn through money here in this Legislature. I mean, there's always an excuse for everything. Some of these things, you know, obviously, we need to spend money on, but I do find it amazing how this government thinks that they're fiscally responsible. I find it amazing.

I'll just give you some brief facts. This is from today, actually. It's actually from the fiscal reference tables from the Department of Finance for Canada in 2011. This is what was said. They compare two of the biggest spending provinces in the country. The biggest spending province is Alberta; second-biggest is Ontario. They do the comparison.

Did you know, Mr. Speaker, that program spending per capita, program spending per person, is \$10,055 in Alberta and \$8,300 in Ontario? Almost 20 per cent more here in Alberta than in Liberal tax-and-spend Ontario. Total revenues per capita in Alberta, \$9,235 per person; in Ontario, \$7,975 per person. Of course, Ontario is the second-biggest spender. This is Dalton McGuinty we're talking about. Growth in total spending in the last five years – five years' total spending increase – in Alberta, a 41.5 per cent spending increase. Three of those years were tough years or at least two of them anyway were kind of either in a recession or, you know, in a quasi-recession. Forty-one per cent. Now, that's tightening the old belt, eh? Excellent. In Ontario it was 34 per cent by contrast. Still awful.

The deficit per capita in Alberta is \$900 per person. That's the deficit for 2010-11. In Ontario it's about \$1,000 so just a very

small difference there. Then the debt per capita – and I remember that the Premier earlier today was talking about how Alberta doesn't have any debt. Of course, that's incorrect. We have billions of dollars in unfunded liabilities, direct borrowing for capital projects, and all sorts of debt that's on the balance sheets. Anybody can take a look at it at any time. Clearly, Alberta does have debt, more than it had five years ago as well, when it was basically paid off and we didn't have half of the liabilities that we do now.

In Alberta we have \$4,869 per man, woman, and child in debt, not deficit but debt. That's according to Statistics Canada. I guess Statistics Canada may be lying, but I hope not. [interjection] Well, that's why I'm quoting Statistics Canada, since you feel that way, hon. member.

Then in Ontario it's \$16,000 in debt per capita. They do have four times more debt per person than we do here, well, actually closer to three times.

This government has absolutely not a leg to stand on when it says that it is fiscally responsible, when it starts talking about the need to balance and blah, blah, blah. All that stuff: it's baloney. Until they get their fiscal house in order and until they get their priorities straightened out and the ability to distinguish between needs versus wants and priorities versus those things that can wait, they are putting the financial future of our children and grandchildren in jeopardy. They're certainly not living up to our potential. Hopefully, we could do a little bit better than terrible. Maybe we could try to excel in how we manage our finances. You cannot possibly give one statistic that shows that we are managing our finances given the riches that we have in this province.

As Jack Mintz said today in his report about Alberta, Alberta, Ontario are both mismanaged and profligate.

One province is bigger in population and slimmer in wealth. The other is smaller and fatter, referring to Alberta.

Ontario and Alberta may seem very different, but they do share one attribute: Their governments spend well beyond their capacity.

This month, we have seen the release of the Drummond report for Ontario and the Alberta budget. Both governments could use a crash diet.

The Drummond report is all about reality. Ontario must curtail spending.

It talks about the need for Ontario to quit spending like drunken sailors.

Then he goes on:

The Alberta budget is based on fantasy.

This is Jack Mintz.

Using optimistic forecasts for oil prices averaged well in excess of US\$100 per barrel, the government expects a return to surplus by 2013-14, even though its "rainy day" fund to avoid cash deficits is plummeting a further \$3.7 billion just this year.

How could each of these provincial governments so mismanage their finances over the years? In Alberta, riches have spoiled fiscal discipline. Since 2005, spending has grown massively by 41.5% despite the major global recession of 2008-09. True, Alberta's inflation and population growth puts pressure on spending, but this is not an excuse. Even after adjusting for inflation and population growth, Alberta's real per-capita spending has grown by 11%,

in excess of that inflation plus population growth. That is more than the private-sector productivity growth.

Alberta's profligacy comes of public-sector wage costs escalating far above the national average. In 2000, the differences in wages per employee were little different between Alberta and the rest of Canada.

This is interesting. When Ralph was at his best, I would say, roughly in the area of 2000, he had really turned this province around. The engine of the economy was roaring. We were getting very close to paying off our debt, which would be done a few years subsequent to that. In 2000, at that time, public-sector wages in Alberta were about the same, a little higher but about the same, as in the rest of Canada.

By 2010, Alberta government employees were being paid vastly more, roughly \$30,000 per employee more than the rest of Canada. Think about that. This is why we're in this situation to pass the supplementary supply act, Mr. Speaker.

5:20

He goes on to say:

Not only does the province lack a good fiscal plan, it also lacks a savings plan. The province continues to run down its financial assets, whose [net] worth is expected to be \$15 billion by the end [of 2012].

It was over \$20 billion not such a short time ago.

Alberta is endowed with vast oil and gas resources that have been generally sold off to support current public consumption. Its total per-capita revenues are over \$9,000, but more than a quarter of that comes from non-renewable resource revenues. By selling off its assets in the ground while depleting its net financial and capital assets, the province is reducing its wealth . . .

Get this number, Mr. Speaker. Wait for it. You're going to love this number.

. . . by about \$13 billion a year.

If they had just kept their spending to inflation plus population growth, invested the rest in the heritage fund, the savings fund, et cetera, we would be taking in this year, just off interest and all these other things, \$13 billion a year more. Now, that would solve our deficit issue right now, wouldn't it, without having to cut any services.

Without better fiscal planning, the Alberta government has aggravated economic cycles in the past decade by jumping up spending in the good times and pulling back in bad times. This not only hurts Albertans but also other Canadians, since Alberta is a major player in investment markets.

Now, it then goes on to talk about Ontario's sad story, and it is a sad story, a very sad story, and it has a lesson in it for us. Twenty years ago Ontario was the centre – well, in Toronto they felt they were the centre of the universe, but surely they were the economic engine of the country, of all of Canada. Twenty years ago they had a very healthy automotive industry. Think about the '90s and how much money was coming in just from the automotive industry, with GM and Ford and all of those plants over there in Ontario just absolutely humming. It was the economic engine.

Now here we are, and according to this article and according to other published reports Ontario is literally on the brink of financial collapse. Their credit rating is going to be significantly downgraded if they do not get their finances in order. So when we're thinking about passing these bills, Mr. Speaker, we need to think about the fact that right now Alberta is on the path to becoming Ontario. That's what we're on the path to. Now, maybe this new Premier has a plan – I wish she would share it before the election – to get us back on the path to being exceptional again. Maybe she's got that plan somewhere up there, and she just wants to keep it a secret until whenever, after the election, and I hope that's the case.

But if she continues down the road that this government has gone down over the last five years in particular but also over the last couple of years of the Klein years, unfortunately, we are going to be

in a very bad place. We will not be the economic engine of Canada anymore. We've got to get this province of ours and our budget straightened out.

It's not about being crass. The Premier always says: it's not just about the bottom line. Well, that's true. It's not just about the bottom line, but it is also about the bottom line. You cannot be a fiscally conservative, responsible government if you refuse to look at the bottom line and use social programs and social spending as an excuse to ignore the bottom line. One day guess what happens? We run out of money. Oil is at \$60 a barrel all of a sudden because of new technologies and so forth, and then what do we do? How do we balance our budget then?

If we don't get ourselves straightened out, Mr. Speaker, we are going to have a lot of 'splainin' to do to our grandchildren and to our children, and that's not a conversation that I think any of us in this Chamber want to have and want to have to defend.

There's still time. We probably have another boom here coming up in the next 10 years. Oil probably won't go down too, too much. It won't go into the \$30 range for at least another few years, anyway. But we know how volatile the price of oil is, so let's plan now. Let's stop throwing money around like it's paper, and let's control our spending, get our balanced budget, start putting away some of our resource revenues into our savings plan so that we can turn what is a sea of nonrenewable resources into a mountain of permanent investment capital, replenishing and growing with interest each and every year and every single year enriching the opportunities of Albertans for generations to come, Mr. Speaker.

That is what I hope this Premier will eventually come up with before the election, and if she doesn't, I know of a very solid party that would be willing to pick up the mantle and do it for her if she doesn't feel the need to do it. We are prepared to do so, and we'll be taking that message to Albertans over the next several months.

With that, I've spoken to Bill 3. Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

The Acting Speaker: Thank you.

Hon. members, section 29(2)(a) is available should anybody wish to question the hon. member who just spoke or make comment on the speech. The hon. Member for Calgary-Glenmore.

Mr. Hinman: Yeah. I'd like to ask the hon. Member for Airdrie-Chestermere about a few areas that you didn't maybe go into detail on. You know, each year as we go back to supplementary, I find it very frustrating that we can't ever stay within the constraint of a budget year after year. We have 10 ministries that have come forward here. Do you have any comment on each of the individual ministries and where we're spending this money and why we need to go to supplementary supply and why they couldn't stay within the budget in those areas? I'm just wanting your knowledge on whether you have anything specific there as to why we're running these deficits.

Thank you.

[The Deputy Speaker in the chair]

Mr. Hancock: You mean given that you just gave a 15-minute speech and didn't touch on anything in the bill? Is that what you mean?

Mr. Anderson: That's just unfair. I think that this touched on a lot in the bill. Third reading is about looking forward and how we can avoid these types of bills in the future, the need for these bills, Minister.

You know, there's always an excuse for all of these things, isn't there? One of the big ones is wage increases for the judges under

the Ministry of Justice. Now, we all want good judges, and we all want to make sure that they're fairly paid. But I add, again, that we don't seem to understand that when the average person looks at the increase that the judges are getting, just like they did when the politicians gave themselves a 30 per cent pay raise, when the average person sees the elites getting that kind of a pay raise, it sets a tone. I hope we can all agree that it sets a tone.

It's just like anything else. The CEO of any organization sets the tone for the organization. You look at the incredible success of Apple, and you think: why were they so successful? One of the reasons – there are many reasons – is because Steve Jobs set a tone as the CEO. It was a tone of innovation. It was a tone of: "There are no walls here. No one is going to be in a box. We're going to think outside the box. All ideas and creative solutions are going to be embraced. We're going to look at those new things, and we're going to spend money on those new things, being innovative and so forth." And because of that, he set the tone for his company. Then, of course, there are other companies that don't set such a good tone, and they fail.

It should be the same in the province. The people that lead us – our politicians, our Premier, the front bench, all of the MLAs in the Assembly, the lawyers, the judges, the doctors, everybody – should make sure that when we give ourselves these salary raises or when our salaries are adjusted, we're setting a responsible tone. I mean, it's just like the opposition leader says. It is pretty hard to look a worker in the eye who has been cleaning hospital floors, with all the awful things that get on hospital floors, and say: "You know what? We can't afford a 3 per cent increase or an inflationary increase this year. Sorry. We've got to tighten our belts."

5:30

It's hard to ask them to make that concession, so to speak, or to agree to that when the first order of business after the last election for the cabinet that was then in existence, including this Premier, who was in that cabinet, was to give themselves a 30 per cent raise. It's pretty hard to then go to the worker who's cleaning the vomit off the floor and say: "You know what? We've got to cut back. We've got to tighten our belts." There's no fiscal leadership. There's a disconnect, and people see it. So when the government goes in and negotiates with these unions for a fair deal, the union leaders take a look and say: "Well, good grief. You gave yourselves a 30 per cent raise three years ago. What do you mean you only want to give us zero per cent this year and 1 per cent next year or 2 per cent next year? What are you talking about?" And you know what? They have every right to say that.

Now, if we had been the example and had made it our first business when I was over on that side and the PC government would have made it their business to say, "You know what; we're only going to increase our salaries by the rate of inflation; we're not even going to do average weekly wage index, just inflation," and then you go to the bargaining table with the teachers and you go to the bargaining table with the workers, it's a much easier process.

The Deputy Speaker: Any other hon. member wish to speak on the bill? The hon. Member for Calgary-Glenmore on Bill 3.

Mr. Hinman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'd like to stand and, I guess, share a few of my thoughts on Bill 3 and the disappointment Albertans relate to me when I'm out talking to them in various places and visiting them in their homes that this government has failed for the last five years to be able to balance its budget despite record revenue. I was just looking this afternoon

at the revenue from our resource industry – oil, gas, bitumen, land sales – and over the last seven years I don't believe it has dropped below \$8.9 billion. It has been as high as \$14 billion, down to \$8.6 billion. It has been a landslide of revenue for this government, yet every year this government fails to be able to meet its budgetary expenses.

I can see in a few areas, perhaps in Human Services, that we've had some tragedies and need to address them, perhaps in Municipal Affairs, again, where we've had some real natural disasters. Those are areas that, you know, we can't always predict, but again in good budgeting you would set aside that \$300 million for those different areas where we might need it.

To go through and look at some of them, I want to start off with the first one for the Legislative Assembly of \$3.1 million. I sat on the committee when our Chief Electoral Officer came in to make his presentation requiring this extra amount of money. Mr. Speaker, this wouldn't even be in the appropriation if this government and the Premier would keep their word on having a set election date. The whole reason he came in with the cost and the expense, the Chief Electoral Officer, is because he has to be prepared because tomorrow or Monday this Premier could, if she decides to, call an election. It's his responsibility to have places ready to rent, people ready to go to work because this Premier broke her promise on setting a fixed election date.

So we have an extra \$3.1 million here in supplementary supply because the Chief Electoral Officer needs to be ready in case this Premier all of a sudden wakes up from a nightmare and thinks, "I've got to go to the polls now," and off we go. Very disappointing that this Premier wouldn't keep her word, give a date. The first one here in the appropriation bill wouldn't be in here if we knew it was the 15th of June, the 30th of April, whatever it is. But here we are having to spend extra money, and the frustration of people trying to be prepared and ready. Why? Because this government fails to plan. This government fails to be transparent. This government fails to be open with the people of Alberta. This government and this Premier fail to keep a promise. Very disappointing.

Intergovernmental, International and Aboriginal Relations needs an extra, if we flip through and go to that in the book – excuse me. I've got the wrong page flagged here. But we can go through line item after line item and ask why the government has failed to be able to properly allocate its funds, or to be even more impressive, Mr. Speaker, actually come in under budget. Why is this such an impossibility for this government? Here it is. Intergovernmental relations. The supplementary amount of \$2 million is requested together with \$500,000 made available from lower than budgeted expenses in other programs, to provide an increase of \$2.5 million to the First Nations development fund.

I'm not saying that the development fund isn't great and that we don't need to have it, but the question is: why can't we budget for these things a year in advance? Why is it that with 30 days left, this government comes in and says: "We need this money. We need \$118 million for the First Nations development fund"? Well, what is it that it's actually presenting? We don't know. It would be very nice if these things actually came with line items to say what the contracts are for and what they're trying to achieve. It was another one of the promises. In her mandate letter the Premier said that they're going to be open and transparent. There's no transparency here, Mr. Speaker. There's no openness. It's line item budgets, and who knows what it's for?

We go to the next one. A supplementary amount of \$28 million is requested to provide funding for salary increases and pension plan enhancement for the Alberta Provincial Court judges and the

Court of Queen's Bench masters in chambers. Again, a line item, not enough information there to be able to determine whether this government failed to budget properly or whether they were just unaware.

As my colleague from Airdrie-Chestermere has pointed out so many times, the whole budgeting process, in my opinion and for many people across this province, comes from the first act that this government did, the Premier included, to go into Members' Services and give themselves a nice big hefty wage and then to turn around to the rest of Albertans and say, "Look at what a wonderful job we're doing; we are wonderful; pay us top dollar," and not be able to see the domino effect of what that leadership actually causes. Leadership in that they lead, they take significant raises, and then those behind want to follow and ask for significant raises. They've lost all credibility to be able to deal with any of our numerous public servants because of what they gave themselves. In most Albertans' eyes they weren't doing a very good job, Mr. Speaker. They're actually appalled at the jobs they were doing in many cases and very upset with the way they pushed forward and took those.

Municipal Affairs: \$17 million, I believe, is requested together with \$523,000 made available from lower than budgeted expenses in other programs, to provide \$18 million for the government-wide response to the wildfire in the town of Slave Lake and surrounding communities. Here, Mr. Speaker, is a case of an unforeseen tragedy needing some money. We understand that, but again my question is: why don't we have that fund in place so that we don't have to go through supplementary supply?

It's disappointing as we go through case by case. Seniors supplementary estimate: \$10 million. The amount of \$10 million is requested together with another million made available from lower than budgeted expenses in the affordable supportive living initiative program, to provide \$6 million for the costs related to higher caseload growth for financial assistance to assured income for the severely handicapped. There have been many, many speakers here that have talked about the need for putting them first. It's kind of interesting, like I say, that they got this huge wage increase themselves, yet we've waited four years before we've finally seen those on AISH and PDD receive that increase. Four years they had to wait before they got a significant increase, when this government, again, put themselves first and said they needed it. Why can't they plan and budget for these things?

5:40

Another one of the concerns that I have because of the total amount that they're asking for – it's interesting that this Premier was propelled to the front, I believe, largely because of a \$107 million promise that she made with just two weeks left in the leadership campaign. She went to Albertans and said, "We'll restore the \$107 million," which the Wildrose spoke against taking from the teachers because they'd signed contracts. I mean, the current Finance minister is the one who gave them such a lucrative contract five years ago, and then they didn't want to keep it. [interjection] I'm getting the House leader over there, Mr. Speaker, chattering, saying that that isn't so. It absolutely is so.

She also promised that they would take that \$107 million from in-year savings. If we had \$107 million of in-year savings, why are we even coming to supplementary supply?

It's interesting, too, to even go back to her Bill 1, Results-based Budgeting Act. This is the result of poor budgeting. This is the result of the sky is the limit. We have record revenue, yet we have a bigger problem; we have record spending. They're unable to control it. They refuse to control it. It's kind of interesting, you

know. Even those over there that believe in Keynesian economics of spending when times are tough miss the other half of the time. We want the government to be able to keep spending when times are tough, but they spend even more when times are good. The only limit that they actually had, Mr. Speaker – and I often kind of chuckle at this. It's like giving a child a thousand dollars and saying, "You have a half-hour to spend it, but you have to spend it at a dollar store." Well, it's not too far into the spending when the child realizes that, "Well, there are so many other things that I want." They'd be happy to save and go over there, but: "No. These are the parameters that you're in. You've got a thousand dollars. Spend it in the next half-hour at a dollar store."

That's what this government does. It has revenue coming in, and it says: "We've got to spend it. It's burning a hole in our pocket. We can't put it into savings if we can spend it." We look at some of those record revenue years. Thank heaven there wasn't the capacity out there for them to spend any more and they were actually forced to walk out of that dollar store and put some into our sustainability fund. Gratefully, that is sustaining us at this point so that we don't have an actual debt. We just have cash deficits accumulating now to, I think, \$15.8 billion over the last five years.

Mr. Speaker, as we look through this, it's very disappointing that this government comes year after year with its supplementary supply. Other than one or two ministries where there's been some action that's happened that was, you know, unexpected, that needed some extra funds, we have to come to this. For a Premier who says that she's going to be fiscally responsible, she certainly has not demonstrated in any areas some proper results-based budgeting. It's always next year. You know, the rainbow is just over the next hill. They don't seem to realize that that rainbow is a lot farther away than that. In their budget and in their revenue that they're projecting, it's just next year now. After five years this is the fifth "Next year the revenue is going to be here, and we're going to be back in the boom years again, so why do we need to worry about balancing the budget?"

It's interesting that we continue to repeat this day after day, year after year not being able to control our spending. It's a poor example. It's a poor example to Albertans. It's a poor example to all of our public servants that work hard to create a better Alberta. The lead is poor. The number one message that this government and this Premier have sent out to all of the working people in Alberta is that raises are in order. "We deserve them; we'll restrain yours to a very limited amount." They're unable to look at the domino effect that a 2 or 3 per cent raise has when it comes to the teachers, the nurses, the doctors, the policemen. [interjections] No raise? The Government House Leader says that he's had no raise in five years. He doesn't remember his 30 per cent raise, or maybe he was just so heavy at the trough, he couldn't consume any more if he wanted to.

It's quite interesting, Mr. Speaker, that Bill 3, Appropriation (Supplementary Supply) Act, 2012 . . .

The Deputy Speaker: Hon. member, I hesitate to interrupt you, but it's a quarter to 6, and Standing Order 64(5) requires the chair to call the question on any appropriation bill standing on the Order Paper for third reading, so I'll do my duty.

[Motion carried; Bill 3 read a third time]

Government Bills and Orders Second Reading

Bill 2 Education Act

[Debate adjourned February 16: Mr. Boutilier speaking]

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Fish Creek on Bill 2, Education Act.

Mrs. Forsyth: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased to stand and actually talk about Bill 2, the Education Act. I think it's something that has been long in coming. I know that when I was on that side of the House, we talked about the Education Act. I think what's happening right now is that as this bill was tabled in the Legislature, I think a week ago, this is where we're starting to get questions from people, Albertans and constituents, in regard to some of the things that they would like to see in the Education Act and what they think is important. Hopefully, during the debate we'll be able to ask the minister on that.

I know the Government House Leader was very passionate about the Education Act. I know that when I was with the government and I brought forward my bullying bill, which was defeated in the Legislature, the minister at the time, from Edmonton-Whitemud I think it was – I want to make sure I have the right minister – assured me that the bullying bill, as my private member's bill, would be incorporated within the Education Act.

It's nice to see that. I think he realized, as well as many of the people in the school system when we talk about bullying, the seriousness of the bullying. As the Member for Calgary-Fish Creek and as someone who did bring the private member's bill forward in regard to bullying in school, some of that has been incorporated in the act, and that's nice to see. As we go through, I'm going to go back to my private member's bill, and I'm going to look at the section in the act in regard to bullying and find out exactly what has been incorporated and what hasn't been incorporated.

What I always find fascinating when I read a bill – Mr. Speaker, this is a huge bill; it's 186 pages. I'm not the critic – the Member for Airdrie-Chestermere is the critic on Education – so I haven't had time myself as a member of the Wildrose to go through this bill line by line to find out some of the things that . . . [interjection] I have the Government House Leader, once again, yelling across the floor at me, and I thought I was very kind to him when I was bringing him up with regard to his passion when he was the Education minister. I guess I find it somewhat questionable or frustrating why he'd be yelling at me because I actually was very nice and complimentary to him in regard to when he was the Education minister and fulfilling what I consider to be a pretty big promise in regard to incorporating my private member's bill on bullying into the Education Act.

5:50

When we're looking at, as I said, a 186-page piece of legislation, you always start with the preamble. I always find fascination with the preamble. The vision and principles and values of the education system are so much common sense, yet we feel the need to put this in a piece of legislation.

We have a government that has had the Education Act forever. You would think that all of the things that are in the preamble, when you talk about "whereas education inspires students to discover and pursue their aspirations and interests and cultivates a love of learning and the desire to be lifelong learners" – well, Mr. Speaker, my boys are way past the school age. They were in the public school system. That was an aspiration, quite frankly, when they were in the school system. I'm not going to age myself. I can bet that if we go back in history to when I was in school – and that's a long time ago – that was the aspiration of the teachers at that particular time that were teaching us. I remember, quite frankly, some very, very passionate teachers that were inspiring me when I was in school and deciding what I wanted to do when I

grew up. I have to say just on that that I don't remember anyone, when I was in school, quite frankly, inspiring me to choose the role of a politician. But, you know, I guess that was then, and this is now.

We talk about: "The role of education is to develop engaged thinkers who think critically and creatively, and ethical citizens who demonstrate respect, teamwork and democratic ideals, and who work with an entrepreneurial spirit to face challenges." And it goes on and on. All of this is what we should have been doing and what we have been doing, so I wonder, when you see all of these whereas incorporated in regard to a piece of legislation, what exactly the government was doing previously or what they thought they were doing in the past.

I want to talk about some of the interpretations in the act. They talk about the attendance board and the attendance officer. I know that one of the priorities for us is how to keep children in school and, I guess, as it says in section 8(1), enforcing school attendance. We've had that. I know that we've talked about that in the past when we've talked about: how do we engage our children and keep them in the school system?

Now we've got the Solicitor General and Minister of Public Security doing his famous hand signals in the Legislature and his famous grin. We wonder about the Solicitor General, who should be setting an example in his particular position, making faces at the opposition and hand gestures. It goes back to yesterday, when he thought he was so smart in tabling a letter in the Legislature in regard to a very small quote about what our leader said in regard to the provincial gun registry. That was the Solicitor General and Minister of Public Security misleading Albertans.

Point of Order Parliamentary Language

Mr. Denis: A point of order, Mr. Speaker, arising out of 23(h), (i), and (j) but also *Beauchesne's* 489. This member has used the word "misleading," which is unparliamentary language. I would ask that she apologize to this Chamber, being the honourable woman that she is.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Airdrie-Chestermere on the point of order, then.

Mr. Anderson: On the point of order. In response, I think the hon. member was just mentioning that, obviously, there was some misleading language in that tabling. Of course, the leader of the Wildrose had said that she wanted to make sure that criminals who had committed gun crimes were registered, and he said that that meant she was promoting the gun registry. I thought it was weird that the Solicitor General doesn't want to register criminals who have used guns in crimes. I just think that's weird.

The Deputy Speaker: Well, I think our Speaker earlier addressed us about the words that are used in the House. I think we'll just focus on the words being used here, not the content of it. Please refrain from those words. You were advised by the Speaker about using the word "misleading" and so on. It has been explained before.

Hon. member, listen. It has been explained before, so now please stay on Bill 2, the Education Act. Don't go venturing further out. Then we'll have no points of order, and everything should be great. Go ahead.

Debate Continued

Mrs. Forsyth: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'd be pleased to stay on Bill 2, actually, once we get the hand gestures and the facial expressions – oh, there he goes again, the Solicitor General of the province. [interjections]

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. member has the floor. Please continue on Bill 2.

Mrs. Forsyth: I'm sure his constituents and the constituents in Calgary-Egmont and, quite frankly, Albertans would love to know that we have a minister of the Crown providing hand gestures and his goofy smile when he doesn't like what's being said.

Anyhow, having said that, I would like to continue on – and there he goes again.

The Deputy Speaker: Hon. member, address the chair.

Mrs. Forsyth: You know, it's too bad that we did not have a camera in regard to what's happening in this Legislature because, quite frankly, Albertans would be appalled.

On the bill, talking about part 1, the access to education and the right of access to education, I don't think anybody can argue with the fact that every person – and it talks about: six years old and younger than 21 who is a resident.

There are things that we like in this bill. We also like the idea of the authority of the schools, the charter schools, and the importance of public education in this province. We like the idea of the religious and patriotic instructions that are exercised.

A lot of the things that are incorporated in the bill are part of the policies that we support under the Wildrose. We think it's important that every student has the right to an education, and that's incorporated in the bill. The government in the bill talks about the parents having the right and the responsibility to make informed decisions respecting the education of their children. Now, that's an interesting comment because then we go into some of the controversy that we've had – the particular bill escapes me – on human rights and having the right that if there is an educational class being taught, as a parent I have the right to withdraw my child from that particular class. I think that truly is something that is up to the parent. I don't think there is anything wrong with the fact that if a parent decides that their particular child – let's say that they're taking a sex education class – isn't ready for that or they feel that they would rather teach the child themselves about sex education, that really is up to a parent's choice.

I have to tell you that when my kids were in school, I felt that it was my right as a parent, and I think today it's very similar to parents having the ability to have the right to choose. We hear a lot about the fact that – and we see some of the things that are going on across the province and, particularly, in B.C., I think, where they've indicated that it's mandatory that a child stays in the classroom. I think that – and I've repeated this – it really, truly is up to a parent to make those decisions.

I understand we're running out of time, and you're going to stand up, Mr. Speaker, so I'll sit down.

The Deputy Speaker: Well, it's 6 o'clock, so the chair shall now just inform all hon. members that the policy field committees will reconvene at 6:30 p.m. in committee rooms A and B for consideration of the main estimates of the Department of Culture and Community Services and the Department of Energy.

[The Assembly adjourned at 6 p.m. to Thursday at 1:30 p.m.]

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Province of Alberta

The 27th Legislature
Fifth Session

Alberta Hansard

Thursday, February 23, 2012

Issue 10

The Honourable Kenneth R. Kowalski, Speaker

Legislative Assembly of Alberta
The 27th Legislature

Fifth Session

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Legislative Assembly of Alberta

1:30 p.m.

Thursday, February 23, 2012

[The Speaker in the chair]

Prayers

The Speaker: Good afternoon and welcome.

Let us pray. As we conclude for this week our work in this Assembly, we renew our energies with thanks so that we may continue our work with the people in the constituencies we represent. Amen.

Please be seated.

Introduction of Guests

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development.

Mr. Berger: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise today to introduce to you and through you to all members of this Assembly a group of junior high students from Rockyview Christian school who have travelled here today from Pincher Creek. It's a great privilege for me to have students here. It's not very often that I get visitors, so I really appreciate their participation. These bright young students are accompanied by their teacher, Miss Brittany Penner, and by parent helpers Myron Koehn, Cheryl Koehn, Dawn Nikkel, Ted Nikkel, Laurel Warkentin, Kathleen Warkentin, Galen Toews, and Gwen Toews. They're seated in the members' gallery, and I would ask them all to rise. Please give them the warm reception of the Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Strathcona.

Mr. Quest: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. On behalf of the hon. Member for Sherwood Park it's my pleasure to rise before you in this Assembly and introduce to you and through you a group of 41 grade 6 students from Woodbridge Farms elementary school in Sherwood Park. These bright young students are accompanied by their teachers, Sheryl Dermott, Anita Sisson, and Chris Sudyk, and parent volunteer Judy Andrekson. I hope the students have enjoyed their visit here today and take away many fond memories of their experience. They are seated in the members' gallery. I'd ask that the students rise and that we give them the traditional warm welcome of this Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. the Premier, please.

Ms Redford: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure to rise today and introduce to you and through you Colin and Eden Wetter. Eden was born in Edmonton and is currently a grade 6 student at Glenora elementary school. Her class was lucky enough to spend a week at the Legislature earlier last month. We had a visit today, and she thoroughly enjoyed it. They had a wonderful tour of the building and saw all sorts of secret compartments and rooms. I'll tell you that her teacher, Sandy Myshak, is a great supporter of this program and has let Eden come today to question period but has asked that she report back on our conduct, behaviour, and the substance of the discussion.

Her father, Colin, was also born in Edmonton. He's a lawyer with Justice Canada. He comes from a long line of Albertans, primarily from central Alberta. In fact, his grandfather, Gus Wetter, has a high school named after him in Castor, Alberta. They're seated in the

members' gallery, and I would ask both of them to rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of this House.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for West Yellowhead.

Mr. Campbell: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my privilege to introduce to you and through you to all members of the Assembly Mr. Peter Watson. As you know, Peter is the deputy minister of Alberta's Executive Council, and I'll be giving a member's statement on an award he received just this week, that we should all be proud of in government. I'd ask Peter to rise and receive the warm welcome of this Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Cardston-Taber-Warner.

Mr. Jacobs: Thank you. I'm happy today to rise and introduce to you and through you to all members of this Assembly some of my family that are visiting today. I would ask them to stand as I call their names: first of all, my wife, Linda; my daughter Candice; her husband, Randy; their children Danny, age 6, and Kayla, age 3. It might be of interest for you to know, Mr. Speaker, that Randy's grandfather Alvin Bullock served in this Assembly in the 1960s. I would ask that my guests please receive the warm, enthusiastic response of this Assembly.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Lacombe-Ponoka.

Mr. Prins: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's really an honour for me to introduce to you and through you to all members a group of people representing rural electrification associations from across Alberta. Today we have with us Delores Cherwoniak from Smoky Lake, representing the Lakeland REA; Baynish Bassett from Claresholm, general manager of the southern Alberta REA; Evert Vandenberg from Fort Macleod, also from the southern Alberta REA; and Carl Beniuk from Lac La Biche, with the North Parkland Power REA. I would ask them to rise and receive the warm welcome of this Assembly.

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

Ms Blakeman: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. One of the great things about being an elected official and in the opposition as a critic is that you get to keep meeting all different kinds of people. I'm really delighted today to be able to introduce to you and through you to all members of the Assembly three people who are here from the Edmonton and Area Land Trust. Now, if I could get you to rise. We have the executive director, Pam Wight; the board chair, Marg Reine; and one of the directors, Glen Thoman. I'm going to honour these individuals later with a member's statement, but I'd really like to thank you for your work on behalf of all Albertans and particularly Edmonton and area. I would ask my colleagues to join me in welcoming them to the Alberta Legislature.

Members' Statements

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

Organ and Tissue Donation

Mr. Webber: Mr. Speaker, most of us are not aware of organ and tissue donation unless we have been personally affected. For most Albertans awareness never goes further than signing the back of our Alberta health care cards. Few of us realize that in most cases, even if we were to die and wanted our organs to be donated, many things could preclude the chance to be a donor.

Organ donations require a well-thought-out plan. Harvested organs deteriorate after a 24-hour period, so time is of the essence. Medical personnel must co-ordinate between emergency units and organ donation programs, and the plan must involve having trained personnel in emergency rooms to be able to ask sensitive questions of family. Yes, family consent can override even though a person has signed his or her Alberta health care card.

When families know in advance the wishes of a loved one, 96 per cent give consent to proceed with organ donation. In contrast, only about 45 per cent of families that are unclear about their loved one's wishes consent to the donation of organs. If family members hesitate to give timely consent, the odds of a successful transplant taking place decrease dramatically. That is why it is so important that family members are aware of the wishes of loved ones who want to donate their organs upon death. This way, should a tragedy occur, the wishes of individuals are known, and family members will take comfort in knowing that they have carried out their loved one's final wishes.

To raise the profile of organ donations and to bring families together to discuss the wishes of family members, an Alberta organ donor registry should be developed, it should be implemented, and it should be promoted in such a way that the maximum number of usable organs will be available for transplantation.

So to this, I urge all members of the Assembly and all residents of this province to set aside time to talk about organ donation with their loved ones to ensure that their wishes are understood and that they are carried out. I would ask all colleagues of mine to consider becoming an organ donor.

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

Edmonton and Area Land Trust

Ms Blakeman: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Today I'd like to do a shout-out to my guests joining us in the visitors' gallery from the Edmonton and Area Land Trust. This group is a land conservation trust for our region. They steward millions of dollars of donated land in and around Edmonton to conserve natural areas and habitat. Now, that doesn't mean that people are banned from using it, just that it's to be conserved.

So for those that are watching on TV or Internet streaming, consider getting involved in your local land trust. You can volunteer for general tasks or sit on a board or donate money. Now, that's the interesting part. Although these land trusts get land donated to them and there are definitely incentives and tax recognitions for donating the land, there is very little government support for the land conservation trusts' costs in receiving the land.

1:40

Each time land is offered, the trusts must hire professionals to survey, plan, and report on the feasibility of accepting that land grant. As well, there are costs to repair or build fences, repair structures that are there, provide garbage cans, et cetera. In all, each donation costs the land trust about \$25,000 to accept. Now, Albertans are very supportive of land conservation trusts and very generous, but it still doesn't cover all of the costs. The Edmonton land trust has more offers of donated land than they can accommodate within their budget.

Interestingly, the funding streams from this government seem to lack the capacity to deal with land trusts. The community initiatives program routinely turns down applications from land trusts. They get bounced between Environment and SRD as Environment is air, water, soil, and cumulative effects, and SRD does white space but not green space. So we have a funding catch-22.

I hope my short honouring of the work of the land conservation trusts from across Alberta and particularly the Edmonton and Area Land Trust will help government, elected officials, and staff to be more accommodating of these organizations.

Thank you so much for joining us today.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for West Yellowhead.

Peter Watson

Mr. Campbell: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The Alberta Chamber of Resources is recognized as a leading voice for Alberta's resource industries. It is a resource-based, cross-sectoral industry association that provides leadership for responsible natural resource development in this province.

Each year the Alberta Chamber of Resources selects a person of the year who is "a leader who exemplifies the best of Canadian industry, representing the qualities that make Alberta's resource development companies some of the most prosperous, entrepreneurial and forward-thinking organizations in the world." This year the chamber has selected our friend Mr. Peter Watson as the Alberta Chamber of Resources person of the year.

Peter is no stranger to many of us in this government as he has faithfully served in the public service for over 25 years. Peter began his career with the public service in 1983, where he worked as a water rights engineer for Alberta environment. Since then, he has played a critical role in advancing Alberta's energy and environmental interests through numerous positions, including assistant deputy minister of environmental assurance, deputy minister of Alberta environment, and Deputy Minister of Alberta Energy.

Peter played a strong leadership role, in fact, where I first met him, in developing the water for life strategy, Alberta's provincial energy strategy, and Alberta's carbon capture and storage initiatives. Through all his work he has had a profound impact in advancing our province's energy and environmental stewardship.

His outstanding talent and expertise were further recognized by our hon. Premier, who on October 11, 2011, named Peter Watson as Deputy Minister of Alberta's Executive Council.

Mr. Speaker, I stand today recognizing the accomplishments and contributions made by Peter Watson to Alberta, and I congratulate him on being awarded Alberta Chamber of Resources person of the year.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

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

Dr. Marvin Fritzer

Mr. Bhardwaj: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Today I rise to celebrate the achievements of Dr. Marvin Fritzer, a senior health researcher at the University of Calgary and chair of the Alberta Research and Innovation Authority.

Dr. Fritzer, a native of Vulcan, Alberta, recently received the top achievements in health research award from the Canadian Institutes of Health Research and the *Canadian Medical Association Journal*. A panel of Canadian and international experts honoured Dr. Fritzer with this prestigious award based on the considerable impact of his work on Canadians and others worldwide.

Dr. Fritzer is a professor in the departments of medicine and biochemistry and molecular biology and a member of the McCaig Institute for Bone and Joint Health. He has worked tirelessly to identify and test for biomarkers for autoimmune diseases such as

lupus, MS, and rheumatoid arthritis. Dr. Fritzler's discoveries are in wide use in clinical diagnostic and research labs around the world.

As chair of the Alberta Research and Innovation Authority Dr. Fritzler further contributes to the physical well-being of Albertans and the economic health of our province by providing strategic advice to this government on research opportunities, emerging technologies, and policies to enhance innovation.

Please join me in congratulating this extraordinary Albertan for his many accomplishments and for this well-deserved recognition.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for St. Albert.

Distracted Driving

Mr. Allred: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Lucky. Lucky is a good word most of the time. We're very lucky to live in this province. But when it comes to distracted driving, being lucky is not what it seems. Were you simply lucky that you didn't hit your neighbour's six-year-old daughter? You were talking on your cellphone and didn't notice her crossing the street until you were inches away from her pink jacket.

Were you just lucky that you didn't get hit by a gravel truck? You were texting and didn't look up until you were already through the red light and a truck's grill was at your window.

Were you lucky that you didn't hit your golden retriever? You were reading a report for your meeting and didn't see him bounding across the road until you were a tire's length from his front paws.

Maybe tomorrow you won't be so lucky. Maybe it's time to change your luck by paying attention behind the wheel. This month we're working with our traffic safety partners to remind Albertans about the distracted driving law and the importance of complying with it. While we know that fewer Albertans are talking on their cellphones since the legislation was introduced, it takes time and effort to change behaviour. Through advertising, enforcement, and other awareness initiatives throughout February we are working to ensure that Albertans are safer on the road.

Distracted driving. It's not about being lucky. It's about giving your full and undivided attention to your driving. Drive safely and keep your eyes on the road.

Thank you.

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

Health Quality Council Review Report

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. The Health Quality Council report released yesterday confirmed what the NDP opposition has been saying for a long time. There are major problems in the health care system, and these problems mean that sick Albertans are not safe in our system.

Doctors and other staff, who have a professional and moral obligation to advocate for better patient care, are constantly bullied. The government is clearly the problem here. The report is crystal clear. The massive reorganization of the system that led to the creation of Alberta Health Services is identified as a significant part of the culture of fear and alienation that physicians say they are experiencing. This reorganization was deliberately initiated by this government under the leadership of the former health minister, now the Finance minister, without a plan or consultation. The chaos created by this massive reorganization destroyed confidence in the system's accountability, leading to an increased culture of fear and

an inability to advocate for better patient care.

To continue to have the chief engineer of this costly upheaval still sitting in an important position at the cabinet table is unacceptable. It reveals that there is no real change in this government. This government continuously disregards the well-being of ordinary Albertans in order to pursue its own agenda.

The same people who are in cabinet now stayed quiet for two and a half years while they had shocking information from physicians about these problems. They continued planning significant and dangerous changes to the health system after the next election. They broke their own promises to build necessary long-term care spaces. Adequate long-term care facilities would have taken much of the pressure off our acute-care system to free up acute-care beds for patients in urgent need of them.

This report makes evident just how important a full judicial public inquiry is. Things that are hinted at in the Health Quality Council report need to be given full investigation. We have to know exactly what this intimidation by politicians in the government consists of.

These are very large issues, that we've only begun to understand, and we need the right process, a full judicial inquiry.

Roseanne Supernault

Ms Calahasen: Mr. Speaker, you and I both know that coming from a small community, we face many challenges. We also know that coming from a small community can bring many opportunities. First and foremost, you learn the importance of knowing who you are and accepting yourself for who you are and what your talents are. Over time, as you excel in the areas you are good at, the community also accepts and recognizes you and your talents.

Today I recognize a beautiful, talented young actor, Roseanne Supernault, who has excelled in the arts. Pride arises in me as I congratulate Roseanne on recently winning the best supporting actress award at the American Indian Film Festival in San Francisco for her role in the film *Every Emotion Costs*. Not only did she win this award; she has also won two straight Rosie awards from the Alberta Motion Picture Industries Association for her role in *Blackstone*. While she has big dreams, including honing her talents in comedic acting roles, Roseanne remains closely connected to her small-town home.

Mr. Speaker, it pleases me to no end when I learn about young Albertans becoming role models in their communities. I know that her actions will inspire not only the youth in East Prairie Métis settlement but young people across Alberta in the film industry.

On that note, I was pleased that the Minister of Culture and Community Services indicated her support for the film industry during budget estimates last night because there are so many talented Albertans just like Roseanne in this industry. I believe the minister's vision for the film industry in Alberta will go a long way in helping many other role models like Ms Supernault reach their potential.

Again, congratulations, Roseanne, on winning your award. You deserve it. I ask my colleagues to give you a huge round of applause.

Thank you.

1:50

Oral Question Period

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

Minister of Health and Wellness

Dr. Sherman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Yesterday's Health Quality Council report said that sick Albertans who go to the ER wait 10 to 20 times longer than the national standard. Their safety is at risk, and many needlessly suffer in pain for hours, metres from care. Tragically, those needing end-of-life care spend their last few hours in the emergency department hallways. This report gives the minister of health, who has been part of the PC government's health policy for several years, a failing grade. Will the Premier take the first necessary step to repairing trust in our health system and fire this minister of health?

The Speaker: The hon. the Premier.

Ms Redford: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. I am very proud of our minister of health. Our minister of health is working very hard to respond in a meaningful way to all of the issues that he is having to deal with in managing his department. There is no doubt that it's probably one of the greatest responsibilities in our government. We know what a great percentage of our expenditure is spent on health care. What we also know is that this is a man who has committed his life to improving health care administration and to the provision of better health care for Albertans.

Mr. Speaker, as we know, the population in this province is growing, the system is growing, and to have someone who is intimately familiar with this work is something that we should have confidence in.

The Speaker: The hon. leader.

Dr. Sherman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Given that this same minister has committed the last few years of his life to breaking this system and that the Health Quality Council states that a culture of fear and intimidation exists and that bureaucratic and political interference is to blame, this health minister's interference, I'll ask again: will the Premier show leadership and fire her health minister, the one that helped break the system, Premier?

Ms Redford: Mr. Speaker, in the past year and a half there have been a lot of discussions with respect to how to manage the health care system. One of the commitments that I made to supporting a publicly funded health care system in this province was to ensure that while I was Premier, there would be no political interference in the health care system, and there won't be.

Dr. Sherman: Mr. Speaker, I'm not sure if this Premier read this report. We all know that the same minister is the principal architect of the PC government's failed seniors' housing policy, the disastrous seniors' drug plan, and now this health system and ER debacle. How can the Premier possibly stand up in this House in front of Albertans and defend him? Premier, will you please show some leadership and fire this minister?

Ms Redford: Mr. Speaker, it's been fascinating for me to travel across the province in the past four and a half months and talk about health care. I'll tell you one thing that there is an awful lot of consensus on, and that's when I say that our minister of health is doing a good job, a strong job, a competent job and that we have to ensure that we support him in continuing to improve the health care system. I believe that's what Albertans want, and we're going to stand behind our health minister.

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

Health System Restructuring

Dr. Sherman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. What Albertans want is the health care system to be fixed despite the political rhetoric.

Exactly four years ago, in the wake of the Health Quality Council's last such report, the former Premier made many promises, promises on long-term care beds and on how the health care system would be fixed if he won, on this PC letterhead. After the election this government broke all of those promises and actually went on to make the system even worse by forming AHS, by bringing in our code of conduct, and by closing these long-term care beds. What in yesterday's report can the Premier point to that could possibly give Albertans any reason to trust this PC government anymore on health care?

Ms Redford: It's fascinating to review the report because, in fact, there are some very good recommendations in that report. Our minister of health has said that in a continuing effort to strive to improve the health care system, he is going to accept those recommendations, review them carefully, and make sure that we're able to actually make changes in the health care system.

I will tell you, Mr. Speaker, that one of the reasons that Albertans can have confidence in their health care system is that for the past 18 months we've been hearing wild allegations about lists from the 2000s and hundreds of people dying from many members who are hon. members of this House, and one thing that the Health Quality Council did yesterday is that they said that those allegations were completely unfounded.

Dr. Sherman: Mr. Speaker, to the Premier. Let's consider sticking to 2012. In this report the health care system is still broken. Given that the Health Quality Council report says that many of the problems we're experiencing today stem from the hasty dismantling of the regional health system and that there was a report from the Health Quality Council that wasn't listened to in 2007, Premier, while you were in cabinet, why did you and most of these cabinet ministers decide to close long-term care beds and break an already broken system by bringing in AHS? Premier, you were in cabinet.

Ms Redford: Mr. Speaker, first of all, that is an unfounded allegation.

Secondly, I will tell you that I am sticking to 2012. The press release I'm looking at is dated February 22, 2012. What it says is that a number of allegations that have been made in the past by this hon. member were found to not have any foundation. Every single time that an allegation is made in the future, we must question whether or not there's a foundation for it.

Dr. Sherman: Mr. Speaker, it's a sad day when this Premier says that this report is an allegation of patient suffering.

Given that when the former minister was asked about the current crisis, he said that it was an unavoidable result of forming AHS, how can the Premier justify rewarding and defending these rude, insensitive, harmful, and offensive comments made by her Minister of Finance, the former health minister, who broke an already broken system? Answer that question, Premier.

Ms Redford: Discussions with AHS in the last four or five months with respect to work that they're doing to improve and enhance the system involved one very clear message to me, and that, Mr. Speaker, was that where we are right now with the administration of health care in terms of having a provincial board is where we need to stay. What we know is that change is sometimes difficult. There is no doubt that there are comments made in this report that have been identified as things that we need

to improve upon, and there is no doubt that, being open and transparent about that, we have to accept that.

The Speaker: Third Official Opposition main question. The hon. Member for Calgary-Mountain View

Health Care System

Dr. Swann: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I quote from the Health Quality Council association report: “distrust,” “engagement,” and “conflict.” These are terms used in the report to refer to many physician experiences in the health care services today. The report cited “increasing control among unelected deputy ministers and assistant deputy ministers,” clearly creating a conflict for conscientious physicians trying to advocate for quality care. To the Premier: how do you suggest restoring trust in an organization that continues to employ most of the senior staff that created this health care mess?

Ms Redford: Mr. Speaker, I find this a very interesting question. We have one member of this party standing up and saying that they're concerned about political interference in the health care system. Then we have another member standing up, referring to quotes, saying that there's not enough political interference or control in the system.

Now, Mr. Speaker, we believe that there should not be political interference in the system. We have confidence in the health care administrators that are running the system. We believe and Albertans have said that they have confidence, that as we move forward and continue to deliver a health care system, they expect excellence and they expect improvement, and we will continue to provide that.

Dr. Swann: Well, maybe I'll repeat the question as the Premier wasn't listening. I said that “increasing control among unelected deputy ministers and assistant deputy ministers” clearly conflicts with the physicians' duties to advocate for their patients. How do you suggest restoring trust when you have the same people who authored the problems in the first place still managing the system?

Ms Redford: Do I have to answer, Mr. Speaker?

Dr. Swann: I see that she doesn't want to answer that question.

Lack of any accountability has been the hallmark of this government for years. Here is the author of the health care chaos sitting beside her now as health minister, exemplifying the lack of accountability of this government. When are the people truly responsible going to be held accountable? When are heads going to roll, Madam Premier?

Ms Redford: Mr. Speaker, this kind of emotional reaction does nothing to improve health care in Alberta. We are not going to implement any program that's going to suggest that anyone will be punished for wild allegations that have been unfounded.

2:00

Public Health Inquiry

Mr. Anderson: Mr. Speaker, the PC slogan for this upcoming election ought to be: vote PC; we'll tell you our plans after the election. The Premier says that we'll have a discussion about taxes after the election. She says that she'll start balancing the budget after the election. She says that MLAs will vote on their new salary packages after the election. She'll start enforcing the unpopular .05 registry after the election. Premier, will you commit to ensuring that your long-promised public inquiry into physician intimidation and

the ER crisis is up and running before the election is called, or are you going to wait until after the election, just like everything else you've promised?

Ms Redford: I believe that we had a very robust debate with respect to this yesterday in my estimates. The answer to the question is that we put a plan in place in the fall, we passed legislation, and we said that we would wait for the health quality report to ensure that we established terms of reference that made sense for the independent inquiry. There's no reason for anyone to suggest that that's not going to happen, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Anderson: Still waiting for an answer.

Given that on October 15, mere days after being sworn in as Premier, you told Don Braid at the *Herald* that a full public inquiry into health care would be “up and running before an election next year” – up and running, Premier – were you just saying that to get a reporter off your back, or were you betting on Albertans forgetting you said it, or door number 3, are you going to keep your word and have the health inquiry well under way, meaning actual public hearings, before the election is called? Call the public inquiry.

Ms Redford: Mr. Speaker, I've never in my life not stood by my word.

Mr. Anderson: Well, we shall see.

Given, Premier, that on September 13, mere days before you were selected as PC leader, you told Rick Bell at the *Sun* that the public health inquiry would include a probe into “alleged queue-jumping by the politically connected” and given that former superboard CEO Stephen Duckett recently confirmed that there were dedicated go-to guys in the health regions to help PC MLAs with these requests, will your health inquiry, if you ever call one, include a probe into politically influenced health queue-jumping, or are you just saying that to get elected as well?

Ms Redford: Mr. Speaker, I've always stood by my word.

Health System Restructuring

(continued)

Mr. Mason: And her words have different meanings at different times, Mr. Speaker.

Yesterday's report of the Health Quality Council confirms what Albertans have known all along: wait times are atrocious, doctors are being intimidated, the government's constant restructuring is creating chaos, and health outcomes are worse. All of these things hurt Albertans and threaten their health, and all of these things represent the government's failure to provide good-quality health care to Albertans. My question is to the Premier. Will she apologize to Albertans for this government's disastrous handling of health care?

Ms Redford: Mr. Speaker, what we do in this system is that we ensure that we're making it better. We ensure that we're making decisions and putting resources into the system to make it better, we come up with new ideas about how to improve health care such as family care clinics, and we take advice from people who are experts. There's no doubt that there were experts on the Health Quality Council panel who have given very good advice to this government and to this minister. This minister is undertaking consideration of those recommendations now, and that's what we'll continue to do.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Given that the reorganization foisted on the health system by the former health minister, now the Finance minister “created a sense of chaos and instability” according to the report and given that doctors called it irresponsible and semi-criminal, will the Premier finally take responsibility, hold the minister accountable, and fire him?

Mr. Horne: Mr. Speaker, this Premier, this minister, and this government are accountable. As we have said since the report was released yesterday, unlike other hon. members we are going to take the time to carefully consider this 420-page report and its 21 recommendations influenced by the input of experts such as the former Chief Justice of the Court of Queen’s Bench of this province; a former Deputy Prime Minister of Canada, who was also a Minister of Health; and the head of an international organization that has expertise in cancer treatment. We’ll take the due diligence. We’ll provide hon. members with a thoughtful response.

The Speaker: The hon. member, please.

Mr. Mason: Thanks very much, Mr. Speaker. Well, I didn’t know that the health minister could fire the Finance minister. Isn’t that interesting?

Given that the restructuring caused an increase in wait times and longer hospital stays and given that the report says that major performance deterioration is only now being overcome and given that the minister responsible is still sitting there in her cabinet – not the health minister’s cabinet but the Premier’s cabinet – can the Premier explain why he is still there?

Ms Redford: The Minister of Finance is a fantastic Minister of Finance. He’s given great leadership with respect to building a budget that responds to what Albertans want. One of the things that Albertans want, Mr. Speaker: they want an investment in education, and they want an investment in health care. We’ve made sure that we’ve addressed that.

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

Public Health Inquiry

(continued)

Mr. Taylor: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. [interjection] I have the floor now, hon. member. Thank you.

Health care, an issue that should not be political in nature, has become entirely politicized because of the decisions that were made by this PC government, the most disruptive and damaging of which were made while this Premier sat at the cabinet table. Now Albertans justifiably have no trust in us politicians to fix the very system that we made sick. To the Premier: given the unfortunate reality that the only way to remove the politics polluting our health care system now is to understand the decisions that led us here and who made them, when will the public inquiry begin? Will it be fully independent and led by a judge?

Mr. Horne: Mr. Speaker, if what the hon. member is seeking is a diminution in the politicization of health care, then perhaps the hon. members opposite should look in the mirror and consider what they’re saying in this House each and every day to Albertans about their health care system.

With respect to the public inquiry, Mr. Speaker, the government remains committed to holding the inquiry that was promised. Unlike other hon. members, we do see some redeeming factor in taking the

time to review the report in detail and the recommendations. Our recommendations with respect to the inquiry will be forthcoming.

Mr. Taylor: Wow, Mr. Speaker. To the Premier: since you’re promising an inquiry and since you brought in a bill last fall to have the Health Quality Council conduct it and since the Health Quality Council said yesterday, in essence, “Well, you know, we’ll run it if you want, but we don’t really want to,” will you finally call a fully independent, fully public judicial inquiry and nothing less?

Mr. Horne: Mr. Speaker, the hon. member fails, of course, to recognize all of the other recommendations in the report that point to improvements in the system that have already begun and that we can further enhance. The point of the report is to improve health care for Albertans. The report is not about the hon. members opposite. It is not about individual members of this government. It is not about money and institutions. It’s about delivering better care to Albertans, and in any decisions this government makes with respect to these recommendations or with respect to terms of reference for an inquiry, that will be paramount.

Mr. Taylor: Mr. Speaker, I would expect the government to study and implement the 21 recommendations made by the Health Quality Council anyway. I’m seeking an answer about the public inquiry. Will it be judge led? Will it be fully independent? And when are you going to call it? Simple as that. The Premier, please. [interjections]

The Speaker: Hold on here, okay? Please. Questions to the government can be answered by any member of Executive Council. That’s a long-standing tradition of parliamentary democracy.

Mr. Horne: Well, Mr. Speaker, there is no confusion about the fact that there will be a fully independent, judge-led inquiry called in this province with respect to health care issues. What is in question, I think, is whether the hon. member is expressing support for the findings of the Health Quality Council report or whether he is dismissing those because he somehow thinks that an appropriate study of the matters that were referred to the council has not been completed. We refer again to the expert panel that was part of this process. Some of the other individuals involved include the Hon. Anne McLellan, whom I spoke of earlier, former Health minister of Canada; and Dr. Zaheer Lakhani, known to many members opposite.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Red Deer-North.

European Union Fuel Quality Directive

Mrs. Jablonski: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. A very important vote was taken today. Today European Union member states voted on a proposed fuel quality directive that rates fuels based on greenhouse gas emissions. The member states did not pass the discriminatory fuel quality directive, but they didn’t reject it either. To the Premier: what does this mean for Albertans?

2:10

Ms Redford: Mr. Speaker, this is a success for Alberta today because working with the federal government, we have been making the argument that anything that was being considered with respect to the sourcing of our resources that might be available in Europe should not be discriminated against based on their source. What we saw today were technical experts in a committee agree

with our position. It gives us an opportunity now to ensure that we can work with people that support our position, understand the people who aren't quite sure and haven't made up their mind, and know that there are some people that may not agree with us. For us this is a tremendous success. It shows that people are listening to what we're saying about Alberta.

The Speaker: The hon. member

Mrs. Jablonski: Thank you. To the Minister of Energy. The European member states did not pass the fuel quality directive, but that doesn't mean the misperception of our so-called dirty oil has been dispelled. What will this government do to mitigate the damage done to our oil industry?

Dr. Morton: Mr. Speaker, the vote yesterday was a small victory but a very significant victory for Alberta and for Canada, and it shows that the success of our communications effort with members of the European Union is working. We've made it clear all along that we support the objectives of the Europeans to reduce carbon intensity in their fuels but that we want it done in a fair way that treats all oil on the same basis; that is, scientifically based. I think yesterday's vote shows that we're making progress.

Mrs. Jablonski: To the same minister: knowing that Alberta was singled out in the fuel quality directive in part due to information on the carbon intensity of our oil, will the minister change the way his ministry releases information in the future?

Dr. Morton: Mr. Speaker, the fact is that the way we both monitor and report carbon intensity of the oil sands is one of the best – the best – in the world. Ironically, we actually get punished for it because the other sources of oil that Europe gets have very shall we say incomplete, if not shoddy, ways of reporting total CO₂ emissions. So it's the very efficiency and comprehensiveness of our system that actually ends up some of the objections that the Europeans bring. [interjection]

The Speaker: Did I hear "Sorry"?

Ms Blakeman: Yeah, you did.

Long-term and Continuing Care for Seniors

Mr. Chase: Mr. Speaker, placing my mother into long-term care was an extremely difficult decision, particularly for my father, who had become her primary caregiver. A year later when she suffered an irreversible stroke, our family, with Dr. Gladman's advice, chose to have her remain in her room to make her last days as comfortable as possible. I am grateful that my mother didn't die in a backless hospital gown on a cold steel gurney, abandoned in a frantic emergency hallway. My questions are to the Premier: why are Alberta seniors denied their final dignity by this government?

Mr. VanderBurg: Mr. Speaker, first, let me say to the hon. member that we all have had family issues and families that have gone through tough times. I feel for you, and I know the exact circumstance that many in this House have gone through. But to suggest that this government and our Premier does not care for these situations is absolutely wrong. This minister, this government, your government, sir, care about the seniors in our facilities.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Chase: Thank you. Again to the Premier: why are recovering seniors forced to occupy badly needed acute-care beds because of

the ongoing shortage of affordable home care, continuing care, and long-term care options in Canada's wealthiest province?

Ms Redford: Mr. Speaker, we have had very good discussions so far with respect to the budget that was tabled in this House two weeks ago. When I look at what we have reflected in that budget in terms of commitment for long-term care, for enhanced home care, and for ensuring that we're creating a system where there are more options available for long-term care for seniors with publicly funded health care in place, this is incredibly important in terms of creating spaces. It is a commitment that we have as this government. We want to ensure that all Albertans, particularly our seniors, are living their last days in dignity.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Chase: Thank you. Again to the Premier: given this latest damning report by the Health Quality Council will you at the very least commit to not selling out seniors and their families by removing the cap on long-term care fees? Please make that commitment here and now.

Mr. VanderBurg: Thank you for that comment. I'm going to tell you, Mr. Speaker, that I have no plans on removing the cap right now. I had over the last four months an opportunity to personally review the benefits and the impacts, sir. I made it very clear in the estimates the other night that until I've had a thorough discussion – it's a policy discussion – in this House with all members, with Alberta seniors, with all Albertans, I'm not removing the cap at all.

Electricity Prices

Mr. Ouellette: Mr. Speaker, many of my constituents have brought their power bills to my office looking for answers on high electricity prices. They're confused about the high costs and the different charges, that seem to fluctuate on a monthly basis. To the Premier: are Albertans destined for another winter of ridiculously high power bills?

The Speaker: The hon. the Premier.

Ms Redford: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. There is no doubt that we've all heard that volatile electricity prices are a hardship for many Albertans, and while we do have programs in place that can assist people that are vulnerable, we also have to know that for an Albertan who's living in their home, they need some certainty with respect to what those electricity prices will look like.

The first thing we know is that the regulated rate option will drop the price of power to approximately 8 cents in March, which is good news, and that will probably be a 40 per cent decrease over January and February prices. More importantly, Mr. Speaker, I've ordered that an independent review panel take a look at the variable rate option and all ancillary costs, to report back before the summer so that consumers can have protection and certainty.

Mr. Ouellette: Well, Mr. Speaker, my constituents will be very happy to hear that, but it's not only the electricity rates that are the issue here. It's also the distribution costs and all of the other ancillary costs that fluctuate. To the Premier: what can be done about those costs?

Ms Redford: Well, Mr. Speaker, in addition to the review of the variable rate, we will ask the Alberta Utilities Commission to freeze ancillary costs, which are included in other respects. Those

are costs related to distribution, to transmission, to riders, and to administrative charges. We need to bring some certainty to this issue. We can't snap our fingers and fix it, but we are going to fix it for Albertans.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Ouellette: Well, thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. If costs are going down, why would we talk about pushing consumers to contracts? To the Premier: is there really any advantage to being on a contract?

Ms Redford: Well, Mr. Speaker, we have had this discussion many times in this House, and we do believe that in a deregulated system there is an advantage to having a contract. We also understand, though, that it's sometimes a challenge for people to be able to enter into contracts.

I have directed the Minister of Service Alberta to ensure that regulations are in place that will ensure that people who are having difficulty getting into contracts right now, Mr. Speaker, will be able to get into contracts and have that dealt with through a deposit.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre, followed by the hon. Member for Cypress-Medicine Hat.

Land Conservation Trusts

Ms Blakeman: Thanks very much, Mr. Speaker. Land conservation trusts receive donated land to steward and conserve. For each donation of land offered, trusts must raise money to assess the suitability and then raise money for fencing, removal of garbage, upkeep, safety precautions, et cetera. Conservation land trusts in this province are being stymied in their valuable work by this government, and I'd like to know why. My first question is to the minister of AGLC and lotteries. What is the reason the land conservation trust organizations have been consistently denied casino licences?*

Do you not know who that is? Pick somebody.

The Speaker: Hon. member, second question, please.

Ms Blakeman: They don't know who's in charge of AGLC. That's bad.

Okay. Well, how about to the Minister of Tourism, Parks and Recreation: why do these conservation land trusts not qualify for funding under Alberta Sport, Recreation, Parks and Wildlife?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Hayden: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I can take a look at the regulations that deal with that, but I can tell you that we have 480 parks in Alberta, more parks than any other jurisdiction in our country, and all Albertans are within one hour of them. I can check into it, but we're doing pretty well.

Ms Blakeman: Minister, there's a difference between conservation land trusts and parks, but I'll help you figure that out later.

Okay. The last question, then, is to the Minister of SRD. Where in the Land Stewardship Act is the place for land conservation trusts?

2:20

Mr. Oberle: The hon. member should know, Mr. Speaker, that the Alberta Land Stewardship Act is about long-range land

planning out there, land-use planning, not about the granting of funds to organizations. As a matter of fact, the land conservation trusts are funded through my department through the land trust grant program. The hon. member should have known that as well.

It sounds to me, because she's got guests in the gallery, that she's got an issue. I would advise her to, rather than scaring them, have them come and talk to me, and maybe I can work that issue out. [interjections]

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Cypress-Medicine Hat, followed by the hon. Member for Calgary . . . [interjections] Whoa. Whoa.

Mr. Mason: It wasn't me.

The Speaker: It wasn't you today, hon. member. Aren't you lucky. The hon. Member for Cypress-Medicine Hat.

Long Gun Registry

Mr. Mitzel: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'd like to preface my questions today by saying that I'm talking about long guns and the long gun registry. Many years ago, when the long gun registry was proposed and passed, there were many here in western Canada who did not register them, and they were concerned about whether their guns would be seized. The owners' responses ranged from registering them to hiding those in places where they were boarded up. My first question is to the Premier. With the present announcement that the bill passed the House of Commons to abolish the long gun registry, Madam Premier, can you reaffirm Alberta's position now and into the future?

Ms Redford: Mr. Speaker, from the very beginning of the introduction of this registry this province, this government, and me personally as minister have been opposed to the registry. We have worked in partnership with the federal government to ensure that other Premiers could follow that same direction. I think it's very good news today that we've finally seen success with respect to a piece of legislation that simply did not need to be there.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Mitzel: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My first supplemental is to the Solicitor General and Minister of Public Security. Given that illegal guns, whether handguns or rifles, are still illegal and should be confiscated, when the bill passes the Senate as proclaimed, will the law enforcement people recognize this bill if they find a lawfully owned firearm in a vehicle they stop for whatever reason?

Mr. Denis: Mr. Speaker, in a word the answer is absolutely. There are many, many hard-working peace officers and police officers throughout this entire province that work to keep us safe every day. They enforce many laws, and they will enforce this new law when it is passed in the Senate.

Mr. Mitzel: My second supplemental is to the same minister. What will happen to present regulations regarding storage and carrying of rifles and ammunition, and will the existing restrictions continue to exist with regard to such things as the purchase of ammunition? I'm talking about the firearms acquisition certificates and the firearms possession certificates.

The Speaker: Go ahead.

Mr. Denis: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased to advise this member and this House that we will continue to

*See page 295, left column, paragraph 8

enforce the new regulations and the existing regulations as they come to pass.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Fish Creek, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Health Care System (continued)

Mrs. Forsyth: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. This government's record on health care is truly unforgivable. I don't know if the minister of health gets it, but it is the patients, everyday Albertans, who lose out when the doctors can't advocate for them. Worse yet, the Health Quality Council report states clearly that this government's political mismanagement is responsible for creating a top-down culture of fear and intimidation for our doctors. Does the minister of health even understand the important role of doctors in advocating for their patients, and does he honestly think his government is not at fault for the declining state of our health care system?

The Speaker: Well, if this is policy, proceed.

Mr. Horne: Mr. Speaker, this government completely understands the importance of physicians and other health professionals being able to advocate for their patients effectively. What I will say to the hon. member is that the Health Quality Council report does a very good job of citing some of the conditions around the creation of Alberta Health Services, such as a very short transition period and lack of opportunity for physicians to have input into the transition process, that are part of the reason for the concerns that are expressed in this report. We take those concerns very seriously, but we also note that much has been done since then to address them.

Mrs. Forsyth: You don't get that it's not a workplace issue; it's bullying.

Given that yesterday's report quotes physicians who feel that obvious systemic harassment and intimidation does have a negative impact on patient safety, could the minister please clarify if his government believes a task force that is held away from the public eye is enough to cure the ailing state of our health care, or will they do the right thing and include the rampant bullying of our health professionals in a full judicial public inquiry?

Mr. Horne: Mr. Speaker, I'll refrain from commenting on the characterizations that the hon. member has made about myself and the government and physicians. What I will tell you is that it was very important that this report provide the opportunity for physicians and others to tell their stories about their individual experiences and the very real challenges they faced in terms of advocating for their patients. The Alberta Health Services Board has put in place a very rigorous set of medical staff bylaws since then that not only provide a clear process for physicians to advocate for patients but actually puts resources in place to actively support them in doing so.

Mrs. Forsyth: It's peculiar, Mr. Speaker. The minister called it a workplace issue; I didn't.

Given that this government refuses to accept responsibility for their incompetence in managing our health care and has lost its credibility and given that Dr. Cowell has said that the government has a problem implementing recommendations made by the Health Quality Council, how can the health minister expect

Albertans to trust this government to preside over the health care system any longer?

Mr. Horne: Well, Mr. Speaker, it's hardly a question of government policy, and the hon. member can call things whatever she wishes, of course. That's her prerogative. What we have acknowledged, I think, once again, are the very real challenges that were faced by physicians and other people who worked in the health system at the time of the creation of Alberta Health Services and in the transition process that followed. I think this government, Alberta Health Services, and the health professionals themselves have learned a lot from that experience. All have provided very meaningful and real suggestions for solutions and improvements to the process in the future. They're well under way now, and there's more that we can do that's cited in this report.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar, followed by the hon. Member for West Yellowhead.

Health System Restructuring (continued)

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you. Regarding the formation of Alberta Health Services the Health Quality Council's report yesterday states, "The decision to create a single regional structure was made by the government without physician consultation." My first question is to the minister of health. Why would this government make a radical change to a health department with a \$12 billion budget without consulting physicians in the first place? That's incompetent.

Mr. Horne: Well, Mr. Speaker, I'm not going to attempt to speak to all that the report has to say about this issue. It is certainly much more dimensional than the one issue the hon. member has raised. What I will say is that in my experience and I think in the experience of most people that have worked in health care any major change in health care delivery requires full consultation with the people who are going to be affected by those changes, not just health providers but the patients themselves.

Mr. MacDonald: Let's talk for a moment, Mr. Speaker, about taxpayers. The Health Quality Council report yesterday indicates: "If money is being wasted, you have to blow the whistle on that." What exactly is being talked about here? Is it the fact that someone is complaining about Jack Davis, the former regional health authority CEO in Calgary who received a \$22,000 per month pension, or is it the legal fees that were racked up to fire the nine health authorities and create the superboard?

Mr. Horne: Mr. Speaker, the hon. member's question invites a speculative answer, and I'm not prepared to do that. I don't know what specific portion of the report he's referring to. What I can tell you is that this government, while we certainly pay attention to the total cost of health care, is much, much more concerned with the value of the health care dollars that are spent. That value is expressed in things like wait times. It is expressed in things like efficiency of administration and many other performance measures, all of which have been adopted by this government and are reported on publicly for all to see.

Mr. MacDonald: Again, Mr. Speaker, to the minister of health: given that over a long period of time this individual has been one of the masterminds of this flawed plan, this radical change to our public health care system, if the Premier will not fire you, will you

do the honourable thing now and resign because of this incompetent performance?

Mr. Horne: Well, all I'll do, Mr. Speaker, as in response to a similar question from members opposite on one of my first days as minister of health, is that I will repeat again that in some cases there are questions that are asked that simply do not warrant an answer.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for West Yellowhead, followed by the hon. Member for Calgary-Buffalo.

2:30 Health Quality Council Review Report (continued)

Mr. Campbell: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My questions are to the Minister of Health and Wellness. Now that the Health Quality Council has released its final report, it shows that we face challenges in the health care system that would not be uncommon to any large corporation. As a matter of fact, a number of these matters could be characterized as labour relations issues. Could the minister please tell us what will happen next?

Mr. Horne: Mr. Speaker, Alberta Health Services is indeed a large organization with over 90,000 employees. In terms of the process, following up on the Health Quality Council report, we're taking the next few days to review the recommendations and the findings in detail. The government will respond fully to all 21 recommendations as well as present our plans for the public inquiry that's been promised by the Premier.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Campbell: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. After reviewing the report, it's clear that the Health Quality Council did not substantiate the allegations made in this Assembly by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Meadowlark. To the minister: what were the report's actual findings?

Mr. Horne: Mr. Speaker, the report refers to allegations made in this House with respect to, first of all, the existence of a lung cancer surgery waiting list and then, secondly, the alleged death of 250 patients waiting for treatment on that waiting list. The Health Quality Council and the panel of experts that I referred to earlier examined all of this evidence, interviewed many people regarding these allegations, and found them clearly to be unsubstantiated.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Campbell: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. To the same minister: how will the minister be addressing the recommendations in the report, and how will Albertans learn about what he's planning to do?

Mr. Horne: Mr. Speaker, I was in discussion yesterday with the Health Quality Council after they released the report. I'll be meeting by telephone with the Alberta Health Services Board tomorrow. Over the weekend I'll be meeting again with the board of the Health Quality Council of Alberta and speaking as well with the College of Physicians & Surgeons. Because all of these organizations are mentioned in the report and are the subject of recommendations, I'll obviously be consulting with them prior to any government formal response to the recommendations. We expect the formal response to occur within a week or so.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Buffalo, followed by the hon. Member for Leduc-Beaumont-Devon.

Education Funding

Mr. Hehr: Mr. Speaker, I have noticed a distinct pattern in the minister's responses to questions regarding educational supports in this province: blame the school boards. In Alberta classrooms today there are 450 fewer teachers than there were at this time last year. Why are there 450 fewer teachers, and who is to blame, the school boards or your government?

Mr. Lukaszuk: Mr. Speaker, this is a good question because I think that what this question really does is show clearly the difference between this government and the opposition. They tend to be focused on blame. There is no blame, and no one should be blamed for anything. As a matter of fact, indeed, our school boards in Alberta have duly elected trustees, and they are the employers, and they make the staffing decisions.

We will be debating the Alberta Education budget in a few days, Mr. Speaker. Trustees will get their share of the money, and again they will be making staffing decisions. No blame.

Mr. Hehr: Mr. Speaker, that's a different answer than I got last week when he did blame the school boards when I asked him that question.

Nevertheless, given that schools across Alberta have more than a billion dollars in deferred maintenance debt and kids are going to schools with leaky roofs and the like, who's to blame for this deferred maintenance? Is it this government or is it the school boards' fault?

Mr. Lukaszuk: Again, Mr. Speaker, perhaps the confusion lies in the fact that this member doesn't differentiate between responsibility and blame. The Minister of Education has a wide scope of responsibility, and we are living up to it. Boards have their range of responsibility, and they are living up to it. If he has issues with local authorities and locally made decisions, he would be well advised to meet with the board in question. At the end of the day, Mr. Speaker, what he forgets is that we are all, the boards and the government of Alberta, together delivering a superb education throughout this entire province. We work in collaboration; they're focusing on blame.

Mr. Hehr: Last week in the paper the minister blamed the school boards for parents having to pay hundreds of dollars in school fees to send their kids to school. Now are you retracting that statement here today that you made last week, or do you stand by it?

Mr. Lukaszuk: Mr. Speaker, one should never read his own quotations in the newspaper. It very often leads you to wrong conclusions. I have clearly said to the newspaper and I will repeat it again today that, indeed, there are parents in Alberta who are concerned about school fees. Those school fees are put upon students by locally elected officials, by boards, and we will be reviewing those decisions. Again, there is no blame. Locally elected officials have the ability to make local decisions. We support that, and we will be working in collaboration with them.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Leduc-Beaumont-Devon, followed by the hon. Member for Calgary-McCall.

Residential Construction Standards

Mr. Rogers: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Today the city of Leduc announced an evacuation order for a partially completed apartment-condo complex, which will require some 150 individuals to find new accommodations by March 31. To the

Minister of Municipal Affairs: what is the province doing to protect my constituents and all Albertans from shoddy construction practices?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Griffiths: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I, my colleagues in this House, and this government sympathize very much with the residents of Bellavera Green condominiums. This is an incredibly stressful situation, and it's incredibly unfortunate that anyone would be taken advantage of by what can only be seen as unethical developers or builders. We have legislation in place that provides the necessary tools for safety officials to enforce compliance with the building and safety codes. The city of Leduc is taking the appropriate steps necessary to protect the public and to protect those who are in the condos, and our ministry is willing to work hand in hand with the city of Leduc to help those people who are being evicted from those condos.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Rogers: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Again to the same minister. Building codes represent the bare minimum that builders are expected to adhere to. Shouldn't Albertans expect at least this and more?

Mr. Griffiths: Absolutely, Mr. Speaker. Albertans are entitled to have homes and buildings that meet the safety codes. Our fire and building codes are based on the National Research Council standards and are adopted in conjunction with their development, but no matter what those standards are, they will always be the minimum. Anybody in Alberta who is building a building or a house can ask their builder to exceed those codes at any time. That's their prerogative.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Rogers: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Last year a number of people in Fort McMurray found themselves in the same situation that we're now faced with in the city of Leduc. There seems to be a problem with the system. Mr. Minister, is there something wrong, and what can you do to deal with this?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Griffiths: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I understand that litigation is proceeding in the Bellavera Green condo association and the Penhorwood Condo Association cases, so it would be inappropriate right now for me to speak on those particular cases. But I can promise the hon. member and all Albertans that we're working very hard right now to improve the safety training for officers. We're working on a new home warranty program to help protect people who are making the largest purchase in their life. We're working on updating and improving the safety codes and on improving and extending the limitations and fines that go along with violations of the safety codes.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-McCall, followed by the hon. Member for Bonnyville-Cold Lake.

Heartland Electricity Transmission Project

Mr. Kang: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My questions are to the Minister of Infrastructure, but he is not here today. Albertans recognize the need for proper electrical infrastructure in Alberta, but

with Bill 50 this government bulldozed the requirement for a needs assessment for new transmission lines. This week concerned parents of Colchester elementary school, which is right in the shadow of the transmission lines in Sherwood Park, took to the radio to defend their school. To the Minister of Infrastructure: why didn't the government think it was important to do a comprehensive needs assessment of the schools, daycares, and homes within close proximity of the heartland lines?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Lukaszuk: Mr. Speaker, I guess I'll take it. I'm not sure. This is not an Infrastructure/Transportation issue. The government of Alberta is not in any way suggesting that any schools in that particular area have to be closed. However, we will be respecting the choice and the school board will be respecting the choice of the parents if they choose not to send their children to that school in September. If that decision indeed happens, we are already discussing with the affected school board the possibilities of accommodating those children in other schools that will provide them with adequate space.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Kang: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. To the same minister again: given that the Colchester school is less than 200 metres from the two-storeys-high towers, will this government provide the Elk Island public schools with the \$20 million to renovate the school in Sherwood Park that it needs to move these students to?

Mr. Lukaszuk: Mr. Speaker, what will happen is that Elk Island school division will make a decision whether they want to renovate an existing school, whether they want to move the children to other schools that don't require renovation, whether perhaps there is a number one priority under their capital plan to construct a new school. There are a number of combinations of what may happen, and parents will still have to make a decision as to whether they will indeed decide not to send their children to the affected school. Once those decisions are made, our Ministry of Education together with the affected school board will find accommodations for all the children so that they will have adequate space to continue learning.

2:40

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Kang: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The issue is the money. Will the minister commit to providing the funds to move those kids to a different school?

To the same minister again: given that Colchester school was built long before the transportation and utility corridor was created, why didn't this government already have a plan to relocate the students and staff of Colchester? Why didn't it consider their needs?

Mr. Lukaszuk: Mr. Speaker, I think you can help me on this one. The utility and transportation corridor was put in place, I believe, in 1967, so I would have a very difficult time to respond to that question in this position right now. But I can tell you one thing, this government in co-operation with the school board will do what we have to do to make sure that the children of the affected area are properly accommodated in a school that provides them with adequate space to continue learning up to the internationally renowned standards of Alberta Education.

The Speaker: Hon. minister, I may be older than you, but if you don't make an issue out of my experience, I will not make an issue out of your inexperience.

Today 17 members were recognized; 101 questions and responses.
Might we revert briefly to Introduction of Guests?

[Unanimous consent granted]

Introduction of Guests

(continued)

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Creek.

Mr. Zwozdesky: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. On behalf of the Minister of Intergovernmental, International and Aboriginal Relations I'm very pleased to introduce to you and through you to all members of the Assembly about 90 representatives of the Alberta native friendship centres. We have elders, presidents, executive directors, and youth who have travelled here from all across Alberta to visit our Legislature and to participate in their workshop called How Governments Work. Alberta native friendship centres provide great support for aboriginals, as we know, and have been doing so since 1950.

Among our guests are five individuals whom I'd like to introduce personally, and I'd ask them to rise as I call out their names: President Merle White; Vice-President Bob Oshanyk; the secretary, Lucille Cook; the national board representative, Kevin Provost; and the national youth board representative, Jessie Johnson.

Mr. Speaker, in my capacity as chair of the secretariat for improving outcomes for aboriginal children and families I'd ask all of our guests seated in both galleries to now please rise to accept our thanks and our gratitude.

Presenting Reports by Standing and Special Committees

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

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. As chair of the Standing Committee on Public Accounts I am pleased to table five copies of the committee's report on its 2011 activities. Additional copies of the report have also been provided for all members of the Assembly.

Thank you.

Notices of Motions

Ms Notley: Mr. Speaker, on behalf of the Member for Edmonton-Highlands-Norwood and pursuant to Standing Order 30 and after having provided your office with the appropriate notice, I wish to inform you that upon the completion of the daily Routine I will move to adjourn the ordinary business of the Assembly to hold an emergency debate on a matter of urgent public importance; namely, the issues of patient safety as described by the Health Quality Council of Alberta report titled Review of the Quality of Care and Safety of Patients Requiring Access to Emergency Department Care and Cancer Surgery and the Role and Process of Physician Advocacy.

Tabling Returns and Reports

The Speaker: The hon. Member for St. Albert.

Mr. Allred: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I have the requisite number of copies of a document from St. Albert protestant schools, which

is headed The St. Albert Protestant Separate School District #6 Board of Trustees Statement Regarding Bill 4, the St. Albert and Sturgeon Valley School Districts Establishment Act.

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

Ms Notley: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I have a number of tablings today. First, I'd like to table a letter and an electricity bill from William and Marie Chascha of Grande Prairie. They wrote to say: "Our charges are ridiculous . . . I have to work full-time just to pay these bills." Their January 2012 statement from Direct Energy was \$521.16.

I'd also like to table a letter and a bill for the month of January 2012 from Annalee Swensrude of Lac Ste. Anne for the amount of \$603.95. She writes: "Living is getting worse and worse . . . Someone in the government needs to take action and help the working people."

Ray Welsh of Vegreville sent us notes and a bill from January and February for \$507 and \$475 respectively.

As well, I have a tabling where we can see the effects of high power prices on small businesses, too, which includes EPCOR power bills for Independent Bath Products Ltd. where their bill was \$432 and \$967 at their two locations.

Those are all.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Airdrie-Chestermere.

Mr. Anderson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I have two tablings today. One is an article from the *Calgary Sun* back in September, which I quoted today in my questions, that talks about the Premier's then position that we should call a public inquiry into the queue-jumping. I'll table five copies of that.

The other tabling, again with regard to my question, is the article of October 15 in the *Calgary Herald*, where the Premier is quoted as saying that the public inquiry will be up and running before an election is called next year, referring to this election coming up.

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

Mr. Chase: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I have two tablings. My first tabling is an e-mail from Alison Ainsworth, who I introduced previously in the House along with her daughter, Emily, and son, Nathan, and Emily's service dog, Levi. After 10 years of closed doors and dead ends in trying to secure funding from FSCD for her daughter Emily, Alison recently announced the formation of a community resource consulting service. Alison's website is www.communityresourceconsulting.com.

My second tabling, Mr. Speaker, is a further 20 e-mails out of the hundreds I've received from the following individuals who are seeking the preservation of the Castle wilderness: Jacques Thouin, To and Alison Martin, Chris Hooymans, Krystal Kamanos, Alison Luco, Andrea Becker, Erinn Collier, John Davis, Teena Cormack, Amir Shams, Andrea Hull, Eva van Loon, Michael Callaway, Jill Lutz, Samanta Zbinden, Frithjof Lutscher, Carolyn Ferguson, Justin Wheler, Irv Gerling, and Lorna Lyons.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: Are there others? The hon. Member for Calgary-Glenmore.

Mr. Hinman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'd like to table the appropriate number of copies of petitions.

- Alberta government and Industry Canada [need to] audit . . . CCI Wireless with respect to the terms and conditions regarding competition with private industry.

- Claw back any infrastructure that has been deployed in defiance of the terms and conditions regarding competition.

Recently grants were provided by Broadband Canada and Alberta Government for improving high speed internet access in areas of Alberta where internet is unavailable or unsatisfactory. The recipients of the grants were restricted from competing with existing private enterprise that was already providing high speed internet . . .

I've got hundreds of receivers of those Internet providers that are very concerned and are asking that government audit the data that CCI Wireless submitted to the government in order to get their contracts.

The Speaker: Are there others? The hon. Leader of the Official Opposition.

Dr. Sherman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I have 11 tablings today. Today I asked an hon. member to resign, and I'd like to table tablings concerning the interactions and involvement that he's had with the health system. Here's an e-mail dated November 10, 2006.

The Speaker: No, no. Just table them.

Dr. Sherman: I have five copies of this e-mail discussing the policy for the hon. Member for Edmonton-Whitemud when he was running for leadership.

On November 11, 2006, I have five copies of a tabling from the hon. Member for Edmonton-Rutherford thanking me for the advice and said he would tweak the policy with respect to the emergency crisis that was present at that time.

Here's another letter dated December 19, 2006, between myself and the hon. Member for Edmonton-Rutherford. I was asking for help as there were medical disasters in the waiting rooms of Edmonton and Calgary. The hon. Member said he was starting work as the EA to the minister at that time, and he was wondering if he could take a rain check.

2:50

Here's another letter between myself and the hon. Member for Edmonton-Rutherford dated December 27, 2006, wishing ourselves a Happy New Year and me requesting a meeting with the minister at the time, the hon. Member for Edmonton-Whitemud, an emergency meeting to discuss the emergency crisis at the time.

Here is a comprehensive letter, five copies, dated January 14, 2008, which happened just prior to the last election, regarding the ER crisis that occurred during the election.

Here are another five copies of an article titled Crisis in the ER – Mr. Speaker, that's when I was a handsome young lad and practising freely – saying: this is a severe crisis. This is in 2007.

Shortly after that letter, that article that appeared in the *Edmonton Sun*, here's an e-mail between myself and the hon. Member for Edmonton-Rutherford dated January 27, 2007, and a copy of an e-mail, dated January 23, 2007, between myself and the hon. Member for Edmonton-Whitemud, who was the health care minister at the time, discussing the ER crisis.

Here is a letter, Mr. Speaker, a signed letter on PC Alberta letterhead, dated February 23, 2008, I believe exactly four years ago today, when the previous Premier of the province promised to build 600 long-term care beds and 200 replacement beds and to convene an expert emergency panel to fix this ER crisis. It's my understanding the hon. Member for Edmonton-Rutherford helped draft this letter.

Here, Mr. Speaker, I have five copies of a graph. It's labelled Historical Expenditure: The Big Two, Nominal, which are Alberta Health and Education expenditures, from the Institute for Public Economics at the University of Alberta, showing the health care spending curve under this PC government.

We're almost done, Mr. Speaker. I have five copies of the performance measure that's used in the United Kingdom, the same performance measure applied to the Capital health care system right here in Edmonton from when a patient presents to ER to being discharged to a hospital ward bed at the 95th percentile. This is a graph from between June 2005 and December 2010. It highlights the average length of stays, up to 75 hours at the 95th percentile, when the international standard is only four hours in the United Kingdom.

Lastly, Mr. Speaker – I thank you so much for your patience – I have five copies of a presentation dated July 12, 2010. It's from the government of Alberta, Alberta Health Legislation: Moving Forward. It's a process and timing map of the Alberta Health Act, part 1, which was building public trust, and part 2, which was physicians opting out into a parallel private medical system and, as well, private insurance: basically, the Americanization of health care. It shows evidence where the hon. Minister of Health and Wellness, the Member for Edmonton-Rutherford, presented this to the government caucus.

Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: Well, hon. member, that was only six minutes' worth of tablings. One question, though, for you. Have you tabled any of these documents in the House previously? If you have, sir, you know that's a no-no.

Tablings to the Clerk

The Clerk: I wish to advise the House that the following documents were deposited with the office of the Clerk. On behalf of the hon. Mr. Oberle, Minister of Sustainable Resource Development, a listing of full-time equivalent employment for the Department of Sustainable Resource Development for the fiscal year 2012-13, tabled by the hon. Mr. Oberle in response to a question by Ms Notley, hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona, during policy field committee consideration of the estimates for the Department of Sustainable Resource Development on February 21, 2012.

On behalf of the hon. Ms Klimchuk, Minister of Culture and Community Services, a listing of full-time equivalent employment for the Department of Culture and Community Services for the fiscal year 2012-2013, tabled by the hon. Ms Klimchuk in response to a question by Ms Blakeman, hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre, during the policy field committee consideration of the estimates of the Department of Culture and Community Services on February 22, 2012.

Projected Government Business

The Speaker: The Official Opposition House Leader.

Ms Blakeman: To the Government House Leader: would he be so kind under 7(6) as to share the government House business for the week commencing March 5? Thank you.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Monday, March 5, of course, is private member's business.

On Tuesday, March 6, in the afternoon in Committee of Supply the estimates of Education will be considered. It's also day 10 of the consideration of His Honour's Speech from the Throne; and as per the Order Paper.

On Wednesday, March 7, in the afternoon in Committee of Supply the estimates of Health and Wellness will be considered as per the schedule that was previously provided to the House, and thereafter as per the Order Paper.

On Thursday, March 8, in the afternoon we anticipate for second reading Bill 2, the Education Act; Bill 4, the St. Albert and Sturgeon Valley School Districts Establishment Act; Bill 5, the Seniors' Property Tax Deferral Act; and Bill 6, the Property Rights Advocate Act; and as per the Order Paper.

Emergency Debate

Health Quality Council Review Report

The Speaker: Hon. members, we'll now deal with brief arguments about urgency with respect to the Standing Order 30 application by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands-Norwood. I repeat, brief urgency.

The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona.

Ms Notley: Thank you. I'll be making the comments on behalf of the hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands-Norwood. As I've indicated, I put forward a motion under Standing Order 30, and the motion reads as follows:

Be it resolved that the ordinary business of the Legislative Assembly be adjourned to discuss a matter of urgent public importance; namely, the issues of patient safety as described by the Health Quality Council of Alberta report titled Review of the Quality of Care and Safety of Patients Requiring Access to Emergency Department Care and Cancer Surgery and the Role and Process of Physician Advocacy.

The report released yesterday by the Health Quality Council of Alberta described several factors in the management of the health system which have compromised patient safety, including excessive crowding in emergency departments, reorganization of the health system under one health board, and the ongoing perception of more than half of physicians surveyed that their ability to advocate for their patients' safety is constrained. This is clearly an important public issue which requires a full debate in the House. I note *Beauchesne's* paragraph 390 states:

"Urgency" within this rule does not apply to the matter itself, but means "urgency of debate", when the ordinary opportunities provided by the rules of the House do not permit the subject to be brought on early enough and the public interest demands that discussion take place immediately.

Mr. Speaker, I am making this motion under Standing Order 30 because I see no other opportunity for the House to address this issue. I see nothing on the Order Paper related to the health care system or patient safety. I would further suggest that the public interest demands that this discussion take place immediately as the conditions described in the report released yesterday represent an ongoing threat to the health and safety of Albertans who are in our hospital system throughout the province, and there was no indication within that report that those conditions are being ameliorated in any fashion.

In addition, the Premier has stated that the government will make a decision within a week about its response to the report and the appointment of an inquiry, including the terms of reference for such a public inquiry. Today is the only opportunity the House has to discuss this before these decisions are made. As you know, Mr. Speaker, the House is scheduled to adjourn for a full week following this day and will not return until Monday, March 5, so this would be the last opportunity we would have to discuss this matter at least before the 5th of March.

3:00

House of Commons Procedure and Practice, page 689, says that the motion must relate to "a specific and important matter requiring urgent consideration." I would suggest that the specific matter that we are referring to, Mr. Speaker, is the health and safety of patients in Alberta in emergency rooms across the province. I would suggest that it is an important matter because, in fact, in the report itself the authors of the report, who engaged in extensive surveys and discussions with stakeholders across the province, concluded that patients have suffered as a result of unreasonable wait times and that the margins of safety experienced by those patients were substantially compromised. Indeed, the authors of the report noted that in some cases the wait times to which urgently ill patients are subjected are 10 times that of what is recommended as the best practice. As a result, I would suggest that speaks to both the urgency and the importance outlined under the section that I just quoted.

The Health Quality Council report points to a number of ways that safety has been compromised, including reorganization of the health care system.

The Speaker: Hon. member, get to the urgency, please. It's not the issue. The issue has nothing to do with this. It could be about anything. It's the urgency. Please.

Ms Notley: Okay. Well, again, the authority that I was referring to actually speaks to specificity as well and the degree to which this is something within the authority of the government and of this Legislature. The report that I'm referring to talks about organization of the health care system, the relationship of political interference with the ability of doctors to advocate for the health and safety of their patients, and, of course, the excessive crowding of emergency rooms as a result of an inadequate number of long-term-care spaces.

I would suggest that all of these are within the jurisdiction of this Assembly to discuss, and as noted this all, of course, would amount to urgency both in the minds of Albertans and also in terms of the ability of this Assembly to address the matter in a timely fashion.

I hope you will give due consideration to this motion, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: Government House Leader, do you want to make a comment on this?

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I would like to comment on this. The Health Quality Council has been tasked with a very major task of looking into a number of allegations. One of the things that's very important to Albertans is to have confidence in their health care system. Normally I would not believe it is appropriate for the House to take time away from its normal practice to debate issues that it cannot actually come to resolution on, but I think it is important for Albertans to know that their health care is in good hands, and it is important for Albertans to understand what the Health Quality Council was doing and what the effect of the report is. Therefore, I would encourage members to support this motion for a Standing Order 30 debate this afternoon.

The Speaker: Well, I gather the hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre wants to say the same thing. If you want to have the debate, I'd better make a ruling on this. Otherwise, it'll go on for another 45 minutes on procedural matters.

Ms Blakeman: Well, I would like to believe that I'm going to add to it, not repeat. But, of course, if the Speaker would like to rule on it, I will make way for the Speaker.

The Speaker: Well, hon. members, I am prepared to rule on it. I've had this petition before me since 11:25 this morning, so it meets the requirement. We've already heard what the motion is. I have a long way to go to try to find that this would be a conducive motion that I should actually put the question for. I've heard no argument whatsoever about urgency and emergency with respect to this matter other than one. There is always an out. If the mood of the House is such that it wants to do this, I am prepared to accept the mood of the House with respect to this. So I will put the question forward.

As I repeat again, I heard no argument to suggest that I should, but I will because of the mood of the House and the position of the House. You all know the rules with respect to this. They were dealt with last week. They're all very, very clear. Shall the debate on the urgent matter proceed? You know what you have to do. Okay. Then I'll repeat what you have to do. If 15 or more members rise, the debate will proceed.

[Several members rose]

The Speaker: Okay. Yes. It will proceed.

Shall I recognize the hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands-Norwood or the hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona? Just a second. Before we do that – you determine who it is I should recognize – I just want to draw the attention of the Leader of the Official Opposition and the hon. Member for Calgary-Mountain View. When I had recognized the hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona, the two of you violated the standing orders of the Legislative Assembly of Alberta. You might want to think back to how you violated the standing orders when the hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona was speaking, and you can think about that later.

Here is the process. I will recognize the hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands-Norwood. Then I will recognize a government spokesman, I presume the Premier. Then we'll go to a rotation back and forth. We will conclude at 4:30. The rules are 10 minutes maximum speaking time each. There's no resolution. It's an open debate.

The hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands-Norwood. Proceed.

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I appreciate the support of members of the House to have this emergency debate. I think that it would be good to begin with a brief recapitulation of the history around this issue. Of course, initially allegations were made by emergency room physicians, in a letter that was released publicly, that their repeated efforts to get the government to address very poor emergency room waiting times had fallen on deaf ears. As a result of that, a series of events unfolded, and it became very clear that not only was there a serious problem with emergency room waiting times and in other areas of the health system but that doctors who had attempted to advocate on behalf of their patients were being systematically intimidated.

[Mr. Zwozdesky in the chair]

It's also important to note, Mr. Speaker, that at the time the government denied that this was happening. We did not have accurate information relating to the actual waiting times coming forward from the government, and the government, of course, denied and ridiculed claims that there was intimidation of doctors. But more and more doctors did come forward, and the demand

that had been put forward for a judicial inquiry was met, instead, by a government response of asking the Health Quality Council to look into the matter. That was, in our view, insufficient in order to get to the bottom of it. The Health Quality Council then proceeded. They issued an interim report, and they significantly delayed the final report, which was finally released just yesterday.

Nevertheless, Mr. Speaker, the report that came forward yesterday underlines very clearly that what physicians and opposition members have been saying about what's going on in the health system is, in fact, verified. They have concluded that emergency room wait times in this province are extremely poor and that patients have suffered as a result. They claim in the report that there is no evidence that anyone has actually died as a result of this, but we do know of some suicides and other things in emergency rooms that have taken place. They do talk about people in the final stages of their lives dying in emergency rooms because there are not suitable beds for them, and that is, of course, a real tragedy.

The report also deals with the question of certain allegations that have been made by one of the members of this House with respect to cancer waiting lists and deaths of 250 individuals on the waiting list and has concluded that there is no evidence for that.

Interestingly, Mr. Speaker, it does talk about the sense that the reorganization of a number of health regions into one superboard was done in a way that was very high handed, very arbitrary, very quick, and which caused very considerable disruption to the health system.

3:10

So, Mr. Speaker, in that sense it is clear that this government's own policy has reduced outcomes in our health care system very substantially. People are spending more time in hospitals, more time waiting for beds. There are longer emergency wait times, more demoralization of physicians, and it also fanned the culture of intimidation that was already there.

That leads us to the fourth part of the report, the part which is, in my view, completely unsatisfactory. That is that while they talk about a culture of intimidation, they don't trace its source. They don't say where it comes from. They say that it's widespread. They say that doctors feel very much intimidated, including by the College of Physicians & Surgeons, which is seen to be a body that doctors fear arbitrary punishment from for speaking out. But it doesn't say where it came from.

It's clear, Mr. Speaker, that it comes from the government. It comes from the political level. I believe that the culture of intimidation took root originally with some of the major cuts that took place in this province in the 1990s. Obviously, health outcomes deteriorated significantly, and it became a major problem for the government in terms of managing public opinion. So they bore down on those people who were most vocal, speaking out on behalf of their patients and on behalf of the health system, and that was physicians. That is where the culture took place.

It's clear that the irresponsible reorganization undertaken by the former minister of health, who is now the Minister of Finance appointed by this Premier, had an enormous negative impact on our health care system. There is a word for doctor-induced illness. It means something that is not naturally occurring but is caused by a terrible mistake or a bad decision or bad judgment, and that is exactly what's happened here. This government has complete and full responsibility for the damage it has created in the health system, and they don't want to take responsibility for it, Mr. Speaker.

This Premier has not only kept that former minister in her cabinet; she has made him the Finance minister, and he is now pushing through her pre-election budget. There is no accountability. A person who is the health minister forces a reorganization of the health system that causes chaos, is considered by some in the health system to be semi-criminal, that reduces the outcomes very dramatically in the health system – and we're only just recovering from it now – and that person is given a promotion by this Premier, Mr. Speaker. This government is very, very responsible yet refuses to be accountable.

Now, I believe that there should be a judicial inquiry. I don't think that the body that we've just had the report from is going to get any further into this. They pulled their punches on where the culture of intimidation came from because it came from the very people who created them and who appointed them and to whom they are responsible. So they're not really in a very good position to point the finger at this government, Mr. Speaker. In actual fact, a judicial inquiry with an independent judge could do it. I think that that's what we need to do: look at the intimidation and look at why this government can't run health care.

Albertans do not trust this Progressive Conservative government with our health care system. We've seen over and over again the government hiding its true plans for health care before an election. In the case of the 2004 election we had the third way appear just months afterwards. After the 2008 election we had the former minister, now the Minister of Finance, foisted on the health care system. And we know, also, that the current health minister presented a paper to the PC caucus a year and a half ago talking about the delisting of services, creating private insurance, and allowing doctors to practise both in the public and the private system. That's the current minister of health, that has been appointed by this Premier.

This Premier is clearly not the champion of public health care that she claims to be. This Premier is appointing people who have done great damage to or are planning to do further damage to our health care system to important positions in her government. So it is not – it is not – a government that is going to be different from previous PC governments. It's going to be a continuation of the same thing.

Mr. Speaker, unlike this government, that introduced as its Bill 1 a bill to do value-added budgeting – what's it called?

Ms Notley: Results based.

Mr. Mason: Results based is what they call it. Our private member's bill was a bill that would have strengthened public health care. We don't just talk about publicly funded health care; we talk about publicly delivered health care. We talk about extending medical coverage in the areas of dental and pharmacy. Mr. Speaker, those are the things that we stand for.

We would get rid of the private clinics. We would make sure that there's no need for private insurance. We would make sure that our public health care system is strengthened, that accessibility is improved, and that people do not take profits before people get better. That's this government's vision. We can see it with respect to their plans for long-term care, something that has created massive problems in our emergency rooms because the government doesn't get the connection between long-term care beds and mental health beds and emergency room time.

Mr. Speaker, I think my time is almost up, but I want to say that I appreciate the opportunity to have this debate. This government cannot be trusted with our health care system, and I think this report shows it.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Acting Speaker: Thank you.

Hon. members, just before we proceed with the next speaker, as you know, we have 10 minutes each at this time, which leaves us room for about seven, maybe eight speakers before the House time runs out today, so we will proceed in the following order. The Premier will speak next, followed by the Leader of the Official Opposition, followed by the minister of health, followed by the Member for Calgary-Fish Creek, followed by the Government House Leader, followed by Edmonton-Strathcona, followed by the Minister of Education, followed by Calgary-Mountain View, followed by West Yellowhead, then Airdrie-Chestermere, and there's a list that goes on after that. I would ask people to please bear in mind the 10-minute rule and also the fact that there are 15 speakers so far on the list who wish to address this point.

The hon. Premier.

Ms Redford: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. Today our Government House Leader supported the standing order because, while there might be a suggestion that the particular issue isn't of urgency to this House today, there is no doubt that Albertans on a daily basis are thinking about their families, they're thinking about health care, and they want to make sure that in government and in this Legislature we're having the opportunity to clearly understand what our successes have been, what our challenges are, and what we need to do in the future to move forward.

Fundamentally, for me personally and also for this government, we believe that Alberta needs to have a public health care system, exclusively a public health care system. We are fully committed to supporting a public health care system so that every single person in Alberta, whether they're a mom or a dad, a child or a senior, will all get access to the services that they need to allow them to excel and have the quality of life that they need to have.

Now, if I look at the budget that was tabled in this House two weeks ago, I think that the percentage of expenditure with respect to health care is well over 40 per cent, perhaps over 45 per cent. When I look at that, Mr. Speaker, I know that it is an issue that dominates what we talk about in this House, what we talk about in government, and what Albertans are talking about.

The other thing it does in a budget of this size, Mr. Speaker, is that it tells us that's it terribly important to understand how big the system is and that we have very important partners in this system. The government has a role, Alberta Health Services has a role, and professions have a role: doctors, nurses, licensed practical nurses. Our pharmacists have a role in this system.

What Albertans have been saying for a year is that they want to have more ownership of the health care system. What they mean by that, as we all know, is that in our families we're taking responsibility for our own health care. We know where we want to go. We know how we want to be treated. We're often very well informed with respect to the issues that we're facing and in some cases even have ideas about whether or not the treatments that we want to have can be or should be provided by a doctor or perhaps by an LPN, perhaps by a chiropractor. And that's a good thing because that allows us to have a real discussion and design a system and change a very big system so that we're not only dealing with acute care.

There's no doubt that in the Health Quality Council report there are issues identified with respect to the fact that you can't run a health care system based exclusively on acute care. When you do that, you end up putting all of your money into emergency rooms, into acute-care beds, and very often into the services the doctors are providing in order to keep up with that demand.

3:20

One of the things that we need to talk about in this debate – and I hope it can be a constructive process – is: what does health care look like in the future for Albertans? What have Albertans told us they want health care to look like? When I think about the report that the Health Quality Council put together and the fact that they put some very constructive recommendations in place that the minister of health is committed to reviewing and responding to, not alone but with our partners at the Alberta Health Services Board, with the Health Quality Council, and with professions, we know that we can design a health care system that will meet the needs of Albertans.

We talk about family care clinics. We've had primary care networks, and we're very proud of the fact that this government implemented primary care networks. Primary care networks were a new model of delivering health care. It allowed for a team approach. It allowed for multilevels of practitioners, let's say, to work together to support a family and to have ongoing support, whether they be doctors, whether they be nurses, whether they be dietitians. That was innovative, and it was strong.

Now, 10 years later, we know that there's something different going on in our communities, and that is that people are being terribly proactive with respect to managing their wellness. They want to have clinics in place that are in their community, that are consistent for their families, and where people can go to get a full spectrum of services not only for themselves individually but for all members of their family.

You know, my husband is 46 years old, and it's absolutely a struggle every year to get him to go for a physical, and I know that. I think there are probably a lot of people that feel that way. I have a nine-year-old daughter, and I have an aging mother-in-law and father. They all need different supports. What I want to have, through what we're doing with respect to family care clinics for all Albertans, is the ability for families to manage where those services are, what they need, and how they can access those services.

I believe, Mr. Speaker, that that is going to transform health care. It's not pulling back on everything we've done before – there are lots of doctors and nurses and patients that are very satisfied with the work that primary care networks are doing – but we're going to continue to strive to deliver different approaches, again in a public health care system.

The other thing that's important about family care clinics is that they are connected to communities. They are based in communities, and they can respond to the needs of a community. You could very well have a family care clinic that had one or two doctors and perhaps six or seven licensed practical nurses. As we move forward, what we have in our minister of health is a person who understands health policy, who has trusted relationships with people in all aspects of health care, and who can begin to change the way that we deliver health care, and that's real change, Mr. Speaker.

I do want to speak for a minute yet again about an independent judicial inquiry. There's going to be more discussion about this in the next two weeks, just as there has been in the past two days. We as a government and I personally have been very clear as to what steps we believe need to be taken in order to ensure that we have an inquiry.

As I've said before in this House, standing up and saying something different over and over again doesn't mean that it's the truth. We know – and we've been very clear – that we introduced legislation to ensure that we could have an independent inquiry, that after we introduced that legislation, we said that we would

wait for the results from the Health Quality Council report, which were quite comprehensive. We're now at a point where, as the minister of health has said, we will establish terms of reference for an independent inquiry.

[The Speaker in the chair]

I don't expect people to stop asking for one, but to somehow suggest that when the government announces an inquiry, it's related to anything other than our fundamental commitment last year to hold one would be wrong. I'll tell you, Mr. Speaker, that when we move through that process, the important part of that is that we're going to be able to clarify some of the issues that have become so political in the past couple of months and particularly, I would say, in the last couple of weeks.

I listen to the opposition, to many parties in the opposition, and to many hon. members who in one breath criticize the Health Quality Council and in another breath cite the report as evidence that the system is collapsing. We hear many discussions with respect to the fact that there is evidence of problems in the system, usually through very select quotes, and then we hear that we can't actually trust the work of the Health Quality Council because they're somehow associated with government.

Very clearly, Mr. Speaker, the Health Quality Council report was tabled in this Legislature yesterday, and the reason it was done was because we passed legislation saying that that's where the report had to come. It must be a public report, and we're going to be honest and transparent about what the health care system is and how it needs to be improved. As we move ahead, we're going to be able to get clarity with respect to where Alberta Health Services can improve, and in some cases perhaps policies will need to be changed. We're completely open to that. We know that government has to respond continually to change.

The other thing that government has to do is drive change. That's what we're doing with respect to health care, Mr. Speaker, so that it's responding to the changing needs of Albertans. This is a government that's committed to delivering a health care system that's going to ensure that Alberta families are getting the services that they need.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Official Opposition, followed by the hon. Minister of Health and Wellness.

Dr. Sherman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's an honour for me to stand before you to discuss one of the most significant issues in our nation and our province facing our people not only in terms of financial expenditures but, more importantly, in terms of human suffering. I tabled an article earlier where I called it a crisis in the emergency room in February 2007. Subsequently the Health Quality Council conducted a thorough review in September 2007 to fix this emergency room crisis.

I advised the current minister, who was an EA to a previous minister, on the solutions. I along with many other colleagues put patients in hallways and in between two beds in a room as a short-term solution to a crisis where people were dying metres from care. The government implemented the short-term solutions, and they wrote a letter on letterhead, on PC letterhead, a promise to Albertans to solve the medium- and long-term problem, which is long-term care beds, family doctors, and engagement of front-line staff, an expert panel. Mr. Speaker, it's not an ER crisis; it's a health care system crisis that sits in the ER. True experts in this area call the ER crisis a canary in a coal mine. That's all it is.

Here we are again, four years to the day of the previous Premier's letter and commitment and promise, before an election.

Here we are, again, with a 428-page, exhaustive report – 428 pages – examining just about 800 cases of emergency visits, a small number of cases in Alberta amongst more than 1 and a half million cases, one small snapshot in time.

The conclusions of that report, one with respect to the system – here we are still despite the promises and the rhetoric from that government for years – are that half of emergency patients, the CTAS 2 and 3 patients, the sick ones, Mr. Speaker, waited 10 times longer, that 20 per cent of the patients waited 20 times longer than the Canadian standards, suffering metres from care, either in a waiting room chair or an ambulance stretcher, with the ambulance fleet waiting to get sick patients into the departments.

It states that this demonstrates that

the system was incapable of responding faster to patients whose well-being was at . . . risk.

The safety of patients at risk.

Half of the patients who were suffering with pain waited to receive analgesia for more than 4.5 hours and 20 per cent . . . waited more than 7.5 hours.

Wow. Patients suffering, metres from care, for at least seven and a half hours.

Mr. Speaker, we on the front lines call these third-world conditions. In the Third World human beings do not wait for eight hours metres from care from a doctor or a nurse to get an analgesic, a painkiller. This is tragic and devastating. What's even more tragic and devastating is that still despite report after report, announcement after announcement we have many people at the end of their lives who spend the last few hours of their lives half naked in a cold bed in a cold hallway all alone, with the world walking by. It's in this report.

3:30

It talks about front-line staff not being engaged. It talks about how when there was a crisis, they actually broke a very broken system and brought in a system where staff were even less engaged. That led to what was called a potential catastrophic collapse of the health care system in 2010.

Mr. Speaker, I would like to remind you that a doctor's brother successfully hung himself in an emergency waiting room at the Royal Alex hospital. His name was Shayne Hay. It was September of 2010. Nowhere is he mentioned in this report.

A certain doctor's father waited for eight hours during this time period in an emergency department. His heart had failed, and he spent eight days in an intensive care unit, five days on a ventilator tube, and nearly died. That's my father. He is not in this report, only a small number of cases and a small snapshot in time in one ER. This was happening in every ER in the province.

Secondly, cases of physician intimidation. The colleague next to me spoke up and spoke the truth. Another elected member of this House, who was working for a region, fired him because he supported the Kyoto protocol. I stood up and spoke the truth. This government was a threat to public safety. I stood up here and spoke the truth. The current minister of health stepped out of the Legislature, called Dr. P.J. White, his friend and AMA president, and made very serious and slanderous allegations. He, in turn, called an ER department. The College of Physicians & Surgeons' registrar, Dr. Trevor Theman, and a psychiatrist showed up at my constituency office the following day, when I was doing my job in the House with 30 members and the hon. member, who is a doctor, right here. That's called intimidation, Mr. Speaker.

There were many doctors who came forward that that Alberta Medical Association supported physician intimidation. Many doctors have come forward and risked their lives and careers, said

that this happens when we are just doing our job, Mr. Speaker. I was just doing my job as a legislator.

The third issue. I did ask a question. Doctors who I trust told me very serious information, and I asked a question. Dr. Ciaran McNamee and Dr. Tim Winton are thoracic surgeons whose surgeries were delayed because surgeries were cut by 25 per cent in 1999-2000, and these doctors have publicly said that they will not appear. In the Health Quality Council review that was recently done, they were not compelled to testify; they were not subpoenaed to testify.

I'd like to table evidence from *The Lancet*, a report dated January 8, 2011, volume 377. It's an internationally respected publication, which states that in Alberta the five-year survival rate for lung cancer from 1995 to 1999 was 13.8. In the years in question, when the Dr. McNamee and the Winton affair happened, the survival rate went down to 13.1 per cent. From 2005 to 2007 it was 15.1 per cent. During that time period in Canada nationwide the survival rate was 15.7 between '95 and '99, 15.9 between 2000-2002, and 18.4 between 2005-2007. In Ontario in those same time periods the rate was 16.6, 16.7, and 19.1. The survival rate went up in the nation and in every province. In that two-year time period the survival rate in Alberta went down, and we are still not leaders in the nation, Mr. Speaker. Here is evidence, in fact. This is not a part of this report. International, irrefutable evidence.

Lastly, Mr. Speaker, let's talk about tomorrow. The real solutions lie in fixing the health care system. The real solutions lie in the solutions here. Number one, let's immediately get all of our seniors out of hospital – immediately – by investing in world-class long-term care, nonprofit long-term care, where seniors are not used as commodities to be sold to private entrepreneurs who support a political party.

Number two, let's actually stop our seniors from coming into hospital or long-term care in the first place with a massive investment in home care. Keep our couples and our seniors and grandparents together. Keep them together in their own community and their own home. We propose a \$400 million investment – a \$400 million investment – a massive investment. It's an investment because it saves on building hospital beds.

We need accountability, Mr. Speaker, true accountability, which I tried to legislate with many other political parties here in the fall of 2010, legislate true performance accountability measures. Let's take these primary care networks, put nurse practitioners and health care workers in there, and connect them to hospitals and to seniors' facilities and to the school system. Primary care networks. Great idea. But they're not resourced adequately with enough staff.

At the end of the day, Mr. Speaker, let's get every Albertan a family doctor. Let's guarantee emergency and surgery wait times and guarantee to get you a family doctor. Let's fix this problem once and for all.

With respect to the allegations I made regarding cancer treatment, the Premier, who is a QC, knows that nondisclosure agreements and patient files of thoracic surgeons are not accessible.

The Speaker: I'm sorry, hon. member, but the time for this segment has now expired.

The hon. Minister of Health and Wellness.

Mr. Horne: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased to take part in this debate this afternoon with respect to the findings of the Health Quality Council. I would like to spend the majority of the time allotted to me talking about what I think Albertans are really interested in, and that is the measures that are currently in

place and the measures that are planned for the future to address some of the issues that were raised in the report.

What I do want to say, Mr. Speaker – and I do this with greatest respect to the hon. Leader of the Opposition – is that I want to remind the House once again that this report is the result of a number of allegations that were raised in this House with respect to emergency department wait times, with respect to alleged deaths of people awaiting lung cancer surgery in this province, and with respect to allegations about physician intimidation.

I sincerely hope, Mr. Speaker, that the hon. Leader of the Official Opposition is not in these proceedings questioning the independence, the credibility, or the competency of the Health Quality Council in doing the work that they have been asked to do. I would like to be the first to say on record, at least in the course of this debate, that I think they have done an excellent job in thoroughly reviewing the matters that were referred to them and providing us with some very substantive recommendations that will guide not only changes in the health care system in the future but the development of terms of reference for the public inquiry that has been promised by this Premier and which this government will deliver.

I also take exception, Mr. Speaker, to the hon. Leader of the Opposition's remarks with respect to the Health Quality Council's response to his allegations about alleged deaths of patients awaiting lung cancer surgery. I'm not sure whether to interpret from his comments whether he's simply saying that the Health Quality Council didn't do an adequate job of review of this matter. I am not certain whether he is answering their findings by raising new allegations in this House this afternoon, and I sincerely hope that is not the case. I certainly hope he is not ignoring the fact that this review was guided by an expert panel that included some of the individuals I mentioned earlier in question period, and that includes, with respect to cancer, Simon B. Sutcliffe, president of the International Network for Cancer Treatment and Research and past president of the B.C. Cancer Agency.

Mr. Speaker, if the hon. Leader of the Opposition is suggesting that he has a monopoly on the findings and the truth with respect to this allegation or with respect to any of the other allegations and findings of the Health Quality Council, then I suggest we have a much more serious problem than we're going to have the capacity to debate here in this House this afternoon. But I will leave it at that, and I will not respond to the personal remarks that the hon. leader made. I made a very thorough explanation and account of my involvement with respect to his allegations last November in this House, and it does not serve Albertans and it doesn't serve these proceedings to spend the time recounting that once again. So I will not dignify that with a further response.

What I do want to talk about, Mr. Speaker, in my role as Minister of Health and Wellness, is what we are doing about the issues that are raised in this report. With respect to emergency department wait times I think the hon. leader does his colleagues in emergency medicine a disservice by not acknowledging their valiant efforts over the last year to 18 months, working in collaboration with the government, with Alberta Health Services, and with other stakeholders, to implement real solutions. Many of these solutions were alluded to by the hon. member both before he joined the Liberal caucus and after he joined the Liberal caucus. He should know full well – and I'm sure he does know full well – that since these allegations were raised, his colleagues have played a meaningful role in the development of strategies within emergency departments to improve throughput and to reduce wait times.

3:40

Some of these, Mr. Speaker, include procedures within the emergency department to move patients who have been admitted to hospital out through an initiative called the overcapacity protocol. That has met with significant success. Some of it has included initiatives in triage and in the waiting room area to identify patients who need to be seen immediately and cannot endure a lengthy wait and to also identify other patients who would more appropriately benefit from a referral to a family doctor or to a primary care provider.

As well, Mr. Speaker, we have worked diligently to address some of the root causes of emergency department wait times, which include access to primary care. This Premier spoke very eloquently about our vision for enhancing primary care networks and implementing family care clinics; in short, giving every resident of this province a place to go to access the health care system, a place where they only have to tell their story once, a place where there is a team of professionals awaiting to provide them with appropriate service, and many of the other features that the hon. the Premier explained.

We now have 41 primary care networks across the province of Alberta. We have three family care clinics, pilot projects that will be implemented by the end of March, and we have over 40 communities that have expressed an interest to this minister in developing a family care clinic as a viable, community-based, appropriate solution that will meet the needs of their citizens.

With respect to continuing care, Mr. Speaker, this has been a source of great debate in the House. I'm pleased to inform the House that we have increased the number of continuing care spaces through the leadership of the hon. Minister of Seniors. We are well on track to achieving our goal of 5,300 additional spaces over five years. This year we expect to again open over a thousand spaces. This is by far the most aggressive capital infrastructure program for health in the country that I am aware of.

A number of comments have been made about access to long-term care. While I would agree that long-term care is extremely important, what we are doing, Mr. Speaker, is that we are facilitating a shift away from the focus on institutions and money and providers to providing affordable housing for seniors that brings health care to them in accordance with their needs and as their needs change over time. In fact, I was pleased to announce our two first continuing care centre demonstration projects in Red Deer a few weeks ago. These are 100-bed projects that are under development by Covenant Health, 100 beds in each city. They will offer seniors the opportunity not only to age in place within a facility but to age in place within the same unit. We hope that, in particular, couples who live in these communities will be able to take advantage of these services within a year or a year and a half.

That involves a significant commitment of capital. In order to facilitate aging in place, it involves a lot more than labelling a bed a long-term care bed, Mr. Speaker. It involves a commitment to staffing, a particular staffing mix, a construction design, and a community that is willing to support seniors over the long term aging in place and being appropriately supported in their own communities.

This government will continue to lead Canada in the development of innovative thinking around continuing care. We will not be bound by a 1970s model that focused – well, it focused on attempting to deliver good care and was very much focused on institutions, the needs of institutions, and the needs of providers. We are focused on serving the needs of patients, residents, and families in communities in or near where they live.

With respect to the future, Mr. Speaker, the Health Quality Council report did talk about an additional strategy, which I'll be looking at very closely over the next few days, that is focused on more efficient management of acute-care bed capacity in our hospitals. The analysis, if members had a chance to read it, indicated that we are currently operating at somewhere between 95 and 100 per cent occupancy of acute-care beds most of the time. They suggested that 90 to 95 per cent would be a more appropriate indicator for this. If we take a moment to think about that, we need flexibility in the acute-care system in order to be able to accommodate things like flu epidemics, to be able to accommodate large-scale motor vehicle accidents or other disasters in the community. We need to be able to adjust our level of acute-care service as the needs of Albertans change.

I will be placing a considerable emphasis on reviewing that recommendation in the report. I've already had a number of discussions with Alberta Health Services about things that we might try, not just to add acute-care beds to the system, Mr. Speaker, but to make more efficient use of the beds that we do have. That requires a proactive approach. It requires the commitment of physicians and other health professionals and administrators, but I'm very confident that we can make it happen.

Since the allegations around deaths on lung cancer surgery waiting lists were found to be unsubstantiated, Mr. Speaker, I'm not going to comment on that part of the report other than to remind the House that those allegations were determined to be unfounded.

What I would like to spend the last few minutes talking about is the culture within our health care system, Mr. Speaker, and particularly the comments in the report regarding physician intimidation and other difficulties physicians and other health professionals are facing in advocating for their patients. I want to say again that while this government wholeheartedly believes that the policy decision to move to one health region for the province was the right policy – we are beginning to see benefits from that policy now – we are quite willing to acknowledge that the transition to Alberta Health Services was a very quick transition. We need to pay more attention to how to improve.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Fish Creek, followed by the hon. Minister of Human Services.

Mrs. Forsyth: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It saddens me to stand up in this Legislature and once again debate an emergency debate that has been brought forward by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands-Norwood. You know, it talks about: pursuant to Standing Order 30 he wishes to advise that on Thursday, February 23, he intends to adjourn the ordinary business of the Assembly "to discuss a matter of urgent public importance; namely the issues of patient safety as described by the Health Quality Council," and it goes on to what the report is.

Mr. Speaker, I've listened very, very intently, and I listened to the Premier, who, in my mind, was giving an election speech instead of talking about what's really important and what the issue is that we should be talking about, and then to the minister of health. The problem with the government that we're facing right now is that they're not talking about the issue. You know, it's where you were, where we are now, and where we're going.

I still hearken back – I think it was last November – to when I was questioning the minister on the physician intimidation. We have it in *Hansard*. We have it on YouTube. We have it on video. He stood up in the Legislature and spoke about the physician intimidation as a workplace issue. I have been in this Legislature a long time. It takes a lot to knock the socks off me, and I've got to tell you that that comment knocked the socks off me. My

immediate reaction was: he just doesn't get it. He just does not get it.

I have been the health critic as a member of the Wildrose for just a little over two years, and I have to tell you that it's consuming probably 90 per cent of my time. I can't even tell you at this particular time how many physicians I've talked to, talked to in confidence. Some of them, like Dr. Parks, Dr. Maybaum, and Dr. Magliocco, have come out in regard to the physician intimidation. I've got probably another 20 doctors in my BlackBerry that will not come out publicly. One of them, that I spent two hours with yesterday, said to me – and he actually came to the press conference with us – immunity from what? The long tentacles of this government? They may not get you today, but they'll probably get you tomorrow or a year from now. That is clearly, clearly indicated in this report. We have had many heartfelt discussions and heard very heartfelt comments in this report in regard to how our physicians are feeling in this province.

I had the opportunity on the 15th of February, which was a week ago, as a member of Public Accounts to have the Health Quality Council come before us, which was very interesting because a week later we got the report. It was absolutely fascinating in the Public Accounts meeting with Dr. Tyrrell and Dr. Cowell when we were asking them what their major struggle was. Well, their major struggle is the fact that the government accepts their recommendations but that they don't implement them.

3:50

I found his comments very, very fascinating. When I asked both Dr. Tyrrell and Dr. Cowell about that, they shared their frustration, and they shared their concerns about there being no powers in any legislation whatsoever to follow up in regard to the recommendations that you, the government, have accepted. So you can go back to the H1N1 Health Quality Council review, you can go back to the medevac review and all of those recommendations – I can't remember exactly how many have come out – but the government hasn't done anything.

So here we are – fast forward a week later – and we have the 420-page report that I even haven't had the opportunity to read and which I will be reading this weekend because it's amazing what can be buried in a report when you take the time to read it word for word and start absorbing some of the things that you're reading. Even in the executive summary they talk about some of the recommendations that the government should do. Some of them are absolutely fascinating, and some of them are what I would consider alarming.

I went home last night after I'd been at the press conference and then had another meeting – we were in budget – so didn't get home till probably 9 o'clock at night, tired. I had the opportunity to sit and try and absorb what transpired through the whole day. I'm thinking: surely to goodness, Albertans are going to start waking up after this report. Contained in this report is some very, very alarming information. When we start looking at recommendations that are contained in this report, it's as simple as talking about: the Canadian triage and acuity scale in regard to emergency patients is defined as five levels of patient acuity, and they number them.

When EDs [emergency departments] become crowded it is impossible for these ill patients to be assessed in a reasonable time frame. In basic terms ED crowding occurs when the demand for ED services exceeds the capacity of the ED to provide them.

We had the problem in 2008. We had the problem in 2009. We had the problem in 2010. We had the problem in 2011. Here we are in 2012, and we still have the problem, and the government is

not even making the numbers that they're supposed to be making, and we had a problem with that. So now the minister stands up and he says: "Albertans, trust us. We're going to fix this problem. Just trust us." And I'm just going back from 2008.

We go on in this report, and we talk about conclusions in regard to the waiting times to see emergency department physicians experienced by significant percentages of ill patients. The report goes on. "The crowded space, the excessive waiting times for care, and at times the suboptimal space available to provide necessary care compromised patients' margins of safety." Frightening. Frightening. We're in 2012. We're talking about Alberta, one of the richest provinces in the country, and we still can't seem to get ourselves together.

I love this one. It goes on to talk about: let's form a task force. This task force is going to go out and tell docs how to be advocates for their patients. Oh, my gosh, Mr. Speaker. When I read that, I thought that we have probably the best physicians in this province, and their job is to advocate on behalf of the people that they're taking care of. They tried to go through what was set before them by the government: go see your supervisor; then go do this.

Hence Dr. Parks in 2008, after extreme frustration, even writing a letter to the Premier of the province, comes out and says: Albertans, we have a problem. Now we're going to teach them how to advocate on behalf of their patients? Who are really losing on that recommendation, quite frankly, are Albertans, patients. You can have an orthopaedic surgeon who decides he's fed up and had enough because he can't get enough OR time. He has gone through all the proper channels, he has got patients that are waiting two years to get surgery, and he can't get them into the OR. So he finally comes out. We've had that happen. That's just one.

It's the same thing for a psychiatrist who is trying to advocate on behalf of his patients that are mentally ill, and there are no beds. All of a sudden he comes out and says: "We have a problem. We have no beds in this province. I can't tell a patient, 'Come back to me in three weeks if you're contemplating suicide because we have no beds.'" That's the role of the physicians in this province on behalf of the people that they're taking care of. They take the Hippocratic oath to take care of their patients, and we're going to establish a task force?

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Human Services.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's a great privilege to serve the people of Alberta. I've had the privilege of serving the people of Alberta in a number of capacities, and some of them actually are relevant to the debate today. I served on a hospital board before regionalization. I had the ability through that service to understand the complexity of the acute-care delivery system and the challenges of dealing with the varying demands, requirements, and needs within that system: the constant need when you're in that circumstance, whether it's a hospital, whether it's a regional health authority, whether it's a provincial health authority or, indeed, the ministry of health, and the constant difficulty of dealing with competing demands for resources and also dealing with many people who have the considerable ability and much passion for their service to Albertans.

I think we need to start by saying thank you. We need to start by saying thank you to the people who work in the health care system across this province each and every day, whether it's in an acute-care facility or whether it's in a long-term care centre or an extended-care centre or a designated assisted living care centre, the people who provide the very technologically assisted, significant,

and invasive procedures that might happen in a cardiac centre, or whether it's the day-to-day loving and giving care that they provide to individuals who are resident in a facility or in their own home through home care. I think we need to say thank you.

We've had a lot of talk over the last couple of years about how destroyed the system is, how bad the system is. The fact of the matter is that we have a very good quality of life in this province, and that quality of life is very much supplemented and supported by the quality of the health care services that are available right through the system, whether it's the ability to support people living in their own homes, whether it's the ability to support people who are living in lodges or in designated assisted living, whether it's the ability to support people with health care services and long-term care, or whether it's in acute or subacute situations. That is very important.

I think we do need to recognize it because one of the things that has to come out of it and one of the things why I thought it might be appropriate for us to deal with the debate this afternoon and deal with the Health Quality Council of Alberta's report is that one of the most significant things that government can do – and when I say "government," I'm including in this circumstance all of us here in this Legislature as the Legislature is part of the governance of this province – is to provide assurance, provide assurance to Albertans that there is a system in place to take care of them when they're most in need.

When you talk to Albertans, certainly there are struggles. There are struggles at emergency. I've been to emergency with my mom. I've been to emergency with my daughter. I've been there sometimes for lengthy waits and have always been concerned about those waits, but I've also been there knowing that one of the reasons that I was waiting was because someone had a greater need than we did, than our family did at that particular moment in time. That's triage. The emergency system is there for people when they need it.

4:00

One of the things that we can give assurance to Albertans on – and I think this report does a good job of helping us to give the assurance to Albertans – is that while there are lengthy waits in emergency and while there is much work to be done to improve our health care system and to continue to keep up with the pace of growth in our population and the aging of our population and all those factors which continue to put pressure on a health care system, we can give Albertans the assurance that the care they need will be there when they need it. I think this report goes some way to assuring Albertans that some of the reckless comments of the last couple of years have no basis in fact.

In fact, what we have is a system which is a very decent system for Albertans. Could it be better? Absolutely, Mr. Speaker, it could be better, and it will be better. We will do a lot more. There's been a lot of work done on, for example, quality of life for seniors. There's been a lot of discussion that one of the problems for emergency is being able to admit patients to hospital and that one of the problems about admitting patients to hospital is having acute-care beds available.

The hon. Member for Edmonton-Meadowlark indicated in his comments that when he was providing advice to me as health minister, one of the things he talked about was the full capacity protocol. Yes, indeed, there were mechanisms put in place and processes put in place to help move people through emergency and into care when they needed it. Those protocols are being used now, and other processes have been put in place. In fact, one of the things that's clear from the Health Quality Council's report is

that this is not a stand-in-place system. This is a system which has been improving and continues to improve.

In fact, Mr. Speaker, I would reference a couple of the recommendations. Recommendation 3 – I don't have a page number – says:

Alberta Health and Wellness and Alberta Health Services review the current need for long term care and supportive living facilities based on detailed forecasting created by appropriate models . . . to further reduce the percentage of alternate level of care bed days.

“To further reduce”; in other words, an acknowledgement that progress is being made, that work is being done, that the issues that we deal with on a day-to-day basis and that we are concerned about on a day-to-day basis are, in fact, subject to progress.

In fact, recommendation 6 in that same portion of the report says that “Alberta Health Services continue” – continue, Mr. Speaker – “with innovative solutions to support palliative care patients in their community setting and prevent, wherever feasible, the transfer of these patients to emergency departments.” That's an issue that's been dear to my heart.

My mom had congestive heart failure, and we were in the hospital a number of times when she needed treatment, but it wasn't an emergency. The problem that I was facing was that this was not an emergency situation, but that was the only place to go for that kind of treatment.

Could we do better? Yes, we could. Do I advocate for changes so that instead of sending patients to hospital, there can be a different place where they can go for the kinds of treatments that they need, particularly for our seniors, who need sometimes specialized care, with frail skin, with the need for particularly trained health care professionals? Emergency isn't necessarily the best place to go. We can do some work on improving that, and that kind of work is being done.

It's interesting that the Health Quality Council in their report, in looking into a lot of these allegations that have been made and tossed around about our system not being there for Albertans or about the system being broken, doesn't say that you need to start doing this. They say that you need to continue with innovative solutions, an acknowledgement of the fact that there's some very good work being done between the department of health and Alberta Health Services and the health care professionals in the system.

Mr. Speaker, I think we need to focus on what's important to Albertans. Yes, there's work to be done in the health care system, and there will always be work to be done in the health care system, but there needs to be an assurance for Albertans that we do have quality care. People throw around the concept of third-world countries. I think that sometimes the people that talk about third-world countries have never been to a third-world country because what we have in Alberta is certainly not third-world country.

What we have in Alberta is a very, very high-end, technologically savvy, technologically supplied system with well-trained, very well-educated health care professionals, in some cases some of the best in the world, who are attracted to Alberta by the quality of life that we have in Alberta and by the opportunity that they have to further the knowledge in the area of health care. In fact, Mr. Speaker, we could talk about the fact that we've done some leading-edge research into health care and the provision of health care services in this province, both on the acute-care side and on the wellness side, and the reason it's being done here is because we have some of the best facilities in the world. We can attract some of the best people in the world to do it,

and they bring others, and that provides an even higher standard of care for Albertans.

Mr. Speaker, I'm straying from where I started, but I really did want to emphasize that, first and foremost, we as legislators, we as governors, we as people who are leaders in the province should be careful about what we're yelling out there. Fundamentally, one of our first roles is to provide assurance to Albertans that care will be there when they need it. That doesn't mean we shouldn't be critical. That doesn't mean we shouldn't point out where there are problems. We should, but we do need to be careful about how we do that because there is nothing more important to most of us than the health of our children, the health of our parents, and, indeed, in some cases even our own health.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona, followed by the hon. Minister of Education.

Ms Notley: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased to have the opportunity to get up and speak on this very, very, very important issue. The reason we're here, of course, is because we've gotten what I think can be characterized as a reasonably objective description of the current state of certain elements of our health care system. Notwithstanding what the Premier and other speakers have said in the past, I think that it is quite legitimate for members of the opposition to take seriously and find credible the description of the health care system that is found within the Health Quality Council report while at the same time potentially rejecting or not completely agreeing with the recommendations that flow from that report.

It is clear that the members of the Health Quality Council spent a great deal of time interviewing thousands of people within the health care system, so it is quite reasonable, then, that their description would be an accurate reflection of what's going on there. They did not, however, ask the vast majority of those people they interviewed for their specific recommendations on how to make things better. So while the credibility and the value of that report can be founded on the breadth of the surveys and the conversations they had for the purposes of the descriptors, the same credibility would not necessarily flow to the recommendations.

I think those recommendations were constructed after the fact, and that's fine. I'm not saying that the Health Quality Council itself doesn't bring a great deal of expertise to the table – of course it does – but it's completely reasonable for members of the opposition to take as a matter of course the very detailed descriptions as a legitimate subject of debate while at the same time perhaps having a different view about how best to move forward.

I want to be very clear. There are many recommendations which are found in the Health Quality Council report which I think are very accurate and which, in fact, in many ways reflect many of the representations that our NDP caucus has been making for many, many years. That's one of the points that I wanted to speak to.

I wanted to just briefly comment on a couple of points that members opposite have made and just respond to those very briefly. The Minister of Human Services spent the majority of his speaking time suggesting that it's our role as members of the Assembly to engage in public assurance. I would suggest to you, Mr. Speaker, that were we to simply focus on engaging in public assurance to the exclusion or at the expense of passionately and thoroughly and constructively advocating for the change that we know needs to happen, then I think that we would not be doing our job. I do not believe, in fact, that it is the role of members of

this Assembly to engage in sort of a 1984-esque assurance process for the public.

4:10

I think we always need to be prepared to subject our public enterprises to a critical eye and a critical analysis because that's how we get better. I think that the notion that was just articulated by the Minister of Human Services is something that comes from a government that's been here for 40 years, which sort of seems to think that the first priority is to kind of placate everybody and to make them think it's okay and that then we'll quietly work on teeny, little problems behind closed doors, but anyone who suggests more outwardly that there's a problem is somehow an enemy of the state. I think that that's why we run into the kind of problems that we've run into here.

Now, I'd like to move fairly quickly to the issue of the solutions, that I think are really very, very important, that we need to focus on. Clearly, we have a problem in our emergency rooms. Clearly, we have a problem in our health care system. The Health Quality Council very clearly identified that people's safety was put at risk, that the margin of safety was compromised, and that we are not meeting anything close to the guidelines and the standards that experts would recommend that we should attempt to meet.

Then how do we deal with that? Well, it's definitely a complex problem. We could all sit here, and if we removed our political hats, we would probably have very good conversations that would address a number of issues. I do think that what this report points to are at least two issues that we have tried to raise with this government repeatedly and which they have not addressed yet and that I think it's vital for us to talk about.

The first of those issues is, in fact, the issue of appropriate long-term care. As you know, Mr. Speaker, going into the last election, the former Premier committed to Albertans that somewhere between 750 and a thousand long-term care beds would be constructed. After the election that promise was broken, and subsequently a document that was internally generated by this government suggested that, in fact, we would slowly reduce the number of long-term care beds and that, instead, what we would do was that we would build sort of quasi-care beds that were publicly subsidized but privately run and that those would be the model of what we'd move to. Ever since then the government has clung desperately to the language that their communications folks have come up with around that: "Oh, we want to move away from institutions" or "Oh, we want to age in place," all those kinds of things.

Now, even if we take, however, the government at its word on this, I have to say that we are extremely concerned about what is going on in this area. As I raised in question period last week and as I raised in estimates last week, the fact of the matter is that this government is unable to tell us, of the 4,000 or so new beds that they're so proud of having created in the area of continuing care, what kinds of beds they have built. Are they AL 1, are they AL 2, are they AL 3, are they DAL 4, or are they long-term care? The fact of the matter is, Mr. Speaker, that there's a significant difference between those categories of spaces and the degree to which those spaces can act as the recipient of these patients who are otherwise in our hospitals accounting for the crisis that we see in our emergency rooms.

You know, the Health Quality Council says that we need to plan to have appropriate places, alternative places for these people to go. They say – I'm not sure of the page as I don't have the page numbers – under recommendation 1, under their analysis:

Reducing inpatient occupancy rates begins with accurately estimating the number of acute care and long terms care beds that are required in order to have enough resources available for the demand that exists now and over the next few decades. This estimate should include detailed human resource planning.

Well, Mr. Speaker, we have kicked about half a billion dollars out the door. We've built somewhere between 3,000 and 4,500 beds – we never know for sure – but we don't know if those beds are capable of providing the care that is necessary because our Minister of Seniors and his staff, even though I have asked them for three years in a row to describe to me the kinds of beds that we are building with all that half a billion dollars of money, can't tell us. What I'm saying is that with the very solution that the Health Quality Council is saying is absolutely critical to fixing this problem, this government has spent three years not knowing what they're doing on it. That is an emergency, and that has to change. I mean, I still don't actually think that the model they are proposing is the right model, but even if you think that it is the right model, you should be able to then describe to Albertans what it is you've just done, and that hasn't happened yet. That's a very, very serious concern, and it should be a concern for all Albertans, who want to see these recommendations followed and met and see the improvements that we're talking about.

The other issue that we've raised repeatedly in this Legislature is the whole issue of mental health services. Now, even before we had the elimination of the regional health boards with everything moving into Alberta Health Services, previously we had the Mental Health Board, and it was chronically underfunded. Being able to sort of count the amount of services through that Mental Health Board was an extremely difficult process. Well, it's become far more difficult now with it being embedded in Alberta Health Services.

Every now and then when we ask the minister of health about the mental health services, we have these cavalier references to: well, under the Minister of Justice we had the safe communities project, and we opened up 30 beds in Calgary, and we had a great press conference, and we had lots of people there for tea and lots of media showed up, and we provided 30 beds for people who would otherwise be in jail and yada, yada, yada. But finding out what the overarching investment is in mental health in this province – nailing Jell-O to the wall is a thousand times easier than getting an answer from this government on what they're doing to deal with the fact that we are grossly underfunding mental health services.

Anybody with an expert in emergency room care will tell you that that's the other problem, so what we need to do is . . .

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Education, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

Mr. Lukaszuk: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Thank you for this opportunity to speak to the House on this important issue. I have to tell you that the reason I voted in favour of having an emergency debate was not because I believe that there is suddenly an emergency as such that Albertans lives are at stake. I would agree with your comments that perhaps this debate may not have met all the requirements of what this procedure is meant to accomplish. But I do believe that it is important, and perhaps it is somewhat of an emergent nature to advise Albertans on what truly is going on in the health care system, perhaps even more importantly what truly is going on in this House and how this very important topic of health care, that I think every single Albertan, if not on a daily basis then at least from time to time when they're found in need of using health care, finds very dear and important

in their life, is being manipulated and used for purposes that simply are inappropriate.

Mr. Speaker, let me give you a few examples, some personal ones. I will be the first one to tell you that there is a great deal of room for improvement in the health care system, as there probably always will be. Yes, we have pressures. During the cabinet tour in the town of Athabasca at a great meeting with a number of physician specialists and support staff and nurses and other allied professionals they were telling me what the issues are in the system. One of the main issues in the system is the fact that Albertans have a difficult time accessing family physicians. We know that. As a matter of fact, I have to tell you that I'm personally concerned because my physician of some 30 years is considering retiring, and I will be in a situation where I will have to look for a GP.

I have to tell you one thing, Mr. Speaker, and I know this for a fact, and the reason I know this for a fact is because not only have I been told of it by a number of constituents and Albertans, but I have actually experienced it in my own family, on my own skin. When you need medical care in this province, you will receive world-class medical care in this province.

I'll give you an example. Just about three months ago my three-year-old needed medical care. At the time when it happened, I took her to Sturgeon hospital just in St. Albert. Yes, Mr. Speaker, she and I waited there for about three hours, but she wasn't truly an emergency. The only reason I was in that room with her was because there was no family physician available at that time to go to, so I had to utilize that service, perhaps myself contributing somewhat to the problem. When she finally got to see the physician, she received the care she definitely deserved.

Mr. Speaker, I would insist that the members of the Wildrose and NDP actually not interrupt me and listen to the conversation because it is after all they who wanted this debate to occur, but obviously they are more interested in other topics. I know that I'm not allowed to speak on the attendance in this House, but it's very tempting to. Those who are here, it would be good if they would at least allow me to speak.

Nonetheless, Mr. Speaker, when she did receive care, it was top notch.

4:20

The cabinet tour as well, Mr. Speaker, gave me an opportunity to get away from education issues. We visited the Calgary Children's hospital and the new trauma room that was put in for children, showing me not only the calibre of specialists that, I would say without much hesitation, the rest of the world would probably be envious of but the quality of equipment and the technology that is available there to assist children when they are in trauma. Also, the soft services, the support services and psychological services for traumatized parents who are waiting to find out what the results of an emergency surgery would be, were simply world class.

We know that, Mr. Speaker. We are attracting doctors to this province from all over the world, renowned specialists from all over the world, not only because they want to work with other specialists of equal calibre but because there is equipment over here which they have access to to do their research and to provide quality care.

Mr. Speaker, there has to be some balance to what's being said about Alberta health care. Is it perfect? No. Will it ever be perfect? One would hope so but perhaps not. Is there room for improvement? Yes. But I do have full confidence in our minister of health not only because I know him to be a friend but because I

know that he actually cares. He lives in this province. His family lives in this province just like other members of this particular Assembly.

I have to tell you, Mr. Speaker, that what really concerns me is that the confidence of Albertans is being undermined. Situations where the Leader of the Opposition and his colleague, who are both trained medical doctors – those are the individuals that we think of and we turn to when in trauma. If a car hits you or me, you hope that there is an emergency room doctor waiting there for you to provide you with quality professional service. Now, to have that very same individual stand up the House, mind you not in the capacity of a medical doctor but now a politician, to tell us all in this House and, de facto, tell all Albertans that Alberta has third-world class health care really not only disturbs me but it offends me.

I would hate to know that somewhere out there there is an Albertan who is in dire need of help and prays to God to be saved or a mother or a father looking over a child hoping that their child will be saved, and they hear from an emergency room doctor that this province has third-world health care. That's simply shocking, Mr. Speaker, and unbecoming not only of a politician in this room but unbecoming of a medical practitioner, who should be working hard to increase Albertans' confidence in the system and pulling together with government, pointing out constructively how the system can be repaired, as opposed to engaging in such damaging activities and behaviour simply by tabling over and over and over again the same package of letters.

Mr. Speaker, if you were to look into this Legislature's archives, I bet you have multitudes of copies of the same letters and newspaper articles that the leader of the Liberal opposition has tabled because those are all he really has.

One has to ask him- or herself a question: are we here in this Chamber debating this emergency because there is a true emergency that needs to be resolved today, or is there really a bona fide emergency at all, or is this for political gain? I hate to question the motives of any individual member in this Assembly, so I will give them the benefit of the doubt that they actually are well intended but horribly misinformed, and perhaps that is what leads us to having to debate this particular issue.

I can tell you, Mr. Speaker, that having had numerous discussions with colleagues in our caucus and particularly the minister of health, undeniably there is a hundred per cent commitment on this side of the House to work constructively with allied health care providers, medical doctors, and others to make the system as good as it can be at any given time and be open to criticism.

I think that the report that has sparked this debate is just that. You know, some members of the opposition – I can't refer to them now – would say that it's a damning report, that it definitely convicts this government in many different ways. The members of another opposition party would say that it's a whitewash, as a matter of fact, that it doesn't point out anything, that it is some kind of a cover-up. Well, the fact is, Mr. Speaker, and you know well enough, that if you have opponents equally upset at the report, one saying that it is too good and another one saying it is too bad, odds are you actually ended up dealing with a fair report that fairly reflects what the situation in the system is.

This government is not about to deny sections of the report. We will take it as constructive criticism and work with this report to continually improve the system. The fact is, Mr. Speaker, that many of the comments are subjective. The Premier has made a commitment, our minister of health has made a commitment to further investigate those issues and get to the bottom of it and

make sure that Albertans have confidence in their medical system, particularly at the most crucial time when they truly really need it.

I know Albertans are busy. They're raising families, and they're working hard, and they don't have time to pay attention every day to what happens in this House. But there's an interesting development, Mr. Speaker. For months members of the opposition were demanding an inquiry. The moment the Premier said, "Yes, we're going to have an inquiry," then this inquiry wasn't good enough. It had to be a judicial inquiry with subpoenas. The moment the Premier said, "Yes, you will have an inquiry that will meet all the requirements" of what she feels is appropriate and reflects, actually, what the opposition was asking for, now the request is that it has to happen before an election. Well, it's obvious that it will never . . .

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

Ms Blakeman: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Well, I can always tell when the dart has hit dead centre of the board because I just heard it here repeatedly, and that's when the government gets up and says: "There's no problem, and if there is, we'll fix it. Anybody that's complaining about this has just got, you know, problems."

It's a consistent pattern, and after the number of years I've been in this place, I can speak to that pattern. As any member of opposition brings up issues, the first thing that happens to us is that the government members trivialize the issue: "Oh, that's really not," or "It's a labour problem," or "That's just not an issue," or "I've never heard that," et cetera, et cetera. Then they demean the questioner by commenting on their heritage or their ignorance on the subject or their presence or absence in the House or some other thing. So they demean the person asking the question. Then, finally, they diminish the problem: it's really not a big deal.

Where have I seen this? Well, I've seen this happen on electricity deregulation. I've seen it happen on the education system and teachers in the education system, full-day kindergarten. I've seen it

happen around a savings plan for the government and royalty rates. I've seen it happen around health care more than once. It has become a pattern, and it tells me that this government is in big trouble.

They've all had very good speaking notes today. My compliments to the Public Affairs Bureau.

What did we actually get out of this report that we are here to talk about this afternoon? Well, what we got was: there is a huge problem with wait times in urban emergency rooms. That's in the report. It says that there's a problem. It says that acute-care beds are blocked by frail, ill seniors who need to be in a care facility with a high enough level of care to look after them. In this system in this world in this province those are called long-term care beds. They have a medical component to them that is co-shared between the government and the individuals.

This also talked about physician intimidation. Yes, it happened. Yes, people were intimidated. Yes, people were blocked or punished when they tried to advocate for their patients. And it talked about the fact that massive reorganization over and over again in the health care system in Alberta destabilized the system and messed up the authority and accountability.

Despite a huge elected majority, despite astonishing revenues in the bank, despite 40 years of control and the power to do what they want to do, this system has suffered under this government a series of crises in labour relations, in access and wait times, in cancer treatment times, and in a failure to integrate poverty reduction strategies, mental health strategies, and social determinants of health.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: Hon. members, pursuant to Standing Order 4(2) I must advise that it is now 4:30 on a Thursday night, and pursuant to the calendar published under Standing Order 3(7) the Assembly will stand adjourned until Monday, March 5, at 1:30 p.m.

[The Assembly adjourned at 4:30 p.m. to Monday, March 5, at 1:30 p.m.]

Bill Status Report for the 27th Legislature - 5th Session (2012)

Activity to February 23, 2012

The Bill sponsor's name is in brackets following the Bill title. If it is a money Bill, (\$) will appear between the title and the sponsor's name. Numbers following each Reading refer to Hansard pages where the text of debates is found; dates for each Reading are in brackets following the page numbers. Bills numbered 200 or higher are Private Members' Public Bills. Bills with lower numbers are Government Bills. Bills numbered Pr1, etc., are Private Bills.

*An asterisk beside a Bill number indicates an amendment was passed to that Bill; the Committee line shows the precise date of the amendment.

The date a Bill comes into force is indicated in square brackets after the date of Royal Assent. If it comes into force "on proclamation," "with exceptions," or "on various dates," please contact Legislative Counsel for details at (780) 427-2217. The chapter number assigned to the Bill is entered immediately following the date the Bill comes into force. SA indicates Statutes of Alberta; this is followed by the year in which it is included in the statutes, and its chapter number. Please note, Private Bills are not assigned a chapter number until the conclusion of the fall sittings.

1 Results-based Budgeting Act (Redford)

First Reading -- 4 (Feb. 7 aft., passed)

Second Reading -- 31-38 (Feb. 8 aft.), 125-34 (Feb. 13 eve., passed)

Committee of the Whole -- 124-34 (Feb. 14 aft.), 160-61 (Feb. 15 aft., passed)

Third Reading -- 164-65 (Feb. 15 aft., passed)

2 Education Act (Lukaszuk)

First Reading -- 115 (Feb. 14 aft., passed)

Second Reading -- 152-59 (Feb. 15 aft.), 187-88 (Feb. 16 aft.), 182-85 (Feb. 16 aft.), 256-57 (Feb. 22 aft., adjourned)

3 Appropriation (Supplementary Supply) Act, 2012 (\$) (Horner)

First Reading -- 115 (Feb. 14 aft., passed)

Second Reading -- 150-52 (Feb. 15 aft.), 161 (Feb. 15 aft., passed)

Committee of the Whole -- 185-86 (Feb. 16 aft., passed)

Third Reading -- 251-56 (Feb. 22 aft., passed)

4 St. Albert and Sturgeon Valley School Districts Establishment Act (Lukaszuk)

First Reading -- 236 (Feb. 22 aft., passed)

6 Property Rights Advocate Act (McQueen)

First Reading -- 236 (Feb. 22 aft., passed)

201 Alberta Bill of Rights (Property Rights Protection) Amendment Act, 2012 (Hinman)

First Reading -- 69 (Feb. 13 aft., passed)

203 Tobacco Reduction (Protection of Children in Vehicles) Amendment Act, 2012 (Sherman)

First Reading -- 69 (Feb. 13 aft., passed)

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9718 – 107 St.
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Province of Alberta

The 27th Legislature
Fifth Session

Alberta Hansard

Monday, March 5, 2012

Issue 11

The Honourable Kenneth R. Kowalski, Speaker

Legislative Assembly of Alberta
The 27th Legislature

Fifth Session

Kowalski, Hon. Ken, Barrhead-Morinville-Westlock, Speaker
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Legislative Assembly of Alberta

1:30 p.m.

Monday, March 5, 2012

[The Speaker in the chair]

Prayers

The Speaker: Good afternoon. Welcome back.

Let us pray. At the beginning of this week we ask for renewed strength in the awareness of our duty and privilege as members of the Legislature. We ask for the protection of this Assembly and also the province we are elected to serve. Amen.

Hon. members and ladies and gentlemen, please remain standing now for the singing of our national anthem. We'll be led today by our long-time song master, Mr. Paul Lorieau. Please join in in the language of one's choice.

Hon. Members:

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

The Speaker: Please be seated.

Hon. members, this past weekend might have been a weekend of celebration for some members. Thirty-one members marked the fourth anniversary of their first election, and two additional members marked the fourth anniversary of their second election on Saturday. So congratulations to all of them.

Statement by the Speaker

Member for Little Bow 20th Anniversary of Election

The Speaker: Today, March 5, 2012, however, marks a very special anniversary for the hon. Member for Little Bow. In 1992 on this date the MLA for Little Bow was elected in a by-election and since that date has subsequently been re-elected in 1993, 1997, 2001, 2004, and 2008. He has averaged a remarkable 58.2 per cent of support by way of votes in these six elections.

The hon. member joins a select few who have been honoured to serve the people of Alberta through their work in this Assembly for over 20 years. Seven hundred and ninety one members have been elected since 1905, and only 32 of those men and women to date have reached or surpassed the milestone of serving in six Legislatures. That is 4 per cent of all those who've been elected as MLAs in Alberta's history.

Little Bow is a riding with a rich legislative history. The constituency of Little Bow first came into being on an election map of Alberta in 1913. The voters of Little Bow are loyal and consistent. Only five members have been elected in that constituency in the 99 years of its existence. They are James McNaughton, who served eight years, from 1913 to 1921; Oran L. "Tony" McPherson, who served 14 years, from 1921 to 1935, and also served as Speaker from 1922 to 1926; the Rev. Peter Dawson, who served from 1935 to 1963, a total of 28 years, and served as Speaker for 26 of those 28 years, from 1937 to 1963, a number that will never be surpassed; and Ray Speaker, who served a total

of 29 years, from 1963 to 1992, when the current hon. member commenced his service.

In his 20 years the hon. member has driven an estimated 1.6 million kilometres in the course of his work as a member of this Assembly. His constituency is 11,571 square kilometres in size, which is in comparison larger than the countries of Jamaica and Qatar.

Over his career the hon. member has served as the minister responsible for capital planning and the associate minister of infrastructure and transportation and is currently the parliamentary assistant for Agriculture and Rural Development. He has served on numerous committees and councils and, prior to his service in this Assembly, served as a municipal leader for many years.

The hon. member is a humble representative. A farmer from Carmangay, he pledged from the beginning of his legislative career to do his best and to work hard and to listen to his constituents. He's a friend to all of us.

I would ask that the hon. Member for Little Bow approach the podium, and I would also ask that the Premier of the province of Alberta approach the podium.

Hon. members, we have a 20-year special Mace pin, and I'm going to ask the hon. Premier to either present it to the hon. Member for Little Bow or pin it on him. [The Member for Little Bow was presented with a 20-year Mace pin by the Premier] [Standing ovation]

Introduction of Visitors

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Little Bow.

Mr. McFarland: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. For the first time in 20 years I get to introduce my whole family. [applause] Believe me, it wasn't supposed to be like this; I'm usually the hard one, you know.

First of all, I have two very special friends: constituency manager Lois McLeod and her husband, Rob. I'd ask that they rise. Lois is one of the sixth-longest serving constituency managers in Alberta, and she has helped me for 20 years.

I'll embarrass my wife next because she didn't want any of this, my wife, Mary, of over 41 years. She has spent all her life as a registered psych nurse and still helps people today. That's truly why I got the job; she's saving me a bed.

Our daughter, Shara, and her husband, Drew: Shara is an HR person with Pason Systems in Calgary; our son-in-law, Drew, is in sales and service with Swagelok. Please stand up.

1:40

I won't make you guys do this. I'll introduce the rest of you and then have you stand up. Our youngest son, Patrick, is a youth clinical mental health therapist, and his friend Keiko McCreary is doing MS research in Lethbridge. Going across to the other side, Brenna Jones is from Marsden, Saskatchewan, an LPN down in the Lethbridge area, and our second-oldest son, Sean, has got Prairie Custom Paint Works, a business of his own. Our oldest son, Ryan, is a regional director with employment standards, and his wife, Leslie, is a systems administrator with Enmax. Would you all please rise and receive a warm welcome.

Introduction of Guests

Mr. Horner: Well, Mr. Speaker, that's a tough act to follow, but it is always great to see young people in our Assembly to witness the kind of commitment that a long career like that can take and also the family behind it.

It is an honour for me to introduce to you and through you to the members of the Assembly a group of grade 6 students from J.J. Nearing elementary school in St. Albert. They are accompanied by teacher/group leaders Mr. Curt McDougall, Mrs. Christine Sowinski, Mrs. Renée Dewitt, Miss Brandi Kennedy and parent helpers Mr. Jason Krips, Mrs. Deborah Oke, and Mrs. Gabrielle Campbell.

I'd like to make mention of a special young man, Aidan Krips. Aidan was a mere eight months old during my first campaign and spent a lot of that time in a playpen at the campaign office while his father, Jason, worked as my campaign manager. His dad later worked for the government of Alberta as my executive assistant. So I've watched Aidan grow up to be the fine young man that he is.

Through Aidan and my own experience at J.J. Nearing I can tell you, Mr. Speaker, that when you ask any of these kids about their teachers, one word: awesome. They are in the members' gallery. I would ask that they rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of this Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Justice and Attorney General.

Mr. Olson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure today to introduce to you and through you to all members of the Assembly a group of people from my constituency. I haven't actually spotted them yet, but I trust they're up there somewhere. The Camrose Christian home educators are here, 15 exceptional students along with their parents. Sir, I know these parents to be strongly committed to the education of their children, and I really appreciate them being here today to see the Legislature in operation. I hope that they have a wonderful time and enjoy their visit. If they would all rise if they're here.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Leduc-Beaumont-Devon.

Mr. Rogers: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It gives me great pleasure to rise today and introduce to you and through you to all members of this Assembly 13 of Alberta's brightest and best students from East elementary school in the city of Leduc. They are seated in the public gallery. They are accompanied by their teacher, Mrs. Trena Kiss, and educational assistant, Mrs. Shannon Giles. I would ask that they rise and receive the warm welcome of this Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Human Services.

Mr. Hancock: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's an honour today to rise and introduce to you and through you to this Assembly members of the Alberta College of Social Workers. March 4 to 10 is National Social Work Week, and it's an important opportunity to recognize the dedication of social workers and to thank them for making a positive and lasting difference in the lives of others. Those in the social work profession build on the strength of individuals, families, and communities to assist them in overcoming difficult and challenging situations.

I'd like to thank all social workers across Alberta as well as the ones here in the gallery today: Lynn Labrecque King, executive director of the Alberta College of Social Workers; Ernie and Sheila Schlesinger, true pioneers of social work who've received the Canadian Association of Social Workers' distinguished service award for over 40 years of contributions; Elaine Spencer, a social worker for over 25 years and a current educator at Red Deer College; Elizabeth Radian, a social worker for over 30 years and a current educator at Red Deer College; and Lori Sigurdson, an elected official at the College of Social Workers Council and a faculty member at MacEwan University. I'd ask them all to rise as

representatives of social workers across this province and receive the thanks of this Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Sustainable Resource Development.

Mr. Oberle: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It's a real honour for me to rise today on behalf of the Solicitor General and Minister of Public Security, of course the Member for Calgary-Egmont, to introduce to you and through you to this Assembly Jennifer Downing. Jennifer has been a resident of Calgary-Egmont since 1994 and has been on the Egmont constituency board since 2008. In addition to her board duties Jennifer is an avid traveller in Canada and the world though she is about to take a break from that as she's going back to school to earn her bachelor of commerce. Jennifer is seated in the public gallery. I would ask her to rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of the Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Service Alberta.

Mr. Bhullar: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Earlier today I had the pleasure of hosting the Alberta consumer champion awards. These awards recognize outstanding people, groups, and businesses that go the extra mile to educate consumers about their rights and to ensure Alberta's marketplace is fair for everyone. As the minister responsible for consumer protection I'm very pleased to introduce to you and through you these Alberta consumer champions. I would ask that you please stand as I call your name. The winners in the business category: Mr. Don Kachur from Highland Moving & Storage, that created an online household inventory checklist called Click and Move to ensure consumers receive an accurate written quote for moving and storage services; and Sorin Mihailovici. I owe you that for the idea I gave you this morning, Sorin. He created the Scam Detector app, which is a free online service and smart phone application that provides information on how consumers can protect themselves from more than 500 different scams used worldwide in 80 different countries.

The winner in the media category is Julie Matthews from Global News Edmonton for a report she did on romance scams. Mr. Speaker, I had no part of such a thing. Julie spent several weeks investigating online romance scams and posed as a potential love interest to expose a romance scam artist in her report. Thank you, Julie.

The winners in the youth category, Mr. Speaker. Michelle Ku of Calgary is the first-place winner. Nicholas Yee and Eunil Cho of Edmonton are the second-place winners. The third-place winner in the youth category is Farzanah Allinoor. Two of the winners, Ron Hutchinson and Derek Hassay, could not be here this afternoon.

Mr. Speaker, I'm very proud of these individuals and of the work they do to ensure that our consumers are protected and that we have well-educated Albertans. I ask them to once again rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of this Assembly.

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

Mrs. Sarich: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's an honour and privilege for me to rise today to introduce to you and through you to all Members of the Legislative Assembly five guests that are seated in the members' gallery, here in recognition of the National Film Board of Canada's world premiere of the film *The Basketball Game*, which debuted at the recent Global Visions Film Festival, which is celebrating its 30th year. I'd ask them to please rise as I mention their names. Hart Snider made his directorial debut with the animated short film *The Basketball Game*, a film he also authored and edited. He has a master's degree in media studies

from Montreal's Concordia University and specializes in editing and writing in film, television, and interactive media. Hart is extremely proud to return to his hometown of Edmonton for the world premiere of this film. Hart is also joined by his father, Dr. Earle Snider; his mother, Ruth Snider; his brother Adam Snider; and Bonnie Thompson, National Film Board representative and producer in the National Film Board northwest office, located right here in Edmonton.

Mr. Speaker, it's important to note that the National Film Board of Canada was established in 1939, and they have a rich history of collaborating with emerging and established filmmakers in every region of Canada. They are known as an award-winning organization. They have received 12 Oscars, 14 Webbies, and more than 90 Genies to name a few. They create interactive works and support many emerging artists and are a world leader in auteur animation.

I would like my guests to receive the traditional warm welcome of the Legislative Assembly. Thank you.

1:50

Oral Question Period

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

Advocacy to Government

Dr. Sherman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. This government continues to bully Albertans: Airdrie alderman Allan Hunter yelled at by the Finance minister; Linda Sloan, AUMA president, bullied by the Minister of Municipal Affairs and by the Premier's chief of staff; Shiraz Shariff, the PC party's own candidate, pushed out; and now the threatening letter from the Member for Dunvegan-Central Peace to Betty Turpin because she advocated for students freezing in a school. When Albertans raise important issues and concerns, this government chooses to bully and intimidate instead of listening and addressing their concerns. To the Premier: what the heck is wrong with this government?

Ms Redford: It is important for Albertans to know that they can advocate on behalf of the people they represent. The people who were talking about the school and the work that needs to be done in Grimshaw were certainly entitled to take all of the steps that they did. I was, frankly, a little disappointed with our Member for Dunvegan-Central Peace in his comments. We had an opportunity to discuss this over the weekend. You may know today, Mr. Speaker, that we were very grateful to accept the member's resignation as chair of a cabinet policy committee because this is a government that is going to respond to what Albertans say in terms of what they need. We will listen, we will respond, we will be constructive, and that is the culture of this government.

Dr. Sherman: Mr. Speaker, I'd like to thank the hon. Member for Dunvegan-Central Peace for doing the right thing in offering his resignation. To him: I thank him.

To the Premier: why is it more important for this government to intimidate and hammer local officials into submission and the other officials I've previously mentioned than to get our children heat for our gymnasiums?

Ms Redford: Mr. Speaker, what this government will do is to provide the essential services that students need, that our pupils need in schools, that our patients need. We're going to ensure that systems are working well, that we're responding to the needs of Albertans in this province. That is our priority.

We will always have challenges with respect to what those conversations will be. In fact, in a democracy we should have different points of view, and sometimes conversations get heated. Mr. Speaker, you know very well from this very Legislature that that happens. The important part is that we have the dialogue, we treat each other with respect, and we deliver better services for Albertans.

The Speaker: The hon. leader.

Dr. Sherman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Will the Premier please be objective and look at the politicization of decision-making in Alberta and do the right thing and commit today in this House to fixing the school in Grimshaw and putting some heat in the gymnasium while we're at it?

Mr. Lukaszuk: Mr. Speaker, be it known that I have actually had a number of good visits with the school board in question. I have visited the school. As a matter of fact, I had the unusual experience of crawling underneath the floor of the gym of this school just to see the state of this school. I'll be the first one to say it here, and I said it to the school board. This school is not up to our standard; the children of Grimshaw deserve a better school. It's something that I will be working on together with the school board.

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

Judicial Inquiry into Health Services

Dr. Sherman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Now let's crawl under health care. The Health Quality Council report found that 51 per cent of doctors felt their ability to advocate had been limited, 20 per cent experienced active harmful obstruction for advocating, 30 per cent had a negative outcome, 10 per cent were simply ignored. AHS execs and administrators were involved in systemic harassment and intimidation. There was "bureaucratic and political interference" leading to a culture of fear and intimidation. These are the facts from the report, Premier. Will the Premier correct last week's blunder and include bullying of doctors and political interference in the judicial inquiry on health care?

Ms Redford: Mr. Speaker, the Health Quality Council was very clear with respect to a number of things that need to be addressed in the health care system. Two weeks ago, when that report came out, we accepted all 21 of those recommendations. We are not going to include those issues in a judicial inquiry. The reason we have a judicial inquiry is because there is independent work that was commenced this morning, chaired by Justice Vertes from the Northwest Territories, to deal with issues of queue-jumping. We made that commitment. If there are issues around doctor intimidation connected to that, we know that that can be part of the report. That's in the terms of reference. That's our commitment, and we made that commitment.

Dr. Sherman: Mr. Speaker, the Health Quality Council was very clear. In slick, legal double-speak here – given that the Health Quality Council report also states that safety margins for patients were substantially compromised, patients suffered due to long waits, palliative care patients received suboptimal care in the ED, where some spent the last hours of their lives in an ER department. Here are the facts, Premier. Will you correct last week's blunder and keep your promise to hold a public judicial inquiry into your government, that broke this health care system?

Ms Redford: Mr. Speaker, in fact, the Health Quality Council report was very clear. It actually said that we didn't need to have a judicial inquiry.

We accepted all 21 of the recommendations that the Health Quality Council made. We will act on all of those recommendations, Mr. Speaker. In terms of our commitment to an independent judicial inquiry that would be up and running before the election, we kept our commitment.

Dr. Sherman: Mr. Speaker, the Health Quality Council was very clear that this government has caused intimidation.

Given that a gross lack of public home care and long-term care are some of the prime root causes of the failure of our health care system, can the Premier please explain how a few pilot projects and a measly \$25 million, an extra 12 bucks for our primary care networks, and 30 long-term care beds in Strathmore are going to fix our health care crisis?

Ms Redford: Mr. Speaker, this hon. member stood up in this House three weeks ago and demanded added funding for primary care networks. Our minister of health delivered on that promise because that's going to matter to Albertans. I'll tell you that the way to start good public policy is to begin a conversation with stakeholders and to introduce projects that will matter. We have committed to three family care clinics that will be up and running this year, an investment of \$100 million. It speaks to access for families around health, wellness, and primary care. That's a commitment Albertans can rely on.

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

Dr. Sherman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Thank you, Madam Premier. A measly 12 bucks is better than a kick in the head.

Edmonton General Continuing Care Incident

Dr. Sherman: Last week family members of Audry Chudyk came to this Legislature to tell her story, a deeply disturbing story of severe senior neglect at the understaffed and underfunded Edmonton General continuing care centre. She had fallen twice. When Audry's husband Mariano went to see her on Valentine's Day, he found her unconscious, unresponsive, with black bedsores, laying in her filth, with feces underneath her fingernails. Staff had to be persuaded by her son to call 911. How could this government allow this to happen in the richest place on the planet, Premier? Come on.

Ms Redford: That is a terribly unfortunate incident. We never want to have these things happen in the health care system. That's one of the reasons that we have systems in place through the Minister of Seniors to ensure that these reports are made in a timely fashion at a time when it matters to the patient, Mr. Speaker, and not when people try to make political gain out of it three weeks later.

Dr. Sherman: Mr. Speaker, my own father didn't get home care until the night before he died.

Given that this Premier told this House on February 9 that "this government provides public health care to seniors that allows seniors to live in dignity," the parents and grandparents and great-grandparents of these children up above, to the Premier: could you look Audry Chudyk's husband in the eye and honestly tell him that your government did everything so Audry Chudyk can live in dignity?

Ms Redford: The reason that we have a system that investigates unfortunate incidents where people are impacted is so that we can ensure that we identify what happened and that they don't happen again. It's an unfortunate tragedy when these things happen, Mr. Speaker, and no one is going to deny that. Our Department of Seniors is going to ensure that we take the opportunity to work with health care providers such as Covenant Health to ensure that there are systems in place that don't allow these things to happen again.

Dr. Sherman: Mr. Speaker, the only thing unfortunate is our failed seniors policy.

Given the deeply disturbing nature of what happened to Audry Chudyk, who is still fighting for her life today, it was deeply offensive to read that the Minister of Health and Wellness over there said, quote: I would certainly hope that as concerning as this particular case is, that no one would be allowed to cast doubt or criticism on the work of our nurses. Unquote. To the Premier: will you demand today that that minister over there, the health minister, apologize to the Chudyk family for suggesting that they should not be allowed to raise criticisms?

Ms Redford: Mr. Speaker, if we take a look at the conversation that arose around this terribly unfortunate incident, the first thing and the correct response was to try to determine the facts. The context of who should or should not be held responsible must be determined in the context of those facts.

2:00 Judicial Inquiry into Health Services (continued)

Mrs. Forsyth: Obstruction by this government must end, starting with the bullying of our doctors and the broken promises made by this Premier. The Premier told Albertans several times that an inquiry would have to include doctor intimidation and political meddling. Instead, in her inquiry the government was given a way out by ignoring the issues completely. Now Albertans may never know who needs to be held accountable, and the culture of corruption will be allowed to continue unchecked. Why does the Premier insist on covering up her government's bad behaviour?

Ms Redford: Mr. Speaker, today is an important day in Alberta. In the middle of the summer last year Albertans heard that there could be a problem with queue-jumping that would impact our confidence in an Alberta health care system. I'll tell you that I was quite pleased to support an independent judicial inquiry, which many hon. members in this House suggested we would never call. Today that inquiry was called. It is headed by a retired and well-respected judge from the Northwest Territories, the terms of reference are clear, and if there are facts to be found out, we will find them.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mrs. Forsyth: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Given that the terms of reference of the inquiry completely ignore the cold reality that patients can no longer feel confident that the doctors can stick up for them, with over 20 per cent of doctors experiencing active harmful obstruction, does the Premier seriously believe that doctors and Albertans do not deserve answers for the bullying caused by your government's mismanagement?

Ms Redford: Not two weeks ago there were answers with respect to that. There was a Health Quality Council report, that many members in this House demanded be called last year. There was a

report published that was quite frank with respect to the state of health care. As a result, we took 21 recommendations from that report, every recommendation in that report, and we accepted them. We are acting on those recommendations, Mr. Speaker. In fact, we are taking the advice of the Health Quality Council to act on them now as opposed to what the hon. member would suggest, which is a lengthy inquiry to avoid the issue. We are dealing with the issues now.

Mrs. Forsyth: Mr. Speaker, I'll tell you what Albertans are demanding: the truth.

Given that the AMA president says that your inquiry only bandages over the system and argued that the Health Quality Council's findings on doctors' intimidation can't be swept under the rug, does the Premier think Dr. Slocombe's comments are wrong, or are they just misguided?

Ms Redford: Anyone who has an opinion is certainly entitled to have that opinion. Our responsibility as the government of Alberta is to ensure that health care systems are working in this province for the good of Albertans, not for a doctor's agenda, not for a nurse's agenda, and not for the agenda of a political party, Mr. Speaker. We've accepted the recommendations, we're implementing those recommendations, and we have an independent judicial inquiry starting their work today on the issue that matters to Albertans.

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

Criticism of Government

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. When the Holy Family school board challenged this Tory government's refusal to replace a dilapidated and unsafe school, their own MLA tried to silence them with threats. This Premier promised that this government would be different, more open and accountable. It's odd how they keep promising that, but nothing ever changes. To the Premier: why are you misleading Albertans about doing things differently when your government uses the same old intimidation tactics as always?

Ms Redford: Mr. Speaker, I'll tell you what doing things differently means. It means that when these allegations came to light, I acted, and as a result of that people have had to accept responsibility for their actions. Both myself and the Minister of Education have been clear that we did not think these were appropriate comments. There have been consequences as a result of that, and that has changed.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Given that the Premier's own chief of staff, her Municipal Affairs minister, and her entire caucus all attempted to intimidate the Alberta Urban Municipalities Association into silence about the partisan political nature of funding for cities and towns, how can this Premier stand there and, with a straight face, claim that her government does not attempt to intimidate its critics?

Ms Redford: I don't know if the hon. member was at the meeting with the AUMA 10, 15 days ago, but what we saw at that was a very good relationship between members of this Legislature, most on this side of the House, as well as with the minister, who, as I understand it, received the only standing ovation at the event. As we move ahead, it's going to actually matter that we're

constructive about what that relationship will be, Mr. Speaker. It was demonstrated at that event that we have a strong working relationship on policy issues and not politics, and that's going to make a difference for Albertans.

The Speaker: The hon. leader.

Mr. Mason: Thanks very much, Mr. Speaker. Well, given that after the Member for Edmonton-Rutherford phoned the president of the AMA complaining about the mental health of another member of this Assembly, she appointed him as the health minister and after the Minister of Finance fired three doctors for putting on a syphilis campaign that he didn't like, how can this Premier's claim that bullying critics will not be tolerated be anything more than just misleading pre-election propaganda?

Ms Redford: Mr. Speaker, these are unfounded allegations. There is no basis for them, and I won't respond to them.

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

Edmonton General Continuing Care Incident (continued)

Mr. Chase: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. As we were all appalled to hear last week, 67-year-old Audry Chudyk, a resident of the Edmonton General continuing care centre, was found unresponsive and lying in her own feces on February 14. Meanwhile, Auditor General Fred Dunn's 2005 recommendation that systems for monitoring the compliance of long-term care facilities with basic service standards be improved, while accepted, has been ignored for nearly seven years now. To the Premier: why have Alberta Health Services' recommendations, that might have saved Audry Chudyk and her family such suffering, not been implemented?

Mr. VanderBurg: You know, it was very clear earlier and it's very clear to all Albertans that if there are safety issues, if there are abuse issues, you report it. Everybody here and everybody out there has an opportunity to report it, and it's mandatory. We have an obligation to protect seniors together, not to publicize it in here.

Mr. Chase: Enough of apologies, enough of excuses. Let's have some action. When will the results of the investigation into the case, launched by the AHS's contractor, Covenant Health, be released to the public? The damage is done. When will it be released?

Mr. Horne: Mr. Speaker, the results of that investigation will be delivered to me by Alberta Health Services when they receive them from Covenant Health, and they will be made public.

Mr. Chase: Will the minister of health commit today to implementing the Auditor General's outstanding recommendations so that other residents of long-term care need not suffer such abuse as has gone on for seven long years?

Mr. Horne: Mr. Speaker, the hon. member has made a very serious allegation with his last statement. I'm quite prepared to stand in this House and to listen to accounts of unfortunate, very unfortunate incidents such as the one that has just been mentioned and to join with my colleague in explaining to this House what action we are taking in response to that. What I will not do: I will not gratify erroneous and, quite frankly, dangerous generalizations based on these individual cases and suggest for a moment that this

is rampant in the entire system. That's an insult to the people that deliver the care.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Cypress-Medicine Hat, followed by the hon. Member for Calgary-Mountain View.

Promotion of Alberta Energy Industry

Mr. Mitzel: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The relationship that Alberta has with the United States is an important one, especially when it comes to oil and gas. In fact, overall we have the largest trading relationship of any two countries in the world. With significant economic and employment benefits on both sides of the border we want to ensure that this relationship stays strong. My question is to the Premier. My constituents commented very favourably to me last week regarding your trip to Chicago, but I'd like to ask you directly: who did you meet with in Chicago, and really what was the outcome of these meetings?

Ms Redford: Well, Mr. Speaker, Illinois in the Midwest is a very important market for us. There are five refineries right outside of Chicago, where 70 per cent of the feedstock that's going into those refineries is coming from the oil sands. Illinois is one of our largest trading partners, with over a hundred companies that are delivering products directly to the oil sands, and we had a very good opportunity to meet with the Chicago Council on Global Affairs, with Midwest state legislators, with the council of executive officers to actually talk about how to continue to build and enhance that trade.

2:10

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Mitzel: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Again to the Premier. While I was happy to hear that all the meetings went so well, there are other issues out there, and I hear about these and see these in the want ads in all of our papers. I believe there is much higher unemployment in many parts of the United States. Were you able to get any further in resolving some of the labour issues that exist?

Ms Redford: Well, Mr. Speaker, for most people in this Legislature who are actually concerned about our economic development and are as optimistic as we are about it, we need to know that within the next 10 years there will probably be 110,000 positions that we're not going to be able to fill from inside Canada.

We had very productive discussions with the trades union councils to identify opportunities in partnership with the federal government where we could put in place preclearance systems so that skilled workers were being prequalified in the United States and then could deal with the immigration issues coming up here.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Mitzel: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My final question is to the Premier. Because I truly believe that we must maintain and cultivate our relationships with our neighbours to the south, what is the purpose of your visit to Washington next week?

Ms Redford: Mr. Speaker, we had very good news last week when TransCanada PipeLines announced that they were going to proceed with the line from Cushing to Port Arthur. That's going to matter to the U.S. economy, and for us the really good news was that the White House made very favourable comments with respect to that. We believe that one of the reasons for that is that as Canadians and Albertans we've been working together to be very effective advocates for what's going on in the oil sands.

The work that we will do this week in Washington and in New York, attracting investors and speaking to people on both sides of the aisle with respect to why the oil sands matter for the United States and for Canada, I think allows these decisions to happen in a way that Albertans can have confidence in their economic future.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Mountain View, followed by the hon. Member for Calgary-Hays.

Physician Services Agreement

Dr. Swann: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Alberta's 7,000 physicians have for a year now been without a contract that would give them a real voice for patients at the table when key decisions about health care are being made. Instead, the Minister of Health has imposed a one-year increase in compensation and primary care network funding, meant to shut doctors up before the election. To the minister: do you really believe this desperate pre-election attempt to silence physicians will work, and what are you afraid of?

Mr. Horne: Well, Mr. Speaker, we are not afraid of anything. This government wants a long-term agreement with our physicians. We believe it is in the best interests of the public health care system to have a long-term agreement with our physicians, and in fact negotiations are continuing.

Dr. Swann: Quite so, Mr. Speaker. In rejecting binding arbitration and subverting the negotiating process, this minister thinks he's going to build trust with health workers. Is that what you're saying?

Mr. Horne: Mr. Speaker, this government isn't subverting anything. I spoke to the president of the Alberta Medical Association as recently as yesterday. We have plans to meet later this week. The letter in question that the hon. member refers to was a letter I sent to the physicians of Alberta. This government said that we wanted stability and predictability in our health care system. That means addressing in the short term, prior to negotiating our long-term agreement, the resource requirements to keep our health system running smoothly. That started with a \$12 increase for our primary care networks, which have not received an increase since 2003.

Dr. Swann: Mr. Speaker, how can this minister seriously believe that unilateral action is going to improve trust and patient care in this province?

Mr. Horne: Mr. Speaker, we don't. That's why we are continuing negotiations with the Alberta Medical Association. If this hon. member wants to stand up and tell me and this House that \$93 million in additional financial resources to support Albertans' physicians is a bad idea, I leave him to it.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Hays, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

Promotion of Alberta Oil Sands

Mr. Johnston: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Albertans recognize that our prosperity and ability to develop our energy resources depend in part on decisions made in other jurisdictions. The infrastructure necessary to get our energy to market can only be built with the

co-operation of others. All my questions are to the Premier. What are you doing to make sure that people have the facts on the oil sands?

Ms Redford: Mr. Speaker, we know that throughout North America there is infrastructure in place that is allowing our economies to thrive, whether it's in the United States or whether it's in Canada. We know that the regulatory decisions that are being made on both the west coast and also the United States need to be part of an informed public discussion. So we're talking about who we are as Albertans, how proud we are, what our environmental record has been, that we are proud environmental stewards, that we're continuing to build sustainable technologies, and that we're making investments with respect to joint partnerships with industry. Of course, we saw some very good news last week with industry coming together to say that they will share intellectual property with respect to this. This is the story that we need to tell in the United States. It's resonating, and that's why we're getting a good response from the White House.

The Speaker: The hon. member, please.

Mr. Johnston: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. To the Premier: how do you intend to get the support of other jurisdictions in Canada?

Ms Redford: Well, Mr. Speaker, it was very interesting last week, of course, to see some of the comments that were made with respect to the oil sands. I was very pleased that within a couple of days there was an informed national conversation going on with respect to what the energy economy means to the rest of Canada. As we know – and we did talk about the fact – we're looking at a tremendous tens of millions of dollars going into at least Ontario with respect to economic development in the oil sands. When we do that, those billions of dollars are what's going to allow Canadians to emotionally connect and to ensure that we're all proud of what we're doing here.

Mr. Johnston: A final question to the Premier: will these efforts support the necessary pipelines being built?

Ms Redford: I believe they will, Mr. Speaker, because what we've seen now in the discussion with respect to pipelines, after much of the fanfare at the very beginning of these hearings, is that people who are getting jobs building and refining off these pipelines understand the importance to their communities of what these resources mean. It is important to connect the dots in a way, whether we're in the United States, British Columbia, or eastern Canada, that people are understanding that it all matters for a strong energy economy. We're having success, and I think that's good for Alberta.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre, followed by the hon. Member for Calgary-Shaw.

Residential Construction Standards

Ms Blakeman: Thanks very much, Mr. Speaker. Last week I raised concerns that the glacial pace on improving construction and inspection was not protecting the homeowner or condominium owner. The Minister of Municipal Affairs responded by suggesting that last May's wildfire disaster in Slave Lake precluded the government from bringing in new homeowner protection measures as promised. Now, it has been the practice of Municipal Affairs for some time now to contract out the administration of disaster recovery programs to LandLink

Consulting Ltd. My question is to the Minister of Municipal Affairs. What's the real reason behind the snail-like progress on helping Albertans to be protected?

Mr. Griffiths: Mr. Speaker, I was at our meeting of Municipal Affairs with all of our department staff. There was endless discussion about all the hard work that went into helping Slave Lake deal with what turned out to be the worst disaster in the province's history. I think every single person in Municipal Affairs who spent all their time and energy working to help the people of Slave Lake and region work on rebuilding would be very offended by the insinuation that they did nothing.

Ms Blakeman: All of your staff worked on that?

Back to the same minister. There are now too many examples of Albertans being assessed huge amounts in order to make their condo or house livable and safe to list in 35 seconds. I'd like to know why the minister won't implement an interest-free loan fund for folks that are faced with massive special assessments for substantial repair costs related to shoddy construction.

Mr. Griffiths: Mr. Speaker, that may be something we can consider down the road. It would be inappropriate to discuss that before we finish passing the budget because we can't really start to spend more money at least until we pass the budget.

In the meantime, as I've said before, we're working with homeowners in this province on a home warranty program, on extending the term limits for fines and limitations so that we can make sure that we protect home builders. They still have avenues through the courts to make sure that they can deal with those people, those construction practices that have left them with inappropriate housing.

Ms Blakeman: Well, let me follow up on that with the same minister. Given that the government has had policy recommendations in its possession since April of 2008 and the former Minister of Municipal Affairs first began revealing details of this forthcoming legislation as early as the fall of 2010, three different sittings ago, what exactly is the minister's excuse? What is the actual problem here that this ministry cannot move on this?

Mr. Griffiths: Well, Mr. Speaker, I get to answer the question again. As I've said before, we have very limited staff in Municipal Affairs, who were distracted a bit by a crisis situation in Slave Lake and region with the fire.

In the meantime, Mr. Speaker, we have done extensive consultations, past ministers have as well, with contractors, with builders, with homeowners, and with banks to make sure that we get the system right because it's not just about enforcing a new homeowner warranty, that could drive up the costs and drive out new home purchasers. We make sure on this side of the House that we do appropriate consultation with all stakeholders to get it right the first time.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Shaw, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona.

2:20 Canadian Oil Sands Innovation Alliance

Mrs. Ady: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I was really pleased this last week to see 12 companies announce a partnership to bring the Canadian Oil Sands Innovation Alliance to life. The goal is to break down barriers and to share environmental research and ultimately produce innovations in oil sands cleanup. Some critics may find this collective commitment to be more rhetoric from

industry. Can the Minister of Environment and Water tell us how this alliance adds to the work the government is already doing?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mrs. McQueen: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker, and thank you to the member for the question. This is actually excellent news. Whenever we can have many companies, in this case 12 CEOs, sign an agreement to work together and to pool their expertise and their resources to generate innovative solutions, particularly with the challenges around the oil sands, this is excellent news. It encourages integration of resources and building technologies so that we'll find solutions quicker as they work together and share those. We're very excited about this. We encourage more of these kinds of opportunities to happen in this province.

Mrs. Ady: Mr. Speaker, my first supplemental is to the same minister. It's great to see industry work together. Do you think that this is going to move into other sectors of the oil and gas industry? Are we going to see that kind of co-operation in others?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mrs. McQueen: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Certainly, we encourage it not just in the oil and gas industry but in all industries when it pertains to environmental protection. We encourage all of this kind of collaboration to happen. We think that this is the first step. Industry in the oil sands is taking a big step to come together, and we encourage that practice in other industries across the province.

Mrs. Ady: Lastly, to the same minister: how do you plan on working with this group? They're a private industry group. Are you as government going to be able to work with them with the stuff you're doing?

Mrs. McQueen: Well, what we're very happy about is that the initial focus they're looking at is on our own issues that are important to us in Alberta Environment and Water, and that is dealing with the four main areas of tailings, water, land, and greenhouse gases. So we plan to continue to work with them so that they will find solutions that will meet the challenges we are facing in Alberta to reduce environmental issues.

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

Grimshaw Holy Family School

Ms Notley: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. An independent report to government on Holy Family school in Grimshaw uncovers a laundry list of problems that no family would accept in their own homes let alone in a place they send their children to. To the Minister of Education. This report shows there is both merit and urgency to the community's request. So if the reason for ignoring the school's unsafe condition isn't related to their video and isn't related to their, quote, upsetting comments, what else could it possibly be?

Mr. Lukaszuk: Mr. Speaker, a lot of things can be learned from that situation. As I've said on a number of occasions, I'm looking forward to working with that particular board. I myself have seen that school, and I agree that you don't need an engineer to tell you that this building needs to be replaced. But other things need to be learned. The oldest part of the school is 50 years old; the newest is about 20 years old. The whole building has to be bulldozed down. I also need to find out why. I think that not only this government

but other school boards can learn to make sure that this doesn't happen again in any other jurisdiction.

Ms Notley: Well, Mr. Speaker, this school has been talking to this ministry for 10 years.

Now, given that the report lists no fire sprinklers, deficient gas shut-off, inadequate heating, accumulated water under the floor, blocked sewers, and unsafe electrical systems and given that this description apparently represents the status quo that requires no attention within the next three years, will the minister apologize to Albertans for his government's long-standing failure to provide safe buildings within which our children can learn?

Mr. Lukaszuk: Mr. Speaker, the member is correct. All the disrepair that she listed actually does exist. I've seen it for myself. All of that is happening while the school board has in excess of \$7 million in their savings account. I will be working with that school board. We will probably be using this school as a model to make sure that infrastructure that is paid for by the taxpayers of Alberta is properly maintained in the future so that all children in the province of Alberta have buildings that are adequate for learning. This one is not.

Ms Notley: Well, Mr. Speaker, given that the Member for Dunvegan-Central Peace wrote local officials advising caution and diplomacy to so-called upset individuals to avoid delay of a new school and given that Infrastructure staff recommended the replacement of the school to their political masters only to be inexplicably ignored, why won't the minister admit that this government's decision-making is discretionary, arbitrary, political, and fails Alberta's families every day?

Mr. Lukaszuk: Mr. Speaker, the only things political at this point are the comments by the hon. member. I pride myself on having a good relationship with school boards. They know how to contact me. They're always welcome in my office, and I will be visiting them as often as I possibly can. At the end of the day we have pressures for new schools throughout the entire province, and that school will be considered like all the other school boards are being considered. Plenty to be learned. Plenty to be done.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Buffalo, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Beverly-Clareview.

Funding for Private Schools

Mr. Hehr: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The Minister of Education has stated that he always encourages every school to try to put the other one out of business, so I just want to ask: does the minister honestly believe that pitting schools one against another by encouraging schools to drive each other out of business is the best way forward for schools in this province?

Mr. Lukaszuk: I would like to commend this member for reading Twitter because that's where he actually got it from. If he's forming his policy on 144 characters, then that's not a good thing to do.

Mr. Speaker, I have always said that having good, healthy, child-focused, curriculum-focused competition is what makes Alberta the NHL of education systems in the world. Parents have choice, and they choose where they want to send their children. That is healthy competition. Competition does not pitting make.

Mr. Hehr: Well, I got the quote from the *Calgary Herald*. Nevertheless, it was on Twitter. I should have been reading there.

Is the minister by his statement actually saying that he wants more kids going to private schools and more kids going to charter schools than to our own public school system?

Mr. Lukaszuk: Mr. Speaker, I want kids going to schools that the parents approve. I want kids going to schools where they are getting world-class education, as they are. I want parents to have choice. Parents right now have the choice of home-schooling, private schooling, public schooling, Catholic schooling, charter schooling. The list goes on and on. That is what makes Alberta education strong, where parents get to make the choice that is right for their family and for their values.

Mr. Hehr: Well, Mr. Speaker, how can the minister justify this apparent embracing of an American-style education system by funding private schools, trying to pit schools one against another? Has he not reviewed any of the information on how this actually destroys the public education system and doesn't assist it?

Mr. Lukaszuk: Mr. Speaker, here they go again with the comfortable slogans that they've been using for other portfolios. As a matter of fact, there is a good reason why Alberta education is considered one of the top four jurisdictions in the world. One is that we have excellent teachers doing some fabulous work in the classroom. We have supportive communities and Albertans who support education. We have a government that makes Alberta education its priority, and we have choice that parents get to exercise. If the Liberals don't like it, that's too bad.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Beverly-Clareview, followed by the hon. Member for Airdrie-Chestermere.

Mental Health and Addictions Services

Mr. Vandermeer: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. This morning the minister of health announced news of an investment into the Alberta Hospital Edmonton site, yet in the same announcement the health minister referred to the importance of Albertans with addictions and mental health issues getting the help they need in the community. Building a psychiatric hospital in a fairly remote part of Edmonton seems contrary to providing mental health services and programs in the community. Can the health minister explain why we continue to invest in this old, institutional way of treating mental illness?

Mr. Horne: Mr. Speaker, the answer is: because we need it. We need to consider both services in hospital and in the community. As members of this House will know, for a number of years now there have been questions about the future of Alberta Hospital Edmonton. This morning's announcement, which will result in the creation of 60 new in-patient beds in that hospital, will provide some much-needed services that will not only address specialized in-patient care but will support transition for patients when they leave hospital to go back to the community.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Vandermeer: Thank you. My next question is to the same minister, who also announced this morning increases to psychology and counselling services through primary health care. I have had constituents tell me that it takes weeks or even months to get access to a psychologist through their doctor's office because there are not enough of them and those that are available privately cost at least \$150 an hour, which many of my constituents can't . . .

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

2:30

Mr. Horne: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Well, it is true that psychology services are not currently covered under the Alberta health care insurance plan, but as the hon. member points out, the demand for psychology and counselling services is increasing, has been increasing for a number of years. We feel there's an opportunity to offer psychology services along with other counselling through our primary care networks, through other primary care delivery models, thereby getting to people sooner and avoiding some of the very unfortunate circumstances we hear about when problems are not addressed.

Mr. Vandermeer: To the same minister. The announcement also talks about focusing programs on children and youth, yet nothing was mentioned about the PCHAD Amendment Act, a key piece of legislation that can help the children who are most vulnerable. My question to the hon. minister is: why haven't you proclaimed the PCHAD Amendment Act?

Mr. Horne: Well, Mr. Speaker, I am in discussions now with the Minister of Human Services about that precise issue. This morning's announcement did provide an additional \$8 million to support the mental health capacity building initiative, which is a tremendous project that encompasses many schools across the province, providing much-needed wraparound addiction and mental health services to children and youth. The Minister of Human Services and I will continue to work toward proclamation of the PCHAD legislation as quickly as possible.

School Board Funding

Mr. Anderson: Mr. Speaker, in a letter written to a school board advocating publicly for a school in desperate need of repair, the Member for Dunvegan-Central Peace said, "In order for your community to have the opportunity to receive a new school, you and your school board will have to be very diplomatic from here on out." It goes on: "Your comments could be upsetting to some individuals. This could delay the decision on a new school." What shameful behaviour from an elected member of this government. To the Minister of Education: what are you and this Premier doing to hold this member accountable for such blatant thuggery?

Mr. Lukaszuk: Mr. Speaker, I think the Premier has spoken eloquently on this topic. I have made my comments as well. The member has done the honourable thing and has removed himself from a committee. This member has a record of serving Albertans with a great deal of dignity for many, many years. As a matter of fact, this unfortunate letter will not affect the relationship between this minister or this Premier or this government or the school board in any way.

Mr. Anderson: So no accountability whatsoever.

Minister, will you commit – commit right now – to immediately publish a list of all school board funding requests for new schools and school maintenance, from highest priority to lowest priority, right across the province as well as the set of objective criteria used to arrive at that priority so that communities and parents across Alberta can feel safe that you and your government will not politically extort or punish their children for their parents committing the cardinal sin of speaking out against the PC government? Will you do that, sir? Publish the list.

Mr. Lukaszuk: Mr. Speaker, as a matter of fact, I would advise this particular member to start adhering to the code of conduct that the member to whom he was referring has been adhering up to now.

Mr. Speaker, yes, as a matter of fact, we will be releasing a list of priorities for schools, and the members will see objectivity. But also, then, this member has to promise us that he will no longer be holding rallies at the front stairs of the Legislature, convincing the government that schools in his riding are the most important.

Mr. Anderson: Minister, we all know school boards all request funding for their top priorities. I'm talking about how you choose which boards to fund and for how much.

The final question: are you telling me that your government spends hundreds of millions every year on new schools and maintenance but has no objective priority list for deciding which school board gets how much? If you do have such a list, why won't you make that secret list public? Is it because you enjoy being able to hand out money to reward supporters and punish those who speak out? Publish the secret list, Minister, and stop the culture of corruption.

Mr. Lukaszuk: Mr. Speaker, yet another secret list. If it's so secret, how does he know about it?

I'll tell you one thing. There is no secret list. Schools are prioritized every year based on the capital plans of each school board. That's how decisions are made. Frankly, we will have to probably build approximately 40 schools per year for the next 10 years to catch up to the infrastructure pressure that we have. But if this member is questioning the objectivity, I would again ask this member, then, to stop holding rallies at the front stairs of the Legislature to pressure this government to build schools in his riding as opposed to in other ridings if he wants a decision . . .

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Cross, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview.

Safe Communities Resource Centre

Mrs. Fritz: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. A significant step was taken recently in reducing and preventing crime when a new Safe Communities Resource Centre was announced in Calgary, and that was to provide services to individuals that are indentified by their probation officers as being at high risk to offend. My first question is to the Minister of Justice and Attorney General. How will this community resource centre's programs differ from those that you're already offering to high-risk offenders?

Mr. Olson: Mr. Speaker, thank you to the member for the question. One of the things that we've found is that we have many services available, but they're not always as easily accessible as perhaps they might be, particularly when we have repeat offenders who seem to be on a cycle in and out of the court system. We see this as an opportunity to innovate and to provide services in one place where we can be especially effective in breaking that cycle.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mrs. Fritz: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. To the same minister: will you consider expanding this program to all offenders who are a risk to public safety?

Mr. Olson: Well, Mr. Speaker, the people who are the focus of the initiative, that was just announced about a week ago in Calgary, are people who are on probation, so they're under court

supervision. That makes it possible for there to be some direction as to what programs they should become involved in, so this is an opportunity for them to have addiction counselling, mental health counselling, housing assistance, any number of other types of supports in one spot. We would like to expand that to many other areas of the province. This is a pilot project that will run for three years, and we hope to be able to expand it.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mrs. Fritz: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. My second supplemental is for the Minister of Health and Wellness. Given that your ministry's programs will be aligned with Justice services – and the minister has mentioned some of the health programs that will be available – would you please let us know what else you'll be offering by way of community services?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Horne: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. We are participating in this in a collaborative way, as the minister had discussed in his previous answer. We are primarily concerned with addictions and mental health services, and we see the ability to provide those on-site in conjunction with probation as a tremendous support to the overall intended impact of this program.

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

Administration of Elections

Dr. Taft: Thanks, Mr. Speaker. My questions are to the Justice minister. The federal robocall scandal gives an urgent warning to this government about the upcoming election here in Alberta. After all, Alberta's election determines control of the largest energy reserves in the western world. When the stakes are so high, some people are bound to fight dirty. They could be anyone from anywhere, and it seems they can disappear without a trace. To the minister: will this government undertake an urgent review of the Election Act before the next election and bring forward amendments that reduce the risks of robocall-style election abuses?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Olson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and thanks to the member for the question. I suppose it's not surprising that this might come up in question period just because of the headlines, but we don't make policy based on headlines. We are always interested in updating the Election Act. As a matter of fact, there are periodic reviews.

But in answer to the member's question, no, there is no plan to make any urgent amendments.

Mr. Chase: Lorne Gibson, 198 recommendations, all ignored.

The Speaker: Hon. Member for Calgary-Varsity, did you want to raise the question? I sure recognized Edmonton-Riverview.

Dr. Taft: I appreciate that. Thank you.

Given that the courts have made it clear through a series of rulings that governments have an active obligation to ensure that the administration of elections is effective and fair, will this government consult with Alberta's Chief Electoral Officer to make sure he has enough funding and staff to handle the risk of a whole new type of election fraud?

Mr. Olson: Well, Mr. Speaker, speculation and allegations on the federal scene about voter fraud do not translate to the same thing in Alberta. We are always aware that there may be risks, but that's why we have a Chief Electoral Officer, who is an independent officer of the Legislature, who oversees and manages this. I have every confidence that the Chief Electoral Officer can run a very good and fair election.

2:40

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Dr. Taft: Well, thanks, Mr. Speaker. Given the severity of this problem and the fact that it threatens the very base of democracy, the Official Opposition, at least, is prepared to fully co-operate with a review of the Election Act. Will this government do anything to prevent a replay of the federal robocall scandal here in Alberta? We should act now.

Mr. Olson: Mr. Speaker, after the last election there were a number of suggestions, recommendations made by the Chief Electoral Officer. This Assembly considered them very carefully. We actually adopted a number of the recommendations. They were made as amendments to the act. The Chief Electoral Officer will provide a report with recommendations after the next election, and we will certainly consider them. We had a very extensive debate before Christmas about amendments to the Election Act. Members opposite had every opportunity to raise this type of an issue, and I don't remember it being mentioned at all.

The Speaker: Hon. members, we have a request from the Minister of Finance to supplement a response to a question that arose on Thursday, February 23.

Land Conservation Trusts

Mr. Liepert: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. On Thursday, February 23, the Member for Edmonton-Centre as part of her question asked why conservation land trusts in this province are being denied casino licences, and I'd like to provide a brief response.

The Alberta Gaming and Liquor Commission has had three requests from land conservation trusts. One received a casino licence in 2012 and is slated for another later this year. Another application from a land trust from southern Alberta is currently pending, waiting for some follow-up information. The third application: the Edmonton and Area Land Trust applied two years ago and was denied a casino licence because of how the organization is structured. This group never appealed, and the file has been closed.*

The Speaker: Hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre, you have the right to a supplemental question.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. My understanding is that part of the problem might have been that they are structured as a part 9 company, and we are hearing rumours that the AGLC will no longer allow any kind of licensing to a not-for-profit organization that's registered as a part 9 company. Can you tell me if that's, in fact, true?

Mr. Liepert: Mr. Speaker, I don't have that information. I'll endeavour to get it.

The Speaker: Hon. members, 17 members were recognized today for 102 questions and responses plus the three supplementary ones as well.

We are going to continue with the Routine, and we're going to return to Introduction of Guests.

Introduction of Guests

(continued)

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

Mr. Prins: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It's really an honour for me to introduce to you and through you to all members a great friend, and I have another introduction after that. My friend is Reverend Paul Kortenhoven from Grand Rapids, Michigan. He was a missionary in Sierra Leone from 1980 to 2002. I first met him in 1984 in Sierra Leone and have worked with him many times. He continues to work in Sierra Leone and consult in the peace and reconciliation process subsequent to a 10-year civil war.

Paul was also involved in the creation of the Kimberly protocol, which is the international agreement on marketing diamonds, especially those originating in Africa. Mr. Speaker, if you have ever watched the movie *Blood Diamond*, at the end of the movie there's a picture in Brussels, I think, or in Antwerp about the protocol for marketing diamonds. Paul was one of the members of the group that put together the international protocol. He's lecturing on west African history tonight and tomorrow night as well at The King's University College. I would like to ask him to stand and receive the warm welcome of this Assembly.

Some other guests that I have are Peter and Andree Verhoog and their children Ginelle, Micheline, Janice, and Suzanne. They're home-schoolers from Ponoka. They're interested in Bill 2, and they're with us as well today. If they're still in the galleries, I would ask them to rise and receive the warm welcome.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Creek.

Mr. Zwozdesky: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure to also introduce some special guests who were here for the education rally this afternoon and who also are home-schoolers and tremendous supporters there, too. Unfortunately, they had to leave a short while ago, but for the record I'd like to note that Kathrine Baer, Tylor Baer, Kristina Baer, Landon Baer, and Austin Baer were all here in support of home-schooling. Thank you very much for your attendance.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Fish Creek.

Mrs. Forsyth: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure today to introduce to you and through you the Wildrose candidate for Sherwood Park, Garnett Genius. Garnett is executive director of Responsible Electricity Transmission for Albertans and an associate fellow at the Canadian Centre for Policy Studies. Garnett has told me that he's knocked on every single open-access door in the riding, and we're very proud to have him on our team.

Secondly, I would like to introduce Alison Landreville. Alison is a registered nurse here in Edmonton, working in medication safety and quality. She received both her bachelor's and master's degrees in nursing here at the University of Alberta. She's a mother of two children.

We're very happy to have them both here today. I'll ask them to rise and receive the warm welcome from the Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Intergovernmental, International and Aboriginal Relations.

Mr. Dallas: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Today it is my great pleasure to introduce to you and through you some members of a family

*See page 266, left column, paragraph 8

from my constituency. Paul van den Bosch and his four children have joined us today from Red Deer for question period and to visit the Legislature Building. Paul and his children with him today in the gallery – Joseph, John, Frances, and Bernadette – are part of our province’s home-schooling community. As a government we support home education and would like to commend Mr. van den Bosch and his family for their dedication and excellent work in educating their children as bright and talented citizens of our province. I would like to thank the van den Bosches for joining us today in Alberta’s capital city to learn more about our democratic customs and political traditions. The guests are seated in the members’ gallery. I’d like to ask them now to please rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of the Assembly.

Ms Calahasen: Mr. Speaker, I have the great honour of introducing to you and through you some of my constituents, who were at the rally this afternoon. They are I believe seated in the public gallery. That’s Patricia Bergen and her family as well as 28 other family members who are here today. I know they’re very strong home-schoolers, and they produce the greatest and brightest children. I’d ask that they stand, if they are still here, to receive the warm welcome of this Assembly.

Members’ Statements

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Little Bow.

A Life in Politics

Mr. McFarland: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I appreciate the recognition you gave me today. Rarely do elected members of this Assembly have the opportunity on their anniversary to recognize and to thank people who help and support us in all the work we do. We are, indeed, fortunate to have dedicated people around us in our ridings and at home, and I want to thank all the Little Bow constituents who’ve supported me for 20 years.

I’m proud to have had some great friends throughout this building in all walks of life. I only wish there was time to mention all of them. Earlier I introduced one of our constituency managers, Lois McLeod, who along with Julie Annable has provided courteous, confidential, and capable assistance to our Little Bow constituents.

I’ve had a terrific amount of help in the past number of years, Mr. Speaker, from Dianne Wills, Tracy Kully, Brendalee Gardner, Phyllis Hennig, Peter Pilarski, Robyn Kowalski, and Ryan Osterberg.

Thirty-five years ago, in 1977, I was elected for the first time to the county of Vulcan council. I don’t think my wife ever thought that 15 years later I’d be elected in a by-election to this Assembly. While I was here in Edmonton, Mary was making sure that our kids were getting a proper upbringing, commuting nearly a hundred miles each day to her psych nursing job as well as keeping our farm and our home operating.

Life for those in politics is no different when it comes to family sadness. During my time here my mother, Mary’s mom and dad, and seven out of eight of my aunts and uncles have passed away, many times while I was right here.

I’m proud of my family. Not too many have a kid who could have won a gold medal in a Dominion hurdle championship at the age of 15 or have a son who can take a mangled piece of autobody work and turn it into a brand new, shiny-looking product. Our second son operates that business. Our daughter danced for 14 years in ballet, pointe, lyrical, and hip hop and worked while earning her degree in human resources. Our youngest son, one of the youngest black belts out of Lethbridge, is helping troubled youth and is going to work in July on his master’s in clinical psychology.

Thank you, Mary. Thank you to all our family. Your grandparents would have been very proud. [Standing ovation]

2:50

Saving for the Future

Mr. Hehr: There once was a farmer named Jim. He had sections of land. Jim got married and started a family. He was extremely generous. They had the best of everything. Jim and his wife thought the good times would never end.

Although Jim had a great deal of land, he never brought in enough revenues to pay the bills. At the end of the year when Jim was getting his finances together, he was always short. So every year he would sell an acre or two, and that would seem to balance things off. Jim’s children: they liked living on the farm so much that they never left. Because he loved his children, he did not ask them to contribute to the bills.

Jim had to keep selling off land to keep everyone happy. Then one year when he looked at the family finances, it finally became clear that he didn’t have any more land to sell off. That farm was a memory. Nothing was left. By not asking the children to contribute and by living high on the hog, Jim was broke. This is not unlike the parable of Alberta.

One of the themes that we have seen emerge over and over again is that we need to manage our province’s great wealth. This is about the long-term future of our province and whether after it’s all said and done – when the oil has been pumped, when the gas is gone, and the bitumen has been dug up – we will have anything to show for it. For 25 years this province has spent all of its \$225 billion that it has brought in in resource revenues. We pay our daily bills by spending the revenue, which is akin to Jim selling off pieces of the family farm.

If we’re ever going to have anything left when it’s all said and done, we need to save. In order to do that, we’re going to need to ask citizens to pay for the things they use. They know public education and good roads cost money. They also know that once you sell a barrel of oil, you never have that barrel to sell again.

It’s time to look at our tax code and to develop a fair model, a model that recognizes that it should not be our God-given right to blow every last dime of petroleum resources to pay today’s bills. It’s not fair. It’s not fair to future generations; neither is it in the best long-term interests of this province.

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

National Film Board of Canada World Premiere

Mrs. Sarich: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. On March 4, 2012, it was my honour and privilege to attend the Global Visions Film Festival in Edmonton. This film festival, in its 30th year, is Canada’s longest running documentary film festival. It is dedicated to presenting socially relevant films from around the world, exploring issues of social, economic, and environmental development.

Mr. Speaker, this year’s festival featured the National Film Board of Canada’s world premiere of the film *The Basketball Game*. This film is produced by the National Film Board of Canada and features the directorial debut of our very own Alberta-born and -raised Hart Snider, an award-winning filmmaker.

This film is significant, Mr. Speaker, because it is based on the recollections of a nine-year-old boy coming to grips with hate and discrimination in Alberta. This issue is relevant within societies around the world. The film shows how children understand and can be impacted by hate and discrimination.

More importantly, Mr. Speaker, the film sends a profound message that when children are provided with an opportunity to resolve issues amongst themselves, in this case through a sports game, the real issues are better understood and potentially resolved by the children themselves. The film is also significant because it was done using animation, which is always timely, especially for attracting younger people to the story messages.

Mr. Speaker, congratulations to the National Film Board of Canada for their insightful decision to produce this short film. Also, congratulations and special thanks to Hart Snider, an Albertan filmmaker who profiled a deeply human reality message when he informed audiences on how hate and discrimination impact children and how children must be involved to help resolve these problems before they become their adult problems. The film is innovative, thought-provoking, and its filmmaker, Hart Snider, is definitely a living example of the Alberta spirit.

Thank you to all involved in the film *The Basketball Game* for adding immeasurably to our society as a whole.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Strathcona.

Alberta Business Awards of Distinction

Mr. Quest: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's a pleasure to rise today to speak about an exciting event held on March 2 at the River Cree Resort and Casino. Hosted by the Alberta Chambers of Commerce, this year's Alberta business awards of distinction was the 21st annual awards gala celebrating the best in Alberta business. Awards were presented to a number of Alberta companies and organizations chosen for exemplifying excellence in their respective industries.

The hon. Minister of Intergovernmental, International and Aboriginal Relations presented the aboriginal woman entrepreneur award, which recognizes aboriginal businesswomen as positive role models. This year's winner was Isabell Ringenoldus of TAWS Security Ltd., a company based in Fort McMurray.

The hon. Minister of Human Services presented the employer of persons with disabilities award to Long View Systems, an information technology company with offices in Calgary and Edmonton. This award recognizes leading-edge practices in the hiring, training, and career development of employees with disabilities. The hon. Minister of Human Services also presented the employer of youth award and the very prestigious Premier's award of distinction to Alberta Blue Cross Benefits Corporation.

Mr. Speaker, this government is proud to support the Alberta Chambers of Commerce in recognizing excellence in the province's business community, and we look forward to continuing this valuable partnership for years to come. I would like to congratulate all of this year's winners and nominees for their tremendous accomplishments and important contributions to our province's diverse economy and, on behalf of this government, thank them for the outstanding work that they're doing.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

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

Donation to Olds College by Jack Anderson

Mr. Marz: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise today to recognize a remarkable act of kindness and generosity, one that will benefit future generations of Albertans. Mr. J.C. (Jack) Anderson, a Calgary businessman and rancher, is donating the proceeds from the sale of a hundred vintage cars and trucks to Olds College in my riding to mark their centennial in 2013. The auction of Mr. Anderson's prized

collection, which ranges from a 1984 Rolls-Royce to a 1968 Corvair, is expected to raise more than \$2.5 million.

This is not the first time Mr. Anderson has made a generous gift to the college. In 2007 he gave the school \$1 million. This latest donation, the largest in Olds College's illustrious history, has more than monetary benefit. The auction of Mr. Anderson's collection will shine a bright spotlight on the college as it celebrates a hundred years of education excellence in the fields of agriculture, animal sciences, business, and technology.

Mr. Speaker, as a businessman and supporter of lifelong learning opportunities Mr. Anderson fully appreciates the programming offered by Old College and the quality of its graduates. In addition to employing Olds graduates in his business, at 84 he still attends seminars at the college, proving you're never too old to learn something new. Mr. Anderson shares our government's goal of inspiring Albertans to reach their full potential through advanced education. He is an inspiration to anyone at any age seeking to keep their mind and body engaged by actively pursuing knowledge and experience.

On behalf of this government and the citizens of Alberta, especially those attending Olds College, I would like to thank Mr. Anderson for his historic donation. Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Bonnyville-Cold Lake.

Bonnyville Primary Care Network

Mrs. Leskiw: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It is a pleasure to rise today to speak about the successes of the Bonnyville primary care network, or PCN. Created in 2005, it was the first rural PCN established in Alberta and currently serves a community of approximately 15,000 people. Led by a team of health professionals consisting of 15 family physicians, four registered nurses, and two licensed practical nurses, it provides patients with improved access to the right care from the right health professional at the right time.

The Bonnyville PCN plays such an important role in my constituency, Mr. Speaker, offering several programs, including the chronic disease management program, the well baby program, the well women and teen clinic, and the obstetrics program. The chronic disease management program is the largest program offered by a PCN and helps to treat patients with diabetes, obesity, kidney disease, blood disorders, mental illness, arthritis, and much more. In addition to this treatment, nurses also offer a public education program to help raise awareness about chronic disease, its management, and prevention.

Mr. Speaker, the PCNs play an important role in building a health care system that is sustainable, accessible, and provides quality care for all.

The Bonnyville PCN continues to strive for excellence in rural primary care and is interested in helping Alberta Health Services determine the direction of family care clinics in Alberta. I would like to thank them for the wonderful work that they are doing in my community and for the high bar they have set for PCNs across this great province.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

3:00

The Speaker: Hon. members, Standing Order 7(7) has been arrived at. The hon. Opposition House Leader.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you. Could I ask the co-operation of the House to unanimously waive 7(7) to allow us to complete the Routine of the day?

[Unanimous consent granted]

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Lethbridge-East. We're continuing on with members' statements.

National Social Work Week

Ms Pastoor: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. March 4 to 10 is National Social Work Week. This is a time to acknowledge social work professionals for the exceptional job that they do. This year's theme is Social Work: Celebrating the Person and the Professional.

People in this field work tirelessly for the vulnerable Albertans in our communities. This line of work isn't easy, and their caring, hard work is often behind the scenes and goes unnoticed. What is noticed are the results of their work: happy children, healthy families, and people who are able to make positive changes in their lives and to create stronger communities.

In Lethbridge just recently a young man in his early 20s came by a residential home for youth. He had been a resident there about five years earlier. He wanted to thank the staff for all the hard work they had done with him. He is doing well and has not forgotten the difference made in his life by the social workers and youth workers who came into his life when he needed them the most and when he was so alone.

Like him I would say thank you to the people in this field for their dedication, professionalism, compassion, and for all the hours they put in that are far and above their duties.

I would also recognize the partnership that the Alberta government has with the Alberta College of Social Workers. This partnership creates opportunities for continued professional development, which is important to maintain our skilled workforce and leadership within that social work field.

In addition, there are many social workers with contracted agencies who work to make a difference in the lives of Albertans. Social workers in these agencies work directly with families, providing valuable services such as early intervention services for children, parenting classes, and in-home support. As dedicated professionals they have a critical role in our province. Alberta is a better place because of the selfless work that they do.

Thank you to our social workers.

Introduction of Bills

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Red Deer-North.

Bill 5 Seniors' Property Tax Deferral Act

Mrs. Jablonski: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I request leave to introduce a bill being Bill 5, Seniors' Property Tax Deferral Act.

Mr. Speaker, a seniors' property tax deferral program will help senior homemakers take advantage of their home equity to defer all or part of their property taxes. These freed-up funds can then be used by the homeowner for things like home repairs and modifications, which will help our seniors to remain in their homes longer.

Supporting seniors to remain independent and in their own homes for as long as possible is a priority for our Premier, our seniors' minister, and for me. A seniors' property tax program will help us to meet that priority.

Thank you.

[Motion carried; Bill 5 read a first time]

Mr. Weadick: I would ask that Bill 5, the Seniors' Property Tax Deferral Act, as presented by the Member for Red Deer-North be moved to Government Bills and Orders.

[Motion carried]

Tabling Returns and Reports

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

Ms Blakeman: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I have two today. The first signs himself unhappy voter, but his name is actually Robert Fitzsimmons. In it he makes the point that he feels that the government has "reduced the Natural Resources Royalties that were being charged American companies for the exploitation of the Tar Sands to save them money, and increase their profits – not ours." He also notes: "It means that more than \$100 Billion per year is being exported to the United States due to the [loss] of personal, business, and royalty taxation for the benefit of American companies, and personnel."

The second tabling that I have today is from a constituent, Stephanie Reeves. She's a U of A psychology student. She is quite concerned about how inaccessible psychology services are, especially to low- and middle-income people and families, the irony being that these are the people that most often need it, and she notes that in the United Kingdom and Australia there has been considerable investment over the last couple of years to make these psychological therapies accessible to citizens.

Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

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

Dr. Taft: Thanks, Mr. Speaker. I am tabling the appropriate number of copies of a letter received from a constituent, and I'm tabling with permission the constituent's name, Mr. Hanno Hartmann. He has attached his power bill, which he describes as outrageous. He's deeply upset about the way that the electricity system is being managed in Alberta.

Thank you.

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

Dr. Swann: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'll table the appropriate number of copies of a letter from Dr. Paul Parks, the first sentence of which says:

As a health care provider, and more importantly as a proud Albertan, I am extremely frustrated and angered that the current Premier insists on insulting all Albertans with her disingenuous . . . distracting terms of reference for the public inquiry.

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

Mr. Chase: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I have two sets of tablings. The first consists of e-mails and 15 letters from individuals who are concerned about the proposed logging in the west Bragg Creek area, all of whom believe clear-cutting will damage essential watershed and recreation area that thousands of Albertans use to promote health and fitness and be detrimental to wildlife and natural species. They come from George Cote, Lloyd Bossert, Alvis Doglioni Majer, Wendy Hagel, Paola Romanelli, Tom Nagai, Michael Ward, Dr. Stella George, Maureen Bildfell, Michael F. Milne, Carl and Gail Peter, Tracy Davis, Jennifer Rogers, Darryl Barr, Ian Oxtton, Ulla Allan, Dr. Ina Dobrinski, Mark Verbeek, and Lara Dziurdzy.

My second set of tablings, Mr. Speaker, is a letter and a brochure from Sustain Kananaskis, a group involved in raising awareness of the proposed logging in the west Bragg Creek area. They are asking citizens concerned with the effects of logging on tourism, recreation, watershed, environment, local economies, and fire protection to request a complete and facilitated public consultation before any logging starts this summer.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: Hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona, do you have tablings today? Proceed, please.

Ms Notley: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I have several tablings. First, I'd like to table the appropriate number of copies of letters regarding the Holy Family school in Grimshaw which were written by the MLA for Dunvegan-Central Peace regarding the conduct of school officials in relation to their request for funding.

I'd like to table the appropriate number of copies of a consultant's report on Holy Family school in Grimshaw dated January 2011. This is the executive summary. Again, this report outlines the desperate need for the rebuilding of that school. I referred to this report in my questions earlier today.

As well, I'd like to table the appropriate number of copies of a letter received from Velma Wildman of Lloydminster in which she enclosed her power bill for December 2011 in the amount of \$523.78. She says, "We are now faced with the dilemma of either having a roof over our heads or food on the table but cannot afford both."

3:10

As well, I'd like to table the appropriate number of copies of a letter from Dennis Aquin of Edmonton, who enclosed his January 2012 electricity bill of \$194.47. His remark: "I am a single parent of 2 boys and keep finding it more difficult to afford the basics of living."

I'd like to also table a letter from Mercedes Allen and April Friesen of High River. They enclose a bill of \$367.51, and they note: "Despite having two incomes, a few more [bills] like these, and April and I may lose our trailer."

As well, the appropriate number of copies of a letter and bills from Stanley Nykiel of Calgary. The bills are from January 2011 and 2012, showing that the increase in electricity was \$71.84. He notes that people "in their ivory towers making these increase decisions have no conceptions or care how others must contend to pay such bills."

That's all for now. Thank you.

The Speaker: Nothing more? Hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands-Norwood, do you have some?

Mr. Mason: No thanks, Mr. Speaker. Not today.

The Speaker: Okay.

Tablings to the Clerk

The Clerk: I wish to advise the House that the following documents were deposited with the office of the Clerk. On behalf of the hon. Mr. Hancock, Minister of Human Services, a report dated November 14, 2011, entitled Alberta Veterinary Medical Association Foreign Credential/Qualification Recognition; pursuant to the Veterinary Profession Act the Alberta Veterinary Medical Association 2011 annual report.

On behalf of the hon. Mr. Lukaszuk, Minister of Education, a letter dated March 5, 2012, from Duane Plantinga, executive director, Association of Independent Schools and Colleges in Alberta, to the hon. Mr. Lukaszuk, Minister of Education, expressing concerns regarding the scope of parental rights in the proposed Education Act; memorandum dated March 2, 2012, from the Association of Independent Schools and Colleges in Alberta to its membership providing an additional update on the Education Act; and an academic paper, undated, entitled Towers, Bridges and Basements: the Constitutional and Legal Architecture of Independent Schooling, prepared by Dale Gibson.

Orders of the Day

Public Bills and Orders Other than Government Bills and Orders Second Reading

Bill 201

Alberta Bill of Rights (Property Rights Protection) Amendment Act, 2012

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

Mr. Hinman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's an honour to rise today to present Bill 201, the Alberta Bill of Rights (Property Rights Protection) Amendment Act, 2012.

Property rights have been built into our laws for the past 800 years, since the Magna Carta. The purpose of the Bill of Rights is to guarantee every citizen the right to life, personal liberty, and enjoyment of property without intrusion from anyone or any group, including the government. John Locke said it best when he wrote that all mankind, being all equal and independent, ought not to harm another in his life, his health, liberty, or possessions. Although he wrote these words 300 years ago, around the time of the Glorious Revolution, when the right of property was secured for all Englishmen, his words still ring true today. Locke understood that for a free society to flourish, the security of property is as important as your right to not be put in jail at the whim of the Crown. There is nothing that is more important when we talk about good government than preserving and protecting these rights.

While the right to life and liberty are obviously important, the right to property is the cornerstone of a prosperous society in a fully functioning democracy. Alberta farmers, ranchers, and business owners became world leaders in their different industries based on the age-old understanding that these rights would be protected by the rule of law. As a result, collectively we have been able to build a province that is one of the best places in the world to live. When the Alberta Bill of Rights was passed in 1972, it acknowledged these historic rights to the enjoyment of property and the right to not be deprived of it or any other freedom except by due process of law.

Now, the need for an exception like this for property is as obvious as it is with personal freedom. The government needs to be able to take away the freedom of convicted criminals, for example, and sometimes needs to expropriate property for projects deemed essential for the common good like a public roadway or a water reservoir. However, over the past several years we have seen this government take incremental steps to infringe upon these rights by creating legislation that removes the due process law provision. Put simply, while the criminal is entitled to his day in court, the government can write the laws in such a way that landowners are not.

In the last few years bills like 19, 24, 36, and 50 have become notorious for the controversy that they have sparked with regard to property rights. Each of the opposition parties has echoed the assertions of various property rights experts that these bills represent an unprecedented undermining of the rights of landowners. Every single one of these pieces of legislation sought to take away the checks and balances in our system and give the decision-making authority on the individual's property to cabinet. Further, each took away the opportunity from landowners to challenge these acquisitions, to seek full compensation in a fair and timely manner, now without recourse to the courts.

What this means is that people owning land or running a business on their land cannot be sure that when the next land-use

framework or the next declaration for a power line comes out, their livelihoods won't be ruined without any hope for full compensation and that whether they are in the minister's favour or not might decide their fate. It isn't hard to argue that in respect to property rights Alberta has stepped back three centuries, and landowners are subject to the benevolence of cabinet. It is these types of laws that infringe on the liberty and the freedom of all Albertans and hurt the reputation of our province as being home to a free and democratic society.

[The Deputy Speaker in the chair]

Mr. Speaker, just listen to the pieces of legislation that were passed that directly infringe on the property rights of Albertans. The passing of Bill 19 let the Minister of Infrastructure freeze development on your land indefinitely with no compensation if he thought there might be a project there in the future. I am going to say that again for emphasis. Bill 19 allowed a member of this cabinet to decide that an Albertan can't even build a shed on his land indefinitely without having to go through full compensation for them.

There were many other serious problems that the government finally amended last fall, but it's outrageous that it took two years of mounting political pressure to undo problems that should never have been allowed in the first place. That's what the Bill of Rights is for, so that individuals don't have to always rely on the vigilance of the majority to ensure that no unjust laws are passed. Mr. Speaker, this was just the first piece of legislation that Alberta landowners needed to worry about.

Bill 24 hands ownership of the pore space under their land right over to the Energy minister so that he now has the power to let companies store CO₂ under their land without needing to compensate them or even ask. It is offensive enough that the government is spending almost \$2 billion of taxpayers' money on unproven technology, but it is even worse that they are asking Albertans to allow carbon to be stored under their land without being fairly compensated.

Bill 36 gives the Sustainable Resource Development minister the power to revoke water licences, mineral leases, development permits, et cetera, with no guarantees of adequate compensation. It also gives him the power to tell municipalities that they will have to pass all kinds of bylaws that coincide with his grand plan for their region. This type of centralized decision-making has made it extremely difficult for landowners to invest in their property with any sort of confidence and has played a heavy hand with our municipalities, forcing them to coincide with the provincial government's plan.

Last and perhaps not least, one of the most offensive pieces of legislation that is on the books is Bill 50, which gave cabinet the power to declare a series of enormous power lines critical infrastructure, thereby enabling them to skip the independent needs assessment and begin running these monstrosities over land without even having proven that we need them.

Even after the prairie firestorm told this government to immediately repeal these pieces of legislation, this government continued to stubbornly insist there wasn't a problem. Now, I believe that most of the people who voted for these bills and who stuck with the government line about the ministerial powers being necessary did so because they genuinely trust their government to do the right thing. Maybe they even trust the minister much more than they trust a judge. But you don't write laws that give the government this kind of power just because you like government. Even here in Alberta Premiers are forced out, and even if the same party is in power for 20 or 40 years, it changes from within and not usually for the better.

3:20

Bill 201 adds a clause to the Alberta Bill of Rights to ensure that the government cannot again create legislation that makes an Albertan's right to due process of law void. It ensures that all legislation includes full, fair, and timely compensation for those affected by government legislation and recourse to the courts to determine compensation when someone feels that the government is unfair. Why do we need any courts? If we listen to the Premier and cabinet, they declare that they will put the interest of Albertans first. This is nonsensical. It's ridiculous.

These are straightforward requirements that even the government members have been extolling, especially last year when amending Bill 19. They will also, I believe, help preserve the spirit of the Bill of Rights and its attempt to protect property. The argument that the government will make, in private if not in public, will be that this creates roadblocks to implementing policies and plans or that we cannot afford full compensation for the land and property that we're taking.

Well, here's what Premier Peter Lougheed said about the elements of the Bill of Rights, including property, when he was arguing for it back on May 15, 1972.

It's certainly [not going to be convenient] for government. Every minister and every department, I know, already is concerned with it. But these reasons are the very reasons why I feel so strongly we should propose it. Because in this modern day, and in our society today in Canada, almost every facet of our life seems to be involved with government law or government regulation, so the rights of the individual needs protection from the power of the state. And the basic philosophy that I have, as a Conservative and as a Legislator is to assure that those rights of the individual – those six rights of Bill No. 1 – are protected.

As we look around the world over the last 100 years, it's still true today. The places with the most centralized power are the poorest, have the biggest environmental problems, and have the fewest freedoms for their citizens. By passing this amendment, hopefully we will not need another prairie uprising to stop encroaching bills because they are not going to be passed in the first place.

Mr. Speaker, the purpose of Bill 201 is to entrench the pillars of a free and democratic society that enjoys peace and prosperity. Let's make sure we entrench property rights into the Bill of Rights. Never in Alberta's history has it been more needed than today.

Thank you.

The Deputy Speaker: Any other hon. member? The hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview on the bill.

Dr. Taft: On the bill, yes. Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I believe I have 10 minutes. Is that correct?

The Deputy Speaker: Yes, 10 minutes.

Dr. Taft: Okay. Well, I was interested in the comments from the Member for Calgary-Glenmore, and actually I find this an interesting bill that upon initial reading I am inclined to support. It seems to make sense, but as I think about it, I do have some questions and some issues. I think it's worth starting by reflecting on the Bill of Rights itself, Mr. Speaker, to which this proposed Bill 201 would be an amendment. Bill 201, which we're debating right now, proposes to amend the Bill of Rights, so I think we need to of course look at the initial Bill of Rights.

I might stand to be corrected on this, but I believe the Bill of Rights in Alberta might have been the very, very, very first bill

introduced by this government in probably the fall of 1972. I think that was a visionary step, a bold step, and I must reflect on how visions have gotten smaller and smaller as we watch the nature of flagship bills in subsequent governments.

Anyway, this Bill 201 proposes to add another section to the existing Bill of Rights, and it would amend section 1. I think it's worth reading section 1 of the existing Bill of Rights into the record so that we know what we're amending. It reads as follows, Mr. Speaker:

1 It is hereby recognized and declared that in Alberta there exist without discrimination by reason of race, national origin, colour, religion or sex, the following human rights and fundamental freedoms, namely:

- (a) the right of the individual to liberty, security of the person and enjoyment of property, and the right not to be deprived thereof except by due process of law;
- (b) the right of the individual to equality before the law and the protection of the law;
- (c) freedom of religion;
- (d) freedom of speech;
- (e) freedom of assembly and association;
- (f) freedom of the press.

That is the full extent of section 1.

Now, this Bill 201 would add a significant further paragraph. I'm wondering as I stand here – and I would put this question to the Member for Calgary-Glenmore or one of his colleagues – given that the existing Bill of Rights already makes it clear under 1(a) that “the right of the individual to liberty, security of the person and enjoyment of property, and the right not to be deprived thereof except by due process of law,” then what does this Bill 201 add to that? Perhaps a bit of clarity, Mr. Speaker? Perhaps a little bit more detail?

I suppose that Bill 201, as we're debating it today, would take the phrase “due process of law” which is in the existing Bill of Rights and expand it, and it would describe what that due process might entail. So what I'm interpreting here, Mr. Speaker, to quote Bill 201, is that it would entail “full, fair and timely compensation” and “right of recourse to the courts to determine the compensation payable.”

I suppose that makes some sense, Mr. Speaker. It's taking a fairly general statement in the existing Bill of Rights, and it's making it more specific. As I look at the existing Bill of Rights, I don't believe that that level of detail would be covered anywhere else, so that does make some sense to me. I'm ambivalent about overreaching, as I would say, property rights into things like, say, bills of rights, which can be taken to court or can be used or abused.

I think the obvious example that the Member for Calgary-Glenmore anticipated is that if the public interest requires something to be built – a roadway, a reservoir, whatever it might be – we can't hold the public interest entirely to ransom because one landowner maybe doesn't want to sell their two acres of land. That doesn't make sense. I'm concerned that we don't set up a system where the right to property could be abused.

I also think it opens up other debates which would be very lively in here such as the right to bear arms, which I personally don't regard as a right but other people in this Assembly, I'm speculating, would. So is that a right, or is it a privilege? Is a gun a piece of property? Sure. Therefore, if we entrench property rights, are we entrenching the right to bear arms? That's the kind of Pandora's box that I worry about when we bring forward a piece of legislation like this.

On the other hand, I'm going to tell a brief account of an experience in my constituency and in the constituency of Edmonton-Strathcona with the extraordinary right that universities

had to expropriate land. In this case it's the University of Alberta, which is in my constituency. In the 1960s the University of Alberta effectively expropriated an entire neighbourhood, insisting that they needed the land and all of the buildings on it to expand because they were expanding so quickly, so many families ended up being effectively forced out of their family homes to make way for the university's expansion.

Not three weeks ago I was talking to a man, who is now a senior partner in a major law firm, and his family home was one of those that was expropriated in the 1960s by the University of Alberta. What he told me, with some bitterness in his voice, is that the university, having expropriated their family home because they urgently needed the land, never did anything, and his family home still stands there. His family was pushed out, without wanting to be, on a supposed urgent need that was never fulfilled. Forty years later his family home is still intact and used as some kind of secondary office space for the university.

3:30

There's no question that governments and public bodies can overstep reasonable bounds when it comes to expropriation. My understanding of the compensation offers from the university in the 1960s is that they were well below market value. Some of the people ended up selling their family homes below market value, not realizing that perhaps they could have taken a tougher stand.

This is a complicated issue. I think about municipal controls. What is a reasonable enjoyment by my neighbour of his property? If he wants to build a disco next door, I'm not so keen on him enjoying that. But if he has unfettered property rights, can the municipality stop him? Are we running the risk of zoning laws getting challenged? Is this the kind of thing that could end up in the Supreme Court and cause a huge series of repercussions? I would hope not.

I think we need to go and look at the roots of this bill, which, as the Member for Calgary-Glenmore put it, are essentially bills 36, 19, and 50, the ramming through of transmission lines, and the cause of that problem is pretty clearly the drastically mistaken decision taken some 12 or 14 years ago now to deregulate Alberta's electricity system. One of the effects of deregulation is that transmission capacity has to be vastly overbuilt. It used to be, Mr. Speaker, that the same companies that built the power plants built and owned the transmission and distribution lines, so they would only build sufficient transmission capacity to fit with that.

Mr. Speaker, it sounds like I'm out of time. Thank you.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Minister of Justice and Attorney General.

Mr. Olson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's a privilege to be able to say a few words today about Bill 201, the Alberta Bill of Rights (Property Rights Protection) Amendment Act, 2012. I want to thank the hon. member for bringing this important matter forward for debate, and I appreciate having the opportunity to discuss it here. I also want to acknowledge the comments of the Member for Edmonton-Riverview because he very eloquently said a number of the things that I wanted to say.

I don't think there's any doubt that every member of this House supports the idea that property rights are vital to Albertans. It's one of the most important things that we can think of. That's why we have an Alberta Bill of Rights, and that's why that Alberta Bill of Rights does acknowledge the need to protect property rights.

We live in a complicated, complex world. The Speaker earlier on today mentioned the fact that a number of us were first elected almost exactly four years ago. I was one of those people. When I

reflect back on why I decided to run, one of the things that I heard very often in speaking to people in my constituency and in my former life as a small-town lawyer was their concern about the pressure on Alberta in terms of our rapid growth. We are blessed; we are very lucky to live in a place in the world that has so many natural resources, so many natural assets, but it is a challenge to manage those assets. What I heard over and over again from many clients, many constituents was the need for a plan. We need to manage the growth of the province.

I support the idea of planning, of having a framework, an infrastructure. For that reason I support a lot of the legislative initiatives that have been taken in the time that I've been here. But as I say, it's a complex world, and we need to always be conscious of the need to balance the public interest against private interests. I think that this government has been very deliberate about that. We've done our best to pay attention to the need for planning while at the same time paying attention to the need to protect private interests.

Albertans have been very vocal on this issue, and they have had a lot to say. As you know, Mr. Speaker, our Premier created a Property Rights Task Force to go out and listen to the concerns of Albertans. I was on that task force. Our marching orders were to listen, and I'm quite proud of the work that was done by that task force because we listened and we heard a lot of good things.

It is true, as the hon. member has suggested, that there were a number of people out there who said: scrap these bills. Four bills are mentioned quite often, and one of the problems that I have with scrapping the bills is that it doesn't address the issues that we in Alberta have to deal with in terms of managing and planning our growth. There's a lot of very good material in that legislation.

Mr. Speaker, I'm a rural landowner. I live on land that my grandparents homesteaded a hundred years ago. I'm a mines and minerals owner. So I understand the concerns that are expressed, yet I believe that this government has done a very good job in balancing all of these interests. The Premier has responded to the concerns that have been expressed; it's in a report that has been made public. There is a response to that report. In fact, there is legislation in the form of Bill 6, which addresses many of those concerns.

Even though I appreciate the intent of this legislation, the hon. member's bill, I believe that Bill 6 – and I know we're not debating Bill 6 here today; we're debating Bill 201 – does what the hon. member wants to see done and even goes further. It underscores the importance of the Expropriation Act, and the Expropriation Act remains in play. It underscores the right that a person has to have an independent tribunal, a court, adjudicate on their concerns.

In fact, it even goes further and creates a property rights advocate. That advocate will actually be a part of what my department is responsible for moving forward. I very much look forward to the development of this office, and I think this is going to be a great asset. Much in the way that the Farmers' Advocate for many years has been a great asset for farmers, this property rights advocate will be somebody who can listen to concerns of Albertans, report to the Legislature, and make recommendations and suggestions and explain. One of the things that we heard on the tour of the Property Rights Task Force was that people found laws confusing and that they needed somebody to help cut through some of the complexity. That's going to be, I think, one of the great benefits of the property rights advocate.

Once again, I applaud the hon. member for his intention to emphasize the importance of property rights to Albertans, but with great respect I believe we have a Bill of Rights in place that

already does that, and we have a Bill 6 that is going to go even beyond what the hon. member is proposing.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Fish Creek on the bill.

Mrs. Forsyth: Yes. Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased to support my caucus colleague's bill, the property rights protection amendment to the Alberta Bill of Rights. The Member for Calgary-Glenmore has worked long and hard for the rights of Albertans. As a farmer and a rancher he knows full well about the importance of property rights. I'm proud, quite frankly, to be a landowner in Alberta, and I'm concerned about the government's record in the last few years in regard to property rights.

3:40

I support this bill, Mr. Speaker, because it is doing what should have been done a long time ago, and that is very simple. It's protecting people's rights to the courts when their land is at risk. The basics of this bill are very simple. If the government passes a law that enables it to take your land or other property, you must get full, fair, and timely compensation for it. If you're not happy with the decision, you have the right to go to the court system. To the average Albertan – and this is the average Albertan – this makes perfect sense. Of course, if someone wants to take your land, they should pay you full price. If you feel like you weren't treated fairly, you can go to the courts.

Well, quite frankly, things are a little different here in Alberta. We have to pass this private bill because the government isn't doing its job. Worse, they're the same group that is causing the problem. Now, you want to ask: how are they causing the problem? They're passing bills that put cabinet before everyone else. I believe that we as members are elected to represent, quite frankly, our constituents' views. But I believe in checks, and I believe in balances; that's what the courts are for. The bills that they have passed in the last few years – and I mean the government – including Bill 24, Bill 36, and Bill 50, put cabinet ahead of everyone else.

Now, I know my constituents in Calgary-Fish Creek don't like that, and quite frankly neither do I. It's sad that the issue of property rights seems distant and remote because for me it's very real. As I said earlier, Mr. Speaker, I own land in Alberta, and I'm very proud of the land that we own in Alberta. This isn't just about land owned by ranchers and land owned by farmers; it's that every homeowner has a stake in this issue. The new power lines that are going through Sherwood Park are going right over an elementary school.

There is an even bigger picture here, and it's not about land, it's about civil rights. It's about your rights as a human being in Alberta. What if one day cabinet decides that you don't get recourse to the courts on free speech? The reasons given by this government, quite frankly, aren't good enough. They just want projects to move faster. It's about convenience. It's like driving through McDonald's drive-through. Well, Mr. Speaker, the Bill of Rights is there as a check on a government tempted to pass laws that make things easier for them at the expense of individuals' rights.

Here's what Premier Lougheed, someone I still admire to this day, said about it here in the House when he was introducing it back on May 15, 1972. "The Alberta Bill of Rights restricts the power of the Legislature, in terms of imposing upon individual rights and freedoms . . . It establishes a procedure that restrains government from attempting to deprive persons of fundamental

rights.” Government should do something because it’s the right thing to do, quite frankly, not because it makes their job easier.

Mr. Speaker, we’ve got an election coming up soon. It’s kind of like the fixed election date. I love that bill. The only one who knows when the election is is the government, yet they want to call it the fixed election date. It would be a lot easier to be in government with all of those pesky elections that keep coming up. The Premier, as I said, promised fixed election dates. Yeah. We got a fixed election period instead. Quite frankly, as my constituents have told me at the doors as I’ve been door-knocking, it’s a pathetic decision. It insults the intelligence of Albertans.

Every time the government gets caught doing a poor job of governing, they say the same thing: trust us. Well, Mr. Speaker, trust is earned. It’s based on the past, and it’s based on relationships. You can’t have a relationship with someone that never listens, tells you you’re wrong, and pretends they were right all along when they’ve changed their mind. It’s a recipe for disaster, and that’s exactly what we’ve had over the last few years. Look at the changes in the royalty rates in the oil and gas sector. The government was warned about what would happen if they made drastic decisions. Did they listen? No. They thought they had all the answers. Any criticism was wrong, and it was sour grapes. But you know what? They went ahead and did it anyhow, and we all know what happened. The oil and gas sector fired thousands of people. The government made change after change until it was back the way it was before. Did the government at any point take responsibility? Now, that’s a good word, Mr. Speaker, responsibility. Did they ever say that they made a mistake and why it happened? Another good point. No, never. No lesson was ever learned.

The government then decided to make changes to the way land was managed and power lines were constructed in Alberta. Did they listen? No. Just the same as always. Again concerned citizens brought legitimate criticisms to the government. Again the government said: “You’re wrong, Albertans. The critics are wrong. It’s just sour grapes. You’re being afraid.” Like a stubborn mule this government dug in its heels for years, but eventually the truth won out. The government started backtracking, making changes and amendments piece by piece. It was quite a sight to see, Mr. Speaker. For years people like Keith Wilson had been called a liar and a fearmongerer for explaining about the government’s own lands. Boy, did the government ever change its tune.

Why didn’t the government get it right and make sure the laws were sound? Because, quite frankly, that’s not how they operate. Listening is not what they do; that’s what Albertans are supposed to do. It wasn’t the government that didn’t understand; it was the average Albertan. The government wasn’t wrong; you, the people, were. Well, I have a little more faith in the average Albertan than I do, quite frankly, in the government. That’s why we need this bill, to keep the government accountable. I say that I’m accountable because I listen to my constituents, and as the health critic I listen to the doctors and people in the health care profession. You know what? Because I’ve learned why I have two ears and one mouth, I have finally figured out what the priorities are for Albertans.

Mr. Speaker, governments that don’t listen don’t last. I hope that this government listens to the merits of this bill from my hon. colleague and sees the right arguments at the right time, and I hope they pass Bill 201.

Thank you.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Innisfail-Sylvan Lake on the bill.

Mr. Ouellette: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. It’s a privilege for me to rise today in this Assembly to speak to Bill 201, brought forward by the hon. Member for Calgary-Glenmore. I think I want to start out by saying that I think Alberta is the very best province to live in, to raise your family in, to work in, and to play in. Unlike the hon. member that just spoke, I absolutely believe that this is the best province and that everything positive has been happening in this province. That’s why we’re the envy of the rest of the provinces and possibly the world. That’s why we have a low unemployment rate, and we’re going to at one point in time here very shortly be short of a lot of people to fill the jobs that are available in Alberta.

Mr. Speaker, I own land in the province of Alberta and probably will buy more because I honestly believe that I’m fully protected to own land in this province without changing anything. She was mentioning about years of all things happening, when a small two years ago she sat on this side of the House. I have to say that it’s very, very easy for someone to say that there’s a lawyer that’s running around the province and really telling people that they’re not protected. When people pay somebody, they manage to go out and do a job, but it doesn’t mean that their opinion is right. Probably with every single bill in this Legislature, if you have two lawyers, you’ll have two opinions. There’s nobody to say whose opinion is right in this case, when you’re standing in a town hall and there’s only one lawyer and no judge.

3:50

Do we think Keith Wilson is right? I don’t, but some people do. Mr. Speaker, I have to say that we don’t have to be redundant and keep putting in more and more and changing a Bill of Rights that has been in place since, I think the hon. member over there said, 1972 and that seems to serve this province very, very well.

Mr. Speaker, I ran in politics to make sure that everyone could have the same opportunities that I had. When my children were born, I wanted them to have the same opportunities I had when I was born. I’m going to be a grandpa soon. My son and daughter-in-law are going to be having a baby in July, and I hope that that grandchild has the same rights all through its life that I feel I’ve had and the opportunities that I’ve had because I’m an Albertan. I’ve got to say that most of my adult life and all of my business life have been under the Progressive Conservative Party of Alberta, and I’m very, very happy with how this province has been governed.

I believe that now, with the amendments to some of the bills that the hon. member is trying to correct in a different way, we’ve corrected and we have some of the most compensable rights there are anywhere in the country, Mr. Speaker. I think Bill 10 did that.

For those reasons I thank the hon. member for bringing the bill forward. I think he has very, very good intentions by bringing the bill forward, but I believe it’s unneeded. Therefore, I won’t be supporting the bill.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Deputy Speaker: Any other hon. member wish to speak on the bill? The hon. Member for Calgary-*Buffalo*.

Mr. Hehr: Well, thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It’s a privilege, as always, to rise and speak to any bill in this House. It’s the same with Bill 201, brought forward by my hon. colleague from Calgary-Glenmore.

I guess that to start discussing this bill, we have to sort of know why it’s arrived here on the legislative floor. If we look, we can go back to starting this in about 2006, when the first discussions were happening in front of the Alberta Utilities Commission, where

people were expressing their dissatisfaction with the transmission line process and were having what they assumed was a full and fair hearing in that regard into the siting of our transmission lines, the effects it would have on their land, and whether there were any other ways to go about doing that.

We all know what happened out of that situation. There were allegations made that the government, in fact, had hired a private investigator to go in and look at the process, to try and derail that full and fair hearing that those citizens wanted to have in front of the Alberta Utilities Commission.

We fast-forward a little bit. The government realized: “Oh, my goodness. It is going to be a real difficult thing for us to get through all these transmission lines. Can you imagine us having to have an open and accountable process, where every landowner, every school district, every person who may or may not be affected by these power lines will have a forum to come in and explain how this transmission line is going to affect them?” The government realized this was going to be not only a difficult process but a public relations nightmare for them.

It was with that backdrop that they went on to a series of bills – 19, 24, 36, and 50 – that essentially allowed for the government to make the decisions without this need to go before the Alberta Utilities Commission, the need for a public hearing into the placement of transmission lines and to actually go through a needs-based hearing. It was in this series of bills that a great deal of power was concentrated in cabinet. In the original drafting of those four bills it centralized the decision-making power within I think it's 24 cabinet ministers that now would have the decision-making power over this.

Well, that didn't sit well with Albertans, and even more of a public relations nightmare emerged. People were concerned about this concentration of power. They were concerned over the fact that this was no longer happening in an open fashion. They were concerned about the fact that this government could now make decisions not only about a power line but, in regard to the power line, possibly make a decision about the expropriation of land without due process as well as possible compensation in that process.

I full well admit that there were some politics at play that may or may not have always represented the issue as fair-mindedly as it may be. Nevertheless, that's the backdrop. The government realized that sometimes doing things in an open, accountable way is difficult. But democracy is difficult. It's messy. Sometimes you have to make hard decisions that affect people's lives, and it's not always easy.

I appreciate the hon. Minister of Justice recognizing that there is often a battle between individual rights and the collective good. There is no doubt that governments have to make decisions sometimes in the collective good that affect individuals deeply and irrevocably and can change their interests in a family farm or change their interests in a business that they do. That shouldn't stop governments from doing it, but they should be able to do this in an open, accountable, and transparent fashion. The original drafting of bills 19, 24, 36, and 50 was to allow this to possibly not happen in this fashion.

That's sort of the backdrop. That's why we see before us Bill 201. Property rights, whether they've been protected in this province before through the Bill of Rights, as we heard the hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview say, or through Bill 10, that the government had, and now with trying to put even more lipstick on a pig with the property rights advocate – all that series of bills is trying to restore what transpired after 2006, when the government tried to do things behind closed doors. But, hey, if we look at this bill, it stems out of that background.

I tend to agree also with the Minister of Justice that the Bill of Rights as it is drafted protects property rights inasmuch as our enjoyment of property. It doesn't say much after that. But with our Expropriation Act, if used correctly and as it's applied to all the instances when governments expropriate land and if the government doesn't go behind closed doors and do things like it was doing in bills 19, 24, 36, and 50, this should be able to be handled through the Expropriation Act.

4:00

I do also recognize the hon. member's intent in this bill and almost even more his nervousness about this government's future course. It shows where he's trying to get this into the Alberta rights act. To be fair, I applaud his efforts to highlight an issue that was very concerning to people, and it still is. It was brought up very vociferously by his party, and I believe they did a good service to the Alberta people by highlighting some of the secrecy that was going on in our transmission process. As for this, I'm not so sure if it is necessary; however, it is a good discussion piece to remind us of how we got here and how we find ourselves debating property rights because of a series of bills that tried to do things behind closed doors.

Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I'll allow someone else to take the floor.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Leduc-Beaumont-Devon.

Mr. Rogers: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm very pleased today to rise and join the debate on Bill 201, the Alberta Bill of Rights (Property Rights Protection) Amendment Act, 2012, brought forward by the hon. Member for Calgary-Glenmore. I'd first like to say that I believe that this is certainly a very good discussion to have. Across this province there is great interest amongst Albertans to ensure that property rights are adequately protected. One thing that I do know for sure is that under this government Albertans' property rights are indeed protected and that our government would never – and I emphasize never – compromise on this fundamental principle.

Private property is at the foundation of our free market economy. It provides the legal certainty that is necessary for individuals to invest their resources, and it provides and enhances confidence in markets. For example, Mr. Speaker, I can't imagine that anyone would invest in something tangible such as land if at any time that tangible asset could be seized by other individuals or, heaven forbid, by the government. That is why one of the most important roles of government is indeed that protection of private property, and this government has a very strong record of promoting and protecting these rights.

Now, looking at the bill being debated today, the right to compensation and access to the courts, according to the author of this bill, would be inserted into the Alberta Bill of Rights. Well, Mr. Speaker, the Alberta Bill of Rights stands alone in Canada as the only piece of legislation that defines certain property rights and that these rights can only be deprived under, and I emphasize again, due process of law. This illustrates the strong value that Albertans place upon property rights and the protection thereof.

Immediately after being sworn into office in September 1971, then Premier Peter Lougheed initiated the drafting of the Alberta Bill of Rights. Mr. Speaker, this was the first Bill 1 under the new PC government at that time in the spring session of the Legislature in 1972. In speaking to second reading of the bill, Premier Lougheed stated:

The Alberta Bill of Rights, proposed before this Legislature, is the first and only provincial bill of its kind in Canada.

He further stated:

What is very significant about this bill, and I think not well understood, is that under The British North America Act, clearly and distinctly, the responsibility for property and civil rights is [indeed] the responsibility of provincial government. And so, in undertaking the course that is implicit in Bill No. 1,

this was again Premier Lougheed continuing,

we in the government are well aware that we are striking in very new ground with a very important bill.

Mr. Speaker, Premier Lougheed clearly understood that the protection of property was the responsibility of the provincial government, and he took this responsibility very seriously in a way that no other jurisdiction had, and I submit that our government has continued that tradition to this very day.

When the Alberta Bill of Rights was passed, it clearly emphasized property rights. Section 1 of the Bill of Rights states:

1 It is hereby recognized and declared that in Alberta there exist without discrimination by reason of race, national origin, colour, religion or sex, the following human rights and fundamental freedoms, namely:

- (a) the right of the individual to liberty, security of the person and enjoyment of property, and the right not to be deprived thereof except by due process of law.

Now, Premier Lougheed fully understood that it was the responsibility of provincial governments to protect property rights. However, when we look at other jurisdictions, we see that no other Canadian province has gone nearly as far as Alberta in recognizing this provincial responsibility and protecting this fundamental right. So I think we can be very proud, Mr. Speaker, of what we have in this province today.

In looking at the legislation in other provinces, British Columbia, Manitoba, Ontario, P.E.I., and Newfoundland fall short of protecting any basic private property rights. Saskatchewan affirms the legal right to sell real estate. Section 10 of the Saskatchewan Bill of Rights states:

Every person and every class of persons shall enjoy the right to acquire by purchase, to own in fee simple or otherwise, to lease, rent and to occupy any lands, messuages, tenements or hereditaments, corporeal or incorporeal, of every nature and description,

I'm reading the legislation, Mr. Speaker. This isn't my language.

and every estate or interest therein, whether legal or equitable, and probably a good reason why we need lawyers to interpret some of these laws, Mr. Speaker.

without discrimination because of the race, creed, religion, colour or ethnic or national origin of such person or class of persons.

However, Saskatchewan's Bill of Rights lacks any statement referring to the right not to be deprived of property or any provisions to due process.

Legislation in the Maritimes, Mr. Speaker, also provides minimal private property rights.

Quebec's Charter of Human Rights and Freedoms contains a number of statements in regard to private property, but like other provinces they, too, do not go as far as Alberta in recognizing the right not to be deprived of property or contain any provision for due process.

Although the protection of property is clearly the responsibility of provinces across Canada, we see very little property rights protection in provincial legislation.

Bill 201 as proposed would extend what was accomplished in the Bill of Rights to include the rights to "full, fair and timely compensation and . . . recourse to the courts" for when the Crown acquires private property. Currently, Mr. Speaker, the Alberta Bill of Rights does not specify a requirement for just compensation or

for court recourse to determine the compensation payable, nor does any other legislation across Canada specify these rights. However, I would suggest that the fundamental principles of fair compensation and access to the courts are enshrined in numerous other pieces of Alberta legislation that relate to land expropriation for public use. For example, in the land assembly act we see clear provision for fair compensation and access to the courts specified under section 6.

In the Alberta Land Stewardship Act we also see fair compensation and recourse to the courts. In fact, in section 1 of the Alberta Land Stewardship Act the very first statement of the act states:

In carrying out the purposes of this Act as specified in subsection (2), the Government must

and I emphasize "must," Mr. Speaker,

respect the property and other rights of individuals and must not infringe on those rights except with due process of law and to the extent necessary for the overall greater public interest.

Further to this, Mr. Speaker, we see the concept of compensable taking being inserted into this act, with compensable taking defined as "the diminution or abrogation of a property right, title or interest giving rise to compensation in law or equity."

4:10

Mr. Speaker, section 19.1 of the Alberta Land Stewardship Act specifies a right to compensation for compensable taking and the process for court recourse. Although the right to compensation and access to the courts is not currently defined in the Alberta Bill of Rights, I believe it is clear that this government has gone above and beyond any other jurisdiction in ensuring that these rights are protected in statute and, in fact, in practice.

I thank the hon. Member for Calgary-Glenmore for introducing this bill, and I look forward to further debate and discussion on this topic, that is so important to many Albertans. While I can appreciate the intent of this bill, I believe that the proposed wording of the Alberta Bill of Rights (Property Rights Protection) Amendment Act would not be of measurable benefit to Albertans and given the work of this government in support of compensation and access to the courts for landowners, I must say, Mr. Speaker, that I will not be supporting this bill.

Thank you.

The Deputy Speaker: Hon. Member for Airdrie-Chestermere, do you wish to join in before I recognize other hon. members?

Mr. Anderson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Alberta's Bill of Rights clearly seeks to protect the rights of Albertans to the enjoyment of their property as has been stated earlier. As with all bills of rights, the freedoms enumerated are protected from government actions as much as those from any other person or group.

In the last few years certain bills like 19, 24, 36, and 50 have become notorious for the controversy they have sparked with regard to property rights. Each of the opposition parties agree with various property rights experts who say that these bills represent an unprecedented undermining of the rights of landowners. The government has claimed, first, that there was nothing to these claims. It was a bunch of fearmongering, they said. Then when they realized that these bills were so offensive to the basic rights of Albertans that the opposition was only going to increase until the election, they admitted that there needed to be some changes. So they proceeded to propose bills in each session last year that revised the compensation provisions and scope of two of the main bills, significantly in Bill 19 but not far enough in Bill 36, and we're just hearing that they are essentially going to eliminate Bill

50 but only after ramming through the power lines the bill was created to make sure happen.

Let's be clear. The government would never have touched these bills if it weren't for the advocacy of people like Keith Wilson as well as the political pressure and threat posed by the Wildrose. If there weren't a fledgling party threatening the rural Alberta seats, you can bet this issue would have been ignored. The citizens of Alberta shouldn't have to rely on that kind of coincidence for their rights to be protected. That's the kind of thing a bill of rights is for. It's there to ensure that when government wields its enormous power, individual Albertans aren't unfairly damaged by it, and if they are, they can go to a court to ensure fair compensation.

The question that arises is: if property rights are protected by the Bill of Rights, how are these laws passed in the first place, and why did it require massive political pressure to get them even partially amended? The answer is that the Bill of Rights protects property in the following list of freedoms, one that ends with an important caveat: "the right of the individual to liberty, security of the person and enjoyment of property, and the right not to be deprived thereof except by due process of law."

Now, it goes without saying that the government needs the power to deprive citizens of their freedoms in certain circumstances, such as in the case of someone who poses a danger to fellow citizens. The hallmark of a free society is that this power to restrict citizens, to take away their rights, is strictly controlled and circumscribed very specifically by laws that respect freedoms. But the shortcoming in this clause has been illuminated by the passing of the controversial bills. All the government needs to do is to write a clause in the legislation stating that it need not fully compensate landowners or that compensation is at the direction of the minister with no right of appeal, and it has satisfied what the Bill of Rights termed due process of law, that requirement that allows the government to deprive Albertans of their property.

Bills 19, 24, 36, and 50 all have versions of this included in their original manifestations. Some have been altered since then. Only in Bill 19, for example, has the sweeping discretion of the minister or cabinet been substantially amended and placed under legislation, in that case under the Expropriation Act. We believe that it was not the original intent of those who drafted the Bill of Rights for Albertans that compensation rights could so easily be compromised by a simple act of the Legislature.

In fact, Premier Lougheed was explicit about this when he brought in the Bill of Rights 40 years ago. He said that the bill was intended to restrain government. It's to empower the courts to stand up for individuals against the government. It's a check on cabinet and the legislation passed by the majority. It was always meant to protect landowners, property owners, from the majority, from the Legislature. That's why we have a Bill of Rights, to protect those groups that can't protect themselves sometimes.

Here's a quote from Premier Lougheed on what the bill is supposed to achieve.

The purpose of the Bill of Rights, therefore, is to say to the courts, "here are the fundamental freedoms we intend to protect; if we haven't done so, then you, the courts, in your interpretation – which is certainly one of the major purposes of our courts – you interpret our laws in that regard."

But as the government has made clear in the last few years, they are perfectly willing to boldly write in clauses that take away the compensation rights of landowners, and without this clause it's too easy to hide behind the due process clause, as we examined earlier.

This bill seeks to make it more difficult for any legislation to undermine the rights of Albertans intentionally or unintentionally by making clear that the due process of law must include

- (a) full, fair and timely compensation; and
- (b) right of recourse to the courts to determine the compensation payable.

The government may have the very best of intentions in granting powers to ministers to adjudicate compensation claims, but we believe that this is not a responsible way to legislate. The simplest reason, that should resonate with all MLAs, is that even if the government of today were indeed utterly fair-minded, those powers will still be in place when a less trustworthy government is in power in the future, which is why we have to protect these rights. This is why the Bill of Rights was created, so that no matter how imperfect the government of the day, whatever their ideology may be, there are protections for individuals for certain basic and fundamental freedoms that will not change with the political winds.

We believe that the right to enjoy property is one of them, and I hope that all the members of this Assembly will support this bill so that there will be much less of a concern in the future about whether legislation fails to ensure that Albertans will have a process available to them to fairly adjudicate their compensation when government decisions cause them a loss of property.

Mr. Speaker, I think that this bill is timely, that it is needed. There is no reason why despite the political differences of the party that this hon. member belongs to and the governing party at this time – they talk about property rights. They talk about how important those property rights are to them. Let's work on this together, make sure that we put this bill forward and agree to it, and pass it so that Albertans can feel safe and secure, as you keep saying that they should feel. If that's the case, then prove it by passing this act and strengthening Alberta's Bill of Rights.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Strathmore-Brooks.

Mr. Doerksen: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased to rise today and speak to Bill 201, the Alberta Bill of Rights (Property Rights Protection) Amendment Act, 2012, brought forward by the hon. Member for Calgary-Glenmore. This bill would amend the Alberta Bill of Rights to state that in cases where a law authorizes the Crown to acquire private property, the landowner is entitled to full, fair, and timely compensation and the right of access to the courts to determine the compensation payable.

Although it is a relatively short bill, it raises an issue that is absolutely fundamental in our province, that being property rights. As a landowner, farmer, and rancher the matter of property rights is extremely important to me and to my constituents in Strathmore-Brooks, and I've had many conversations with many of my constituents over the last several years with regard to the matters that were being considered in a whole range of areas and how it would impact property rights and the fact that over the last number of years there has been accelerated discussion with regard to the importance of this whole matter and how it related to a range of legislation and also the ongoing development of our province.

4:20

I would like to thank the hon. member for raising this important topic in the Assembly, providing an opportunity to discuss ways of supporting and protecting this important right. As we all know, the right to enjoyment of property and to not be deprived thereof except by due process of law is enshrined in the Alberta Bill of Rights. This right was established under the leadership of Premier Peter Lougheed in 1972, as a number of our hon. colleagues have mentioned.

In fact, we are one of the very few provinces that actually have this right protected under legislation. Even the Canadian Charter

of Rights and Freedoms doesn't protect this right. As an Albertan I feel fortunate to live in a place where these rights are protected, and I know the importance of having a government in place that takes property rights very seriously.

Our government has recognized that our energy industry will continue to get stronger, and consideration of the estimates with regard to the growth of the province raises the importance of good planning for the future. We have come to accept the fact that Alberta's population will also continue to grow. We've seen rapid growth in this province over the last number of years, and the estimate is that that will continue for years to come. This is a very dynamic and exciting opportunity for our province, and in many ways we're a privileged people to live in a province that is growing so rapidly. Our province has become more diverse and more innovative as newcomers bring fresh perspectives and ideas to our province. As our government has recognized these changes, we have adapted in a responsible way to ensure that we prepare and plan for growth in the province.

Mr. Speaker, I and, I think, our government will be the first to admit that it hasn't been easy developing a legislative framework that finds the balance between supporting property rights, conservation efforts, and infrastructure planning for the future of our province. That has been, really, at the centre of a debate among Albertans for the last number of years.

I recall the dynamic discussion with people in my area, prior to being the Member for Strathmore-Brooks, with regard to decisions and procedures that were in place for planning various kinds of livestock operations and other planning as well and the challenge it was to get approvals. That over a period of time led to, I think, the significance and the importance of planning for the future while balancing the interests of landowners and also conserving important parts of the province that have significance for environmental or conservation reasons.

I think this has been an important and necessary initiative. The growth pressures that Alberta is facing and will face in coming years are complex, and a complex issue such as this requires a thoughtful and broad response that takes into account all of the factors that will play out in our future.

Mr. Speaker, I believe that Bill 201 is not that response. I do not believe that adding several lines to the Alberta Bill of Rights is an answer to the challenges that our province will come up against. I don't see any problem with the bill per se. It sends an important message, that we will protect Albertans' right to compensation and access to the courts, but in actuality these two lines cannot be effective without strong legislation backing them up.

That legislation has already been put in place by government in the form of a number of acts that have strengthened Albertans' property rights while also ensuring that we are able to plan for the future. These acts include the Expropriation Act, the Alberta Land Stewardship Act, and the Land Assembly Project Area Act.

Mr. Speaker, when Albertans raised concerns about some of this new legislation such as the Alberta Land Stewardship Act and the Land Assembly Project Area Act, we responded in a manner that I believe has been effective and really goes further than what is covered in Bill 201. First, we amended both the Alberta Land Stewardship Act and the Alberta Land Assembly Project Area Act to clarify the intention of these pieces of legislation and the rights that they provide to Albertans, including stronger rights to compensation and improved access to the courts.

We also established the Property Rights Task Force, led by the hon. Minister of Environment and Water, to consult with Albertans with regard to what their concerns are and have been with regard to property rights. I was pleased to be a member of that task force and found a very dynamic discussion with

Albertans over the course of the months of January and last December. In fact, some Albertans were concerned that individual property rights were not being protected as diligently as other interests.

With the results of the consultation now available to us, our government is taking further steps to effectively deal with these matters. First, our government has committed to taking steps to improve engagement with Albertans in property rights consultations going forward. We will do so by reviewing our engagement policies and procedures to ensure that they are meaningful and responsive to people's needs.

In addition, we will continue to strengthen landowners' access to compensation by reviewing both the Expropriation Act and the Surface Rights Act and the compensation guidelines that underlie them.

Third, our government will be creating a property rights advocate office, which will help people to determine the appropriate resolution mechanisms to deal with any property issues. This advocate will act as an independent and impartial resource for Albertans to access information and guidance related to property rights. I must say, Mr. Speaker, that at every one of the meetings that I attended, these concerns relating to the type of advocate that is being proposed here were raised by landowners and Albertans. This will include information related to the three very important areas that we're discussing today: compensation, consultation, and access to the courts.

Mr. Speaker, these are just a few of the commitments our government has made to ensure that Albertans' rights are and continue to be secure. For me, these actions and laws are the real meat and potatoes of property rights in our province. Our consultation activities, our legislation and regulations and boards that support them are what really protect Albertans' property rights, and these are important. I'm proud to be part of a government that has shown time and again that we are willing to get out and listen to what Albertans want and need and to take action on their concerns, and we will continue to do that.

Again, for me, these two lines in the Alberta Bill of Rights are an important gesture, but to truly address the issue of property rights and managing our resources for the future, we really do need to look deeper. In light of all the work that government has done to ensure that Albertans' rights to compensation and access to the courts are protected, I will not be supporting this bill. I want to thank the member for bringing it forward.

Certainly, I want to speak, Mr. Speaker, to the importance of clarification with regard to what is intended. I think the discussions that I've had with constituents over the last number of years and particularly the last eight or 10 months have raised the importance with regard to Albertans' understanding of the legalities of the law. [Mr. Doerksen's speaking time expired]

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

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

Dr. Swann: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. An honour to rise and speak to this interesting bill, Bill 201, property rights protection, one that raises, I think, some very important issues for all of us as well as Albertans who have paid attention to the issues of the last couple of years. It certainly highlighted for me the difficulty we have in trusting this government. Bill 201 is really trying to address the need for protection of landowner rights and for fair compensation and access to the courts, which is inherent in the Alberta Bill of Rights.

But for a number of reasons – and I'll go into a few of them –

this government has been so negligent in addressing these issues and so parochial and self-serving in its decision-making that many Albertans have come not to believe that there will be an honouring of the spirit of the Alberta Bill of Rights.

4:30

The government has been, I would say, this last couple of years paying the price for three areas of malfeasance: one, the failure to follow due process in some of the policy-making decisions it has made. I would point to Bill 50 as a glaring example of problems in their process, a spying scandal that resulted in an overturning of that whole process, and then a leap to a bill that is very draconian and not seriously accepted by thoughtful Albertans.

The second area of malfeasance is the recurrence of policy based not on evidence and not on public interest but on political advantage. Examples are easy to cite here as well. We've been hearing about them these last few months in this province, with intimidation and bullying of people who disagree with this government, whether it's in the health system, the education system, or elsewhere; illegal donations to this party from municipal and school board sources, other government-funded bodies that are clearly out of line but feeling the effects of a government that cannot be trusted; and the high corporate donations that this party enjoys because they continue to listen not to Albertans and not to respecting the long-term well-being of the province but to thinking more short term and acquiescing, I would say, to the large corporate interests in this province.

There are some serious issues that are inherent in any discussion of human rights and property rights. This government has simply ignored the impact of years of – instead of evidence-based policy-making, we might call it policy-based evidence-making. They like to bring in decisions that support what they want to do, an ideology of, well, if I could say so, continued power. After 41 years they've stopped thinking about the long-term interests of Alberta and Albertans. They've stopped considering individual and community well-being, and they've simply taken onto themselves the right to make decisions without, as I say, expert evidence, meaningful consultation with Albertans, and a view to the long-term interests.

I will say that I don't share the concerns of my colleague for Calgary-Glenmore, who brought the bill forward, about Bill 36. I thought the land-use framework is an important step forward. I supported it. I still think it's an important initiative. We have to get on with planning and conservation and addressing the longer term needs of this province fairly and appropriately for the long-term interests of Alberta, ensuring that we have protected waterways, that we have protected areas for industry but that we also have residential and conservation areas and wildlife habitat that will ensure the long-term well-being of this province.

I don't share the same concerns about Bill 36 that my colleagues do, but Bill 50 is a glaring example of what happens when a government decides it no longer matters about due process or about evidence, evidence of many scientists and many energy producers who have indicated repeatedly that we don't need this much infrastructure, that we don't need the north-south focus, that has been so dominant over the years because of massive coal production. We can produce more power locally with shorter transmission lines, with a backup from other resources, renewables. Natural gas should be a logical transition fuel for us. It's cheaper, it's more environmentally friendly, and it allows more local and regional production and transmission, which would not only be more cost-effective, Mr. Speaker, but more environmentally consistent with what Albertans want.

I'm intrigued by this. I think it's an important recognition that the most fundamental issue that we're dealing with here is trust. This government has lost the trust of Albertans. This is one symptom. We have had to come forward repeatedly and push this government to do the right thing and, if not, now bring forward bills and motions to try to protect the public from a very abusive and manipulative and, I would say, corrupt government, that is using not only public dollars but also corporate dollars to continue at whatever cost to sustain their power in this province.

They're going to have their reckoning, Mr. Speaker. They're going to have their reckoning in the next six weeks. We're going to see some real change in this province. I think Albertans will have a chance to see and hear more about what this government is about, and it's not the long-term public interest but many other interests involved quite apart from the long-term public interest in this administration.

Mr. Speaker, I'm very pleased at this time to support this bill and look forward to further debate on this important principle of public trust and due process for property rights as well as civil rights.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Red Deer-North.

Mrs. Jablonski: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's a privilege for me to speak today in this Assembly on the subject of Bill 201, the Alberta Bill of Rights (Property Rights Protection) Amendment Act, 2012, being brought forward by the hon. Member for Calgary-Glenmore.

Mr. Speaker, the purpose of this bill would be to amend the Alberta Bill of Rights to supposedly further clarify the rights of property owners. In a democratic and entrepreneurial society the Bill of Rights is a fundamental document in the legal protection of our rights. The Alberta Bill of Rights clearly states that property is one of the human rights and fundamental freedoms which all Albertans are privy to. In section 1 of the act it is written that the individual has the right to enjoyment of property. The act states that a person may not be deprived of their property without the due process of law. This right is fully recognized by the Bill of Rights, and Alberta is rather unique when it comes to such forward-thinking legislation concerning property rights.

The member's bill would add a subsection for the purposes of further clarity, stating the right to timely compensation and access to the courts. The hon. Member for Calgary-Glenmore mentions two of the Cs, yet this government remains committed to all three of the Cs – compensation, access to the courts, and consultation – and we have acted on each of those counts.

Mr. Speaker, we know what the values of Albertans are, and we know of our deep connection to the land. Landowners expect this government to treat them with respect and within the confines of the laws that were designed to protect them. They expect to be consulted on important decisions, and this government has continued to provide them with this. Alberta legislation already requires the government to pay the fair market value price for any such compensation, as we just heard from one of the hon. members of the Assembly.

Albertans continue to have access to the courts, and this right is reflected in several pieces of existing legislation. Albertans are still living in a democratic, free society and are able to pursue their rightful interests in a court of law should it become necessary. In speaking to property rights in Bill 201, I think the hon. member can agree with me that the enjoyment of property is one of the most treasured values of Albertans, and the protection of that right already exists in Alberta legislation.

The objective of the hon. member's bill is to amend the Alberta Bill of Rights to refer to compensation and access to the courts. However, I'm sure that the hon. member would admit that Albertans and landowners, in particular, want also to be consulted on their opinions. This government knows that consultation is a crucial element in policy and legislation development. People want to be assured that government is actively lending an open and responsive ear to their concerns.

Mr. Speaker, a recent sign of this government's commitment to continued consultation with landowners has been the Property Rights Task Force. This government stands by the notion that having this ongoing conversation is important and valuable. This task force recently spent two months gathering ideas, comments, and insights from regular Albertans. It toured across all the regions of this province, visiting many communities. It was met with an outpouring of participation and involvement from those communities. Albertans had the chance to write, e-mail, call, or complete an online survey. The open-house sessions had a very strong turnout of over a thousand people.

The task force delivered its report to government on January 31, and we have taken the time to assess all the comments and suggestions that we've received from the public throughout the last two months. Since Bill 201 claims to be concerned about property rights, I'm certain that the hon. member has reviewed the findings of this important report.

4:40

The task force has heard numerous comments from Albertans, and the results of this consultation with Albertans indicate a focus on four main areas. First and foremost, they indicated that they must be actively consulted about decisions that affect them. A listening exercise such as this task force was a perfect example of how Albertans expect consultations to take place. This government will continue to consult with Albertans in the future.

Albertans want to be reassured that their access to the courts continues to exist whenever they must negotiate actions that affect them. Granted, as we have heard, access to the courts is already protected by several laws, including the Expropriation Act. Mr. Speaker, in cases where use of land is required, Albertans want to be reassured that they will receive appropriate compensation. Again, there are several laws that already exist to provide appropriate compensation for Albertans.

Since Bill 201 professes to further clarify rights, the hon. Member for Calgary-Glenmore ought to be pleased with the clarification on property rights that this debate has produced. I'm pleased to say that this government has acted on all these points.

Finally, Mr. Speaker, Albertans have expressed the need for an advocate to help them navigate through the process of seeking compensation and access to the courts and to advise them on their rights. On February 22 the government introduced legislation that will create a property rights advocate for the province. Bill 6, the Property Rights Advocate Act, supports the government's position that Albertans must have recourse to compensation, access to the courts, and consultation.

This will be a one-stop source for people requiring information and advice and will provide them with the support that they may need to make decisions in their best interests. The advocate will share independent and unbiased information about property rights. It will assist people in exploring the various options available to them in terms of compensation and appeal, and it will help them to identify the appropriate resolution mechanism that best suits their needs. This office will report to the Minister of Justice and Attorney General, and there will also be a requirement to table an annual report in the Legislature every year.

Frankly, Mr. Speaker, the amendment to the Bill of Rights that the hon. member is proposing seems redundant to me given what this government has already accomplished in terms of property rights.

This government is in tune with the values espoused by most people in this province, a deep connection to our land and the prosperity that it brings. This government has set forth a very clear and honest process that protects the property of landowners. There is no ambiguity with these laws, and Albertans' right to the enjoyment of property is already protected in the Alberta Bill of Rights.

Mr. Speaker, for these reasons I will not be supporting this bill. Thank you.

The Deputy Speaker: Hon. Member for Grande Prairie-Smoky, do you wish to join the debate on the bill?

Mr. Knight: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. A good conversation and, I think, a good debate relative to an issue, a very serious issue, in fact, facing Albertans. I think that inside of this Assembly sometimes we tend to forget the very solid basic reasons to enact the types of legislation that are being discussed here today and the regulations that follow them. Unfortunately, we tend to try and take political advantage of very, very serious issues that face our province and its citizens.

We need to go back, Mr. Speaker, a moment or at least a year or 10 to kind of get an idea of why this thing started in the first place, how we started, and how we arrived at a situation where a number of Albertans, so many of our colleagues and our constituents, got quite concerned with what it was that this government was doing with respect to what we're now calling property rights but what is really the land and water, what we would consider in many cases to be public.

Mr. Speaker, we had a need, a pressing need, for planning. The province of Alberta was growing more rapidly than any other jurisdiction in the country. We've gained about a million people in a period of time of about a dozen years. In all the time that this growth has been taking place, we've been attempting to deal with this issue: a growing province, expansion of industry, tremendous expansion of industry. In some cases the expansion of industry was taking place so rapidly that our infrastructure, our population, our opportunities for the deployment of capital were really being exceeded by the pace of that growth.

We required access by industry to public land and in certain circumstances, Mr. Speaker, to private land. This brought about a circumstance where we as a government were charged with the responsibility to make sure that as this land base was being more and more pressured, as this activity ramped up, there were opportunities for us to set aside certain areas, to be certain that there was species-at-risk protection for species like caribou and grizzly bear and others. It was a real, pressing, and overriding concern of this government that Albertans were not left in a situation where the federal government, in certain circumstances having overriding opportunities here, would come and make these pieces of legislation for us. We needed to do it, we wanted to do it on behalf of Albertans.

I think that when we come to this kind of new legislation and bring amendments to legislation that we've done, we are going back and we're trying to correct things that we have done, but, Mr. Speaker, I think it comes to a point in time where Albertans really do understand that what we've done here is the best that we can do given the circumstance we're in and given the tools that we have to work with. In my riding today most of the individuals that I speak to with respect to this issue are satisfied that this

government has listened, that this Premier has listened, and that we're going to move forward and totally respect the rights of the individual in this province. The right to court access, the right to compensation: those things were never in question and are not now, and with some of the work that is currently being done, they will not be in the future.

Mr. Speaker, there was an issue brought up about pore space, about the injection of carbon. I would suggest to you that Alberta was one of the very last places, most certainly one of the very last places that has the kind of energy technology and energy industry that we have in the province of Alberta, that doesn't have some sort of legislation that governs pore space ownership. Pore space ownership in almost every jurisdiction that I have had the privilege to visit and talk with relative to this issue: that's been managed many, many years ago. The pore space a mile under your feet, unfortunately, does not in most cases and will not in the province of Alberta belong to any individual. It belongs to the residents, the people of the province of Alberta. I think that is pretty common in other areas.

4:50

Also, there's a discussion, and again I go back to this thing: let's politicize everything. A member has indicated that we were being very – I don't know – aggressive, rude, bullying, overpowering with the idea that we needed to build some transmission infrastructure in this province. Mr. Speaker, I do have to say that in all the period of time that we have worked on that program – and it's been in my case eight years – there has never been, that I'm aware of, on the part of this government, most certainly on the part of the members of this government, any malice with respect to that issue at all. We did what we did with the best interests of this province and the citizens of this province in mind every step of the way.

Mr. Speaker, I will close by saying about the pieces of legislation that we put in place: do they require amendment? Could they be better? Absolutely. Will they be better under this Premier and under this government? Absolutely. They will be. I have to say, as we conclude the discussions that we're going to have here around this new private member's bill on these particular issues around the rights of individual Albertans, that we're already doing it. I'm afraid that as a member of this Legislature I will not be supporting this legislation.

Thank you.

The Deputy Speaker: Hon. Member for Edmonton-Calder, do you wish to speak?

Mr. Elniski: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's an honour for me to rise today to speak to Bill 201, the Alberta Bill of Rights (Property Rights Protection) Amendment Act, 2012, brought forward by the hon. Member for Calgary-Glenmore. Bill 201 claims to further clarify the rights of compensation and access to the courts in the case of expropriation as amended by the Alberta Bill of Rights with the following clauses: "full, fair and timely compensation" and the "right of recourse to the courts to determine the compensation payable."

Mr. Speaker, this bill is purported to strengthen property rights, and I believe that it is imperative that we discuss what has already been done in this matter. In November 2011 the Property Rights Task Force was created to consult with and listen to Albertans and to get a better understanding of people's concerns on property rights. As a member of that task force I attended a great number of those meetings, and I determined that in a relatively short time the

task force heard from well over 1,400 Albertans, both online and in person. Participants had the full opportunity to share their opinions in writing through an online survey or to come to one of the open houses. We attended those open houses as an opportunity for us to listen. In addition, two meetings with stakeholders were held in December, and face-to-face sessions were held in January in 10 communities across Alberta to give a good geographic sampling of where people were on this particular issue.

Mr. Speaker, on January 31 the Property Rights Task Force delivered its findings to the government. It was quite clear from that report that Albertans expect careful consideration of their concerns, suggestions, and solutions, which we have done. Furthermore, the viewpoints provided by the people of this province were consistent, and we heard concerns in four key areas. Albertans told us they must be actively consulted about the decisions that affect them. They need to be reassured that they have access to courts and the ability to negotiate or to appeal actions that would affect them and their land. Thirdly, when use of the land is absolutely required, they expect fair and appropriate compensation. Finally, they've asked for an advocate to help them navigate through the process.

These points are something our government has taken very seriously, Mr. Speaker, which is why this past February we introduced Bill 6, the Property Rights Advocate Act. Now, it is my absolute belief and the belief of my other colleagues in this government that the Property Rights Advocate Act is the correct way to go. However, Bill 201, while it is an interesting and useful document, is incomplete, and as a result I will not be supporting this particular bill.

Thank you, sir.

The Deputy Speaker: Any other hon. members wish to speak?

If not, the chair shall now recognize the hon. Member for Calgary-Glenmore to close the debate.

Mr. Hinman: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. It has been an enlightening discussion this afternoon. I must say that the government protests far too much for property rights and then says that it's all redundant. When you look at their past actions of the last two or three years, I guess actually going back to our last Premier – he was the one who started the discussions, saying that we needed a new royalty framework and at that time breached the mineral leases in the province, with no respect to those leases that were out there.

In closing, I want to address a few of the points this government has predictably raised as an excuse to defeat this bill to strengthen property rights. The government says that they fixed Bill 19, the Land Assembly Project Area Act. To a large extent that's true. But the purpose of this bill isn't about fixing Bill 19; it's about preventing another Bill 19.

They say that they fixed Bill 36, the Alberta Land Stewardship Act. Well, they did improve it with Bill 10, but they didn't fix it by any means, Mr. Speaker. There was nothing in Bill 10 from last spring that gives the rights or the protections to Alberta farmers and resource holders where the cabinet uses its new draconian powers under section 11 of ALSA to rescind water licences, feedlot and dairy barn approvals, forestry permits, gravel permits, development rights, mineral leases, grazing leases, et cetera.

Yes, property rights were protected, but leases and permits and other things were not. These are forms of property that the government can take with no compensation except what the minister thinks is appropriate. They showed that with LARC, that at any time one of these plans written up by the people – they can

lose their livelihood; they can lose their land – will be made useless, and they have no recourse to the courts for fair compensation.

There is no link between the cabinet's new section 11 powers under ALSA and the Expropriation Act. None. So don't tell us that there's the Expropriation Act that gives recourse to the courts because you just didn't write it into the bill. It circumvents it.

Section 15 of ALSA says that no one can make a claim for compensation to a decision-maker, which the act defines as including the Land Compensation Board. In section 17(4) ALSA trumps all other laws, including the Expropriation Act. Therefore, they have not fixed anything substantial with Bill 10, and we need more to protect Albertans, something solid. The government could still pass laws circumventing the Expropriation Act if they needed to, but they couldn't escape the need to achieve the minimum standard of compensating Albertans for property they take from them.

The other argument I've heard is that the Bill of Rights is good enough as it is. I'll repeat myself. In the last few years the due process of law clause has been openly abused by this government. They simply write in clauses saying that the minister's decisions are government policy, therefore circumventing it, and that's the key. The hon. member talked about the pressing needs for planning, required access, the fear of federal government intrusion, and they talked about the consultation on policy. This is the key issue, Mr. Speaker, and why we need to entrench Bill 201 into the property rights, because when the government passes new policy, it circumvents all of these other rights. It's just wrong.

The Justice minister had the audacity to mention Bill 6, the setting up of a property rights advocate, as if that's an answer to this amendment. Bill 6 basically sets up an ombudsman that will tell Albertans when and why they have no property rights. When the South Saskatchewan plan comes through, this person will have the unenviable job of explaining why, despite the Bill of Rights, they have no recourse to the courts, which has been revoked by ALSA. People don't want an ombudsman. They want property rights. They want a Bill of Rights to help them stand up to the government when they are being trampled on. If the government really cares about this issue, if they really mean it, if they don't want to threaten property rights in Alberta, then they should prove it and support this bill. If they don't, they are showing their true colours. They do not respect property rights. They have no intent to respect property rights.

Most important, Mr. Speaker, Bill 6 has a very slim chance of being passed before the next election is called. Therefore, again, it's just a facade. They're saying: oh, don't worry; Bill 6 is going to do it. But Albertans want and need property rights. It's the future of this province. It's the leg on which prosperity and peace stand, where a draconian government can't come in, take those mineral leases, take water leases, take a feedlot permit, and fail to compensate those individuals fully and properly. We need this amendment. I expect every person who truly believes in property rights to strengthen them by supporting this bill. Anything less than that is, again, pure corruption.

The Deputy Speaker: The chair shall now call the vote.

[The voice vote indicated that the motion for second reading lost]

[Several members rose calling for a division. The division bell was rung at 5 p.m.]

[Ten minutes having elapsed, the Assembly divided]

[The Deputy Speaker in the chair]

For the motion:

Anderson	Hinman	Swann
Forsyth		

Against the motion:

Amery	Fritz	McQueen
Berger	Goudreau	Mitzel
Bhardwaj	Griffiths	Oberle
Blackett	Groeneveld	Olson
Calahasen	Hancock	Quest
Campbell	Hayden	Rodney
Dallas	Horner	Rogers
Danyluk	Jablonski	VanderBurg
Doerksen	Klimchuk	Vandermeer
Drysdale	Knight	Weadick
Elniski	Lindsay	Woo-Paw

Totals:	For – 4	Against – 33
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[Motion for second reading of Bill 201 lost]

Motions Other than Government Motions

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Strathcona.

Condominium Reserve Fund Studies

502. Mr. Quest moved:

Be it resolved that the Legislative Assembly urge the government to improve the accuracy of condominium reserve fund assessment studies by setting and implementing standards for persons who conduct such studies at a level appropriate for the complexity of the studies.

Mr. Quest: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased to rise today and open debate on Motion 502. I'm proposing this motion because I believe that protecting owners of condos is of the utmost importance. Motion 502 simply urges the government to set standards for those conducting reserve fund studies on behalf of condominium corporations. I believe that by doing this, the government would decrease the likelihood of condominium owners being faced with unexpected special assessments for emergency repairs.

Ensuring the proper level of expertise for conducting condominium reserve fund studies would help reduce the chance of unexpected special assessments. Potential problems which may be missed by underqualified service providers could be caught earlier, reducing the cost of future repairs. The government, by setting standards for conducting condominium reserve fund studies, would help provide greater certainty to condo owners about the likelihood of unexpected special assessments.

Mr. Speaker, this government has implemented many initiatives, legislation, and programs necessary to protect Alberta's home and condominium owners. For instance, this government put in place the legislative framework in the Condominium Property Act and regulations for the creation and operation of any form of condominium, including residential and commercial. In the year 2000 this government put in place requirements to ensure that all condominium corporations had reserve funds able to cover depreciation of parts of common property which need to be replaced within a 25-year time frame.

This might sound a bit complicated, but in reality the principle behind it is simple. Condominiums age just like cars. You might be advised by an automotive manufacturer that certain parts need to be replaced after a certain number of kilometres or a certain period of time. For condominiums repairing or replacing

something such as an elevator, the carpet in the common areas, or the boiler can also be predicted to a reasonable degree with inspection and with expert knowledge. These predictions help the condominiums plan for these future repairs and replacements both financially and in the ability to plan projects in advance instead of waiting for emergencies to occur. The changes brought in by the government in the year 2000 have brought greater certainty to owners of condominiums about the costs in our province, and that certainly provides young families or individuals buying their own property for the first time a higher level of confidence and ensures that seniors, should they choose to downsize, will not be hit by unexpected costs when on a fixed income.

The certainty that condo owners already enjoy would be improved if the government ensured expert qualifications for conducting condominium reserve fund studies, by potentially catching deteriorating property years earlier than in the current inspection regime, and by properly costing property repairs and estimating replacement timetables. Many other provinces are much more specific about the qualifications of those conducting condominium reserve fund studies than Alberta. Some restrict the service solely to professional engineers. Some include a wide range of potential service providers amongst regulated professions. Still others take a hybrid approach between Alberta's broad allowance for qualified persons to conduct reserve fund studies while also providing specific examples of qualified, regulated professionals. I believe that by setting and implementing standards for those that conduct condominium reserve fund studies at a level appropriate to the task at hand, it would help protect condo owners while allowing those appropriately qualified to work, whether on concrete high-rises or on a community of bungalows in a subdivision.

Mr. Speaker, in the decade since the Condominium Property Act regulations were put in place by the government, the proportion of homes being built as part of a condominium corporation has grown steadily. We attribute this not only to changing consumer preferences driven by cost issues but to the quality of protections Albertans enjoy under the existing act. We certainly must be looking for ways to improve our act and regulations, especially as the proportion of condominiums as part of our housing stock grows. With more condos being built every year, that means the likelihood of inexperienced, unqualified individuals performing condominium reserve fund studies could perhaps be growing as new people are drawn to the industry to service the growing number of condo corporations. Setting concrete standards for those conducting studies would prevent condominium corporations from relying on inexperienced, unqualified individuals through no fault of their own.

Motion 502 builds on the initiatives that this government had already implemented in the year 2000 with the Condominium Property Act and regulations. In my opinion, Motion 502 would enhance current efforts to expand the protection of condominium owners in our province. Whatever the outcome here today, the debate and awareness surrounding this motion will be valuable. I hope the debate will inform current efforts to improve the protection of condo owners.

Mr. Speaker, I believe this government is already doing much to protect condominium owners, but why stop at what we currently do? Condominium special assessments for emergency repairs are still all too common today. To resolve this issue will require leadership, learning from other provinces' best practices that exist, and follow-through from our government. It's impossible to avoid all special assessments for emergency repairs or to account for every eventuality, but that doesn't mean that this issue does not require our ongoing commitment. I urge all hon. members to

follow this debate with interest and consider fully the advantages of making the changes proposed within.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

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

Mr. Hinman: Yes. I'd like to thank the hon. member for bringing forward this motion. Once again, we see where this government fails to act to protect people and their property, their condominium being a major asset that for many individuals is their home. They've invested a great deal of their money, hoping that this condominium protection act is going to protect them.

I must say, Mr. Speaker, that as I've been door-knocking this last week, when we were at home, I've been amazed at the number of people that actually talked about the holes and the problems with the Condominium Property Act and that there was very little protection in too many areas, too many holes that are of great concern to those individuals.

I think that this is a very good motion. It's disappointing that a government member even needs to bring a motion like this forward and that there isn't an actual bill coming forward to amend the Condominium Property Act. There are a few areas here that I guess I'd like to address and maybe ask the hon. member about. I've learned quite a bit in the last year about the condominium problems in Calgary and some of the challenges faced by those owners and how they struggle to make these payments on these extraordinary emergencies that need to be upgraded.

5:20

It's interesting. I guess it goes back to the root of one of the problems. Many of these condominium builders – and I shouldn't say many but, I guess, those that aren't doing the industry any favours. There are always a few bad apples in a box, but what do we do to ensure that they get pulled out?

One of the problems that we have is that there's no real assurance when a condominium is built that it really has been built to standards. I mean, an inspector has supposedly been through there, but we don't have the actual architect or the engineer sign off and have his credibility on the line. They don't have to have homeowner's insurance, that often people can get to protect themselves.

There's a lack, Mr. Speaker, in the ability of condominium owners to feel that safeguard, knowing that due diligence has been done, that these buildings are built to spec, and also that they're not deteriorating at a faster rate. This motion, we think, is very pertinent and should be certainly considered by this government by accepting it as we go forward.

Another understanding that I have. I had a realtor approach me last week, and he said that there's a real problem, that they don't have full disclosure before the close on what the problems are in a condominium and on how big the reserve fund is. There are just lots of areas there where it's very difficult to actually get to the actual knowledge or to have them reported during the AGM and to be able to get those notes and know what has been going on in the condo meeting and to know what could be addressed. People kind of have to almost go in and make an offer and do all of that blind until the very end, before that disclosure is there.

This is an area, Mr. Speaker, that is of great concern to many people. Again, not having this information has caused a lot of hardship to a lot of condo owners in the province and just shouldn't need to be. I think this is, like I say, a very straight-forward resolution.

Be it resolved that the Legislative Assembly urge the government to improve the accuracy of condominium reserve

fund assessment studies by setting and implementing standards for persons who conduct such studies at a level appropriate for the complexity of the studies.”

It’s just one of those things where we should have good reports. We should know with accuracy what the problems are and not be where all of a sudden, like I say, someone makes a lifetime investment only to find out that it’s collapsing underneath them.

Again, one of the individuals I spoke to last week bought a condominium for \$390,000. His job has transferred him. He needs to go out to British Columbia. Because of the emergency assessment on his building, the value has depreciated by \$100,000, and he’s not sure he can even get \$290,000. Plus, he’s got a \$30,000 assessment on top of that as the owner. This is just unacceptable. Yet the builder, again, seems to be able to walk away. He’s not bonded. There isn’t any detriment to the builder, and they just slough it off.

I think it’s important that we look at this and other legislation to ensure that those people that are buying condominiums know what they’re getting before they make an offer, that there is full disclosure of the minutes, of what’s going on in the associations’ meetings: what’s in the reserve, what things are deteriorating, and what’s the repair level that is going to need to be addressed?

I would like to support this motion, and I hope that other government members will as well. Perhaps we can at least pass one bit of legislation today that might secure people’s property here in the province of Alberta.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. minister of advanced education.

Mr. Weadick: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It’s a pleasure to rise today and speak to Motion 502 as brought forward by the Member for Strathcona, and I would like to thank him for bringing this motion forward.

The purpose of Motion 502 is to encourage the government to set standards for individuals who perform condominium reserve fund studies. It would help ensure that their level of expertise corresponds with the complexity of the study being done. Additionally, this motion will make sure that condominium reserve funds hold enough capital to adequately cover major repairs and replacement of any real and personal property owned by the corporation as well as any common property that is not normally repaired or replaced annually.

Mr. Speaker, reserve fund studies and the funds themselves have been mandatory since the Condominium Property Act and regulations were introduced in 2000 and for very, very good reasons. Before this time many condominiums had rainy-day funds to cover repair costs. However, it was not mandatory. As a result, some condominium boards and owners were left short of capital when it came time to make expensive repairs and replacements. I believe that these reserve funds are vital when it comes to condominium upkeep and consumer protection. In fact, that is why legislation was passed to make this mandatory.

With respect to the reserve fund studies section 38 of the Condominium Property Act 2000 states that

a corporation shall, subject to the regulations, establish and maintain a capital replacement . . . fund to be used to provide sufficient funds that can reasonably be expected to provide for major repairs and replacement[s].

The legislation also set out definitions for qualified persons in relation to reserve fund providers. A qualified person means an individual who, based on reasonable and objective criteria, is knowledgeable with respect to the depreciating property, the operation and maintenance of the depreciating property, the cost of replacement or repairs to the depreciating property.

Mr. Speaker, it should be noted that those are not the only criteria set forth regarding standards for home inspectors in our province. The Fair Trading Act as of September 1, 2011, set forth stricter requirements, and home inspectors must now be licensed by the provincial government. To qualify for a licence, inspectors must have successfully completed training from an educational institution approved by the provincial government and passed a test inspection, or they have to hold a certified master inspector or registered home inspector designation.

Determining the qualifications of home inspectors is not an issue in Alberta alone. For example, Nova Scotia’s condominium property regulations, under section 46 of their Condominium Act, have strict limits as to who is considered qualified to perform a reserve fund study. In fact, in that province the only persons qualified to prepare reserve fund studies were professional engineers licensed to practise in Nova Scotia. As well, they must have experience in costing, cost-flow forecasting, building construction, restoration, and familiarity with condominium legislation. These are relatively strict guidelines, but I think they warrant our attention when determining the direction that we will take as a province with respect to this matter.

Mr. Speaker, Motion 502 suggests that a qualified person should be held to a specific set of standards that are consistent throughout the province. In addition, it proposes the accuracy of the studies by ensuring that the provider is experienced at a level appropriate to the complexity of the study.

I believe these are all very valid points. In fact, prior to being elected, I worked in this field. It can be extremely complicated as you have a variety of types of condominiums. For example, some condominiums will have lands around them. Some of the condominium studies I’ve been associated with include paved parking lots, roadways, street lamps. They include fences and exteriors of buildings, mechanical systems. They may include common properties like entire buildings that are held for common purposes.

Mr. Speaker, the requirements for knowledge, if you’re going to try to determine what the value of the present building is, what the state of all the various systems are, and what it would take to maintain and manage them long term into the future, can be quite complicated. In fact, we used to arrive on-site with a whole group of engineers and experts that could look at various specific things like street lighting or mechanical systems.

I believe that it is very, very important that people, when they invest in a condominium, in their home, maybe the largest investment in their life, have a reason to believe that they understand the condition of that facility and the amount of funding that it will take to manage that facility long term and what the major pieces of work that could happen might be. If you were to move into a facility and then find out that it requires a brand new roof – each unit could be tens of thousands of dollars, Mr. Speaker – if there’s no reserve fund study, you could be left with that cost.

So I’m very pleased today to rise in support of Motion 502. I’d like to thank the Member for Strathcona for bringing it forward. I am pleased to support it. I would ask the other members of the House to support it. I’m interested in sitting down and hearing the remarks of my other hon. colleagues.

Thank you.

5:30

The Deputy Speaker: Is there any other hon. member wishing to speak? The hon. Member for Calgary-*Buffalo*.

Mr. Hehr: Yes, certainly. Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It is a privilege to rise and speak to this very forward-thinking

motion. As the Member of the Legislative Assembly for Calgary-Buffalo I can attest to the fact that many of my constituents live in condos and, in fact, face some of the challenges that this motion seeks to address. I know that many condominiums in my area have had significant things happen or go awry and that it has taken some astute financial planning and some creative financing to get things done.

With a motion like this set up first-hand, having a qualified person to analyze the true needs of what a condo reserve fund should look like and what it should actually be funding and some of the pitfalls and pratfalls that lie ahead for people in these dwellings is very, very important. I can attest to the fact that the condominium movement is just getting started. It is a more efficient, more economically viable, and also an energy efficient use by human beings living in their community. It can provide a lot of those options that people are looking for.

But some of the stories here in Alberta recently of possibly some situations where condominium reserve funds have not been sufficiently funded have caused people great concern. It gives them a great deal of unease when moving into a condominium. What are their liabilities? What are their future outputs? What are they like?

I would be remiss, too, if I didn't take this opportunity to dovetail some of this condominium legislation with some of the proposed stuff that is allegedly coming in next spring's budget under the Minister of Municipal Affairs and his department. I will note that B.C. has had condominium protection legislation since 1997. They have done sufficiently good work there to stem off some of the problems that they've had with rogue developers and things; in particular, with the building envelope and the like. I can attest that people in my community have had cash calls of \$30,000, \$40,000, and upwards of \$100,000 to remain in a condominium. These are people who have oftentimes spent their life savings to move into these places. To have significant condominium deficiencies arise a short time afterwards, within even a 10-year period, appears to me to be something that this government should be moving forward to in a rapid direction, if it shouldn't have been here years before.

It's something I'm looking forward to. I hope it has some teeth in it. I hope it allows for some supports for people who have been dragged under by rogue developers and shoddy construction work. I'm hopeful that the legislation will also address future challenges in this area.

I agree with the motion and will be supporting it. It speaks volumes to the future direction, the way our communities are going to be built and developed.

Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

The Deputy Speaker: Hon. members, I have here on my list the hon. members for Calgary-Buffalo, Leduc-Beaumont-Devon, and Calgary-Lougheed. The hon. Member for Calgary-Lougheed, then.

Mr. Rodney: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It's a great pleasure to rise today to speak to Motion 502 as brought forward by the hon. Member for Strathcona. I'd like to personally thank him on behalf of so many people I know who live in condos. This is indeed an honourable member. He's made some great strides in this regard. I'd like to acknowledge him for that.

Now, the motion urges the government to set standards for individuals who perform condominium reserve fund studies. By ensuring that individuals conducting the studies are amply qualified and have the level of expertise and experience appropriate given the complexity of such a study, this motion

suggests that the accuracy of these studies would see significant improvement.

I've actually seen both sides of this equation. Being a condo owner myself, I've been asked to support another \$25,000 for a parkade just because we didn't see it coming. I've also been on the other side, where I've been on a condo board as well. This motion addresses examples exactly like that. It proposes that a qualified person should be held to a set of specific, consistent, and province-wide standards. I know this isn't something that's just local to me or to the condo I've been associated with or to the people in my constituency; it's right across Alberta. That's why this is such an important motion.

In the long run, Mr. Speaker, the goal of the motion is to ensure that the condominium reserve funds hold enough capital to adequately cover major repairs or any replacement of property owned by the corporation and common property that's not replaced or repaired annually. We see a lot of groups getting into trouble because that is not the common practice for a lot of folks.

I would like to address particular circumstances regarding condominiums as well as the current relevant legislation as it pertains to the motion. The Condominium Property Act provides the legislative framework for the creation and operation of both residential and commercial condominiums. The act applies to anyone who develops or owns or manages condominium property, and it outlines basic rules and responsibilities for the condominium corporations. Under the purview of these corporations is the responsibility for reserve fund studies and relevant planning.

This goes back a dozen years. The Condominium Property Act and regulations were implemented back in the year 2000, and reserve fund studies were made mandatory way back then to protect the interests of condo owners. These reserve fund studies are very complex documents. I've seen them. The studies have to include a number of criteria, including an inventory of all the depreciating property that, based on regular usage, might need repairing or replacing within a quarter century; the present condition or state of repair of the depreciating property; an estimate as to when the repairs or replacements may be needed as well as the corresponding estimated costs of these anticipated repairs or replacements based on costs not less than those existing at the time of the report; and finally, the life expectancy of each component of the depreciating property once it's been repaired or replaced.

Now, I can freely admit that, like so many Albertans, I do not feel personally qualified to make these kinds of assessments, and I can understand why the hon. member is proposing that certain parameters are established to protect condo owners from people taking on this important task when they have little or no expertise. But that said, there are certain aspects of the legislation that may have a pitfall or two. It's possible that taking this kind of legislative action might introduce technicalities that work against the system rather than for it by barring potentially qualified and competent individuals from performing reserve fund assessments simply because they lack the official qualifications should the qualifications be defined too restrictively. So that's one thing we have to look out for.

I'd like to explore for the House the ways in which this type of legislation is played out in other jurisdictions which have taken slightly differing approaches to guarding against unqualified persons assuming this responsibility. For example, the Condominium Act of our friends a few provinces to the east, in Ontario, states that it's mandatory that the person conducting a reserve fund study must meet one of the following criteria, and there are a total of five:

1. Members of the Appraisal Institute of Canada [with] the designation of Accredited Appraiser Canadian Institute.
2. Persons who hold a certificate of practice within the meaning of the Architects Act.
3. Members of the Ontario Association of Certified Engineering Technicians and Technologists who are registered as certified engineering technologists under the Ontario Association of Certified Engineering Technicians and Technologists Act, 1998.
4. Members of the Real Estate Institute of Canada holding the designation of certified reserve planner.
5. Persons who hold a certificate of authorization within the meaning of the Professional Engineers Act.

5:40

Mr. Speaker, I think you get the impression. There are actually more qualifying criteria, but in the interests of time I will stop there. As you can see, the point is that while the province of Ontario thought it was appropriate to impose some restrictions on who might qualify to conduct such an assessment, it has included an array of options, making the legislation rather inclusive.

For another example we can look to our neighbouring province immediately to the east. That's, of course, Saskatchewan. Its condo property laws and regulations are found in the Condominium Property Act, that goes back to 1993, and in the condominium property regulations, which are actually a little more recent, 2001. In Saskatchewan a reserve fund study must be conducted annually and include a record of all of the fund's transactions. Moreover, the regulations from 2001 define a qualified person a bit more broadly as an individual who, based on reasonable and objective criteria, is knowledgeable with respect to one of the following:

- (i) components or a particular type of component;
- (ii) the operation and maintenance of components or a particular type of component; and
- (iii) the costs of replacement of or repairs to components or a particular type of component . . .
- (iv) a licensed applied science technologist within the meaning of The Saskatchewan Applied Science Technologists and Technicians Act;
- (v) a member of the Appraisal Institute of Canada holding the designation of Accredited Appraiser Canadian Institute;
- (vi) a person who holds a certificate of practice within the meaning of The Architects Act, 1996;
- (vii) a member of the Real Estate Institute of Canada holding the designation of Certified Reserve Planner; and
- (viii) a licensed professional engineer within the meaning of The Engineering and Geoscience Professions Act.

What's interesting about this, Mr. Speaker, is that while the Saskatchewan government has designated certain professionals as qualified to conduct this study, it has not limited those eligible strictly to professionals. This seems to have circumvented the matter that I raised earlier pertaining to the potential for this legislation to be unnecessarily and, if I may say, harmfully exclusive.

Nova Scotia, the last example, by contrast has gone the other way. Under section 77(4) of their condominium regulations the only persons qualified to prepare reserve-fund studies are professional engineers licensed to practice in Nova Scotia, with experience in costing, cost flow forecasting and building construction and restoration, and familiarity with condominium legislation.

Mr. Speaker, this government believes in supporting the rights of property owners, and it's apparent that condo owner protection could be strengthened in this area. As such, it's possible that this legislation is both useful and necessary. There are a number of variables at work here. I would suggest to colleagues that all factors be considered before deciding whether or not to support Motion 502, but with the intent and the way that we can flesh this out, I encourage all members to support this bill. I thank the hon. member once again for bringing it forward.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Deputy Speaker: Any other hon. member wish to join the debate on the motion?

Seeing none, the chair shall now recognize the hon. Member for Strathcona to close the debate.

Mr. Quest: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The goal of Motion 502 is to reduce the number of condominium owners facing emergency special assessments. Unfortunately, this does happen. It's not rampant, but there are many cases where condo corporations have commissioned people that they obviously believe to be fully qualified to do these reserve fund studies but, unfortunately, have found out a few years later that perhaps the people weren't necessarily qualified.

I can think of one example. I believe the special assessment for the condo owners in the project I'm thinking of was \$10,000 a year for three years per unit to do major work on plumbing and on the roof that should have been caught in that reserve fund study.

I think it is important that we narrow the definition of qualified persons that are able to do these studies. Having said that, I appreciate the comments from all of our colleagues here in the House this afternoon, and I urge all hon. members here today to vote in support of this motion.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

[Motion Other than Government Motion 502 carried]

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

Mr. Weadick: Thank you. Seeing the hour and the great work we've done today, I would ask that we now adjourn to tomorrow at 1:30.

[Motion carried; the Assembly adjourned at 5:46 p.m. to Tuesday at 1:30 p.m.]

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Province of Alberta

The 27th Legislature
Fifth Session

Alberta Hansard

Tuesday, March 6, 2012

Issue 12

The Honourable Kenneth R. Kowalski, Speaker

Legislative Assembly of Alberta
The 27th Legislature

Fifth Session

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Legislative Assembly of Alberta

1:30 p.m.

Tuesday, March 6, 2012

[The Speaker in the chair]

Prayers

The Speaker: Good afternoon.

Let us pray. Renew us with Your strength. Focus us in our deliberations. Challenge us in our service to the people of this great province. Amen.

Please be seated.

Introduction of Guests

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Finance.

Mr. Liepert: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I have the privilege today of introducing some department folks who've been on a tour of the Legislature. As I read their names, I would ask that they stand and at the end of the introduction be appropriately recognized by members of the Assembly. We have with us today Nicole Hartfield, Jennifer Hansen, Alex Gainer, Nikki Knudsen, Pam Chaillard, and Jeannie Gulinsky. Wherever they are, I'd ask them to stand. Give them an appropriate response.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Culture and Community Services.

Mrs. Klimchuk: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm thrilled to rise today and introduce to you and through to all members of this Assembly two bright groups of students, teachers, and parents from my constituency of Edmonton-Glenora.

From Youngstown elementary we have 17 grade 6 students joining us today along with their teacher Ms Cindy Annala and parent volunteers. They are in the public gallery, so if they could rise, please, and we could give them a warm welcome.

I also would like to introduce to you and through you, Mr. Speaker, 21 students from the grade 6 class of St. Vincent elementary school, their teacher Mrs. Angela Whelan, and parent volunteers Mrs. Charlotte Bast and Joan Hertz. I would ask them to rise to receive the warm welcome of the Legislature.

I hope both these groups have a wonderful time and enjoy question period today.

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

Mr. Sandhu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I have two introductions to make today. It's a pleasure to introduce to you and through you to all members of the Assembly a group of 30 future leaders in our province from York academic elementary school in my constituency of Edmonton-Manning. The students are accompanied by their teacher Ms Strasdin and parent helper Mrs. Dean. They're all sitting in the public gallery. I would ask them to please rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of this Assembly.

Mr. Speaker, it's also my honour to introduce to you and through you to all members of this Assembly very special guests from my constituency of Edmonton-Manning: Nicola Elniski, Andrew Parker, Marion McIlwraith, Stephen Parker, Matthew Kallio, Leeroy Gentles, and Ansar Bacchus. These visitors are teachers and former students from M.E. LaZerte high school. The Member for Edmonton-Calder will be speaking more on this group in his member's statement later on today. I believe they are

seated in the public gallery. I would ask them to please rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of this Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Intergovernmental, International and Aboriginal Relations.

Mr. Dallas: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I have two sets of introductions today. I first rise to introduce to you and through you to the members of this Assembly some special members of Alberta's francophone community. As our province prepares to mark the Rendez-vous de la Francophonie from March 9 to 25, it is only appropriate that we acknowledge some of the wonderful people who make up Alberta's francophone community. Earlier today I along with the hon. Speaker had the opportunity to symbolically raise the Alberta francophone flag in the rotunda of this wonderful building to kick off the Rendez-vous, which celebrates French language and cultures across Canada.

Joining us for that event and in the gallery today are representatives from the Association canadienne-française de l'Alberta: Mrs. Dolorèse Nolette, president, and Mr. Denis Perreux, executive director. Also in the gallery are a group of young adults from Francophonie jeunesse de l'Alberta, the provincial francophone youth organization that is marking a special milestone this year. Thirty years ago they helped design the wonderful Franco-Albertan flag that we raised today and in more than 25 communities across the province last Friday. Welcome to Mr. Rhéal Poirier, executive director. Finally, I want to acknowledge some staff members from my ministry's Francophone Secretariat who work to support Alberta's French-speaking community: Mr. Denis Tardif, the executive director of the Francophone Secretariat, and Kate Peters, community liaison officer. I wish these individuals une bonne célébration and ask them to please rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of the Legislative Assembly.

Mr. Speaker, I would also like to introduce to you and through you to the members of the Assembly my second set of guests today, students and teachers from Clé Sèniore choir. I along with many members of this Assembly had the opportunity to hear these talented young adults sing in the rotunda earlier today as part of the kickoff ceremonies for the Rendez-vous de la Francophonie. After their performance the group was given a French-language tour of the Legislature and are now joining us to watch today's legislative proceedings. The Clé Sèniore choir is unique in that it is made up of francophone high school students from two different Edmonton schools, l'école Maurice-Lavallée and l'école Gabrielle-Roy. Under the tutelage of Executive Director Véronique Duquet and choral leader Marie-Josée Ouimet these young people have the opportunity to express themselves through French language music to the delight of their listeners. I now invite them to please stand and receive the warm welcome of the Assembly.

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

Mrs. Sarich: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It is an honour and a privilege for me to rise today to introduce to you and through you to all Members of the Legislative Assembly three guests representing the Anatolian Heritage Federation and member organizations. We had an absolutely wonderful meeting earlier this afternoon. It is my honour to welcome them, and I would ask them to please rise as I mention their names.

Sukan Alkin is president of the Anatolian Heritage Federation of Canada. The Anatolian Heritage Federation is an umbrella organization for ethnocultural institutions having ties to the geographic region of Anatolia or Asia Minor. The membership strives to promote respect and mutual understanding amongst all

cultures and faiths with a goal of influencing global peace and harmony.

Also, I'd like to welcome Ahmat Tamirci, director of the Intercultural Dialogue Institute. The Intercultural Dialogue Institute, Mr. Speaker, is an Anatolian Heritage Federation member organization. It's not for profit, headquartered in Toronto, and currently operating nine chapters across Canada with two chapters in the province of Alberta.

I'd also like to welcome Ibrahim Cin, executive director, Intercultural Dialogue Institute, Edmonton chapter, formerly of Harmony Dialogue (Group). The Intercultural Dialogue Institute, Edmonton, was founded by a group of volunteers concerned about bridging the lack of knowledge and unfamiliar traditions and beliefs so that it would act as a catalyst for mutual understanding within multicultural groups.

I would now ask my guests to accept the traditional warm welcome of the Legislative Assembly. Thank you.

1:40

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods.

Mr. Benito: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It is my distinct pleasure to introduce to you and through you my visitors who are seated in the public gallery: Mrs. Lulu Bernal, treasurer of the Council of Edmonton Filipino Associations, or CEFA; Mrs. Tina Tolvay, president of the Friends of Edmonton Millwoods Multicultural Association, or FEMMA; Miss Dory Gonzales, our constituency assistant for Edmonton-Mill Woods. Miss Gonzales was responsible for opening our constituency office when I was elected in 2008.

Most of all, Mr. Speaker, I would like all of you to join me in welcoming a special visitor, who is also seated in the public gallery. As we all know, without the help of our spouses it is impossible for all of us to do our jobs as MLAs of this Assembly. My wife of 33 years, the pillar of my family, and to borrow a phrase from a religious song, the reason why I am able to stand on mountains and walk on stormy seas, the mother of our three children and my best friend: Estrella Benito.

I would like to ask all my visitors and my wife to rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of this Assembly.

Members' Statements

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

Thom Elniski

Mr. Elniski: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It is commonly believed that to succeed in basketball you need two things, height and heart. While in my family I am visibly regarded as having the height, there was another who had the heart. I speak of my cousin Thom Elniski, who sadly passed away at age 55 in 2004.

His legacy is the difference that he made in the lives of the students at M.E. LaZerte high school. Thom was more than an educator. He was a leader, a mentor, and a fine basketball coach, to such an extent, Mr. Speaker, that to this day, eight years after his untimely death, the students and alumni play an annual basketball tournament in the Thom Elniski gymnasium at M.E. LaZerte high school. This is the first year the tournament included senior teams. Senior teams were what Thom coached best.

Thom started his teaching career in 1973 at Victoria school, but his true love was the east end, the east end kids, phys ed, and LaZerte. Thom ran the phys ed program at LaZerte in the best interests of those who were the most important to him, his students. It's very easy for a kid to get lost in a school of 1,500

students, but Thom was always undeterred. His goal in all things was to help his kids, his teams be everything that they could be.

He has been described by alumni as a father figure and as a fair, if old-school, leader. Andrew Parker, one of the alumni introduced earlier, summed Thom up very well. Thom asked him: "How do you want to be remembered? Do you want to be remembered as the guy who had all the talent, got kicked out of school, and wound up doing nothing with your life? Or do you want to be the guy who went to college, went to play pro, and had his dreams realized?"

He rewarded effort, often at the expense of results, and likely never thought that his legacy in public education would go far beyond educating and focus on helping his students learn about life. As is evidenced by the group here today in the gallery, the work of my cousin Thom continues today, eight years after his death. It was nothing spectacular or calculated, Mr. Speaker. What he did, he did naturally. It's what we call heart.

Thank you.

Judicial Inquiry into Health Services

Mr. Anderson: Mr. Speaker, the Premier keeps insisting she stands by her word. That's very nice. The problem is that Albertans are wondering just which of her many words she is standing by. Is it her words during the PC leadership when she said that the health queue allegations "when combined with earlier allegations of a culture of intimidation, has provided an impetus to call for an independent inquiry?" Or is she standing by her words stated three days before the first PC leadership vote to Rick Bell at the *Calgary Sun* when she said that she would call a "full-blown probe to look at whether docs who spoke out against screw-ups in the health care system were intimidated"? Perhaps it was her word in question period last fall when asked about the alleged bullying of Dr. Magliocco and she told this House

I'm pleased to see that . . . if someone does have concerns with respect to doctor intimidation, they would be prepared to come to an inquiry. The legislation will be tabled in the House today to ensure that that can happen . . . physicians are going to be able to testify with protection.

Or was she standing by her word 10 days ago when asked by Don Braid at the *Herald* if the inquiry would include the allegations of queue-jumping and physician intimidation and the Premier answered: "It has to be."

Now, I don't know what standing by one's word means in Ottawa, Afghanistan, South Africa, or any of the other places the Premier has lived, but I do know what it means in Alberta. In Alberta standing by one's word means actually keeping your word, otherwise known as telling the truth. When you make a clear promise to hold a public inquiry into physician intimidation in order to win votes during a leadership race, that means you call that inquiry, whether it's politically convenient or not. Premier, you have broken your word and have broken the trust of Albertans. Call the public inquiry into doctor intimidation as you promised and as doctors across this province are calling for. Anything less will show just how little your words are worth.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Creek.

Edmonton-Mill Woods Persons Case Scholarship Winners

Mr. Zwozdesky: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, every year the Alberta government awards Persons Case scholarships to students who are studying in programs that will lead to the advancement of women or those studying in nontraditional programs for their gender. This year 315 applications were received, and 44 of them were awarded scholarships.

This scholarship was created in 1979 to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the Persons Case. The scholarships honour five Alberta women – Henrietta Muir Edwards, Nellie McClung, Louise McKinney, Emily Murphy, and Irene Parlby – who in 1929 achieved a very significant milestone for all women. Known as the Famous Five, these women took the Persons Case issue to the British Privy Council, where it was confirmed that women in Canada were allowed to be in the Senate and, as a result, were considered persons under the law.

The Alberta government recognizes how essential it is to support the advancement of women and the enormous contributions women make to all aspects of our society. We support a number of employment programs that, like the Persons Case scholarship, assist women in pursuing nontraditional occupations. For example, the women building futures program supports women pursuing careers in the trades. We know that supporting women in reaching their full potential is critical to the success of our province.

I would like to recognize three Persons Case scholarship recipients from my constituency: Ms Tina Cowan, who is studying for her master's in family and marital therapy at Loma Linda University's Canadian campus and received a \$2,000 award; Ms Mandy M. Kahlmeier, who is studying law at the University of Alberta and received a \$2,000 award; and Ms Gloria Leung, who is studying for her master's in engineering management at the University of Alberta and received a \$1,000 award.

Congratulations to all recipients of this year's Persons Case scholarship. In my capacity as a former minister responsible for women's issues I wish each and every one of you the very best in your education and in your future careers. You are doing outstanding work on behalf of all women and all citizens in this area, and we are all very, very proud of you.

Thank you.

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

Departing Thoughts from Grande Prairie-Smoky

Mr. Knight: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I rise today to recognize and thank individuals who were instrumental in my privileged opportunity to represent the riding of Grande Prairie-Smoky: first and foremost, my wife of 46 years, Diana, and our three supportive children along with 10 grandchildren and two great-grandchildren; next are two very special friends, Tony Yelenick and Rita Boyer, who encouraged and counselled me over these years; then, all the members of my constituency association and the voters who gave me this honour; once here, the support of staff, notably Miss Stacey Leighton, Jason Ennis, and Marie Buck; and so many others who made this job enjoyable.

The riding of Grande Prairie-Smoky and, indeed, all of our great province has made impressive forward strides under the three leaders I have served, and now our Premier Redford is poised to move us to even greater success. This government's support for agriculture, forestry, energy, and other industries has maintained a robust economy, allowing for the very solid support this government continues to provide in my riding in crucial areas of health care, education, and social services, and infrastructure development in all these areas is required and appreciated. A special achievement is the union of Grande Prairie Regional College and the new medical centre.

Mr. Speaker, I have come to understand that politics is a matter of physics: you have to move a mass through a distance, and it takes enormous, focused energy to succeed, in this case human energy provided by all the members of this Assembly. To their great credit

they have moved this province forward to the enduring benefit of all Albertans. It brings to mind a sign in Mr. Royce's shop: "Whatever is rightly done, however humble, is noble."

In closing, Mr. Speaker, I must thank you for your masterful management of this House. I thank all of my colleagues, the cabinet, and the caucus in this Assembly. [applause]

1:50

Oral Question Period

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

Long-term Care for Seniors

Dr. Sherman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. In spring 2005 Auditor General Fred Dunn's damning report on the dismal conditions in Alberta's long-term care facilities included a warning against overmedicating residents. Enforcing Dunn's recommendations could have saved Carol Pifko, who died on May 1, 2009, after receiving several double doses of the powerful antipsychotic drug Zyprexa, which is not approved for patients suffering from dementia. To the Minister of Health and Wellness: is it government policy to overmedicate high-needs seniors with dementia into a vegetative, a potentially lethal state as a management strategy for overworked staff?

Mr. Horne: Well, Mr. Speaker, I won't dignify the tone of that question by responding specifically to the question. What I will say is that I'm aware of what has been reported in the media about this very unfortunate case. I do not yet have any facts beyond that point. I have no reason to believe that any other patients in Alberta are in danger as a result of receiving overprescribed doses of this medication, but we're certainly looking into it. This matter is also the subject of a fatality inquiry, which is under way as we speak.

Dr. Sherman: Mr. Speaker, dignity is all our seniors want, and they want to be dignified.

Given that the Minister of Health and Wellness knows full well that the number of seniors in Alberta and the complexity of the care that they will need is only going to increase, why then is it the minister's strategy to put seniors into private facilities, which provide fewer hours of care with a lower level health care provider and with no on-site registered nurses?

Mr. Horne: Mr. Speaker, it is the policy of this government to build affordable continuing care spaces for all seniors and to bring the health care to them as their needs dictate, including patients who require what is currently described by the opposition as long-term care. The reality is that we have continued to fulfill our commitment to open over a thousand continuing care spaces per year to meet our goal of 5,300 spaces in total. Many of these new spaces offer the opportunity to scale up health care provided as patients' needs change over time. This is what Albertans are asking us to do, and this is what we're delivering.

Dr. Sherman: Mr. Speaker, I'm a doctor who still works in the system. That's the problem. The minister doesn't understand it. Minister, how many more tragic stories like those of Audry Chudyk, who nearly died in her feces and still is struggling to live, and Carol Pifko must we hear before this government abandons its grossly inadequate and inhumane long-term care scheme and builds more publicly delivered long-term care spaces?

Mr. Horne: Well, Mr. Speaker, the hon. leader seems determined to continue in his practice of talking about very unfortunate

specific cases in this House and extending those to a generalization and a condemnation of all care provided in our continuing care facilities. This government will not participate in that sort of a discussion. We are happy to listen to constructive ideas about how to improve continuing care across the province, but beyond that, no thank you.

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

Municipal Financing

Dr. Sherman: Mr. Speaker, this hon. leader will continue to stand up and fight for those bullied and without a voice. Despite the government's bullying of the AUMA president, the province's municipalities have shown the courage of their convictions with an ad campaign that respectfully asks for a new funding relationship with the province. What they need is simple. They need a fix for the problem that towns and cities receive only 10 per cent of the public's tax dollars, which doesn't even count royalty dollars. They're starving for critical funding in the richest place on earth. Will the Minister of Municipal Affairs follow the lead of the Liberals and start treating municipalities as equal partners instead of children to be berated and boycotted?

Mr. Griffiths: Mr. Speaker, I've been very clear from the beginning, from the day I was appointed, that it's very critical that we work with municipalities to build better communities. That's what this is about. The Alberta Urban Municipalities Association works very hard with us to work on MSI. It helped write the formula in 2007, and right now it delivers \$900 million to municipalities in this province, unprecedented anywhere else in Canada.

The Speaker: The hon. leader.

Dr. Sherman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It was a good start, Minister. Unfortunately, it's not working.

To the Minister of Municipal Affairs: will your ministry follow the lead of the Alberta Liberals, who believe local government is the best government, and provide the tools our municipalities need to survive and thrive by introducing a new deal for cities, by giving them a right to share in Alberta's wealth rather than being reduced to holding their hands out and depending on the tender mercies of a government that bullies and intimidates and picks winners and losers?

Mr. Griffiths: Mr. Speaker, I'm very glad that the hon. member listened to the speech that I gave at the AUMA breakfast a couple of weeks ago, where I got a standing ovation from the Urban Municipalities Association, that talked about the changes to MSI funding, that talked about a new Municipal Government Act that would deal with the challenges municipalities have, that would deal with the municipal sustainability strategy to help provide municipalities with the resources they need, and a new civic charter, all four pieces that now he advocates after I released them a couple of weeks ago.

The Speaker: The hon. leader.

Dr. Sherman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Given that those poor municipal leaders had to stand up and clap after his letter because they were scared of losing their grants – they had no choice – to the Minister of Municipal Affairs: now that the AUMA are

standing up to this government once again, can we expect the minister to deal with this in a mature fashion and sit down with them and, hey, you knock out a deal that's going to work best for our municipal leaders and municipalities?

Mr. Griffiths: Mr. Speaker, I met with the AUMA this morning. We met again at noon with our rural caucus colleagues – oh, they don't have any – and we talked about the challenges the AUMA has and their ad campaign going forward. There was a mutual agreement that we are going to work on MSI, we are going to work on the municipal sustainability strategy, the Municipal Government Act, and the civic charter to help address municipalities' needs. We are working together.

The Speaker: Third Official Opposition main question. The hon. Member for Calgary-Mountain View.

Judicial Inquiry into Health Services

Dr. Swann: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Doctors are not usually a noisy, complaining lot, preferring to negotiate and reach a mutual accord, one that each side can live with. Today, however, the Alberta Medical Association has taken a very aggressive, full-page ad to very loudly express its beliefs about the Premier's promise for a public inquiry that involves doctor intimidation and mismanagement. This coming just before an election should be seen by the government as a very, very ominous sign. To the minister: will the government realize that the whole world knows exactly what the Premier promised . . .

The Speaker: The hon. minister. [interjection] The hon. minister has the floor.

Mr. Horne: Mr. Speaker, we are aware of the ad that appeared today in the *Edmonton Journal*, and what I will say is what I said earlier in this House this week and last week. The government continues to be in uninterrupted negotiations with the Alberta Medical Association and Alberta Health Services toward a long-term agreement. We said when we came in here in October that we were committed to providing a stable and predictable environment for our physicians and other health care workers. To that end we've invested \$93 million to support our physicians over the next year. I have a difficult time finding anyone who wants to argue with that.

Dr. Swann: Well, Mr. Speaker, this is not about money, and this minister knows it's not about money. It's about improving access and quality of care in this province. That's what they're negotiating about. Why won't the government follow the Canada Health Act and negotiate with doctors instead of strong-arming them and imposing yet another evidence of their control?

Dr. Sherman: It's about respect.

Mr. Horne: Mr. Speaker, it certainly is about respect.

The \$93 million that I referred to, that will further support physicians over the next year, will see primary care networks get their first funding increase since 2003. That money will go to support the addition of other health professionals to work as part of the primary care teams. It will go to support additional chronic disease management and other programs that support patients and families and communities. We know our doctors are committed to that. We're prepared to continue working with them.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Dr. Swann: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. No funding increase for nine years, and suddenly we come up with this just before an election. Isn't that interesting?

I'll go back to the first question. To the Deputy Premier: will the government realize that the whole world knows exactly what the Premier promised and exactly how she's dancing around the promise and broaden the terms of reference for the Health Quality Council public inquiry?

Mr. Horner: The Health Quality Council presented a very good report. This government and this Premier accepted all 21 recommendations in that report. And, Mr. Speaker, we took a step further because the Health Quality Council actually said that no public inquiry into doctor intimidation was required because those resources would be better spent on other measures. The Health Quality Council report made that comment, but we went a step further. The Premier made a commitment to do a judicial inquiry into queue-jumping. That's exactly what we are doing. A promise made, a promise kept.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Fort McMurray-Wood Buffalo.

2:00

Provincial Tax Policy

Mr. Boutilier: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. The Wildrose has been very clear on taxes: no tax hikes. Period. The PC government is obviously running scared. We've obtained an ad script, which I will table, for a new taxpayer-funded government ad intending to counter the Wildrose pledge to not raise taxes. This government ad isn't about a new program or a project. It's not even a public service announcement. It's a purely political ad using Albertans' hard-earned tax dollars. To the Premier: how much are you willing to spend on these partisan ads, and will you direct the PC Party . . .

The Speaker: The hon. Deputy Premier has the floor.

Mr. Horner: Mr. Speaker, I have no idea what the hon. member is referring to because I have not seen whatever document it is that he claims to have in his possession. I'm assuming that I will see it, but I will tell you this. The Wildrose went out and did a stunt. They said: oh, sign the pledge. Well, you know what? Every cabinet minister in this Legislature has signed a pledge to a budget. I look forward to those members supporting that budget in this House because there are no tax increases in that budget.

Mr. Boutilier: Mr. Speaker, I have a suggestion for you. Why don't you save Albertans half a million dollars by scrapping these taxpayer-funded campaign ads? Instead, you should simply sign the Wildrose pledge to not raise taxes. Period. I have it right in front of me. Save us a whole bunch of time and wasted taxpayer dollars.

Mr. Horner: Again, Mr. Speaker, every year that we do a budget, we spend dollars on informing Albertans of what is contained in that budget and what it means to their lives. Albertans want us to do that. The amount that we're spending represents roughly around 10 cents for every Albertan in the province so that we can communicate and have a two-way dialogue with Albertans because that's what they asked us to do.

As to the hon. member's pledge again I say: where is their pledge not to privatize health care; where is their pledge to actually do the things that they're not telling Albertans they're

going to do? Mr. Speaker, our pledge is the budget that's before this House.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Boutilier: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. He can't hear because his Q-tips are falling in. No one is talking about 2012 except for you.

Premier, it's the four years after 2012 that people are worried about. Given you won't pledge to not raise taxes if re-elected, can you at least show Albertans a little respect and intelligence and tell us how much you are planning to increase taxes? Maybe you can run some commercials about that. It would be far more informative to Albertans.

Mr. Horner: Mr. Speaker, rather than stunts and political grandstanding, what we have done is presented a three-year business plan to the Legislature in this House. We're debating that as we speak. Again, I look forward to all of those hon. members passing our budget and three-year business plan because there are no new taxes in either the budget for this year or the three-year business plan. There is a \$5 billion surplus two years out. Why would you be talking about raising taxes?

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

Judicial Inquiry into Health Services

(continued)

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. The Alberta Medical Association is challenging this government. It has just published advertisements in Alberta daily newspapers saying: how sick is the Alberta health care system? It's clear that doctors have lost confidence in this government over the handling of the health system. They know what we've been saying for a long time, that you cannot trust this Tory government with our health care system. My question is to the health minister. Why has this government broken its promise to Alberta's doctors and to all Albertans to hold a full public inquiry into intimidation . . .

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Health and Wellness.

Mr. Horne: Mr. Speaker, the Deputy Premier has already answered this question earlier in question period today. The fact of the matter is that a commitment was made by our Premier to hold a public inquiry into queue-jumping. As we have said before, to the extent that that mandate involves allegations around physician interference, those allegations will be explored as part of the inquiry. It is an independent process, and it would be very interesting and perhaps refreshing if other hon. members would care to consider that prior to inquiring further into its proceedings.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Mason: Thanks very much, Mr. Speaker. Well, it's clear from this ad that the government has lost the confidence of the province's doctors. It says, "Alberta's doctors have been threatened and intimidated with loss of their jobs and licences to practice when they advocate on behalf of patients" and that a promised inquiry has not been forthcoming. So my question is: why has this government so mismanaged the health system as to lose the confidence of Alberta's doctors?

Mr. Horne: Well, Mr. Speaker, the Alberta Medical Association is quite capable of speaking for itself, and it has done so through the ad that the hon. member has referenced.

The fact of the matter is that over the past four months this Premier and this minister of health have been working very collaboratively with Alberta's doctors to make some specific improvements in the system that they have been asking for for some time. Those include the unconditional \$12 increase in primary care network funding on a per capita basis, a 2 per cent increase for all other physicians, and a commitment to ongoing negotiations.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Mason: Thanks very much, Mr. Speaker. Well, given that listening to this minister, you'd think they were just on a honeymoon together, it's surprising to read in this advertisement: "While the Alberta Government may not want to hear what Alberta's doctors think, we'd like to hear what you think." How can the minister stand there with a straight face and say that he's got a great relationship with Alberta's doctors when they put this out in a newspaper and pay to contradict your propaganda?

Mr. Horne: Mr. Speaker, Alberta's physicians have been without a long-term agreement since March of 2011. That eight-year agreement was many years in the making. It was the result of a lot of collaboration and discussion and vision for the future of the health care system, vision that was shared by government and Alberta's physicians. Our commitment to the next long-term agreement, which we are continuing to negotiate, is for nothing less than that.

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

Municipal Property Tax Relief

Mr. Snelgrove: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Through no fault of their own many residents of a condo in Fort McMurray have been forced out. Regardless of who's fault it is – it's certainly not theirs, and I think the municipality would be sure that they may share part of the inspection blame – the fact is that they are still required to pay municipal property taxes on property that they can't inhabit. My question would be to the Minister of Municipal Affairs. Has he been approached or would he consider action that would exempt people who are unable to inhabit their dwelling because of situations like that to be exempted from their property tax assessment?

Mr. Griffiths: Mr. Speaker, that's a great question. I have been asked by one individual, I think, if there was an option there. Currently we don't have a program in place that would provide such relief. We had one circumstance which had occurred, but again it was a major disaster in the province and fell under our disaster recovery program because the impact was so great to the municipality. Our sympathies are definitely with the people who resided in the condo, and we're working very diligently on four different options that will help make sure we improve the quality of construction so that this doesn't happen again.

Mr. Snelgrove: Mr. Speaker, I think we've seen through the news in the last couple of weeks that there may be other projects that were built in the boom times that may not have undergone the thorough inspection that was there. So my question or suggestion to the minister, maybe, is that rather than getting further along in a situation that then requires a solution, would the minister consider developing a policy that would deal with these situations before they arise?

Mr. Griffiths: Well, I think it's worth considering, and I'm willing to discuss it with those who would represent the condo owners who are in such a situation. The condo owners have to remember as well, as do people who are in this situation, that they can still work out a solution with their municipalities at the local level to deal with the challenges they have with tax. In circumstances like the situation in Fort McMurray it's before the courts right now, and I'm sure that they're going to be looking for restitution on that.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

The hon. Member for Calgary-Buffalo followed by the hon. Member for Lesser Slave Lake.

Full-day Kindergarten Programs

Mr. Hehr: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. During her leadership campaign the Premier promised to reintroduce full-day kindergarten within one year of forming a government. To the Minister of Education: six months later what are the results?

Mr. Lukaszuk: Mr. Speaker, that tells you something about the member's involvement. We're midstream, mid school year. I don't imagine this member actually expected us to start a kindergarten the next day. We're working right now with school boards, and we're looking at how this will be implemented. Number one, there are obvious infrastructure limitations. Some schools that are at full capacity right now will not be able to embrace a whole new grade level. The fact is that the intention is there to make full-time kindergarten available to all Albertans, and the implementation of it will be done in collaboration with school boards.

Mr. Hehr: Well, my follow-up question is: will you be introducing full-day kindergarten in September to keep the Premier's promise?

Mr. Lukaszuk: Mr. Speaker, as I said earlier, we will be working with school boards. The government has the full intention of making kindergarten available. Obviously, that may not be possible in some areas, where the schools are already at capacity. We will be looking at infrastructure options. School boards and this government will be working to make sure that all Albertans have kindergarten, and we will be implementing it in a way that is possible and doesn't obstruct provision of education to other students in the system.

2:10

Mr. Hehr: Mr. Speaker, I need some clarity. The minister appears to be answering a question without really answering it. What percentage of our schools will have kindergarten in them this upcoming September?

Mr. Lukaszuk: Mr. Speaker, I can't make it any more simple, so I'll say it slower. The Premier has made a commitment that children in Alberta will have full-time kindergarten paid for by the government of Alberta. I am currently working with the school boards to implement that initiative. We will be implementing it in a phased-in way because there is the natural fact that certain schools simply can't accommodate one extra grade level. It's a matter of physics. If a school has a capacity of 200, you cannot put in more students if there are already 200 students in that school. It's something we're working through, but the commitment is there and will be delivered on.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Lesser Slave Lake, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Meadowlark.

Slave Lake Disaster Recovery Contracts

Ms Calahasen: Thank you. Mr. Speaker, we have put in millions of dollars to rebuild Slave Lake and region. In this rebuild we offer millions of dollars in two-year interest-free and payment-free to help local companies to rebuild or start a new business, which is great. Then we put out contracts like the FireSmart program for our three communities, and these contracts have been awarded to out-of-area and out-of-province communities. Of course, my question is to the Minister of Municipal Affairs. What gives? What process is being awarded to . . .

The Speaker: The hon. minister, please.

Mr. Griffiths: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The government of Alberta has a \$289 million recovery plan for the Slave Lake region, and I'm very proud of the work that we've done to implement that plan. The plan also includes within it the FireSmart initiatives, and the contracts were awarded through the Sustainable Resource Development department. Those awards are essentially based on a request for qualifications and then chosen by the municipality. It's a very fair, open, and transparent process.

Ms Calahasen: Mr. Speaker, although it may be fair and transparent, local contractors use local labour and use local businesses, which, in turn, helps companies and people to get on their feet. These contracts should have been awarded to at least an Alberta-based company and preferably local. Why was that not considered?

Mr. Griffiths: Well, Mr. Speaker, let me be really clear. The process in Slave Lake is a process that's the same in any other forest protection area in the province. The FireSmart contracts are awarded in the same manner any other government contract would be according to TILMA and the New West Partnership and the agreement on internal trade. It follows the rules and the guidelines in a fair, open, and transparent process that allows contractors to bid.

Ms Calahasen: TILMA, TILMA, Mr. Speaker. Then why are our Alberta contractors being refused work in B.C. when they have the capability and willingness to do the work just like the people who come from B.C. to Alberta? To the Minister of Intergovernmental, International and Aboriginal Relations.

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Dallas: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. If there are Alberta companies that feel that they're being unfairly treated, I'd certainly encourage them to contact my office. We have trade agreements with all the other provinces to provide a mechanism to deal with Alberta companies that might be unfairly being shut out. We've been working diligently to break down trade and labour barriers across provinces. We always support Alberta companies just like we supported the Alberta CGAs in Manitoba in a recent intervention.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Meadowlark, followed by the hon. Member for Calgary-Fort.

Westlawn Courts Seniors' Residence

Dr. Sherman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. In my hand I have a two-

page letter dated August 31, 2011, from Orlan Weber, president of the Pillar society that runs the seniors' Westlawn Courts. The letter states:

The building is now approximately 30 years old. There are some very expensive major repairs required [over] the next few years. Unfortunately, again, the government has done a long term condition report and has not allocated any funds for upgrades in the next several years.

Up until 2015. There's mould in the building from leaking water. The carpets are old, and our seniors have allergies. To the Minister of Municipal Affairs: when can you provide funding to fix this facility for my seniors?

Mr. Griffiths: Mr. Speaker, I would be happy if the member would send over the information. I'm not aware of that particular circumstance. We work very hard in Municipal Affairs, where we have housing as well, to partner with the local housing groups in the community. So if they have an issue, I'd be happy if they brought it forward so I could address it.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Dr. Sherman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. In fact, here is a letter dated September 20, 2011. We did send a letter to the previous minister, at that time of housing and urban affairs, and he states in his letter that "Ministry staff is working closely with the Society to ensure maintenance and staffing issues at Westlawn Courts . . ." How can they solve these problems when they clearly state that there is no funding? We have been working with the ministry, Minister. When will you show leadership and fix this building for these good seniors?

Mr. Griffiths: Mr. Speaker, as I said before, this is a particular case that I don't have any information on. I haven't seen it in the briefing notes, regardless of what they'd like to counter. If they'd like to send the issue over, I would love to work on it because there is nothing more important than providing adequate housing, especially for seniors, in our communities.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Dr. Sherman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Given that this was the neglect that I talked about that has led to a horrifying infestation of bedbugs for my seniors and my tenants, the tenants are furious after a second round of fumigation and disruption in the lives of these vulnerable people, good people. To the Minister of Health and Wellness: when can the residents of Westlawn Courts expect their unwanted and unwelcome bedbug companions to be gone?

Mr. Horne: Well, Mr. Speaker, as the hon. Minister of Municipal Affairs has just said, he would be pleased to look into this. I would be pleased to co-operate with him in that. If the hon. member opposite wishes to table the correspondence that he's presenting here today, we'd be happy to look into the matter.

The Speaker: The hon. member for Calgary-Fort followed by, if you're ready, the hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

Workforce Employment Services

Mr. Cao: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. Alberta is the land of prosperity. Many Albertans are taking advantage of great employment opportunities to enjoy a wonderful quality of life. But there are Albertans who, through no fault of their own, find themselves in unfortunate situations and truly need assistance before they can join the workforce and support a family. My

question is to the hon. Minister of Human Services. Minister, in your very large department what is your priority for servicing Albertans caught in difficult situations and who don't know where to turn?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. As Budget 2012 says, "Investing in People," Human Services is all about serving people. We have nearly 60 Alberta Works centres across the province, located throughout the province and there to assist Albertans who are in the circumstances that the hon. member just described, Albertans who are seeking employment, seeking advice on getting a job, those who are temporarily out of the workforce. The staff can help with career counselling, can help with resumé services, can help people get a job, can help people who are unable to work with assistance to bridge their needs in their time of need.

The Speaker: The hon. member, please.

Mr. Cao: To the same minister: given that Alberta is not an inexpensive place to live anymore, with ever-rising costs of food, shelter, and utilities, what is the status of income assistance rates now?

Mr. Hancock: Mr. Speaker, income supports are temporary measures to help people in their time of need. This year the income supports benefit rates will be going up by an average of 5 per cent to deal with the rising cost of living, and as our economy continues to improve and more people are able to find jobs, we do expect that fewer people will access income supports under the people-expected-to-work or working category. The benefits that we provide are very comparable to our neighbouring provinces.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Cao: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. To the same hon. minister: given that a number of my constituents' cases were not accepted as being severely handicapped for AISH but they are not able to work due to medical treatment for a serious illness, are there government programs to help these Albertans? If not, are you going to look into it?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Hancock: Well, yes, Mr. Speaker. One of the things that we want to ensure is that no Albertan in need falls through the cracks. So if there's an Albertan who through medical disability or other reason cannot have work, cannot do work, they can be supported under the supports for independence program. The level of assistance will depend on each person's situation, including their financial resources, their special needs, their ability to work, the number of dependents or children in the family. Someone who has barriers to full employment or is unable to work due to illness and meets the eligibility requirements will receive those benefits.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre followed by the hon. Member for Bonnyville-Cold Lake.

Residential Construction Standards

Ms Blakeman: Thanks very much, Mr. Speaker. I reviewed the exchange from yesterday between myself and the Minister of Municipal Affairs, and I find his responses quite puzzling. Now, I agree and am very grateful that the work was done on Slave Lake. It was important and urgent. To the minister. The minister seems

to be telling me that every staff member in the department spent all of their time and energy working on Slave Lake. Really? MSI grant administration, all the legislation drafters, library services, public safety: everyone was seconded to this file? Nobody was left? Come on, Minister.

2:20

Mr. Griffiths: Mr. Speaker, the dedication of the staff at Municipal Affairs to the Slave Lake issue permeated the entire staff. Many were moved to work on the Slave Lake issue, but other staff had to move in and fill the gaps. A couple of things had to be put on hold. I'm sorry the member didn't understand it. I thought I made it fairly clear.

Ms Blakeman: No. I understood it. It was just a little murky coming from you.

Well, back to the same minister. Now, given that the same laundry list that's been repeated by previous ministers even in a media release from last June, nine months ago, has the same items as the list the minister gave me yesterday – mandatory home warranty, increased fines, increasing time limits, better education for safety code officers – some fairly limited changes, clearly the department knew exactly what it was going to do. Nothing has changed in the last nine months, so why isn't it done?

Mr. Griffiths: Mr. Speaker, as I said before – and I'm sorry that the member didn't listen – the new home warranty program is with the legislative drafters, and it should be coming forward any time soon. I hope it comes forward before the election, but it may be after. But it's coming soon.

The changes to the Safety Codes Act, which increases the fines and limitations, is proposed for this fall. Because there are some other changes to the act that we also need to make, we'd like to do them all at once.

The Safety Codes Council is providing education training to the safety codes officers; 92 per cent of them have received or are in the process of receiving their training.

We've made excellent progress, Mr. Speaker.

Ms Blakeman: Well, we still don't have the legislation we were waiting for, and you knew exactly what you were going to be doing.

The final question to the minister: given the extensive consultation that the minister says was done, why does this list not include the protections that Albertans told us were most important, like an interest-free loan fund that home and condo owners could apply to if they were losing their homes, literally losing their homes because of additional assessments due to shoddy construction? I have one constituent that's been assessed \$34,000.

Mr. Griffiths: Mr. Speaker, I don't know whether it's the provincial government's responsibility to have interest-free loans for those sorts of circumstances. Our role is to make sure that we increase the quality of the production, which we're doing from the initiatives that I've listed before. That's our role.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Bonnyville-Cold Lake, followed by the hon. Member for Calgary-Glenmore.

Parental Choice in Education

Mrs. Leskiw: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Prior to the break we were discussing in this House the importance of choice in Alberta's education system. This importance rings very true for countless families in this province, including many in my constituency of

Bonnyville-Cold Lake that choose to home-educate their children. They can share their family values and beliefs and build a continuous learning environment in all family activities. My question is to the Minister of Education. Does this minister and this government continue to support the principle of education choice and home education?

Mr. Lukaszuk: The short answer would be an unequivocal yes. We pride ourselves in Alberta on the plethora of choice that's being offered to parents. It is one of the pillars of Alberta Education that makes our system so renowned. Not only do we want parents to have choice between a variety of schools, but we want them to have the option to home-school. [interjections] Mr. Speaker, I understand the members from the Wildrose Alliance don't want to hear my answers. Should I continue?

The Speaker: Hon. members for Vermilion-Lloydminster, Edmonton-Highlands-Norwood, Edmonton-Strathcona, Calgary-Currie, Fort McMurray-Wood Buffalo, and Airdrie-Chestermere, if you want to have a caucus meeting, out, please. We'll continue with the question-and-answer period.

Hon. member, continue, please.

Mrs. Leskiw: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. This is even worse than my grade 8 class.

My second question is to the same minister. Given that parental and family choice on topics such as religion and human sexuality is absolutely fundamental, can this minister assure all parents, home educators included, that they will still maintain the right to exempt their children from such programming?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Lukaszuk: Mr. Speaker, thank you. This is very ironic. The Member for Airdrie-Chestermere, who claims to be the proponent of home-schooling and religious rights, wouldn't even care to listen to the answer.

The fact is, Mr. Speaker, that it's personally important to me and it's important to the Premier and to every member of this caucus that any and all rights and protections that home-schoolers enjoyed in the past continue in the future. It's a very important pillar of Alberta Education, and nothing is to change at all. [interjection]

Mrs. Leskiw: Well, we'll talk about a detention for you later.

Allow me to ask this question bluntly and without equivocation. Is there any intention at all to change any aspect of home education in this province? Yes or no?

Mr. Lukaszuk: Mr. Speaker, no. The fact is that home-schoolers are providing fabulous education to our children in Alberta. They are enjoying the protection under the law, and this protection will remain just the same.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Glenmore, followed by the hon. Member for Calgary-Varsity.

Judicial Inquiry into Health Services (continued)

Mr. Hinman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. On page 9 of today's *Calgary Herald* there's a full-page ad taken out by the Alberta Medical Association. There it is in black and white: "Just How Sick is Alberta's Health Care System?" In it the AMA says that the Premier's promised inquiry into physician intimidation "has been scrapped." They quote the Health Quality Council's report,

which says that doctors have been threatened and intimidated. To the Premier: are you going to deny the AMA's unprecedented public rebuke from Alberta's doctors, who are advocating for their patients because of your government's destructive political meddling and poor management of our health care system? Call a full public inquiry.

The Speaker: The hon. Deputy Premier.

Mr. Horner: Well, Mr. Speaker, I think I answered this question already today. In the Health Quality Council report they did discuss the fact that there was intimidation of doctors. In fact, in some of the recommendations they talk about how we can change the policies around advocacy for patients as well as advocacy for other doctors and their departments and their college. We accepted all of those recommendations. Those task forces will be coming forward.

As to the judicial inquiry, Mr. Speaker, the promise was for a queue-jumping inquiry, and that's what we're going to do.

Mr. Hinman: Well, Albertans and the AMA and the opposition will keep asking the question until they answer it. Given that the Premier's current terms of reference for the public inquiry is about as useful as a doctor saying, "We'll see every sick person in the province, but we won't treat them," when will the Premier keep her word and call a full public inquiry, where senior health officials will have to testify under oath?

Mr. Horner: Mr. Speaker, that's exactly the inquiry that has been called in terms of the queue-jumping, as has been alleged in the past. You know, the opposition over there is great at alleging a whole raft of things, and then when there's no proof, they allege something else, fearmongering for Albertans on this thing.

Here's where we're going with this right now. The Premier promised a judicial inquiry on queue-jumping. We're going to have one. It has already been launched. That's where we're going, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Hinman: I would call that clueless to queue-jumping. That's not what it's about. It's about doctor intimidation. Again, the Premier has clearly failed the people of Alberta by standing on her word rather than keeping her word. The cover-up, the intimidation, and the corruption are real, and they continue. Stop putting yourself and the PC Party ahead of Albertans, and call a full public inquiry, where the Premier and the previous health ministers will have to testify under oath. A full inquiry.

Mr. Horne: Mr. Speaker, what our Premier said last week and what I will say again today is that the government accepts all of the findings in the report with respect to physician advocacy. We are not putting the findings in dispute. We accept them. We recognize that they are a serious problem in Alberta.

What I find most remarkable, Mr. Speaker, is the opposition's total ignorance of all of the recommendations in the report, meaningful actions that were intended to deliver results on this issue, which is important to our physicians.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Varsity, followed by the hon. Member for Calgary-Mackay.

PDD Administrative Review

Mr. Chase: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Last year after significant delay the previous Seniors minister released a report on the administrative review of the province's persons with developmental disabilities program conducted by KPMG. This report

concluded that of the \$592 million then spent on PDD, \$142 million, 24 per cent, went to administrative costs instead of front-line service delivery. To the Minister of Seniors. As we heard two weeks ago during the debate on the Seniors budget estimates, current administration costs remain a whopping . . .

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. VanderBurg: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. You know, I'm very proud of the work that our PDD regions, their chairs, and their boards do around this province. There is no doubt that one of the issues that came up with the previous minister was to do a review of administration costs. I can tell you that they are valued members, and with our service providers they do great work on behalf of Albertans. I wouldn't want to be without them.

2:30

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Chase: Thank you. Awfully expensive front office when front-line servers aren't looked after.

When and what is the minister going to do to ensure that a program vital to vulnerable Albertans is, in fact, sustainable? Instead of all the money in the office, how about some on the front lines?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. VanderBurg: Well, thank you. Again, you know, the 9,600 people that we serve under the PDD file: 46 per cent, severe disabilities; 32 per cent, severe mental disabilities; many, many with both. I'm wondering if this member feels that we're better off not serving these individuals because, I'll tell you, we'll have a debate then. You and I will have a debate. These people are valued Albertans, they're vulnerable Albertans, and I'll stand up for them.

Mr. Chase: Mr. Speaker, it is the PDD clients for whom the money should be spent, not in the offices administering the programs. What steps since the release of KPMG's report has the ministry taken to enhance efficiencies to meet clients' needs, not pencil sharpeners in offices?

Mr. VanderBurg: Mr. Speaker, it's very well known that these PDD boards and regions and their valued members do great work on behalf of Albertans. One of the things that we've said very clearly is that we must make sure that whether you live in Lethbridge or Whitecourt or High Level, the services for our clients and the outcomes are the same. These fine groups of volunteers and individuals that run these organizations are striving towards that, sir.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Mackay, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Skilled Labour Shortage

Ms Woo-Paw: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. A newly formed Alberta Coalition for Action on Labour Shortages consists of more than 15 major Alberta business groups. Since a projected deficiency of 114,000 workers over the next decade represents a serious threat to the future of the economic growth of our province, my questions are to the Minister of Human Services. What is your ministry doing to more aggressively recruit the needed skilled workers locally, internationally, and from the foreign workers who are already here?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Hancock: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. That number of 114,000 workers over the next 10 years actually comes from the projections done by our department. We're working very closely with business, industry, the building trade unions, and others in the province to project not only the requirement for trades and what's going to happen as we build this province as the economy strengthens but also looking at how we're going to attract the workers. Obviously, we need to focus on Albertans and Canadians first, helping students get the skills that they need to move into the trades, but that's not going to provide all of the people we need.

Ms Woo-Paw: Would the minister inform the House of progress your ministry is making in response to the recommendation from a government of Alberta report on the impact of temporary foreign workers that calls for the development of a mechanism to work with employers in industry sectors to advocate for Alberta's labour needs and issues?

Mr. Hancock: Mr. Speaker, we have been working very closely with business, industry, and the building trade unions with respect to advocacy in this area. First of all, we're looking at our own processes to make sure that we carry out our processes with respect to temporary foreign workers and the provincial nominee program as efficiently and effectively as possible, with the least amount of red tape and the least amount of problems for applicants. But we also need to work with the federal government to make sure that our programs as part of the national immigration strategy . . .

The Speaker: The hon. member, please.

Ms Woo-Paw: Perhaps you'll have another chance to expand on it.

What is your ministry doing to advocate for Alberta's industry sector employers on reforming the screening process under the temporary foreign worker program as well as improving the efficiency of the application approval process for employers?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. We're very proud of our immigration unit in Human Services. They do excellent work. In fact, while there was a review of the provincial nominee program across the country, for which the results just came out in January, and there were some concerns raised by the federal government about areas of fraud, language, and other issues, I can categorically assure Albertans that we do not have those problems. Our program is held up as the standard in the country.

Now, there's more work that we can do, but quite frankly it's not about expanding the temporary foreign workers – we have about 64,000 temporary foreign workers in the province now – but it's about finding those people who will come and make Alberta their home.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar, followed by the hon. Member for St. Albert.

Revenue from VLTs and Slot Machines

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you. Since this government quietly changed the accounting method for VLTs and slot machines in 2000, \$14 billion in gross profit has been generated. These accounting changes, unfortunately, hide the fact that the government takes 30 per cent in profit from gamblers who bet at

VLTs. My first question is to the Minister of Finance, who is in charge of this program. Why are cash-in, cash-out totals for VLTs and slot machines not included in the information that's publicly disclosed in the government's books?

Mr. Liepert: Mr. Speaker, I've answered this question several times before. We account the way the Auditor General recommended, and we're going to continue to do it that way.

Mr. MacDonald: It was the board that made the changes, not the Auditor General's office.

Again to the same minister: given that the AGLC tracks cash-in, cash-out totals for each VLT across the province, why are these cash-in, cash-out totals, which tell the truth on the real government take in profit, not included in the information that's publicly disclosed in the government's books? What, sir, are you hiding?

Mr. Liepert: The member is right. It was the board that made that decision, based on the recommendation of the Auditor General.

Mr. MacDonald: I have the audit slips for the information of the hon. minister.

When will this government start telling the truth and tell the VLT players that the government takes in profit from their bets 30 per cent, not the 8 per cent that you declare publicly in the brochures to warn them of potential gaming problems?

Mr. Liepert: Well, Mr. Speaker, if this hon. member is suggesting that the Auditor General's recommendation is not telling the truth, then I think he's got a problem because, as I said earlier, the recommendation came from the Auditor General. We followed the recommendation, and if he has a question about telling the truth, then I suggest he take it up with the Auditor General.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for St. Albert and then the hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Family Care Clinics

Mr. Allred: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. My question is to the Minister of Health and Wellness. During the leadership campaign last summer the Premier proposed family health clinics. How do you see family health clinics functioning as opposed to the present primary care networks?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Horne: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and thank you to the hon. member for the question. Family care clinics, as they're called, are intended as an additional enhancement to primary health care delivery in Alberta. They are not a substitute for primary care networks, which have been very successful. There are over 40 of those operating in the province at the moment.

Family care clinics are, again, a team-based approach to delivery of care. They include enhanced supports that support better health for all Albertans in related sectors like mental health and addictions, housing supports, links to community organizations, and are also expected to serve as training centres for health professionals.

The Speaker: The hon. member, please.

Mr. Allred: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. They seem very similar, so I would pose a further question to the Minister of Health and

Wellness. Do you propose to continue the primary care networks alongside family health clinics, or do you propose at some point in time to amalgamate them into one operation?

Mr. Horne: Well, Mr. Speaker, we do not intend to discontinue support for primary care networks. As a matter of fact, the government has just invested \$33 million in additional support for primary care networks across the province. Family care clinics are yet another enhancement to primary care delivery options for all Albertans. As we have always said, we are interested in offering services that are unique to the needs of the communities they serve. Family care clinics will be no different.

The Speaker: The hon. member, please.

Mr. Allred: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My final question to the same minister: what are the cost implications of family care clinics, and do they fall within the 6 per cent increase that was allotted to Alberta Health Services in next year's budgets?

Mr. Horne: Mr. Speaker, the government's plan is to introduce three family care clinic pilot projects across the province. These pilot projects will be evaluated by an advisory committee that includes the Alberta Medical Association, the College and Association of Registered Nurses, and representatives of other professions. The total cost of the three pilot projects is \$15 million, and yes, it will be accommodated within the Alberta Health Services budget.

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

Revenue from VLTs and Slot Machines

(continued)

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. According to the office of the Auditor General – and this is a direct quote – the board, the AGLC, ultimately changed the accounting policy. For the Minister of Finance to try to slough this off on the office of the Auditor General is, to say the least, politically incorrect. My question again to the Minister of Finance: why does the AGLC track the cash-in, cash-out totals for each VLT across the province?

2:40

Mr. Liepert: I'll repeat again: because it was based on the recommendation of the Auditor General, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. MacDonald: That's not true, Mr. Speaker, and the hon. minister knows that.

Now, again to the minister: are commissions to the VLT licence holders based on cash-in, cash-out totals or on cash played versus cash won? Which is it?

Mr. Liepert: Mr. Speaker, the accounting of the AGLC is done based on the advice of the Auditor General.

Mr. MacDonald: I can see, Mr. Speaker, why that hon. fellow is not involved in health care anymore, and thank goodness . . .

The Speaker: Okay. Let's get on with the question.

Mr. MacDonald: My question is to the Minister of Service Alberta.

The Speaker: Okay. That concludes the question period for today. Today we've had 18 opportunities for members to raise

questions. We had – let's see – 106 minus one, the last one, so 105 questions and responses in all.

We will continue with the Routine in 30 seconds from now.

Members' Statements

(continued)

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

Alberta Hospital Edmonton

Mr. Sandhu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Whether it's directly or through someone we know, addiction and mental illness impact us all. Alberta has been a leader in its approach to dealing with these issues. Last fall this government announced an addiction and mental health care strategy. Yesterday at Alberta Hospital Edmonton in my constituency the hon. Minister of Health and Wellness announced an investment of \$40 million in several initiatives, all stemming from the strategy, that will help some of our most vulnerable populations.

By focusing on counselling and prevention and treatment services in primary health care, we will help Albertans get the care they need up front and prevent problems down the road. By enhancing the mental health care capacity building in schools initiative, we will help increase student awareness and support for mental well-being and suicide prevention. The increased support for Albertans with complex needs offers a much-needed lifeline to those who need it most. Support like outreach workers will help clients live as independently as possible in their community.

Finally, Mr. Speaker, creating four specialized mental health inpatient units with 80 beds at Alberta Hospital Edmonton will provide the best possible services for patients with specialized needs whose needs cannot be met in the community.

I am proud to live in a province where we take care of our most vulnerable populations and offer treatment and prevention right in our communities.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

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

Integrity in Government

Mr. Chase: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Government thugs. This government has reached the height of hypocrisy with Bill 2, the Education Act, in which it proposes to eliminate bullying at the school level. When the biggest bully in Alberta's political schoolyard proposes to eliminate its own well-documented worst practices, Albertans must realize that this is a clear-cut case of: do as I say, not as I do, or suffer the consequences.

Over the past decade 60 children have died while in the supposed care of the Alberta government while hundreds more have suffered injury and neglect. The majority of these bullied and beaten children have been First Nations. Abuse has not been eliminated; it has simply been moved from government-controlled residential schools to government-sanctioned and -subsidized residences.

Alberta provincial government bullying begins at birth for the 73,000 children currently living below the poverty line and for surviving family members does not end with their loved one's death, far too frequently precipitated by inadequate long-term care and denied the dignity of affordable, available palliative care.

Injured workers who qualify for workmen's compensation are bullied back to the unsafe workplace where they were first hurt by real threats of having their benefits reduced or cut off by case

managers who receive bonuses for reducing their files. Farm workers in Alberta do not even qualify for workmen's compensation or safe workplaces. Teachers, doctors, front-line caregivers, public service employees have contracts imposed upon them by this government rather than collectively bargained.

The input of publicly elected officials, whether municipal or school board, is only considered if they've bought tickets to the Premier's fundraising dinners or to their local Tory MLA's golf tournament.

Seniors are about to be given a pre-election break on their property taxes so that they have enough money left to pay for their long-term care after this government removes the cap.

Apathy is democracy's worst enemy. On election day end the bullying. Cast your vote.

Presenting Petitions

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

Mr. Chase: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I have a petition with the first 91 signatures. This was prepared by Marilyn Marks, representing the Alberta Grandparents Association. The petition reads as follows:

To the Legislative Assembly of Alberta, in Legislature assembled:

We, the undersigned residents of Alberta, petition to the Legislative Assembly to urge the Government of Alberta to introduce legislation to provide grandparents with specific rights of access to their grandchildren to enable grandparents to maintain ongoing contact with their grandchildren.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Tabling Returns and Reports

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

Ms Blakeman: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. On behalf of the Leader of the Official Opposition I would like to table two documents that he referred to during question period today. The first is the appropriate number of copies of a letter to the attention of Gerry LeBlanc, signed by the president of Pillar society, outlining the tenants' concerns about stains on walls and ceilings, mould, cleanliness of carpets, and allergies.

The second letter is a response from the then minister of housing and urban affairs, noting that ministry staff "is working closely with the Society to ensure maintenance and staffing issues at Westlawn Courts are resolved." That's dated September 2011.

Thank you.

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

Mr. Chase: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I am tabling a further 20 e-mails, out of the hundreds I've received, from the following individuals who are seeking the preservation of the Castle wilderness, believing clear-cutting will damage the ecology, watershed, wildlife, and natural species and that it must be prohibited at all costs: Elizabeth Miller, Barbara Boettcher, Michael Haack, Jennifer Kuzmicz, Ben Murray, Brent Harris, Linelle Henderson, Monique Passelac-Ross, Olivier Graham, Patricia Cameron, Anna Cairns, Kameron Weicker, Dr. Johan Lindsjo, Michael Kolman, Leanne Anderson, Elmer Wolochaty, Beverly Kunz, Laura Hessel, Louise Broderick, and Karin Nelso.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Education.

Mr. Lukaszuk: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'd like to table the requisite number of copies of a letter addressed to myself from the Association of Independent Schools and Colleges in Alberta, representing all Christian independent and private schools, supporting and endorsing Bill 2, the Education Act, in its current form.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Fort McMurray-Wood Buffalo.

Mr. Boutilier: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. In question period today I asked the Deputy Premier why Albertans are paying for a political ad of the government. I wish to table the proposed script of the government partisan ad, that would be paid for by Alberta taxpayers rather than the PC Party.

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

Mr. MacDonald: Yes. Thank you very much. I have a number of tablings today, and they're all centred around the questions that I had asked earlier. The first is an audit report for VLT ID SO5826 from the Commercial Hotel in Edmonton. This one is dated the 18th of February.

The second tabling I have is an audit ticket from the Treasure Pot Dining Lounge & H2O Lounge. The VLT ID is W06341, and it's dated the 22nd of February. I also have one from the same establishment dated the 27th of February, and it indicates the cash-in, cash-out totals that are calculated by AGLC.

2:50

I have additional audit tickets from the Commercial Hotel for VLT ID S05826 and its cash-in, cash-out totals here as well as cash-played, cash-won.

I also have another audit ticket from the Treasure Pot Dining Lounge, this one dated the 28th of February. It gives you a cash-in, cash-out read on this VLT as well as games played, games won.

Finally, Mr. Speaker, I have . . . [interjections]

The Speaker: You have the floor, hon. member.

Mr. MacDonald: Yes, but I'm having difficulty with the behaviour.

The Speaker: No, no. You're talking to me.

Mr. MacDonald: Yes.

The Speaker: There's no behaviour problem. If you're talking to me, there's no behaviour problem.

Mr. MacDonald: Well, there still is. There still is.

The Sherlock Holmes Pub on 98th Avenue, the audit ticket for VLT ID S06083, this one dated the 26th of February, and it again gives cash-in, cash-out totals as well as cash-played, cash-won.

Then I have another one from Elbow River Casino lounge in Calgary. It's dated the 18th of February, and it again displays cash-in, cash-out totals as well as cash-played, cash-won.

Tablings to the Clerk

The Clerk: I wish to advise the House that the following document was deposited with the office of the Clerk: on behalf of the hon. Mr. Denis, Solicitor General and Minister of Public Security, responses to questions raised by Mr. MacDonald, hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar, and Ms Notley, hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona, on February 13, 2012, Department of

Solicitor General and Public Security, supplementary supply estimates debate.

Orders of the Day Committee of Supply

[Mr. Zwozdesky in the chair]

The Deputy Chair: Thank you very much. Hon. members, I'd like to call the Committee of Supply to order.

Main Estimates 2012-13

Education

The Deputy Chair: Before I call on the hon. Minister of Education, I would like to remind members that today is day 10 of the throne speech consideration, which pursuant to Standing Order 19(1)(c) means that the vote must be called at 5:15 p.m. today. Therefore, Committee of Supply must rise and report progress prior to that time.

Also, at that time all officials on the floor will be requested to leave as quickly as possible, and once the Assembly has voted and Government Motion 10 has been addressed, we will return to Committee of Supply to continue consideration of this department's estimates, at which time ministry officials will be welcomed back into the Assembly.

Please note that we have a total of three hours allocated for this department's estimates, and as provided for in Government Motion 6, the committee may continue its consideration past the normal adjournment hour until it is complete. This means we may well go beyond the normal adjournment hour of 6 p.m. in order to conclude this particular set of estimates debate.

I will now call upon the hon. Minister of Education to begin. I'll just remind people that we will be following the same procedure as previous estimates debates in terms of the combinations of time and the allocations thereunder.

Hon. Minister of Education, I would invite your opening remarks.

Mr. Lukaszuk: Well, thank you, Mr. Chairman. It's a pleasure and an honour to be here before you and before our colleagues in the committee. Joining me today in the Chamber are Deputy Minister of Alberta Education Mr. Keray Henke; Mr. Michael Walter, assistant deputy minister of strategic services; and Gene Williams, executive director of strategic financial services. Up in the gallery listening very attentively and cheering us on are Ellen Hambrook, assistant deputy minister of education program standards and assessment; George Lee, director of budget and fiscal analysis; Kenneth Poon, senior manager of corporate budgets; and Janice Schroeder, director of communications. I'd say hello to all of them.

Mr. Chairman, I would like to present the ministry's 2012-2015 budget estimates and business plan. There are five programs in the budget. Our vote estimates begin on page 63 of the estimates book. We have two primary funding streams that are important to note, the government and lottery fund estimates, totalling about \$4.4 billion, or about 65 per cent of the budget, which we will be voting on later in this session; and the education property taxes, which total approximately \$2 billion. Approximately \$1.8 billion of this amount resides in the Alberta school foundation fund. The remaining \$270 million goes to local separate school boards that choose to collect their education property taxes directly from their

municipalities. These amounts are outlined on page 65 of the estimates.

Mr. Chairman, in addition, \$26 million is allocated to a work-in-progress for Alberta schools alternative procurement, or ASAP, schools and \$327 million . . . [interjection] Did I read something wrong?

Mr. Hehr: I was just complimenting the hon. member on his tie.

Mr. Lukaszuk: Oh. He has a very nice tie, I agree, but maybe we'll focus now on Education. We'll discuss our ties later, and life will be good.

The Deputy Chair: Hon. minister, through the chair.

Hon. Member for Calgary-Buffalo, please, you'll have your turn at the appropriate time.

Mr. Lukaszuk: Just in case anybody missed it, Mr. Chairman, in addition, \$26 million is allocated to a work-in-progress for the Alberta schools alternative procurement, or ASAP, schools and \$327 million for the teachers' pension plan. These nonvote amounts are outlined on page 69 of the estimates.

When you combine the \$4.4 billion voted in estimates, the \$2 billion in education property taxes, and the \$353 million in statutory expenses, support for the K to 12 education system reaches nearly \$6.8 billion and will grow to about \$7.1 billion over the next three years.

Excluding capital, the ministry's operating budget, Mr. Chairman, increased – and I have to underline increased – by \$216 million, or 3.5 per cent, this year; \$213 million, or 3.3 per cent, the following year; and \$245 million, or 3.7 per cent, in 2014-2015. As desired by Albertans, for the first time in the history of this province we have a three-year predictable budget.

The breakdown of the ministry's five programs begins on page 64. One, ministry support services, the first program in our budget, represents the corporate function of the department. This program increases by 3 per cent due to the provision of a 4 per cent salary settlement. Two, operating support for public and separate schools, the second program: the voted portion of this program is \$3.8 billion. If you include the nonvote amounts from education property taxes and the statutory obligation for the teachers' pension plan, operating support to the public and separate schools increases by \$198 million, or, if you wish, Mr. Chairman, 3.4 per cent, to \$6.1 billion.

What does this budget provide for school boards? Well, let me tell you, Mr. Chairman. It finishes the funding commitment for the 2011-2012 school year, provides 4.54 per cent for the base instruction and class-size grants for the remaining five months of this particular school year, and provides sustainable and predictable funding. Did you hear that? Sustainable and predictable funding.

3:00

It provides grant rate increases of 1 per cent, 2 per cent, and 2 per cent for the base instruction and class size grants over the next three years. Most other grant areas will see a 2 per cent increase. It addresses enrolment growth and cost-of-living increases. Enrolment is expected to increase by approximately 1.5 per cent, or about 8,300 new students, plus we expect a 10 per cent increase in the number of students that will require English as a second language programs, a 3 per cent increase in FMNI population, and an 8 per cent increase in early childhood services, children with disabilities.

Also, Mr. Chairman, it introduces a new inclusive education grant that provides \$68 million, an increase in funding. This is the

first step in implementing a new funding model that supports inclusive practices in schools across Alberta, and it ensures that boards have the flexibility to support the unique needs of every learner in their classrooms. Funding will be used to provide the supports and services that parents and teachers identify as most beneficial to students, including instructional supports and assistive technologies. School boards will continue to have the flexibility to meet their local needs, including enhancing the availability of supports such as speech-language and physical and occupational therapies.

There is a new way of calculating and allocating funding based on many different factors. What's important here, Mr. Chairman, is that this transitional year every board will see a funding increase. Going forward, we'll see how this new model works and whether we need to make changes.

Supports for rural schools is a significant feature of this year's budget. We upped our support through a couple of funding areas. The new equity of opportunity continues last fall's \$107 million funding addition by focusing on supporting equitable access for students. The new grant has three components, the first one being a per-student component of \$156 for all boards; second, a component that addresses distance funding; the last, a component that helps remote communities.

Student transportation funding also increased, Mr. Chairman, by \$14 million, and some of this was specifically to help rural communities. In addition to providing a 2 per cent grant rate increase for transportation, grants enhanced funding in other transportation areas. The fuel price contingency program, which provides funding whenever the diesel fuel price is above 60 cents, will continue. We're expecting co-operative transportation funding to urban boards to encourage more efficient busing; in other words, fewer buses following each other through the neighbourhoods and shorter rides for children on buses.

We're addressing declining rural populations, special transportation for students with disabilities, and interschool transportation so that students can be transported to other schools if courses are not being offered in the school of their neighbourhood. As mentioned in the 10-point plan for education, Mr. Chairman, we are conducting two transportation trials aimed at reducing bus ride times and enhancing the educational experience of students on a bus by making Wi-Fi available.

Other provincial initiatives that support students continue: \$48 million for the student health initiative to increase student access to specialized support services such as speech-language pathology or audiologists; \$232 million for the small class size initiative; \$41 million for the Alberta initiative for school improvement grant to support local projects that help improve students' learning. Funding was reduced in last year's budget. This year's grant remains at the reduced level plus a 2 per cent grant rate increase.

Funding for plant operations and maintenance of school buildings increases to \$482 million, providing school boards with a 2 per cent grant increase.

As was previously mentioned, the government provided \$327 million to the teacher's pension plan, an increase of \$27 million, or 9 per cent. This increase is attributable to more teachers in the system and higher teacher salaries. An additional \$447 million will also be provided by Alberta Finance and Enterprise for service earned before 1992, which saves teachers approximately 3 per cent of their salary. In total, government support for the teachers' pension plan reaches \$774 million under Budget 2012.

Transparency and accountability are also very important. To increase transparency, we have posted detailed information about the performance and funding for school authorities.

The Deputy Chair: Thank you very much, hon. minister.

We will now go to the opposition members, who have one hour to go back and forth with the Minister of Education as they wish. We'll begin with the hon. Member for Calgary-Buffalo.

Mr. Hehr: If we can just go back and forth, hon. minister, would that be all right with you?

Mr. Lukaszuk: Actually, just in lumps.

Mr. Hehr: Well, there we go.

The Deputy Chair: Agreed. Proceed.

Mr. Hehr: If we could sort of take up where I left off in question period in regards to the Premier's promise to fully fund kindergarten within one year of her coming to office, what are your ministry's plans in that regard? What is the money allocated for this? How many additional schools will need this? I guess you could get me some background. How many schools are currently getting kindergarten, and how many will need to be addressed in the upcoming school year or school years following if we're going to see this done?

Mr. Lukaszuk: Mr. Chairman, maybe I can answer those questions by completing what I intended to say because it talks about transparency and funding and also school facilities, which, as I mentioned in question period, are important.

To increase transparency, we have posted detailed information about performance and funding of school boards. This includes information sheets that identify trustees, student demographics, capital planning priorities, number of schools and teaching staff, operating budgets, and accumulated surpluses. There's also information about high school completion performance and provincial assessment programs and parental involvement. As was requested by the hon. Member for Calgary-Buffalo – that would be you, hon. member – last year during budget estimates, we are now posting detailed funding information for every school board so Albertans know exactly how their tax dollars are being invested in education. So congratulations, hon. member.

Our third program is school facilities, which ties into kindergartens. Three hundred and sixty-two million dollars is supporting the construction of 45 new schools and 31 major renovation projects. That's part of the \$1 billion investment in school infrastructure over the next three years.

September will see 14 new schools opening their doors to more than 10,000 students. This funding includes \$96 million for infrastructure maintenance and renewal for existing school facilities. The government recognizes that communities change, and some need new or bigger schools. While Budget 2012 does not include new funding for new schools or modernization projects, we will continue to explore alternative methods of funding new schools and infrastructure.

Mr. Chairman, our fourth program, basic education, increases to \$97 million. This increase is related to the government's commitment to increase bandwidth to school jurisdictions to access the SuperNet. Increasing bandwidth allows students to access media-rich content.

Ms Notley: Mr. Chair, a point of order.

The Deputy Chair: Hon. minister, a point of order from the hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona. Citation?

Point of Order Clarification

Ms Notley: I'm sorry. I'm going to have to wing it a bit. The point of order is this. We have a very limited amount of time to ask questions of the minister. Specific questions were asked by the Member for Calgary-Buffalo. The minister has been speaking now for about four minutes. He's not yet gotten to the questions specifically asked by the Member for Calgary-Buffalo. So I would ask, moving forward, that there is more attention paid and a direction given to the minister to respond to the question.

The Deputy Chair: You're just seeking some clarification, and the clarification is this. They have one hour. They've agreed to go back and forth between themselves. They can speak on whatever is permitted under that particular agreement.

Ms Notley: Mr. Chair, I'm not talking about time.

The Deputy Chair: We will continue and let the minister finish. I'm sure he'll be brief.

Ms Notley: Could he answer the question, Mr. Chair? Could you direct the minister to answer the question?

The Deputy Chair: Hon. member, please. We've been in this House long enough to know how these rules work. The Minister of Education has the floor, and he will use it appropriately, I'm sure.

Hon. Minister of Education, please proceed.

Mr. Lukaszuk: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I thought we were to discuss the Education budget, and that's exactly what I was talking about.

The Deputy Chair: Merely a point of clarification. There is no point of order here.

3:10

Debate Continued

Mr. Lukaszuk: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Also, I know the member asked a number of questions during question period, so I'll address them right now, and then we'll go to more specific questions about accredited government schools. The government continues to support educational choice whether through public, separate, francophone, charter, private, or home-schooling. Our commitment to choice has helped make education, as you know, one of the best in the world.

This year's support to accredited private schools increases by \$7.8 million to \$192 million. This represents less than 3 per cent of what we spend on education, less than 3 per cent. For the 2012-2013 school year accredited funded private schools receive the same grant rate increases as public school boards, but it should be noted that they do not receive every grant that is allocated. More specifically to the member's question, the budget foresees \$306 million in total, which breaks down as \$161.6 million as base and together with ECS \$306 million total.

Mr. Hehr: Okay. Well, I asked about kindergarten, and I asked how much money your ministry expects it will take to roll out kindergarten in all our schools across the province. How much is allocated in this budget to kindergarten, and will we see kindergarten in every school system at schools out there in our province?

Mr. Lukaszuk: Thank you. Mr. Chairman, I attempted to answer that question already in question period, so let me try to elaborate here with having a little bit more time. This ministry has made a commitment through the Premier and myself that we will be implementing and making available full-time kindergarten to children throughout the province. The fact is that in order to roll out this particular program, one of the predicaments is simply space, infrastructure. When you have a school – and this member would know, being in Calgary – that is at 100 per cent capacity, adding an extra grade level to that school is physically impossible.

We are working right now with school boards on how we are going to unveil, unroll this program throughout the province to create this option for children as their parents desire to enrol them into this program. It is obvious that you just can't flick a switch and make it available September 2012. It simply cannot happen for all children, at least not in all schools. So in collaboration with school boards we will be looking at where it is possible now and how we are going to unroll it over a period of time.

The commitment remains that we will make kindergarten available to children throughout Alberta. We're also discussing the issue of choice because, as you know, not all parents may want to enrol their children in kindergarten, so we're looking at those numbers.

The number that I was initially tossing around – and it's not a guess; it's a guesstimate – was that if all children who are currently not in kindergarten were to enrol in a full-time kindergarten, it would be somewhere around \$200 million, but that will not be required for September 2012, so it's not in this budget. We will look at the figures as we unroll it progressively throughout the province.

Mr. Hehr: Well, if you say \$200 million is needed to provide this service throughout the entire system, how much is allocated right now from your government's numbers to funding kindergarten? If you guys have those numbers in front of you, I'd appreciate your getting those to the minister so he can inform me how much money in this budget is currently allocated towards kindergarten and getting this up and running.

Mr. Lukaszuk: In this current budget there is \$306 million dedicated for provision of early childhood services, and that will suffice for enrolment as it is planned right now.

Mr. Hehr: Three hundred and six million. But I'm asking for kindergarten. Can you guys break it down specifically to kindergarten?

Mr. Lukaszuk: That is kindergarten, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. Hehr: Three hundred and six million.

Mr. Lukaszuk: Correct.

Mr. Hehr: And you estimate it's going to take another \$200 million to get this up and running throughout the whole system because \$306 million doesn't provide kindergarten anywhere near in the shape or form promised by the Premier. How much, then, does your ministry estimate extra from the \$306 million it would take?

Mr. Lukaszuk: Mr. Chairman, as I indicated earlier, providing that every parent would want to enrol their child in a kindergarten, above what we're currently spending, I am estimating that the cost would be approximately \$200 million additional.

Mr. Hehr: Additional. That's a significant shortfall in this year's budget if we were to be able to fulfill the Premier's promise. Is that fair?

Mr. Lukaszuk: We're getting lost somewhere here, Mr. Chairman. As I said earlier, implementation of full-time kindergarten everywhere simply cannot happen in the fall of 2012. There simply isn't enough space capacity in many of the schools. Yes, many schools would be able to implement it because they have excess space and they could embrace an extra grade, being kindergarten, in their schools. Many schools simply won't. I can tell you that in my riding I don't believe any elementary school would be able to actually fit in an extra grade level because they are at maximum.

So as we unroll it over a period of time, once we reach the maximum and if every parent we anticipate has enrolled their child into kindergartens having available space, the additional cost then would be \$200 million. However, since this possibility won't occur because there are infrastructure limitations, which we are working on with school boards, the initial cost over the next year or two won't be anywhere near that additional \$200 million. We will be absorbing that cost within current budgets.

Mr. Hehr: I guess the \$200 million is the programming cost, but have you guys estimated the infrastructure costs to get these additional spaces up and running?

Mr. Lukaszuk: Mr. Chairman, we're currently starting to engage with school boards in a dialogue on how current infrastructure could be used, as you know. For example, I'll give you a very interesting anecdotal figure. The Edmonton public school board, for example, has some 40,000 to 44,000 empty spaces in their schools. They can accommodate 44,000 extra students, but they have spaces where they don't have kids, and they have kids where they don't have schools. So school boards will be making decisions on how they want to implement kindergarten. Some school boards may designate certain buildings for kindergarten; some won't. This is a dialogue that we're engaging in right now.

Mr. Chairman, I don't believe Albertans expect that a whole new grade level, that would have curriculum implications, staffing implications, infrastructure implications, would simply be made available to all students throughout the entire province in every school as of September 2012. That simply would be unrealistic. But some robust work is being put forward to make sure that it comes to fruition.

Mr. Hehr: Well, I will point out to the minister that he's the fourth minister who's now studying the issue, so there should be some well-laid plans in the ministry going back. If you look at it, it's been well studied by the minister before you and the one before him and so on and so on.

Nevertheless, it appears that we won't have full-time kindergarten up and running in September of this year. When does the ministry expect, with the work that's in place and the deliberations that are happening, that this will actually come to fruition?

Mr. Lukaszuk: Mr. Chairman, 25 per cent of school boards by choice already do provide kindergarten, where they find that this is a program that is desired by the parents, within existing budgetary structure. Some school boards choose not to deliver it. Many choose not to deliver it simply because of space limitations. I will not put timelines on it, but I can undertake to the hon. member that the commitment is there not only from this

government but from school boards to work towards universal kindergarten being available to all students as soon as practicable.

That fact is – it is no secret to anybody in this Chamber, I hope – that infrastructure is one of the key pressures in the provision of education. While we have a 30 to 35 per cent vacancy rate in schools throughout the province, unfortunately, those schools cannot be put on dollies and moved around to places where we actually need them. The Minister of Infrastructure, myself, and Treasury Board are looking at a variety of alternative options to be able to build more schools where they are required, and that in itself, then, will allow provision for kindergarten. I can assure you that the construction of new schools will definitely already implement a provision for kindergarten within the confines of the building.

Mr. Hehr: Okay. Thank you.

I note one of the Premier's promises in her leadership race was also to allow school boards to hire back teachers and support staff that were let go when the \$107 million was cut from the budget back in I believe it was last spring. To date there are still 650 fewer teachers in our classrooms. Can the minister comment on why this has happened and what needs to be rectified, or is that a more appropriate staffing level, in his view, for what is currently needed in education?

Mr. Lukaszuk: Well, not only has the Premier made a commitment but this government has made a commitment to provide additional in-year funding of \$107 million. A promise was made, and a promise was delivered. As a matter of fact, I would venture to guess that from the day of being sworn in as Premier, very few Premiers have managed to deliver on a significant promise like this as expeditiously as this one was delivered.

However, let's not forget the fact that the government of Alberta, particularly the Ministry of Education, is not the direct employer of teachers. Teachers are hired by school boards, and 62 individual school boards make staffing decisions as the direct employers of teachers, and they decide what is and what isn't an appropriate staffing level.

3:20

Now, \$107 million was distributed to school boards in a very equitable – not equal but very equitable – fashion. Instructions were given to school boards that the dollars are to benefit children in the classroom in a very demonstrative way. A great deal of latitude was given to school boards on how the money will be expended, with the proviso that (a) a tangible learning experience improvement would be delivered and that (b) pressure spots, which the school boards haven't identified, would be addressed. Individual school boards made decisions that were most appropriate for their districts. Accordingly, the school boards have reported how they have spent every single dollar, and that was then further reported by myself to all Albertans vis-à-vis our departmental website.

So the commitment was delivered by the Premier, and the commitment was delivered by the government. School boards have done what they found to be a judicious expenditure. Now, in many cases it meant that – and don't quote me on the numbers – in excess of 800 additional teachers were actually hired from that \$107 million. But in some cases teaching aides – we should never forget about the support staff in school that make education possible – were hired; some programming supports were hired; some English as a second language instructors were retained. The list went on and on. But at the end of the day the \$107 million was expended as promised by the Premier.

Mr. Hehr: Nevertheless, there are 650 fewer teachers in our classrooms at this time. One has to assume that the boards are doing what's in the best interests of not only their students but with infrastructure needs and the like. Does that number alarm you? Is there anything your ministry is doing? With the growing population there are more students this September than there were last September, and those numbers just lead me to believe that if the system has fewer teachers, therefore larger class sizes and the like. Does the minister have any plans to rectify this trend?

Mr. Lukaszuk: Well, it's an interesting discussion, and I would actually love to spend more time sitting with this member to discuss this dilemma.

The fact is that for the first time in the history of this province we have a three-year predictable budget, which is something that school boards have been asking for for many, many, many years. I don't believe many, if any, school boards throughout the country have that available to them. So they have that predictability.

Also, let's not forget that this budget invests, not spends but invests, in education, an increase from \$6.8 billion to \$7.1 billion over the span of three years, with annual increases of more than 3 and a half per cent.

Now, in this province, like in some other provinces, we have locally elected trustees because we believe – and this member, I think, would agree – that locally made decisions are often more reflective of what the needs are in local schools, and those school boards make decisions on what is the best investment of those dollars. In some cases they choose to increase the number of teachers or staff or programs. The list goes on and on.

So to answer this member's question: am I concerned? I am concerned about the budget, which I am very happy to table today. That's one of my concerns, to make sure that the budget is adequate, and I am satisfied that, you know, this amount of money spent and invested in education is unprecedented. I am glad to see an increase. I am glad to see a sustainable budget. But the staffing decisions ought to remain at the local school board level, and they will do what is right for students. I don't imagine this member would want me to override local decisions by duly elected trustees and interfere in their personnel decisions and start either hiring or laying off teachers. That's something that we have trustees for, and as MLAs and as constituents we should be communicating with our trustees.

One thing, Mr. Chairman, that definitely allows me to sleep at night quite peacefully is the knowledge that Alberta education in all objective assessments ranks as one of the top four in the world. So whatever is happening in those classrooms must be good because our students, objectively tested by international agencies, are virtually second to none.

Mr. Hehr: Well, I take the minister's comments, but I also take them with a grain of salt a little bit. You're the organ grinder. You send the money. They just try to implement it. I think that at the end of the day you're the guy who's funding these things, and they're doing the best with their money.

Let's talk about your three-year funding agreement. In that is your base instructional grant, and your base instructional grant rises by 1 per cent in the upcoming school year. I think the ministry's own numbers said that there's going to be a 2.5 per cent increase in inflation, so based on the government's own numbers how do you square this circle in being able to keep adequate staff in our classrooms given this predicament that I just showed you?

Mr. Lukaszuk: Mr. Chairman, if one wants to analyze a budget, one cannot take one line item and look at whether it went up or

down and then judge the entire budget by one line item. I have very clearly indicated to the member, although perhaps the member didn't have the benefit of hearing it because it was interrupted by another member, that the budget overall is increasing by more than 3 and a half per cent every year for the next three years. Yes, certain components within the budget may be going up and down, but at the end of the day school boards will be receiving an increase, on average, of more than 3 and a half per cent per year every year for the next three years, which is beneficial from the fact that now they have predictability.

It's much easier for them to run an operation knowing exactly how much money they will have to operate a school system for the next three years, but they also have an increase of more than 3 per cent per year. So we can look at individual envelopes, but individual envelopes are not indicative, are not measures of what the whole budget, that we will be voting on, will be. That's a significant increase, with predictability built in.

Mr. Hehr: Actually, I think those individual line items have more importance than the minister might suggest here. If you look at the budgets in regard to infrastructure funding, it's regarding the teacher pension funding and the like, which has nothing to do with actual bodies in a classroom. I think the minister would agree with that.

If we could return to that question, given that his budget has a lot of things to do without teachers in the classroom, how does he square this circle of a 1 per cent base instructional grant, which primarily deals with our teachers in the classroom, and a 2.5 per cent rate of inflation as well as increasing numbers of students being enrolled in our classrooms?

Mr. Lukaszuk: Well, Mr. Chairman, the member also will know, because I know that he looks at Education budgets in close detail, that in our current Education structure a great deal of latitude is given to our local school boards. I often say – and maybe the member would have actually heard me in some of my communications – that even though today we will be voting on a budget and certain subcategories will be neatly put into envelopes for offset of fuel, for this and for that, the fact is that at the moment we actually transfer this budget, once voted upon, to local school boards. Local school boards will have a great deal of autonomy on how they will prioritize their spending and reallocate their funding.

This budget overall, Mr. Chairman, will give school boards in excess of a 3 and a half per cent or so increase per year for the next three years, which is 3 and a half per cent of \$6.8 billion. It's a significant dollar amount that Albertans will be investing in education over the next three years. But the line item funding, as you will note, probably at the moment school boards start tabling their own budgets will be realigned based on what the local needs are. That's when school trustees will be making those critical decisions of what an appropriate staffing level is or what additional resource money needs to be spent.

That sort of very neatly ties ourselves back into the kindergarten conversation. Right now, as the member knows, Albertans invest only in part-time kindergartens in the province of Alberta, yet 25 per cent of school boards, Mr. Chairman, deliver full-time kindergarten, which means that those school boards at a local level have reprioritized a significant amount of money and have chosen to deliver full-time kindergarten, which is fine because that's what trustees are elected to do. They are elected to reflect local needs and to provide programming that is desired by local communities. So there is a great deal of latitude within school boards.

But the increase overall will be somewhere around 3 and a half per cent per year for the next years.

3:30

Mr. Hehr: Again, I could go back to the point that the overall increase encompasses a whole bunch of things like infrastructure, deferred maintenance, computers, different grants, and the like – it doesn't deal, actually, with teachers in classrooms – but I don't think I'm going to get anywhere on that question. Hopefully, the minister understands that what I'm reading and hearing from school boards and the like is that they're going to have great difficulty being able to find enough teachers to go into the classroom at this rate of increase on your base instructional grant. I'll leave you with that thought because it doesn't look like I'm going to get an answer on it, anyway.

Let's move on. The AISI funding has been cut. This has been recognized as one of those things the school boards have been particularly happy with, and actually I believe the former minister was very happy with this program. Can you tell me: why the cut? Where is this going to be cut? Where is it going to affect? What programs are being offered? Who is doing what with the AISI program? What programs are you going to fund in AISI, and what are not going to be forwarded?

Mr. Lukaszuk: Thank you. Mr. Chairman, the hon. member, with all due respect, is getting answers. He may not like the answer he's getting, but I'm giving you an answer that is actually a reality of what is in the budget and what we will be voting on.

If the member insists on focusing on certain line items, then I will give him another line item to focus on. For example, action on inclusion increases by 22 per cent in this particular budget, so you have a 22 per cent increase on one of the line items. As I said earlier, looking at individual line items and what is going up and what is going down as the appropriation of this budget is not reflective of the entire budget. When you sum it all up – and school boards will be able then to, for lack of a better term, rejig those numbers based on their local needs – the average will be about a 3 and a half per cent increase in the entire budget over three years, from \$6.8 billion to \$7.1 billion.

Now, on the grant that this member refers to as a decrease: actually, no. There were decreases in the past, but now there is a 2 per cent increase on the grant, and also there is additional funding for equity of opportunity, which will provide school boards with money enveloped for those particular programs.

Mr. Hehr: So with the money you're enveloping for equality of opportunity, you're saying that the school boards can then pump that back into AISI. Is that what you're saying, that your budget really means nothing here, that what you've directed them to do means nothing?

Mr. Lukaszuk: Well, a very good question. Yes, if they choose to do that, they will be able to do that. That is one of the reasons why Alberta Education functions as well as it does. Mr. Chairman, we fund our children equally, but we also provide for equity because there are different costs of delivering education in different parts of the province. The fact is that each jurisdiction has different needs, and each community has different priorities. The strength of the system to a large degree is the fact that locally elected – and let me underscore: locally elected – trustees get to make local decisions. If not this member, I think a lot of members from the Wildrose Party and others would be screaming and shouting if a Minister of Education would step into a school board and start overriding their budgets and telling school boards what their priorities ought to be.

Mr. Chairman, I know you were a Minister of Education, and sometimes maybe there is that temptation. You know, we don't

always agree with every decision made by school boards and with what their financial priorities are, but at the end of the day we must respect the process. Parents and residents of that jurisdiction voted for those trustees, and those trustees get to make decisions, such important decisions as budgetary allocations.

Also, under AISI there is a \$71 increase – it's a total amount – per student for 2012-2013. This is actually one of the programs, if you ever have a chance to visit a school, Mr. Chairman, that teachers really enjoy working with. There's \$71 in funding per student for 2012-2013. For equity of opportunity, the program that I mentioned, there's a \$156 per-student allocation under this particular budget.

Mr. Hehr: Well, I guess one of my concerns – and the minister's answers here reflect that – is that I think school boards are often set up to deflect what is actually happening in education and the funding dollars that are coming from the province. Whether they're adequate or inadequate, it becomes very easy just to say: well, that's the school board's problem, not my problem.

But on the actual school boards I'll note that one of the Premier's promises in her leadership race was to roll back fee increases that parents were to receive in the upcoming school year. I also note that the minister in an article in the *Calgary Herald* stated that he was very upset at school fees and at the fact that school boards were passing these along.

From the stats I have, I think the average Alberta parent receives a bill for \$190 a child when they come into school every year. Maybe you have different statistics. What are you doing on school fees? Is this a school board problem as well, or is this something your ministry is looking to address? What's the deal here?

Mr. Lukaszuk: Well, Mr. Chairman, it's very difficult for me to fully appreciate what this member is getting at. I don't want to put words into his mouth, but what he's really telling me, what I'm hearing, is to start overriding locally made decisions. "Never mind the school board and the trustees. You are the boss of education. You step in, and you right the wrongs if you perceive something to be wrong." It's not blaming. It's not setting up school boards for failure. They are capable politicians that have been elected as trustees, and their electorate expects them to have the autonomy that the act allows for. I think you would hear a great deal of discontent from Albertans if the Minister of Education would override locally made decisions simply because it doesn't meet the minister's priorities or the ministry's priorities.

The member keeps talking about the number of teachers. Is there an adequate number of teachers? Well, let me tell you, hon. member, in the entire system how many teachers there are. Again, from school board to school board those numbers may vary because local school boards will have made different decisions. Our class size guidelines: for K to 3 the guideline is at 17 students in a classroom. We are now on average at 19. For grades 4 to 6 the guideline is 23 students. We are now actually below that, at 22. For grades 6 to 9 the guideline is 25, and we're below that. We're at 23. For grades 10 to 12 the guideline is at 27, and we are now at 22. Frankly, when you look at it, there are enough teachers in the system, but how individual school boards decide to allocate staffing is an individual decision. Now, do I have the opportunity to perhaps override their decisions? Maybe, but the fact is that that is why we elect local trustees.

Now, relative to school fees – the member knows because I've spoken publicly on it – I personally am not very comfortable in a public system with parents receiving excessive bills, particularly for items that perhaps we will be voting on today that should be

paid for under the provisions of Albertans' public purse. So I have asked my department to contact all school boards and receive itemized lists of what it is that school fees are being charged for. If we find that there is an issue where in some instances perhaps parents are being charged for items or programs or for certain provisions that are already included under public funding, we will be acting accordingly. I will be looking at some form of synchronizing what is allowable and what isn't allowable, and if you choose to discuss that with me at a future date, we will be looking at it.

The fact is that there are situations where school fees are appropriate when a child is provided with over-and-above services that are simply not included under the provisions of public education or with certain transportation to a program of choice where other programs are available in the neighbourhood or in a nearby school – those are justifiable – or for lunch programs that students may be provided with, and the list goes on and on. We will be looking at whether there is any double-charging, where the taxpayer pays for a certain program and then a parent pays again. We will be rationalizing them if there indeed is a problem.

Mr. Hehr: That's a good start, but I think it's also incumbent to realize that some of these charges that are going for core things that we believe should be taught in the education system are not simply a matter of you having allocated the dollars and the dollars not being adequately allotted by school boards. It may actually be a funding issue from this government. So I point out that that may be an issue.

If we get back to also the school fees – it was important enough for the Premier to talk about them in her leadership race, and it was important enough for you to address it in the *Calgary Herald* – do you think these will be resolved this upcoming school year?

3:40

Mr. Lukaszuk: Which?

Mr. Hehr: The school fees and your analysis of what is being charged.

Mr. Lukaszuk: I certainly hope so. We are now in contact with school boards, and we will be reviewing school fee practices and making a determination on what is and what isn't appropriate. I'm not suggesting that there are fees charged right now that aren't, nor am I confirming that all of them are. I simply haven't had a chance to make a judgment on this as I haven't yet seen the breakdown of school fees. But if indeed I find that there are fees that are inappropriate – and I'm underscoring: if I find that they are – then indeed we will do our best to make sure that those inappropriate fees are removed by September 2012.

I would also like to go back to the preamble of the comment that the member made, insinuating that simply the total of the budget may be inadequate; that is, the \$6.8 billion, growing to \$7.1 billion over the next three years. Well, Mr. Chairman, I have to tell you a few interesting comments. Actually, you know, the chairman of the Treasury Board is over here, and he can confirm these numbers. Over the last 10 years the student population in this province has grown by 3 per cent. Over the last 10 years, the very same 10 years, the teacher population has grown by 12 per cent. Quite reasonable because we've been looking at classroom sizes and all that. Funding for Alberta Education over the last 10 years has grown by 71.6 per cent. Mind you, it's not adjusted for inflation, but even if you were to adjust it for inflation, I have to tell you that Albertans make education their priority. Their investment in education has been phenomenal over the last 10

years, particularly in this budget and for the next three years. So the question is whether there indeed is enough funding.

You know, the hon. member's leader, from the Liberal Party, and I were having a very interesting discourse over Twitter over the last few weeks. As I'm listening to question period and questions posed by the Liberal opposition, frankly by many members of the opposition, to individual ministers, today we were going to build additional nursing facilities for every senior that needs one, we were going to hire a lot of doctors and pay them what they want because, apparently, they have ads in the *Calgary Herald*, municipalities are going to get more than the unprecedented amount of money that they get under MSI, and now this budget is not enough. I have a simple question to the leader of the Liberal opposition. What is your prediction for the oil price for the next year or three years? It must be somewhere around \$300 per barrel if you're really planning on delivering everything that you're saying now, pre-election, that you would do.

Going back to the Education budget, Mr. Chairman, the increase from \$6.8 billion to \$7.1 billion, with the predictability built in, is a phenomenal investment in education. Now what we have to do as members of the opposition and definitely me as minister and my colleagues is to make sure that that money is spent in such a way that as much of it ends up in the classroom and that children benefit from those dollars as much as possible.

The Deputy Chair: Thank you.

Hon. member, just a reminder that there are about 23 minutes left in this particular exchange.

Mr. Hehr: I thank the minister for his comments. You know, I think that's part of this, to put the comment back on his comments, which are related to educational budgeting but, I think, also more to his government's budgeting on the whole. Part of having predictable, sustainable funding is not having to rely on oil and gas revenues to fund every last thing that comes up from the purse. I don't know if the minister was in the House, but I did a parable of the family farm, where we say that right now we're relying on fossil fuel resources to pay today's bills, which is akin to a family farmer selling off a piece of land to pay his bills. Eventually it's unsustainable. We should be asking the citizenry to actually pay for things like public education, public roads, and the like. That would allow us to have predictable and sustainable funding in order that you don't have to jump up and down and cut things and start things.

Why we have a fiscal sustainability deficit of \$11 billion that we spend on oil and gas revenues every year to fund daily operations is beyond me. Why we tax people \$11 billion less than B.C. is beyond me given that we are putting future generations at peril by not saving and by not having consistent, predictable, sustainable funding.

I hear the minister's comments, but I think it would behoove this government to ask people to pay for the public services that they use. I think that is a much more conservative principle than blowing every last dime that comes into the public purse.

Mr. Lukaszuk: Perhaps we're straying a little bit from the Education budget, but I think this government has tabled, not only for the Ministry of Education but all ministries in this House, a very responsible budget based on very small "c" conservative revenue predictions to make sure that we don't overpromise and underdeliver, which I'm hearing a lot of on the other side. The fact is that this government has been loud and clear that we don't need to dig deeper into Albertans' personal pockets and tax them more to deliver adequate services in this province. The fact is that we have a sustainable financial plan that is based on taxation.

Let's be honest over here, Mr. Chairman. The majority of our taxation comes from small business. The reason we have such a vibrant small-business community in this province and the reason why we have attracted 128,000 new Albertans last year is not because we're increasing taxes. British Columbia is not attracting those numbers. There's a reason why, actually, British Columbians are moving to Alberta. It's because we have a friendly business environment. It's because we have an environment where Albertans can actually have a job, and they can work hard, and they can keep most of their paycheque in their pocket and while doing so still receive one of the best education systems in the world, always within the top four in the world.

I'll leave the Liberals to themselves and let them devise their own numbers. It's obvious and clear that they would have to probably increase taxation by some \$5 billion or \$6 billion just based on what I'm hearing in question period that they would deliver over the next year or two. I'm not sure if we would have to worry about building more schools, Mr. Chairman. Maybe that's the method to the madness: increase taxes so high that Albertans will move out to other provinces, and you don't have to worry about building schools. Well, it may be worth considering but not by this government at this time.

Mr. Hehr: I hear the hon. member saying that people are coming here from B.C. for the low tax regime. It would behoove the hon. member to know that we have 97 per cent of Canada's oil resources located right here in Alberta, with many projects going ahead up there in Fort McMurray and the like. So I think it's ridiculous, his assumption that they're moving here for low taxes. They're moving here for jobs, and they'd be willing to pay, actually, for schools in their neighbourhoods.

You know, there was a day and age in this province when, if a neighbourhood needed a school, we built it. We didn't look at oil revenues and the like. We could get into the thick of things, but I think your hon. Premier actually recognized that in her throne speech. After this election, when you're done with the bluster, we're hopefully going to return to a day when we'll actually get to financial accountability, when people pay for what they use. I think the minister would agree that paying for what society uses would be much more practical than using other people's money, future generations' money, by blowing it all at once, okay?

Mr. Lukaszuk: Well, Mr. Chairman, you know, you can paraphrase what the member is actually saying in a more colloquial term. He's saying that Albertans are freeloaders, that they are receiving services that they don't pay for. I would disagree with you. They are not freeloading. New Albertans are coming to this province and long-term Albertans are in this province – why? – well, because there are jobs available. Yes, it's based on natural resources, but those natural resources were in the ground for thousands of years. Our province next door actually had almost the same quantity of natural resources as the province of Alberta. It took a new government a few years ago to revive Saskatchewan and give it an opportunity, where they're actually starting to get investment from outside. They have for the first time in decades positive population growth in that province, and the economy is starting to chug along to where we were as Albertans for a number of years.

So, no, I don't believe that Albertans are freeloading. Albertans are investing in what is important to them. They're investing in education, and they're paying taxes at a rate that is competitive. By doing so, they enjoy a much higher quality of life than they would anywhere else. That's one of our advantages, and this government will maintain it.

3:50

Now, Mr. Chairman, this member is trying to read between the lines, but the fact is that, no, there is no plan to increase taxes by this Premier or this government. As a matter of fact, every minister on this front bench has signed a three-year business plan, and that's what we will be voting on right here, a three-year plan. This combined business plan of all the ministries will not require and will not be calling for any increases in taxes. So as much as the Liberal opposition wants to increase taxes by some probably \$4 billion to \$6 billion, and they feel that Albertans are freeloaders and that it's time that they start paying for what they receive, I will say that there is significant investment . . .

Mr. Hehr: Point of order.

The Deputy Chair: I hesitate to interrupt the hon. Minister of Education, but the Member for Calgary-Buffalo has a point of order. What is your citation, please?

Point of Order
Factual Accuracy

Mr. Hehr: The minister has now said twice that I've called Albertans freeloaders.

The Deputy Chair: What is your citation?

Mr. Hehr: *Beauchesne's* 23.

The Deputy Chair: Standing Orders 23(h), (i), and (j)? Is that what I hear you saying?

Mr. Hehr: Yes.

The Deputy Chair: Proceed.

Mr. Hehr: Clearly, I've never said that Albertans are freeloaders. I've never once said that. What I'm talking about is our tax system and our ability to provide predictable, sustainable funding to things like education and the like. At no time did I say that Albertans were freeloaders.

The Deputy Chair: Thank you. I don't recall you having said that either, hon. member. I've noted here with Parliamentary Counsel the decorum in the House to this point, and I would ask that we continue on that vein and ask the Minister of Education to please clarify his remarks and we'll move on.

Mr. Lukaszuk: Well, of course, Mr. Chairman. That's why I was very careful to say – I never said that the member said that. I'm very careful, and check the *Hansard* if you wish. I said: to paraphrase what the member has said and to use more colloquial terms, Albertans are freeloaders. I would never insinuate that he has actually said it. I'm just paraphrasing what I'm hearing into a different language.

What the member is saying is that Albertans are receiving benefits for which they are not paying.

The Deputy Chair: So, hon. members, we've had some clarification here on this matter. Whether you're quoting someone or paraphrasing someone, let's be careful to keep the debate at the high level. Let's carry on.

Hon. Minister of Education, you did have the floor at the time of the point of order, so if you want to conclude that point, we'll get back to the hon. member and continue debate.

Debate Continued

Mr. Lukaszuk: Thank you very kindly. Mr. Chair, to conclude my answers, I believe that Albertans are investing in education at a very appreciable rate. I believe that there probably aren't any jurisdictions in Canada other than the Northwest Territories that invest more in children and education on a per capita basis, and the Northwest Territories is obviously because of the sparsity and lack of critical masses that they have. I believe that this budget is definitely reflective not only of Albertans' priority in education but this government's priority in education.

Mr. Hehr: Well, continuing on this point of predictable and sustainable funding for education, I think the minister will admit that there have been fits and starts over the last 20 years in terms of hiring teachers, laying off teachers, and the like not only in his department but everything else. The evidence stands clear. We spent \$250 billion in petroleum revenues over the last 25 years and have not saved a dime. Some of that has come from going to a flat tax, which is not a fair taxation system, that does not allow for our wealthy to pay more into the public purse to ensure that there's predictable, sustainable funding and ensure that some equality of opportunity exists.

Would you not agree that going back to a progressive income tax system would allow us to have more predictable, sustainable funding?

The Deputy Chair: Education is what you're talking about. Is that correct?

Mr. Hehr: Yes.

The Deputy Chair: Because we are debating the estimates of Education.

Mr. Hehr: I know.

The Deputy Chair: Please always tie your comments in with Education, and then we won't have any relevance points.

Mr. Lukaszuk: Well, I was just wondering if the hon. member wants me to defend the estimates for the ministries of Finance or Treasury Board, which I'm quite prepared to do if he wants me to do so. But I will try to tie it into Education.

Mr. Chairman, as I indicated earlier, the numbers simply don't add up. I told you what the population increase of students and teachers was vis-à-vis the 71.6 per cent increase in education funding, obviously showing significant year-to-year increases in funding for the Ministry of Education, being the children in the classrooms.

The member brings up a very valid point. He talks about the fluctuation in funding and the lack of predictability. That was one of the problems that educators and particularly school boards always struggled with because they never knew how much money they would have beyond this year. It was very difficult for them to plan programs and definitely very difficult for them to make staffing decisions and particularly to extend continuous contracts to teachers not knowing what their financial position would be beyond this fiscal year.

That is why, Mr. Chairman, I'm very proud of this budget. Not only because of the quantity of it but also because of the fact that for the first time in the history of this province and, I believe, unprecedented anywhere in Canada we are providing three-year predictability to school boards, which will now do away with this on and off of hiring, as the member refers to it, or perhaps laying

off of teachers. School boards will be able to make a more meaningful long-term commitment not only to staff but also to programs within their jurisdictions.

Mr. Hehr: And the hon. minister is doing it by spending every last dime of fossil fuel resource that comes into the public purse.

Moving on, let's look at maintenance. Right now the Calgary board of education has reported deferred maintenance bills of over \$800 million; Edmonton public schools, \$242 million. That's a billion dollars. We brought up Grimshaw. Obviously, that adds to the bill. There are a large number of schools that are in need of repair. It looks like in his budget – and again it's looking at a line item – there is no funding increase for repairing or maintaining schools. How does the minister expect this backlog ever to be rectified?

Mr. Lukaszuk: Well, \$482 million has been added to operations, Mr. Chairman, so that is not entirely correct. Also, the fact is that, yes, I have been the first one to say that in this province, and not only in this province, frankly, in every growing jurisdiction, one of the problems that comes along with success is the fact that you have a population that not only grows significantly; you have a province that attracts young families over here, workers with families. Unfortunately, none of them bring their schools with them. Also, what you have is migration of population to centres where the economy attracts families. You end up with the net consequence of having schools, as I said earlier, where you don't have kids and having kids where you don't have schools.

Mr. Chairman, I am very cognizant of the fact that there are very significant pressures in some jurisdictions requiring new schools, where all the schools in the jurisdiction are at their capacity. The chairman of the Treasury Board and myself and the Minister of Infrastructure are working right now, as we're speaking, on means by which we will be able to build more schools in this province to meet those critical demands because to continue providing this high level of internationally renowned education, we also need facilities that are reflective of the excellence that happens in the classroom.

Having said that, we also have a certain contingent of aging infrastructure, and because the pressure was always to build more schools, sometimes the priorities were more to just provide space to children than perhaps to retrofit existing buildings. So what we will be doing as part of our plan is looking at the state of infrastructure overall in the province of Alberta relevant to schools and looking at where some of the schools can be rationalized. You know, the cost of retrofitting an old building often is very close to building a new school, and in certain parts of the province you will have a large pool of aging buildings that, in order for them to stay and remain as schools, would have to be retrofitted. Often, there may be a good not only financial argument but educational argument to perhaps do away with some of those buildings and build one new school somewhere in the centre of the older facilities. Those are the types of analyses that we're doing right now.

The Grimshaw situation – if you want to delve into it, I gladly will – is a unique circumstance, but I think it's a circumstance that presents itself to us as a learning model because here we have a school that was built in three stages. I'm not sure if it's the only one of such type or if there are many others throughout the province; it's something we're looking at right now. The oldest part is about 50 years old, and the newest part, I believe, is less than 20 years old, yet the entire building is in a state of disrepair.

I want to find out – and we have instigated research into that – whether our schools initially, at least during that time period, were

built to such engineering standards that they were to last longer than this, because I think that the taxpayers of Alberta expect their buildings to last longer than 20 years or even longer than 50 years, and also look at maintenance protocols for schools in Alberta to make sure that we allow those schools to remain functional for as long as possible.

4:00

You know, there are schools in Alberta that are much older than 50 years, and when you actually walk into those buildings, they're a pleasure to look at. They're properly restored, retrofitted, and even though the architecture very much resembles the time during which they were built, they are very functional, esthetically pleasing, and definitely functional buildings, so something to learn from. We will be looking at this, and we will be sharing what we have learned from this particular circumstance with the House in due course.

In the meantime my priority is the children. I want to make sure that children are not only in safe buildings – obviously, safe buildings – but also in buildings that are conducive to education.

Mr. Hehr: Now, obviously, I don't want to prejudice your negotiations with the ATA. I realize they're difficult. Coming to an exact number is awfully difficult, and I understand that. Nevertheless, you've budgeted 1 per cent, I believe, for salary increases. The contract comes up in September of this year, and the school boards are going to be on the hook for whatever deal you sign. Are there plans in place, if the 1 per cent doesn't come in, to get that additional funding to school boards to recognize whatever deal this provincial government comes to?

Mr. Lukaszuk: Well, Mr. Chairman, I have to be very cautious when discussing this particular topic because, indeed, as the member indicated, I do not want to prejudice the outcome of negotiations. The fact is that what will happen – let me retract a little. My communication has been very clear for a number of months. When I say something, I mean it. My encouragement, then, to government negotiators but also school board negotiators and ATA negotiators was to hammer out a deal before the budget was tabled because that would inform the process of the budget.

What needs to be said here, Mr. Chairman, to put things in perspective, is that over the last 10 years I was giving you the numbers of 3 per cent for students, 12 and 71. Ten years ago the split between all salaries in the system and the actual provision of education was 60-40. Sixty per cent was salaries and benefits; 40 per cent was programming and operations. Now we're at an 80-20 split. Eighty per cent is salaries; 20 per cent is provision of services. When one is crafting a budget for a ministry of \$6.8 billion, it would have been good to know what that 80 per cent of that \$6.8 billion or so would be. It would definitely inform the crafting of the budget.

Unfortunately, a deal was not reached at that particular time, so I did not have the benefit of knowing what the numbers would have been in crafting the budget. I have asked the ministry to do an analysis of trends throughout the country of a variety of indicators, and numbers had to be put into the budget because at the end of the day the budget had to be tabled. The numbers that have been put into the budget right now, without the benefit of having a deal ahead of the budget, are 1 per cent, 2 per cent, and 2 per cent, and not necessarily all of that is for salaries.

I still expect that we will negotiate a good deal. I know that I have well-intentioned partners around the table. I don't question the good intentions of the school boards, the ATA, and definitely my ministry, who's there sitting at the table representing the best

interests of the kids. I have full confidence that a deal can be reached that will benefit children at the end of the day.

Mr. Chairman, one thing needs to be highlighted. The last four and a half years of the long-term agreement that was reached four and a half years ago were probably the best four and a half years in Alberta education since past my memory. For the first time in a long time as partners in education we were able to talk about just that, education, and what's important for children: curriculum, pedagogy, and all that. We were not distracted by labour disputes.

I'm hoping that we will be able to reach this agreement. I'm having very good meetings and constructive meetings with the ATA, with school board associations, and with individual school boards. From time to time we will agree to disagree, but one thing, Mr. Chairman, that is unquestionable in my mind is that all of those individuals around the table are focused on what's good for the kids, and when you have that underpinning, I think a deal can be reached.

Mr. Hehr: Well, I think that goes without saying, you know, that everyone wants the best for our kids. It's nice and refreshing to hear you say that, but it doesn't mean a lot.

Nevertheless, let's look at sort of the numbers you quoted, that 80 per cent of the budget is going to teachers' salaries. I would note that the ATA does take some issue with those numbers. You may have read their report on that, where it says that it's closer to 65 per cent. Some districts say that it's as low as 52 per cent of money that actually goes to teachers' salaries. Maybe the minister would like to clarify those statements as to whether he actually believes that 80 per cent of it is going to salaries.

Mr. Lukaszuk: Well, I actually quite strongly believe that what is best for the kids matters, and it matters a lot. I think that is something that should be preoccupying all of us no matter whether we're discussing money or policies.

The fact is that what the member is stating doesn't pertain to all teachers' salaries. The simple fact is this. Our teachers in Alberta are doing a phenomenal job in the classroom, and that is shown in the outcomes that we have vis-à-vis the performance of our system as compared to other systems. They are also very handsomely remunerated compared to any other jurisdiction in the country of Canada. Yes, they need to be remunerated to reflect the quality of work that they do.

School boards have a task of running a very complex education system that has pressures from time to time, and so does this ministry. But at the end of the day, because it matters, Mr. Chairman, what is best for our kids, I know we have the resources in this budget and I know that we have a basis of salaries which teachers are being paid right now and the goodwill of the school boards that will allow us to reach a deal within the parameters as set out.

Mr. Hehr: I think I'll talk to some of the minister's comments there. Sometimes things cost more in Alberta for a reason. We're competing against an oil and gas sector that reimburses employees relatively well. I don't begrudge those people at all, but it drives up salaries and drives up costs in his ministry and other ministries that are sort of just one of the good fortunes of being an Albertan. I do know that. So I recognize that cost structure and why it's there, and I don't fault the government. It's just the nature of being in Alberta and running a department in Alberta.

I do take some umbrage when the minister sets up an equation where he says that 80 per cent . . .

The Deputy Chair: Thank you very much. The chair enjoyed listening to that first hour of debate, and hopefully it will continue in an enjoyable fashion.

We will now move to the next section. The next section will be with the member for the Wildrose, and that would be Airdrie-Chestermere. You have 20 minutes with the minister. Decide how you want to use it.

Mr. Anderson: If you'd like, we could go back and forth, Minister. It doesn't matter.

The Deputy Chair: There seems to be agreement. Proceed.

Mr. Anderson: Okay. Obviously, we don't have a lot of time. We only have 20 minutes, so we'll get right into it. I want to ask questions of you today, Minister, on this priority list. Now, you said something very interesting yesterday in question period, and I was excited to hear it. When I asked about the need for a priority list for new school infrastructure, a publicly listed priority list that put out from highest priority to lowest priority all the different new schools, infrastructure upgrades, all that sort of thing, you seemed to indicate yesterday in question period that you were arranging to do that or that you were in the process of doing that. I just was wondering if you could update me on that. I'd be very excited to know.

Mr. Lukaszuk: Well, Mr. Chairman, a topic definitely worth discussing because this particular member has been insinuating in question period and outside of this House that this government has a secret list. Well, this list must be so secret that even I don't know about it, but oddly enough this member does. I think I have figured out what that secret list is, and I am making an undertaking – and it's the same undertaking that I made in question period – that within probably the next couple of months I will be releasing the secret list of infrastructure priorities throughout the entire province.

4:10

The reason, Mr. Chairman, that I will be able to release that secret list is because all of the school boards in the province of Alberta will be presenting me with their individual capital plans that will be listing their priorities for (a) construction of new schools, (b) renovation of existing schools, and (c) attaching portables to existing schools. As those are accumulated, I will be making them available, and the member will be able to see what each school board's priority is for new infrastructure.

Now, the member knows very well that with the current funding model and in order to not be criticized for deficit spending and going into debt, there are only so many schools this government and Albertans can build paying cash up front. What happens is that, obviously, not every school board's number one priority can be built because there would be 62 schools just for the public and Catholic school boards, not including francophone and others. So, obviously, some prioritizing has to take place. In the prioritizing, Mr. Chairman, first we look at the safety of existing buildings. Are there any buildings that are simply unsafe, that need to be either repaired or, often, replaced? Then we simply look at the numbers.

[Dr. Brown in the chair]

I'll give you an example. In Fort McMurray there is a school right now that, I believe, has somewhere between 23 to 27 portables attached to it. There are more children in portables than there are actually in the school itself. Well, some would say that these portables are actually not bad, that they're very nice classrooms. The problem is that the core of the building can't handle that many students. You are running out of bathrooms, you are running out of space for parents and buses to pull up, your

staff room or the library is not designed for that many, and the list goes on and on.

So when all those capital plans come in, you look at the priorities. Since school boards change their priorities every year because their pressures change as well, there is reprioritizing every year. I have to assure you, Mr. Chairman, that those decisions are difficult because you wish you could actually build every school. That is why the chairman of the Treasury Board and I are looking at the possibility of finding different vehicles by which we can finance schools so that we can build all those schools that they need. Frankly, those decisions are very objective. I wish I could build more schools.

That is the secret list. It's composed of 62 capital plans, which the minister has to look at every year de novo because their priorities change and decide who gets a school and who doesn't, a difficult decision to make because I don't question any school board's sincerity or any school board's need. They actually need those schools, but there are financial limitations on how many we can build.

The Acting Chair: The hon. member.

Mr. Anderson: Thank you. Okay. Let me see if I understand this. As you pointed out clearly, the boards every year set their priorities, and they submit those priorities to you, right? I'm not talking about that list. I understand that every board across the province says: "These are our top five, 10, 20 schools, whatever it is. These are our top maintenance needs, et cetera."

They send you all of their lists, and then you've got these 62 lists – I'm not saying that you keep those lists secret. That's not the list I'm referring to. But at some point you have got to take the \$300 million or \$400 million or whatever you budget for new schools and upgrades and you have to apply it to those 62 lists that you got from the boards. So at some point you have to make a decision: "We're going to give Calgary Catholic X amount, we're going to give Edmonton public X amount, we're going to give Rocky View X amount, Fort McMurray, whatever." That's the list I'm talking about.

Once you get these 62 priority lists, then you have to say, "Okay; everyone has got their priorities; we can't fund everything," like you absolutely correctly stated. How do you go and say: "Look, we're going to put the three top priorities of Fort McMurray here. The five top priorities of Edmonton are going to go here"? How do you make the decision? How do you take those 62 priority lists that you get from the boards and then condense it into: "Okay; as we see it as a province, these are the top priorities, one to 1,000, of school needs in this province"?

Mr. Lukaszuk: Well, Mr. Chairman, we cannot make such a list. That's why the secret list, by virtue of the fact that it would be impossible to compose, doesn't exist. Every year every school board sends its capital plan with its priorities, and every year individual school boards' priorities change. What a school board wanted as their number 1 priority this year may be their number 3 priority next year, and they bumped up another one or perhaps even created a new school that they needed in a new subdivision or a new neighbourhood. So there is no such list because it changes every year.

What the Minister of Education has to do is take every year's capital plans from all of the school boards, look at their priorities, and then decide what from this year's capital plans as accumulated will be funded. The criteria that are being used are that, number one, you look at enrolment numbers, current and projected enrolment numbers. Second, you look at existing capacity within

the district and within a reasonable geographic area where kids can be transported to schools. And last, but not least, you look at health and safety, whether the current buildings the school has, even though we may have capacity, are healthy work environments for teachers and learning environments for students and whether there are any safety issues.

Those decisions are made annually de novo from a new set of sublists that are provided by school boards. I wasn't being facetious when I was answering the member's question in question period. Having a rally and bringing parents from Airdrie onto the front stairs of the Legislature to communicate to the minister that we need a school – I don't question the fact that Airdrie needs schools. It need schools badly. But rallying will not change the decision because the decisions are objective and not subjective and are not subject to political pressures.

What we need right now, Mr. Chairman, is actually some co-operation from the opposition to work with government in finding new funding mechanisms because right now we're paying for every school with cash up front. For me to build another school in Airdrie – although Airdrie is, I believe, getting three over the next year or so – I actually have to find the dollars in this year's budget. I estimate I will need 400 new schools over the next 10 years. I will never reach that number paying cash up front for every school. Obviously, we need some alternative financing methods to be able to build the schools that the school boards need so badly and to provide to those schools on objective terms.

Mr. Anderson: Well, thank you for the explanation. I guess I don't think it is impossible to create this list that we're talking about. I mean, this is pretty basic. You would have to update it. You would have to update it every year, for sure, based on the input that you got. But, I mean, any corporation, any business that runs has to update their budgets quarterly, even monthly. So if you're getting these once a year, all you would do is just simply re-input that information into whatever criteria you use to arrive at what your final priority list is for that year.

The point is that you would be able to see from year to year if there was inconsistency. So, for example, if Rocky View has – well, let's use a different example. Let's say that Calgary public has the top two priorities on your new schools priority list. Number 1, number 2. Then all of a sudden, magically, they resubmit their priority list the next year, and these two schools are still their top two priorities, but on your list they go down to number 5 and number 6 or number 10 or number 11. All of a sudden they're not a priority for the provincial government anymore.

There would have to be an objective reason for that happening. That might be the case. There might be nine new schools that became more of a priority than those two, but at least we would have some objective criteria that we could look at and say that the reason the government has moved them down, the reason they're not in the top 10, the reason that, say, Airdrie doesn't get a fourth school in the next five years or something like that, if that's what happens – there's an objective reason for it. It's because their student-to-school ratio isn't as bad as, say, in Fort McMurray or Beaumont or Edmonton or wherever. The point is that we'd be able to see that. We'd be able to see the criteria, and we would be able to see if the schools are being moved around on the list based on politics rather than on criteria.

I want to believe you. Trust me. I want to believe that these schools are handed out completely based on objective criteria. So just make it easier for all of us in the Assembly by posting the objective criteria, the formula, et cetera, and then have the list adjusted every year, year to year. That transparency will give

parents, I think, a great deal of confidence in your government with regard to knowing that you're not using education as a political football. I'm not saying that you are. I'm just saying that the transparency will help with that.

4:20

Mr. Lukaszuk: Well, Mr. Chairman, we're getting somewhere because we started with an insinuation over the last few days that this government has a secret list, and now we're at a point where the member is stating that it is possible to create a list. So at least I'm absolved of the fact that I don't have a secret list, which is good. That's good. That's progress.

I agree that the funding of schools should not be political football. It never has been, and it won't be with this government. The only reason there are political-in-nature discussions about building schools is because – the member brings it up. Frankly, I have listed the objective criteria. So perhaps it's worth writing down, or maybe I should post it on our website. The objective criteria are: enrolment numbers in the jurisdiction and projections of enrolment, existing capacity within the school district and within reasonable distance geographically, health and safety in existing buildings and, obviously, the physical condition of the existing building.

It is not as simple, Mr. Chairman, as to just adjust numbers and adjust buildings from year to year and have a consistent list and have things bumped up and bumped down. It wouldn't give the viewer of such a list, if such a list existed, any predictability because the changes are drastic. Let me give you the example of a local district here in Edmonton since we happen to be here in Edmonton. One of the school boards, for example, has decided to close a school, a very large school, which would significantly impact their enrolment rates and capacity. They had the school slated for closure. As a matter of fact, if they sold the school or if they turned the land over to the city, that would actually even realize income for the system. But for one reason or another – I'm not questioning the reasons – the school board decided to keep that school. So that sends a chain reaction through the entire system of what their priorities will be when the system bumps a whole bunch of schools from one place to another.

Even further, now that they've decided to keep this enormous school open – and it's a very old school – they will be sending, probably in the next capital plan that will be coming over the next couple of months, an amazingly large bill to the government of Alberta to retrofit that school, which will probably be the equivalent of building two elementary schools anywhere else in the province. So that's how fluid the situation is in the system. Even though one may want to insinuate, for a secondary gain, that there are politics played with it, the fact is that, no, the situation is that fluid that school boards make autonomous decisions.

Now, in Airdrie the situation is rather simple. Airdrie needs schools. They don't need to close schools. They won't be thinking about closing schools for decades. They just need more schools, and they need more schools fast. So their number one priority can remain their number one priority for two or three years, although the community grows so fast that another school may become the priority.

In areas where there actually are surplus buildings, in areas where you have schools where you don't have kids and you have kids where you don't have schools and you have older buildings, school boards are making decisions on an ongoing basis. Today I was speaking with a chairman of a board who is going through a consultation on closing one school, moving the population from that school to another, and then unloading another. That's how fluid the situation is.

I'm glad the member acknowledges finally that there is no secret list. He still believes that one could actually compose such lists, and we do every year de novo, and every year that list will continue to change.

Mr. Anderson: I guess you publish the list of schools that you're going to build that year, obviously, but you don't publish what is coming after. If you did, then after those first schools in the queue got out, we would be able to see whether there was political manipulation going on after that. Those schools would necessarily probably be near the top the next year, and if they weren't, there would have to be a reason, which we would know because there would be objective criteria. I'm not just talking about – you listed some criteria. That's great. But I'm talking about actual numbers here, an actual formula. I'm not talking about safety. That's great. That's a great consideration. What in safety? How do you weight the system? How do you weight safety compared to student population? All of those things, a very simple, independent formula so that we can see it.

With regard to your note that schools have never been handed out politically, that's where I disagree with you. I don't say that you've done it politically, and I'm not even going to say that your predecessor did it either. But when I was still a member of your government, I had a sit-down with the executive assistant to the Minister of Education and was told flat out that the reason – I came to him before the 2008 election with numbers that showed the growth in cities like Airdrie and Calgary and Edmonton and so forth. If you looked at the way they were handed out, a public school board, for example, that had actually declined in enrolment over the last five years got the same amount of schools as a public board in another city of relatively the same population that had increased significantly in student population. They got the exact same number of schools. I asked the executive assistant after showing him the Airdrie numbers, which was one school in the last 10 years despite doubling in population: "How do you explain this? What's the deal here?" He said, "Well, they were political reasons." Those were his words, not mine. You know, maybe he was lying to me. I don't know. But that's what I was told, and the numbers backed it up.

Now, that was not a decision made by the previous Education minister nor by you. But there's no doubt in my mind that that 2008 announcement of schools was not apportioned based on some formula; in fact, it was apportioned based on politics. Edmonton got the same as Calgary. Regardless of what the student populations were and what the growth patterns were, they got the same amount because, God forbid, we wouldn't want to actually do it by formula because maybe Calgary would gain a couple of schools more than Edmonton would, and then – who knows? – there'd be a political price to pay. That's wrong. That's an example, one of many, where politics has been played with regard to schools.

Now, I'm not saying that I'm going to stand here, Minister, and say that this community – you know, Airdrie-Chestermere needs more schools, but I know that there are other needs around. I'm just one MLA advocating for my constituency. What would make it easier for all the MLAs in this Assembly would be if you would, like I say, publish every year after you get the 62 board priority lists, 1 through 500, whatever, just prioritize every single one of those on your master list, publish it publicly every year. On your master list this is 1 through 1,000 of what our priorities are for new schools and schools maintenance. We're going to fund these top 30 because that's the money we have. You take those out, you fund them, and then we can all look at it and see very transparently what should be there for next year subject to changes

that will occur. I understand that. Why couldn't you publish not just what you're building that year but what the priority would've been had you had more money going forward? Would you be willing to do that?

Mr. Lukaszuk: Well, Mr. Chairman, what the member is in essence asking me to do is to produce a list of schools that we didn't build. I think the parents in jurisdictions where they didn't receive a school and have a gaping hole on land with no school on it are pretty well aware of the fact that they didn't get a school. I don't think I have to produce a list to confirm for them that they didn't get a school.

The Acting Chair: Hon. minister, the time has expired. Thank you very much.

Hon. members, may we revert briefly to Introduction of Guests?

[Unanimous consent granted]

Introduction of Guests

(reversion)

The Acting Chair: The hon. Member for Lesser Slave Lake.

Ms Calahasen: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair. I had the great pleasure of joining some of my constituents in a meeting with the Minister of Intergovernmental, International and Aboriginal Relations and the Minister of Sustainable Resource Development this afternoon to discuss some very crucial issues regarding traplines. They are members of the Driftpile First Nation trapline holders. I'd ask them to stand as I introduce them: President Raymond Giroux, Vice-President Earl Giroux, Director Bernard Giroux, and, of course, Lawrence Willier, Denise Giroux, George Giroux, and Perline Schaseas. Also with them is their secretary, Lana Bellhumer, as well as councillor representatives: from Sucker Creek, Lavern Willier; from Swan River, Kevin Twin; and from Sucker Creek, Russell Willier, who is already standing. These individuals from the Driftpile First Nation trapline holders have come to present their issues to these ministers. I'd ask this Assembly to please give them a huge hand for coming today.

4:30 Main Estimates 2012-13

Education *(continued)*

The Acting Chair: Hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona, do you care to combine your time, then, with the minister?

Ms Notley: Yes, I do. As the previous speaker noted, we have a very, very short period of time.

The chair that's in the chair now was not there previously, but to refer back to my previous point of order – I didn't have it in front of me – it was 23(b)(i), that a member would be called to order if they were speaking to matters other than the question under discussion. That was what I was referring to at the time. It seems to have improved somewhat in terms of the specificity, so I'm hoping that we'll get some pointed back and forth specifically answering the questions I'm asking because, as I say, I don't have a great deal of time.

[Mr. Zwozdesky in the chair]

I'm going to focus in on issues around special-needs education because we haven't had a chance yet to talk about that in a great deal of detail. My understanding is that there was a \$68 million increase to special-needs funding this year, and I believe that brings the total amount dedicated to special-needs funding to

roughly \$370 million. I'd like to start by just pointing out that it was a little bit frustrating that my office tried to get the specific number dedicated to special-needs funding, and it took them two and a half weeks to get that answer out of the Ministry of Education. To me, that should be a separate line item, and the fact that it's not a separate line item is really a problem.

Having said that, we're at \$68 million this year. I assume – and I'm hoping the minister will correct me if I am incorrect – that that \$68 million is in addition to the \$12 million that happened last year and that the combined \$68 million and \$12 million is now \$80 million, that is dedicated to the process of implementing setting the direction or inclusive education or whatever it's being called right now. So my first question is: is that the case?

My second question is: out of the remaining pot of money that is dedicated towards special-needs education, could you break down for me the amount that is spent on those special-needs children who are coded as severe, so the amount that the ministry transfers to the school boards collectively on a province-wide basis for those who are coded as severe out of the remaining \$370 million, and then also whether or not the moderate and mildly disabled students and/or the ESL students are also included in that \$370 million figure? If so, if you could just advise me specifically what their breakdown is in terms of the line item. I'll just start with that question.

Mr. Lukaszuk: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. First of all, I must take umbrage with the member's suggestions that I wasn't staying on the topic.

An Hon. Member: Umbrage?

Mr. Lukaszuk: I love that word. Isn't that a great word, umbrage?

I thought and I continue to think that I have been on the topic throughout my entire discussion, but I guess it's for her to judge.

A couple of things, Mr. Chairman. If the member wanted to find out what allocation for special education was given to school boards and how the money was divided, it was very simple to do because, actually, on the day of the budget, the moment money was wired to school boards, we posted that detailed information on our website. It is available. It has been up since budget day. So I would strongly encourage that the member go to the website. I'm surprised that she's been trying to find that information for two weeks. All she really had to do was get on the Alberta Education website, and that information is very clearly and specifically posted. I have made a commitment to continue posting information in more and more detail so that not only members of the opposition but, frankly, parents and educators can look up the number.

The second reason why I'm very surprised that the member would say that she could not receive an answer on how much was transferred is because we have met. My department and my office staff have met with her staff, and that particular question was never asked by her staff. If she really wanted to know, all they needed to do is ask that question, and they shall receive the answer.

To answer the question more specifically relevant to what the facts are, the member should know – and I think we have briefed her staff on this particular item – the fact that we are actually moving away from coding children. The whole idea is to move away from coding individual children and attaching dollars to particular codes, and there are a number of very good reasons for it. She will be, I'm sure, following this exchange, checking on a computer what the funding is if she isn't right now.

Also, Mr. Chairman, I have to tell you that ESL is over and above. The dollars that she meant for special needs are being combined, so yes, it's \$80 million altogether. ESL, English as a second language, is funded above that as a separate envelope, and it is up 11 per cent – 11 per cent up – to a total of \$83 million per year.

Ms Notley: Okay. Well, first of all, my staff did contact your office. If it was so easy to find, I question why it took them two weeks to give us that information. That's the information that I have. However, that being the case, I'm still looking for the answer from you.

I understand that you are moving away from coding, but I also understand that at this point money is still going to school boards for severely disabled children. I would like the minister to please provide me the answer to the question that I asked. What is the global amount going for children who are severely disabled? What is the global amount going for children who are mildly and moderately disabled? If I could please get that answer, I would really appreciate it.

Mr. Lukaszuk: I won't even comment on the preamble, Mr. Chairman, but one thing I am very proud of is not only the department staff that are here and up in the gallery but also my office staff. If a question is asked, the question will be answered expeditiously. I will be making sure, as I have in this case, that more and more of that information will be on our website so that, frankly, no one needs to ask those questions.

Nonetheless, the manner in which supports, dollars, are being distributed is in a variety of categories. It's under instructional support, assistive technology supports and maintenance, learning coaches, literacy/numeracy support services, community support services, counselling support services, speech language support services, physical therapy support services, occupational therapy support services, mental and other health support services, and vision/hearing support services. Dollars are allocated based on forms of disability and the services required. Overall, Mr. Chairman, the goal of the system is to provide a welcoming, inclusive environment for all children in all schools at any time, making sure that all schools within all school boards can develop the capacity to provide superior services to children with special needs, and that goes away from coding.

Very often we know, actually, that children in socioeconomic strata/neighbourhoods who probably most need the support often don't have the parental and community support that would actually get them coded. Kids who really need financial support and extra help don't have the coding, so the dollars don't reach them, and others could.

A second issue, Mr. Chairman, is that there are many children that have special needs that simply are not coded. For example, exceptionally gifted children pose special needs and special challenges to teachers. This new funding formula will allow us to direct money to all school boards and allow all school boards to develop capacities to deal with needs. Currently the dollars have been distributed as indicated. For more detail I would encourage the member to look at our website.

Ms Notley: Okay. Mr. Chair, it's now eight minutes and 34 seconds, and I've not been able to get the minister to give me the numbers. I don't know if you don't know the numbers or what the problem is, but I'm looking for the numbers.

Now, I would like a yes or a no, if possible, from the minister. Is the coding finished now? The profile that applies to each school board for the number of children coded severe in each school

board: is that profile now abandoned, and is there no more funding in this budget based on the profile that has been in place for at least the five years? Can you tell me: is that profile there, or has it already been abandoned for this budget year? Yes or no?

4:40

Mr. Lukaszuk: This is not a yes-or-no question, so there won't be a yes-or-no answer. If the member actually wants information, I will give her information at length. If she wants a yes-or-no answer, go on our website and get your answer.

The answer is this, Mr. Chairman. Per-pupil funding continues, and we are now migrating to a new funding model. We will be using the higher of the two. School boards will be funded this year, in a transitional year, with the higher funding of the two. I listed the old model of how the dollars were distributed. The new model will be looking at variances in: if a jurisdiction is below average income, percentage of homeowners, mother's average education, percentage of lone-parent families, percentage of non degree/certificate educated parents, low-weight gestation period for the child, FNMI/aboriginal children, refugee, children in care, and distance.

This year, Mr. Chairman, we're using the higher of the two criteria. The member should know how the dollars were divvied up in the past. With the combination of the new criteria, whichever is higher, that's how the school board will be funded. From now on we will be moving into the new criteria, which is much more equitable for all children in the system.

Ms Notley: To clarify, then, based on that criteria, which was going to be my next question, to get those criteria that are in place, I'm still looking for the answer – it's not on your website, by the way – to how much money last year was given for severe special-needs kids. I'm still looking for it. If it's on your website, then I invite you to give me the website address, to send it on over to me, and you can do that. I'm looking for how much money went last year per school board as well as globally out of that \$370 million to severely disabled special-needs kids.

Now, is the minister telling me that in the interests of equity money that was previously going to children who were identified as having severe special needs will now be shared with those students who are actually also experiencing mild or moderate special needs, including low income, low birth weight, those kinds of issues? Is that what the minister is telling me now?

Mr. Lukaszuk: Should I give you a yes-or-no answer? I don't think so. Mr. Chairman, the member seems to be very energetic today, and she wants to get me maybe a little bit more engaged in a bit of a debate, but there is no debate. I will give her answers to her questions. Unfortunately, she's asking very complex questions about a complex system, and there won't be yes-or-no answers.

We're here to discuss this year's budget, but if she wants to look at last year's budget, last year we spent \$270 million. This year we have upped the funding by \$68 million to a new total. From last year the member should know the distribution. She's been in this House for a while. She knows how the \$270 million was distributed. This year we will be looking at whichever is higher. So this additional \$68 million added to the \$270 million will be distributed either by the new formula or the old formula, whichever is more advantageous to the school board. In the following budgets we will be completely switching to the new formula, which will be using exclusively the criteria that I have listed, which is birth weight and many other socioeconomic indicators that allow for school boards to provide inclusion services in all of their schools.

Ms Notley: Thank you. Well, you're starting to get almost close to answering the question.

Last year a portion of that \$270 million, which you talk about, was still going to kids who were profiled with severe special needs, and that money was going to boards based on a profile which had been frozen for the last four years. My question at this point, then, which you didn't answer yet, is: going forward, is that profile now abandoned, and is it the case that the criteria will have the money that was previously specifically directed to severe special needs now be shared with a larger group? I think that's a yes-or-no question at this point. I don't know why the minister is struggling to understand the question so much.

Mr. Lukaszuk: I don't feel like I'm struggling, Mr. Chairman. Do I look like I'm struggling?

Ms Notley: You sound like you're struggling.

Mr. Lukaszuk: Mr. Chairman, I cannot be more clear. Yes, in the past children were funded on a case-by-case basis based on the severity of the disability. This year in this budget children will be funded on a case-by-case basis only if it's advantageous to them in dollars. So if that generates more dollars, then the new formula for that particular child – that's how the child will be funded plus 2 per cent. If the new formula is more advantageous to the child, the child will be receiving the new formula. I don't know how much it will generate, but it will generate more, obviously, because it's advantageous.

The year after this all children will be funded on the new criteria, which, obviously, will continue to be advantageous to those who are on a per-file basis, and it will capture more kids because some kids simply were not coded and now will be able to benefit simply from the fact that they meet the criteria that are set out. That means that they either fall above the standards that are set out to be, quote, unquote, normal or below. So kids who are exceptional and kids who are disadvantaged by their disability or a variety of other factors will receive that extra funding.

Ms Notley: The reason I ask these questions – you know, I'm not trying to be intentionally antagonistic. The fact of the matter is that the only meaningful funding that comes from the ministry for children with disabilities in most cases is the funding that goes towards kids who are coded as severe. The other kids who are not coded as severe, who are acknowledged to have a mild or moderate disability, receive virtually no extra support in the classroom. The only way the parents, the teacher, or the administrator can touch or feel or see that additional support is by having the kids who are coded as severe and then having certain measures in place.

Now, if the money stays the same or about the same and it starts going in different ways, maybe you're making it more equitable, but what you're also going to do is make sure that that severely coded child no longer has an aide. So that's the problem that I'm trying to get at, and I still need to get the answer about how much was spent of that \$270 million last year so that we can track it. That's all I'm looking for because I didn't have it last year.

However, before we get to that, the other question I want to ask before we get to the point that this is over is: the \$68 million plus the \$12 million, the \$80 million, is that dedicated towards bringing into place the setting the directions framework? Is that what it's dedicated towards, or is any of it going directly to school boards for the per capita or per-child or per-profile basis, whatever the rules are, to go directly to fund up front? It appears from your press release that it's going to a sort of bureaucratic retooling to move towards setting the directions.

Mr. Lukaszuk: Mr. Chairman, first of all, relative to the initial comments of the member, the member insinuates that if a child was coded, that child actually receives the benefits of those dollars. Well, that ideally would have been true, but the member as an MLA who deals with parents would have known that that was not always the case. School boards always have had and always will have the ability to reprofile dollars. The fact is that even under the new formula, locally elected trustees will be able to reprofile those dollars as they see fit.

So just because a child was coded with a severe disability and a certain pocket of money was allotted to that particular child, that did not necessarily mean that the child in a tangible sense was receiving additional benefits by way of teaching assistants or aides or others equivalent to that dollar value. Those decisions often were made at a local level, where school board trustees were able to reprofile. That ability to reprofile dollars will remain.

To answer the member's second question, these dollars will be transferred to school boards based on per-child allocations based on the new criteria. Having said that, school boards will continue to have the ability to reprofile the dollars, but all of the dollars are intended to go towards providing additional special-needs services to children.

I believe I've answered the question. I think it's rather simple, but the member appears to be still dissatisfied. Maybe she should ask one more question.

Ms Notley: The fact of the matter is that often it did go to the children, but that's a whole different issue. We can have a discussion. You're right; it was totally up to the school board, and there was a relationship between the school board, the principal, and the parents in that decision. Now that's not there anymore, but that's not the point.

My question now is about the \$68 million. How is that being used? The previous minister said that there would be a rollout of a framework and an accountability guideline and a structure for how that money is going to be used. I'm looking for an answer for how that money is being used. Is it in addition to the \$12 million? So are we really talking about \$80 million at this point?

4:50

Mr. Lukaszuk: The entire amount, Mr. Chairman, will be rolled out to school boards for the provision of additional special-needs services for children.

I don't know why this member would say that the relationship between school boards and principals and parents is gone. It seems to be slugging the school board day today. It appears that the members are not happy with any decisions school boards are making, yet our education seems to be firing on all cylinders. The fact is, I think, that the relationship between school boards and principals and parents will remain, and the new school act actually strengthens that.

The Deputy Chair: Thank you. The chair hesitates to interrupt the minister; however, we must proceed.

The chair does have an allocation here for a member from the Alberta Party or the independent member to join in if they wish at this time.

If not, then we'll proceed to any other members who wish to join in the debate. The first one that I had up was Calgary-Buffalo, followed by Edmonton-Strathcona. If any member wishes to speak, please indicate, and I'll add you to the list.

Calgary-Buffalo, please proceed.

Mr. Hehr: Well, thank you very much, Mr. Chair. I think one of those things that our education system is going to have to continue

to adapt to is the increasing number of English as a second language students in our system. If we look at the government's own numbers, we'll need 100,000 more workers in this province in the next 10 years, many of them from out of province and out of country, and many times they're going to bring their families here. There's going to have to be a real concerted effort by this ministry to look at that.

If we look at the statistics coming out of Canada, people who do not have English as a second language skills or are coming from out of country are not doing as well as people who are more fluent in the language or were born here. Could you explain to me what our ESL funding is, what the percentage increase is, and what your future plans are in terms of continuing to support this endeavour?

Mr. Lukaszuk: Mr. Chairman, this member is entirely correct. This province has and will continue to attract immigrants.

An Hon. Member: Because of our low tax rate.

Mr. Lukaszuk: Because of the low tax rate that we have; that's right. Thank you for reminding me, hon. member.

Last year between immigrants and migrants to Alberta this province attracted some 120,000 newcomers. I have to tell you, Mr. Chairman, a bit of Alberta trivia that all members should know. Alberta has the highest rate of retention of migrants that come to Alberta. It's at 85 per cent. So 85 per cent of people who come to Alberta even for a while end up staying in Alberta permanently.

The number of children that we will have entering our schools who don't speak English as their first language, obviously, will continue to grow. That is why this ministry is increasing funding for ESL by 11 per cent, from \$75.4 million to \$83.9 million.

Mr. Hehr: How does that break down at the actual schools? If a person comes over here in grade 3, how many years of block funding does that person receive, and is this sufficient? I believe that program was reduced a couple of years ago, the amount of years they were supported. If that's not true, you can tell me, and we'll go from there.

Mr. Lukaszuk: The member would be correct. Some supplemental funding was removed at a certain point in time, but by far right now it's outstripped by the 11 per cent increase.

When a child is identified as an English as a second language learner, that child receives ESL funding for seven subsequent years. That funding follows the child within Alberta Education for seven years. It's a standard number that's being used. Some children acquire proficiency of the English language faster than others. Some would argue that having been in Canada for over 30 years, I could probably still qualify for English as a second language. But the fact is that seven years is the number that is allotted, and it seems to be doing well because you will find when you look at longitudinal studies of our kids that enter the system as English as a second language learners, they tend to be doing very well compared to the rest of the cohort of students.

Mr. Hehr: Well, let's talk here. You mentioned that we would need 400 schools in the next 10 years. I believe that's what you said. What are the ministry's plans to do that? If you have a number, what's the estimated financial cost of those 400 schools?

Mr. Lukaszuk: Well, you know, I have to underscore that the number right now, looking at capital plans, looking at growth projections and all that, is somewhere around 400. Don't quote me

on that because I know the member from the Wildrose Party will now say that I have a secret list that has 400 schools on it. Not the case.

When you look at growth projections of kids, when you look at the state of infrastructure and the age of current buildings and growth patterns, the number hovers somewhere around 400 new schools over the next 10 years. So that is why we're working diligently with the Treasury Board right now on finding what funding mechanism we could put in place to actually allow for announcing all those schools. As you know, there's no ill will to building schools; frankly, everybody wants to build schools. You would like to cut a ribbon, I imagine, on a school in your riding if you needed one. The fact is that the current financial regime doesn't allow us to build as many schools as we need.

One of the differences between building schools in Alberta and most other provinces and then building other provincial infrastructure is that we don't amortize the cost of schools over a period of time, over the lifespan of the building, but we actually pay for them cash up front. If you were to build a provincial building or something else, you would be able to amortize. The reason is that the moment a school is built and ready for occupancy, we hand over the keys to a school board and no longer have the assets on our books.

So Treasury Board and I and others are working on finding a way that meets our Auditor General's requirements for recording financial expenditures on infrastructure and that would also liberate our ability to build that many schools over that short period of time. As you can anticipate, there will be those who will find objection with this, but the fact is that we need schools now for kids today and not falling further and further behind on infrastructure.

Mr. Hehr: Well, I would agree with much of what the minister says. It would be ridiculous not to build these schools where needed. I would suggest that it's fairly simple. There's nothing wrong with putting capital plans into a separate pool and allotment and borrow the money to do it, for crying out loud. Oftentimes we look at capital projects as being investments.

I think that part of the problem – and maybe we've done it over time – is that we've tried to amalgamate this into a paying-cash-for-everything thing. We recognize that the daily costs of running things, services, yeah, that's one thing, but actually investments in infrastructure, that you can pay over time by people who use them, would be a wise move for this government to do. Is that the plan? If it is, I commend you for it.

Mr. Lukaszuk: I'll tell you what. The plan actually goes even further because the other dilemma comes with: what do we do with existing schools that are perhaps no longer supported by student populations? So two things are being looked at right now.

When we build new schools, we have to make sure that schools are more than just schools because 30 years from now trustees and MLAs will be struggling with the same problem as migration shifts again. So I'm looking more towards a consultation with locally elected officials, municipal officials, with not-for-profit agencies to see whether we can create synergies and build more than just a school. Imagine building a school that has a medical clinic built into it and perhaps has a gymnasium built into it and some arts facility built into it. So we're looking at campuses. That is something that we're working on as well.

That still leaves us with the very unpleasant issue of empty schools. Often those buildings that are paid for by taxpayers still have a lot of life left in them. The problem is that they have no students. So we are looking as a crossministry initiative at the

possibility of bringing other government wraparound services into those buildings, inviting not-for-profit service providers into those buildings so the buildings can still maintain their value and continue to provide the community with valuable services but perhaps no longer be places of education.

At the end of the day in this ministry – and I think our responsibility as government is to make sure that we provide the best education possible for children – when numbers drop to such a low level where it is impossible to provide programming and meaningful options and field trips and all that to children, difficult decisions have to be made by school boards. To ease that decision-making process for school boards, we're looking at creating an environment where other service providers can enter those buildings and perhaps provide equally important services to that community.

5:00

Mr. Hehr: In my view, deficit financing on schools is perfectly cool, and I think most people in these neighbourhoods would essentially agree. There are differences between capital and expenditures. Nevertheless, I realize every school is different, but you guys have an average cost of a school in Alberta, what that number would be just for the average school. If you guys looked at the 14 schools being built right now, what is the average cost of one school to go up?

Mr. Lukaszuk: You're right; it varies. An average K to 6 will cost you about \$12 million. Those are probably the least expensive because of the specialized infrastructure that's not required. Gyms are smaller, and no science labs. When you're looking at high schools, for a capacity of about a thousand students you're hovering somewhere around \$30 million for a building. They range. That is why often you will find elementary and junior high schools combined. Not only do they serve a wider cohort of students, but you find efficiencies in building two in one.

The range changes. As we are going to look at building campuses, you will be looking at partnerships with others, and that cost will be offset by that.

Mr. Hehr: A recent announcement on charter schools said that you were looking at eliminating the cap on student enrolments there. No?

Mr. Lukaszuk: Grow into the size of the building that they're in.

Mr. Hehr: Explain to me your announcement, so I get it straight again. Sorry.

Mr. Lukaszuk: The announcement, Mr. Chairman, was as such: number one, charter schools, I firmly believe, have proven themselves to provide a good quality of education to our children. Obviously, parents are voting with their feet. They're signing up kids into charter schools. The problem charter schools had is that their lifespan was five years, so by the time their charter was renewed, they had to start working and accumulating paperwork and be assessed to get their charter renewed. Now their charter is renewed for 15 years, where they will be able to plan, particularly from the side of infrastructure, longer term, maybe buy a building, enter into a long-term lease, and maybe find some efficiencies there.

The second part of the announcement was, Mr. Chairman, that certain charters were capped at a given number – let's say 300 students – but they were by default in a building that had capacity for 350 students. We will now allow the number of students to grow to the maximum capacity that the building can accommodate

using our Alberta standards of how many children should be in a school building. So they can only grow to size.

Mr. Hehr: Do you have the numbers of how many more additional spaces, then, will be available in the upcoming year as a result of that change?

Mr. Lukaszuk: Hon. member, since it's not a budget number, I can give you that number later, but I have to tell you that it'll be negligible. Because of the popularity of charter schools most of them actually have grown to their maximum size. There are a few that haven't, so the number will be negligible, less than probably 5 per cent, by far, of the total enrolment of children.

Mr. Hehr: Okay. There's \$192.5 million budgeted to support accredited private schools and early childhood services. How much is that, and has that been an increase since last year?

Mr. Lukaszuk: It's the same increase as all the other schools per child; however, they are not getting many of the other envelopes that have been given to the public and Catholic schools, so overall the answer would be no.

As the member knows, we don't pay for any infrastructure for private schools, and we fund them at 70 per cent of the per-student funding, the basic funding, but they don't get the additional envelopes. These schools have proven themselves, again, to be an asset and an asset of choice of parents, parents voting with their feet. Also, they don't get any allotment for class size initiative, and they get no transportation dollars either, so quite a significant overall difference in funding per pupil.

Mr. Chairman, you will find that the desire for charter or private schools stems from the fact that parents desire certain programs that may not be offered in a public setting, and even though charter schools are public, the public school board run schools always get the first right of refusal on a program. I am not suggesting that there will be a new charter application in Calgary, but I will give you a scenario where there could be one. Recently the Calgary board of education made a decision not to provide Arabic studies as a program of choice in Calgary. Well, I'm not sure how desirable that program is, how many parents are interested, but in a case where those parents were turned down, those parents, since it is so important for them to have their children learn their native tongue, may form a charter as a not-for-profit society for a charter application.

The same happens with private schools. In my riding we have an Islamic academy, which now has pretty well full enrolment. When I meet with the parents, this is the kind of program that they want for their children. We fund 70 per cent and no transportation, no classroom size, no infrastructure. They have to build or buy their own school. They do teach Alberta curriculum, and children are required to meet the same standards as kids in any other public school.

Mr. Hehr: Yeah. I hear those arguments. Obviously, I come from a philosophical background that says: "Hey, you want a private school? Pay for it yourself." I don't think I'll ever be persuaded of that argument elsewhere, but sometimes if you grow up in a household long enough, you can't unlearn the stuff you've learned. We'll leave it at that.

I'd ask you, then. You know, you get up in question period, and you say: "We support choice. We love choice." Why is it you don't fund private schools to 100 per cent?

Mr. Lukaszuk: Well, because they have the option of being a charter school. That is the difference. I lived in a house long

enough, too – and perhaps I won't change either – but the fact is that if parents want a specialized program that will be run as a nonprofit, governed by a board of parents or community volunteers, and if it's a program of choice that is not offered by a public system, they can apply for a charter and have a charter school that would be 100 per cent funded by the taxpayers' purse. If they choose to have a certain degree of autonomy and not be affiliated with any school board and have the school run by a board of directors that they elect, then there is a price that comes with that autonomy. Maybe that's somewhat in line with where your belief system is. If you want autonomy, you pay for it.

The fact is that we still expect children to receive basic education. Those parents pay property taxes. They pay for public education through their homes, through their properties that they have. They're taxpayers as well. We simply provide basic funding for basic education, but all the bells and whistles that the private school wants to offer, including a building, parents pay for themselves. The system seems to be working quite well.

That's why we have that wide range of options, you know. You can go into a public school that more and more offers individual programming, individual programs of choice. If those are not sufficient, go into a charter school. If that's not sufficient, then you go into a private school.

Mr. Hehr: Well, I argue that because this is upcoming and it relates to the budget. You know, Wildrose is now going to a voucher system. They're going to 100 per cent fund this stuff to help every person. Money follows the child into a private school. Money follows a child to a charter school at 100 per cent. I wonder if you can point me to the evidence where you're looking at societies that have gone to this funding model, full well knowing that Alberta has the highest funding of private schools throughout Canada. I can find very little evidence out there that says that this has an overall benefit for the whole of society's learning activities, which you as the minister should be in charge of, not worried about some individual family's needs or whether a religious sect or whatever wants a school, okay? If you can point me to that, maybe that will help me. I'll go read the study.

Mr. Lukaszuk: Well, you know, what they would do in the Wildrose is their thing. I firmly believe that education should not be driven by ideology. It should be driven by pragmatism. What's best for the children, right? So I don't entertain many of the ideas coming from that particular corner.

The fact is, I guess, that the best study that really exists, and I think the most conclusive study that exists, is the analysis of how our system performs vis-à-vis all other systems not only in Canada and the United States but throughout the world and the fact that having the system that we have and having the funding formula that we have and giving the parents this wide plethora of options that we give puts us in the top four position in the world. So I would say that it's very difficult to argue with success.

We should strive to improve our results. There are pockets of students that need additional attention. As you know, my personal passion is our aboriginal population, where we have a lot of work to do over a period of time. But at the end of the day don't fix it if it ain't broken. It seems to be doing very well.

5:10

Mr. Hehr: I understand the minister full well, and it's a credit to much of what we've done in Alberta that we're performing so high. Although I can say that you guys have screwed up health care 37 ways from Sunday, I can't necessarily say that about education. I do applaud you on that; nevertheless, it's the future.

Do you have any numbers of students of American descent who are currently going to private schools? What I see happening, at least in Calgary, are many Americans coming to our cities who are working in the oil patch, who are used to more of a private schooling option. They are choosing this more from a fundamental belief that that is it. I'm just wondering if . . .

The Deputy Chair: Thank you.

The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona, followed by the hon. Member for Fort McMurray-Wood Buffalo.

Ms Notley: Thank you. I've been on the website since our last discussion, trying to track down the information that the minister says is there. It's still just for clarification; we're not getting exactly the information I'm looking for.

On your website you talked about \$68 million being made available for the purpose of moving forward on your revised plan on inclusive education. In a time when conversations like this were accompanied with a great more clarity – let's just say that the previous minister was more inclined to that. He talked about the fact that the \$12 million – and now I'm assuming it's \$68 million, or maybe it's \$80 million because I still haven't got an answer to that question – was really geared toward the process of revising and rejigging the system to implement the recommendations, which are far reaching and wide ranging and represent a significant change in the way things are done within our school system.

The idea was that first there'd be \$12 million dedicated to that process, and now it appears from the website that \$68 million is being dedicated to that purpose. So I understand, then, that we're looking at a total of \$80 million although I've yet to get that answer given to me. But I'll try again. So you can tell me if that's what is being done.

My question is – because, again, in previous conversations with the Education minister last year I was told that we would be given much more clarity and description around the work that the government is doing with this \$68 million or maybe \$80 million and that we'd be told because, you know, it's \$80 million; it's not a small amount. I think we're all interested in wise use of our dollars. The idea was that this was around the retooling process.

So I'm asking again if I can get some clarity around what the \$12 million was used for last year and what the \$68 million is going to be used for this year. Just that money. If I could get that information, I would really appreciate it. Hopefully, you won't take 40 minutes.

The Deputy Chair: As the chair I hesitate to interrupt, but the Government House Leader has caught my eye. As we're all well aware, pursuant to Standing Order 19(1)(c) the question must now be put on the motion for consideration of his Honour the Lieutenant Governor's speech. Therefore, I will recognize the hon. Government House Leader for his motion.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I would move that the Committee of Supply now rise and report progress and beg leave to sit again.

[Motion carried]

[Mr. Zwozdesky in the chair]

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Member for Strathcona.

Mr. Quest: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The Committee of Supply has had under consideration certain resolutions for the Department of Education relating to the 2012-13 government estimates for the

general revenue fund and lottery fund for the fiscal year ending March 31, 2013, reports progress, and requests leave to sit again.

The Acting Speaker: Does the House concur in the progress report? Say aye.

Hon. Members: Aye.

The Acting Speaker: Those opposed, please say no. So ordered.

Hon. members, as you all know, under Standing Order 19(1)(c) the question must now be put for consideration of His Honour the Lieutenant Governor's speech. It's a procedural matter.

Consideration of His Honour the Lieutenant Governor's Speech

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

To His Honour the Honourable Colonel (Retired) Donald S. Ethell, OC, OMM, AOE, MSC, CD, LLD, the Lieutenant Governor of the Province of Alberta:

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

[Motion carried]

The Acting Speaker: Now, as indicated, we'll proceed with Motion 10.

Government Motions

Address in Reply to Speech from the Throne

10. Mr. Hancock moved on behalf of Ms Redford:
Be it resolved that the Address in Reply to the Speech from the Throne be engrossed and presented to His Honour the Honourable the Lieutenant Governor by such members of the Assembly as are members of Executive Council.

The Acting Speaker: Are there any other comments?

Seeing none, I would ask the hon. Government House Leader on behalf of the Premier to close debate.

The hon. Member for Edmonton-Whitemud, the Government House Leader, has moved a motion to close debate, so we'll vote on the motion.

[Government Motion 10 carried]

Committee of Supply

[Mr. Zwozdesky in the chair]

The Deputy Chair: Hon. members, I'll call the Committee of Supply to order now.

Main Estimates 2012-13

Education (continued)

The Deputy Chair: As you may know, the Committee of Supply has under consideration the Department of Education, and we are in the middle of the exchange between the Member for Edmonton-Strathcona and the Minister of Education. The chair is pleased to recognize the Minister of Education.

Mr. Lukaszuk: Thank you. Mr. Chairman, I've been trying sincerely to answer that question, and I'm not sure where the

breakdown in communication is. Maybe I've been too long out of the classroom, and I'm not good at conveying information anymore.

Mr. Chairman, I want you to make note of the fact that today is actually quite an important day, with two breakthroughs. Number one, the hon. Member for Airdrie-Chestermere has acknowledged that there is no secret list and now tells us that actually there is a possibility to create a list if I ever wanted to, so that is very important. The second one is that the member who is just asking me questions right now acknowledges that there is a website, that there is information on the website that was previously available, so that is a good deal, too, Mr. Chairman.

Let me try to answer the question in more detail. The entire \$80 million will be going into classrooms. The money is allocated for provision of special-needs services. Tell me where I'm going off base. The money will be distributed in two ways. Historically it was on a per-file basis. Kids were diagnosed, they were coded, and certain codes allowed for certain additional funding. That's how money was directed to school boards. In cases where that form of funding is the higher of the two, that's how money will be distributed this year as well.

But we also have a new formula, which we are bringing into life starting this year, which will be the formula next year. You will be comparing funding vis-à-vis the old formula and the new formula. Whichever one is higher will be funding that child. Under the new formula the teacher will be making the call on whether the child requires additional services and what those services are. It's not the coding that will be determining, but the teacher will be making the decision what additional services the child needs.

5:20

The teacher will be making the determination of whether the child needs instructional support, assistive technology, learning coaches, literacy/numeracy services, community supports, counselling supports, speech/language support services, physical therapy supports, occupational therapy supports, mental or other health supports, vision/hearing support services.

The funding this year will be the higher of the two. The entire \$80 million will be in the pot. That's how the money will be distributed. From the end of this fiscal year on we will be moving to the new formula, which will be looking at the child's demographic and the child's neighbourhood and the family that the child comes from, knowing that children from certain demographics do require additional funding and do require additional services, giving teachers that latitude to provide those additional services to a child who is not necessarily coded.

Those demographics that we will be looking at for extra funding will be: if the child is above or below the norm for average income; for the percentage of homeowners in that geographic area; for the mother's average education, because it's known to be a determining factor; for percentage of lone-parent families; for percentage of parents with no degree or postsecondary certificates; for low-weight gestation for the child; whether the child is aboriginal or not; whether the child is a refugee is not; whether the child is in care, in provincial custody; and also distance, and that is 40 kilometres from a major urban centre.

The child will be judged by those criteria, and if the child falls outside of the norm, additional funding will be provided to the school board. The entire \$80 million will be going to school boards.

Ms Notley: I'm starting to see why I was perhaps a bit confused around this stuff. I'll be quite honest. In previous conversations with the previous minister, when we talked about setting the

direction and action on inclusion, I specifically stated my concern, which continues to be quite significant, about this program and the merits of this program and the advisability of this program. One of the points that I would make, which, quite frankly, I have extreme support for amongst the teaching profession, is that teachers are not currently qualified to assess kids in their class.

For instance, we have speech pathologists, who go to school for years and years and years and years, and we have psychologists, who go to school for years and years and years and years, and they learn how to assess. Teachers, the vast majority of teachers, are in our classrooms right now without ever having taken a course on special needs, let alone distinguishing between the nature of special needs and the best practices and the peer-reviewed literature and the expert literature around the best mechanism for teaching different children with different special needs. Our teachers just are not equipped with that.

Now, when I'd had this conversation before, I'd always understood that this money, the \$12 million last year and perhaps the \$68 million this year, which now I'm hearing is different, would be dedicated to dealing with that gap. It would be dedicated to dealing with the fact that we're asking teachers to do something which they are absolutely not trained to do.

Maybe that's not what you're doing. Maybe what you're doing is that you are just throwing the full \$80 million into the class, and you're just going to cross your fingers and close your eyes and hope that teachers who do not know how to engage in this process will simply learn it off the side of their desks by reading a couple of your online things. I have been on the website, and I have looked at some of the coaching literature and some of the lovely little online web courselets that are being offered for the teachers to read at home, you know, in their extra time and all that kind of stuff. Knowing what I do know about the expertise required to identify a learning program for children with special needs, I know that that's not enough. Maybe that's where the issue is.

You've got more money in there, but really what we've got is a profile that's been frozen for five years. Yes, we've now put \$68 million into it, which is great, although if you do sort of population and inflation over the last five years, essentially this money has just now brought us back to where we were five years ago in terms of the funding.

There was a survey that came out from the ATA in December 2011, and I'm just wondering if the minister can speak to this. Given that the teachers are the ones who you anticipate carrying the load of this whole new area of practice for which they've never been trained and given that we really only put enough money back into the special-needs pot to bring us back to where we were in about 2007, 2008 and given that we have this survey where the number of teachers identifying significant deterioration in special-needs resourcing and special-needs support in the classroom has doubled – you know, in 2006 or 2007 25 per cent of teachers thought that special-needs education was in trouble; now over 50 per cent of teachers believe that special-needs education is in big trouble – I'm wondering if the minister can comment. Since that came out, you know, two months ago, how do you see this unfolding in a way that doesn't continue to compromise the educational outcomes of our special-needs kids?

The last question I'll ask on that. Last year I asked the previous minister about why we have no performance measures around special-needs kids' performance and holding ourselves accountable for how well our special-needs kids do. I see that indeed that's not changed one bit in the measures that you're using to keep yourself accountable even though we're in this incredibly chaotic change in your system. So why is that not in there? Why hasn't there been some work done on the accountability

framework, that was specifically promised by the previous minister in the last estimates debate?

Mr. Lukaszuk: Well, I have to tell you that the world does not look so bleak from this angle and from what I'm hearing and seeing. First of all, this member underestimates teachers' capacity and their ability to make decisions relevant to what the child requires. [interjection] I see the Member for Fort McMurray-Wood Buffalo would like to contribute. I'll sit down and let him talk.

Chair's Ruling Decorum

The Deputy Chair: Through the chair, please. We're having a very good, high-level debate here, and the chair will do his utmost to keep it there. Hon. members, if you could keep your comments until your turn, that would be appreciated. At the moment the Minister of Education has the floor, and I would invite him to proceed.

Mr. Lukaszuk: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I appreciate that.

Debate Continued

Mr. Lukaszuk: Mr. Chairman, teachers do have the capacity to make decisions as to what is required for the child, but it goes further than that. Under the current system, frankly, you will have a situation where you may have a child who is legally blind. Do you really need the child coded and going through the expensive assessments to determine whether the child is blind or not and what the child needs? Teachers can make those decisions very often.

Also, Mr. Chairman, teachers do receive significant in-servicing, and implementation of this particular model will perhaps require school boards and principals to make decisions on in-servicing teachers, at least particular teachers in a school, to develop that capacity, to be able to provide welcoming, inclusive schools for all children. At the end of the day the goal is that every school will have the capacity to be inclusive and to be welcoming to all students. That will be a skill that will be required of teachers as time goes on, and teachers can do this.

Also, that aligns itself very nicely with Bill 2, that is on the floor of our Legislature. As you know, one of the propositions of the bill, if passed, is the fact that parents' rights are being significantly elevated. Parents are now considered partners in education, where they will be making decisions relevant to the education of their child and will be provided access to information that will allow them to make well-informed decisions. The very parent of a child with a disability, who knows the child best, who has been involved in the medical treatment of that child supposedly for years, up to the time the child enters the school system, will also contribute expertise on what the child requires.

You will have collaborative decision-making between parents and educators, and I have full faith in the system that they can make those decisions. Some school boards may have consultants that they will be utilizing and using within the school board to make additional input on what devices and accommodations are the best for what child. But at the end of the day I have no concern that children will receive the help that they require.

5:30

Ms Notley: I wonder, Mr. Chair: could you tell me how much time I have left?

The Deputy Chair: You have five minutes and 45 seconds in this exchange.

Ms Notley: Thank you.

First of all, I don't want to suggest that I don't have confidence in teachers. I have all confidence in teachers, and I have confidence in teachers to teach the children that they themselves have been taught to teach. But I think that you are doing a disservice to the special-needs children of this province if you ignore the fact, the same fact that most teachers themselves understand, that the vast majority of them haven't been trained in special-needs education. Even for those who have been trained in special-needs education, most of them have not been trained in assessment.

You know, saying that I'm concerned about whether a bus driver can rebuild a carburetor but that somehow I don't trust whether they can drive or not is silly. They've been trained to do one thing, and that's what teachers tell me. They are worried about it because they have not been given the support and the training that is necessary to manage complex classrooms with a variety of children with special needs, a variety of behavioural needs, a variety of individual educational planning program requirements, a variety of different standards applied to their educational expectations. They haven't been given that training.

We've already heard about this ministry suggesting that class size is only relevant for the K to 3 population. I appreciate that the class size is not too bad right now for any population. That's fine although, again, we're looking at averages, so that's a bit concerning in those areas where the averages are not being met. But the fact of the matter is that, again, you know, special-needs kids have a different need for a proper class size, and teachers with three or four children who may have previously been coded as severely disabled in that class – it makes a difference. If they've got 20 kids and five who were previously coded severe and now no longer are coded severe, then the relevance of that class size is very different, depending on the composition.

The ministry's decision to focus on K to 3 for class size and to make that decision that 4 to 12 is irrelevant in terms of class size, according to the research and according to what the minister said to us last year in estimates, is an implicit systemic failure to understand the needs of special-needs children.

I'm not in any way critiquing teachers. Quite the opposite. I am here on behalf of teachers to give you the message that you are expecting them to create all the solutions with no resources and no support. They are frustrated and they are stressed and they are anxious because they know that the expectations of this current plan are such that ultimately it's Alberta's children who are going to suffer. That's my concern.

I'd like to switch quickly to the issue of predictable funding and the grant. I know the Member for Calgary-Buffalo has already raised this. You know, we've got the 1 per cent grant, and you guys are proposing 1 per cent, 2 per cent, 2 per cent. You're talking about three years of predictable funding, and there's a lot of self-congratulatory joy over there for having done that. But, of course, everybody has always said that it needed to be predictable, adequate funding.

My concern is that most estimates, conservative estimates, suggest that wage increases for 2012-2013, generally speaking, will be between 2 and 3 per cent, and for every 1 per cent miscalculation on your part I think we're looking at about a \$50 million shortfall. If we want to have stability and we don't want the teacher salary and the funding of the teacher salary, not to mention the support staff salary, to continue to be a political football, the way it has been for the last three years, and to create the kind of chaos that it's created every summer over the last three years, how are we going to deal with that when you're currently planning for an increase that is much lower than what most – you

know, the Conference Board of Canada is projecting a higher percentage wage increase this year for public-sector employees. How are you going to deal with that?

Mr. Lukaszuk: Well, let me deal with the first long comment. The fact is, Mr. Chairman, that just because the funding formula will change for children, the provision of services doesn't necessarily have to be on a per-child basis. If a child comes to a school coded because the child is blind and now the child comes to school not coded but the child is blind, teachers still are making the decisions on what is best for the child and what adaptive devices and what assistance the child needs. When a child comes coded, it doesn't come with a list of devices that the child will need. Plus, there's funding for learning coaches that are being implemented throughout school boards. One of their jobs will be and is to work with teachers and to create that capacity so that proper decisions can be made for all children in all schools.

I still continue to believe that the system is in place to make decisions. At the end of the day there are consulting services that are available throughout school boards that can supplement that body of knowledge.

Relevant to salaries . . .

The Deputy Chair: Thank you. I'm sorry to interrupt the hon. minister, but that concludes this exchange.

We now go to the hon. Member for Fort McMurray-Wood Buffalo or the hon. Member for Airdrie-Chestermere, whichever one is ready. Please proceed.

Mr. Anderson: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I just want to continue and pick up where we'd left off last time. Just to refresh everybody's memory, we were talking about the fact that you had 62 school boards from across the province all submit their priority lists to the provincial government. We agree that that is occurring. The minister said that he would put those lists up online, which is great.

Then I was asking the minister about – every year he has to determine which of those priorities he's actually going to fund, in the order of the way the boards have laid them out, but of course you can't give the boards everything they want. You can only give them some, if any, of what they want, and therefore you've got to prioritize and say who gets what, which board gets how much money for what projects. He said: "Yeah, every year de novo we come and we make a new list from scratch every single year on the priorities for that year. Then we build those priorities with the money that we have in the budget."

My request was that not only would this minister on a go-forward basis put those priorities there, the one through 40, whatever, that he's going to fund that year, but also, based on criteria and so forth, that he publish the full list, well past what he is funding that year, on down the line from highest priority to lowest priority of what's next. What's the next priority for next year should all things remain the same? Of course, that would have to be updated every year and so forth; I understand that. But in that way it would be transparent. People could know why it's important to have a priority list, and it could be transparent that the education bureaucracy is not being used for political purposes. That's why I'm asking this very serious question. I hope I get an answer to it.

The minister was responding, saying: "You know what? People who don't get a school that year know they don't get a school that year. There's a vacant lot. You don't need to tell them." But maybe he misunderstood the point of having those other projects published. The point is transparency. It's to make sure that the

next year when he de novo comes up with his new list, if the priority has changed from those schools that didn't make the cut the year before, if the priority in there has changed again, there has to be a reason for it. That will make sure that people can question the reasoning for it and say: "Look, this school was number two; it was the top school that didn't get funded last time. Why is it not being funded this year?" There would be transparency.

Would that not be a useful tool for parents and school boards and just Albertans in general? Would that be something that you'd be willing to put up, Minister, so that we could have that transparency?

Mr. Lukaszuk: Mr. Chairman, if the list was less static, I would agree with this member that it would make a lot of sense because if only 10 schools are being built and yours happens to be the 11th one, that in a sense would be a bit of good news because wait till the next batch of schools, and odds are yours will be funded.

If you were to print a list of schools you didn't build, what you would be de facto doing is actually setting up false and unfair expectations because there would be a fair degree of expectation, if you were that 11th school and only 10 got built, that in the next batch of schools you would actually be captured in the next 10 schools.

5:40

The fact is, Mr. Chairman, that Albertans actually make very important life decisions, unfortunately in some cases erroneous, based on their anticipation of where a school will be built. I often speak with my constituents, and they tell me that a real estate agent promised them that where they're buying a house, there will be a school built one day. So they build their house because they're planning to have children, and they figure that by the time the kids reach school age, there will be a school. Well, 20 years later there is still a grassy field with maybe a soccer field on it. Now it gets to a point where those very same families don't want the school over there anymore because they're saying: "Frankly, I don't mind this green field. I don't need the noise of a school."

Setting up expectations that you will be receiving a school shortly, with the current funding model, would frankly be very unfair to families because families would be relocating to where they think schools will be built just to find out that their 11th school, which just didn't make the mark, all of a sudden is the 25th or 30th priority come the next capital plan because several school boards decided significantly to reject their own priorities.

Mr. Chairman, I don't think it would be transparent because transparency means providing Albertans with meaningful and truthful information. In this case it may be truthful, but it definitely would not be meaningful in any way because priorities change that significantly. If this member ever wants to sit down, I'll gladly do that with him and show him how priorities in school boards – I know he probably knows his own school board – throughout the province can change significantly and change the entire landscape of what's going on.

You know, if we decide to build a new school for Grimshaw, that will bump off another school somewhere. That's how fluid it really, really is. There's a better way of solving that problem, and I will ask this member and actually his entire party to be a little bit more open minded and co-operative on the issue of how we fund schools because there's a great deal of opposition coming from that corner of the Chamber on anything that resembles debt or debt financing.

The fact, Mr. Chairman, is that we need to look collaboratively at new ways of funding schools. If we continue funding schools

cash up front, we will never ever build all the schools that we require, and we will be falling further and further behind in our infrastructure needs, assessing roughly that we will need some 400 schools over the next 10 years. We need to find innovative ways of building infrastructure so that his kids in Airdrie don't wait 15, 20 years for a school that they actually need today. Then what happens in 20 years when I finally have the money to build them a school? They may no longer need that school. Now instead of an elementary school they need a high school. That's what causes the fluidity.

We would actually need co-operation from the other side of the House to finally acknowledge the fact that some capital needs to be built faster than upfront cash payments would allow and that we need to be much more innovative. That is what the Premier has been talking about, looking at our fiscal plan. It's not about raising taxes but finding innovative ways of funding capital so that we can build schools today for children that need schools today. At the current rate it simply will not happen. Printing lists of schools that simply didn't make the cut is, frankly, meaningless because that list will be so different the year after that, for you, Mr. Chairman, to know that you are number 11 will mean nothing. That doesn't mean that your school will be built in the next batch or the batch after that.

Another reason for the fluidity was that we have introduced special projects where we have bundled schools, as you know, and we have used P3s, and those could be done in certain areas and not in others. So that also changes the priority plan when you introduce funding relevance and bundling and P3 projects. I'm hoping to be able to actually have schools financed directly through government and not through third parties and actually build adequate numbers of schools so that our kids have the spaces that they need and deserve.

Mr. Anderson: Well, I'm always looking for innovative ways to build new schools, but I'll tell you that I do not feel that debt is innovative. There are lots of ways to do things without mortgaging people's futures, and it's called reprioritizing. How many schools would that new MLA office across the way build, for example?

Mr. Boutilier: Three hundred million.

Mr. Anderson: Three hundred million dollars. I'd rather see that turned into schools.

Anyway, I'm glad that he's passionate about building new schools. That's good. But we should never sacrifice the needs of the here and now on the backs of future taxpayers. I just disagree fundamentally with that. I think you prioritize.

Mr. Denis: Do you have a mortgage?

Mr. Anderson: I have to explain this all the time to the House leader. He never understands. He says: do I have a mortgage? The difference is that after I pay the mortgage, I have a house that's worth something, that I can sell on the market if I need to. You can't sell a bridge, can you? Can you sell a bridge? No, you can't. So it's a big difference, a huge difference from a mortgage. It's just debt. In fact, the bridge actually costs more money to maintain as we go forward. Anyway, we're getting off track. I have this discussion with the House leader all the time. It's totally different.

With regard to transparency that was an interesting comment. I don't think transparency is telling Albertans what you think they need to know. I think transparency is telling Albertans what the truth is. So I think you've got it half right. When I say that, that means that they should see exactly why the schools that they requested got left off the list. There's criteria.

People in Alberta are smart, capable human beings that can analyze. They're rational about stuff. They know that the government can't build every school and every project that every Albertan wants. They get that. They really do understand that. But they will only understand it if the criteria is made public, the weighting system is made public, and they can therefore see why their school is not on the list that year, what moved it up, what moved it down. They'll be fine with that. Albertans just want to know what's going on.

That would be a lot more transparent than, you know, someone sitting in Beaumont or Castle Downs or anywhere else saying: "Why are we not getting schools right now? Our population is growing. We have new students that need schools, yet we're not getting our schools." At least then they would know why. The reason is because there are 12 schools in front of you that have a higher need based on these criteria and this weighting system.

I think that will only tell you what you need to know. I mean, that's typical of government, not just this government. All governments when they're in power don't want to tell people more than they need to know. Well, who's to determine what the people of Alberta need to know? They need to know all the information that you have in making your decision. Why shouldn't they know that? Why shouldn't they know why their school was left off the list? They should know that. Guess what? If you were that transparent, they wouldn't be mad at you for it; they would understand it. Well, I guess a few would be mad about it still, but I think at the end of the day the vast majority of people would be rational about it and say: well, obviously, these schools were needed more.

I just don't see the value in holding that information back. It's kind of like the Fraser Institute school rankings. The Fraser Institute rankings, we agree, are not a good indicator in and of themselves of a school's performance. They're not. They don't take all of the relevant information into account. However, that doesn't mean you hold back the test scores from the PATs from the Fraser Institute so that they can't make the rankings. And you haven't. Absolutely. You're not going to hold that information back as far as I know.

For that same reason don't hold this information back. Let Alberta parents know, and then let them decide whether your weighting system is correct. I bet you they will. I bet you that transparency will take the politics right out of schools. I won't need to organize or help organize folks coming up from Airdrie to protest for schools. I won't need to do that anymore because there'll be a transparent list with a weighting system. It'll all be completely transparent. [interjection] Well, then, publish it, though, hon. member. If you were doing it before, publish it. That's the point. More transparency. That's all I'm asking.

5:50

Mr. Lukaszuk: Mr. Chairman, you know, this is quite interesting. I'm glad that this member had ample time to explain himself. Really, when you hear him say that, he's actually more concerned about me printing lists of schools that I didn't build, schools where children are crammed into portables or into Legion basements or into church basements because there are no schools, schools where kids are studying in hallways. He's more concerned about me printing lists of schools that we didn't build than actually engaging in meaningful dialogue on how we can build schools and provide children with schools right now, including in his own riding.

Because of his ideological narrow flaps he will not even consider the ability for creative financing of schools so that the kids in Airdrie can actually have a school maybe in two years, to

satisfy all kids in Airdrie, that they actually need right now. I don't have to tell that member how crammed they are and how the space is inadequate. No. Ideology prevails. He will not look at alternative financing because he will not mortgage today's schools, that kids actually need today, on future finances.

The fact of the matter is that if you don't provide children with schools today, what kind of a future are you building? Yeah, maybe you will have a mortgage-free future, but you're going to have children with no schools in the meantime. I hope that this is not the kind of province and not the kind of vision that this government has in mind. The fact, Mr. Chairman, is that our kids throughout the province need schools today, and there are many ways of financing schools that are creative, that will benefit children today and their children into the future because these buildings will be standing around providing children with adequate education and adequate education spaces.

The ideological argument that you simply cannot either borrow money or use funding vehicles to build schools right now is, frankly, Mr. Chairman, ridiculous. The fact is that businesses don't buy factories and shops and stores with cash up front. Even if they had the money, they wouldn't do it because any financial adviser will tell you that often it is better to borrow money at an advantageous borrowing rate than to keep the money at a lower rate in your bank account, especially having the ability to borrow like the province of Alberta. Then you provide the service right now for children who need it right now.

On a consolidated statement, Mr. Chairman, the school is still an asset. Whether we're selling the school or not, the school is still an asset on the books, and your liability of \$20 million to build that school shows as an asset that is depreciated every year on a consolidated budget like you would with any business.

You know, even the ideology that this member is so confined by, that will deprive our children of schools, doesn't make sense from a capitalist point of view because the fact is that you will find very few businesses anywhere in the world that are paying for their capital acquisitions with cash up front. Everybody amortizes the cost of their capital over the life of the capital. You write off the capital depreciation, and that's how you balance your books.

But, no, there is this ideological digging in your heels that: "We will not provide kids with schools. We will pay cash up front, and by doing so will not build enough schools, will continuously have a shortage of schools, will have children attending schools in church basements and Legion halls and have parents from Airdrie come over here to protest on the front stairs of the Legislature." But of paramount importance to this member and the Wildrose party is that they will only allow for paying cash up front, which allows me to build maybe 10 per cent of the schools that I need every year and to keep on falling further and further and further behind.

Mr. Chairman, what is even more mind boggling is that it doesn't allow us to maintain the schools that we have because every single penny that we have, we put towards building new schools. So we have schools that taxpayers actually spend money on that we don't maintain adequately because there aren't sufficient finances for that. It's a theory that makes no sense. It's a theory that's harmful to our kids. Our kids deserve spaces, and we will be looking into forms of financing that will allow us to build schools right now.

I really want that member to go to his Airdrie families – I met, actually, hundreds of them just a few weeks ago in Airdrie who desperately want schools – and tell them: "You know what? You may need schools, but my ideological limitations are more important than your desire for schools, than your need for schools, because I will simply not allow the government of today to enter

into financial arrangements, that could be internal or external, to build the schools that they require.”

Well, if this member wants to be on the forefront of printing lists of schools that we didn't build and have the parents have the satisfaction that this government is transparent and now they know why they don't have a school, well, he may play and enter into that exercise. Mr. Chairman, I am more focused, with the Treasury Board and the Minister of Infrastructure, on spending our energy on actually printing lists of schools that we will be building where the schools are required, using whatever methodology we have to make sure that the children, the little guys, today have the proper spaces that they need today and into the future. That is what building the future of this province is.

We may find ourselves in a position one day, Mr. Chairman, of saying: “You know, I'm so proud of myself. I stuck to my ideologies so hard that I never borrowed a penny.” But you will be in a position where your schools will not be retrofitted, and you will be in a position where you will not have buildings and more and more kids will be in church basements and inadequate spaces.

Mr. Chairman, I think it's obvious. With a population growing like ours, where 120,000 people came to Alberta last year, mostly young families with children, with the population shifting, we need to find more creative and more adequate ways of financing infrastructure, particularly school infrastructure, which is the foundation of our future. You know, passing a progressive piece of legislation like the school act right now and then not having the facilities that are required would be mind boggling.

I'm looking forward to my next meeting on this particular topic with the residents of Airdrie. I'll tell them: “You know what? There are possibilities to build you a school, but for ideological reasons we simply won't.”

The Deputy Chair: Thank you.

The hon. Member for Fort McMurray-Wood Buffalo.

Mr. Boutilier: Thank you very much. I've been listening to the comments of the tax-and-spend liberal, and my first observation is that I know the Member for Airdrie-Chestermere wants schools. What I find interesting, Mr. Chair, is the logic of this member and Minister of Education. I say that with a great deal of confidence as a teacher. My wife is also a teacher.

What I find interesting is that this minister thinks that it's more important to take \$350 million that could be used, Mr. Chairman, to build schools for little Johnny and Suzie, \$350 million that is going to his government's MLA offices and that could have been used to build schools. So the question I'm asking on this is about the fact that \$350 million, which is very simply a priority: that could have been deflected to the minister.

Now, the minister did say, Mr. Chair, that he, of course, goes to the Treasury Board. So I would encourage this minister to go back to the Treasury Board before this budget is approved and as the Minister of Education fight for \$350 million. It will not be debt. I am sure every Member of this Legislative Assembly would be willing to give up the \$350 million of tax dollars that is being used for MLA offices when it could be used for schools, schools to help the folks in Airdrie-Chestermere and to help schools to be built in Fort McMurray.

I am pleased to see that the minister recognized earlier that here we have a school in Fort McMurray with 54 portables, yet they are spending \$350 million for MLA offices. It's very simple. We don't have to go into debt. We can actually use the budget to be able to spend the money on schools. My constituency of Fort McMurray-Wood Buffalo, the member's constituency of Airdrie-Chestermere, members of the Wildrose caucus, the Member for

Edmonton-Strathcona: we are saying that your priorities are wrong. We believe the priorities should go towards children and building schools.

I'm pleased that the minister thinks that it's important to build schools, but the point is that it's not ideological. It is quite simply that \$350 million of this government's budget is being wasted on MLA offices when it could have gone towards building schools. The reason I bring this up, Mr. Chair, is the fact that this member said that he goes back to the Treasury Board president. I see the Treasury Board president is here. So now it is the responsibility of the Minister of Education to go and fight and say: we want the \$350 million directed towards schools.

Do you know, Mr. Chair, how many schools that \$350 million could build? I will speak very slowly for the Minister of Finance because I know he's not that good with numbers because he didn't want to be the Minister of Finance. He wanted to continue to be the Minister of Energy. At an average of \$40 million a school, we could have had almost – guess how many more – 10 more schools. That would have taken care of a school in Grimshaw, where children after 10 years still have cold hands when they try to go ahead and actually do assignments in that school. I heard the chairman of the school district yesterday talking about the fact. Ten years. The hon. Member for Dunvegan-Central Peace has been fighting for this, but obviously it's fallen on some deaf ears of many ministers. I find it interesting, the fact that there was money.

6:00

To the Minister of Finance: did you hear this? Do you believe that 10 more schools could have been built? Not only that, but the member should have been aware of the fact there could have even been money used to build a long-term care centre. Or he might have forgotten about that when he was the wrecking ball in the ministry of health.

But that being the case, I want to not lose the focus of this minister. I'm sure that this minister wants to build schools. Ideologically, we do not have to go into debt. We can do this by taking \$350 million. To the President of the Treasury Board, to the Minister of Finance, and to the Education minister: why don't you have a meeting right afterwards, a Treasury Board special meeting, and say that with \$350 million, we can build 10 more schools in this fiscal year. I think it would put a smile on the Minister of Education's face because I know he was a dedicated teacher in his previous life. Deeply I do believe that this minister does want more schools. So to the Treasury Board president and to the Minister of Finance: I'm helping out the Minister of Education; we want 10 more schools rather than MLA offices for \$350 million.

I think if the Minister of Education could get some help, if you want me to come over since I sat in Treasury Board, maybe – maybe – the Treasury Board president would readjust his priorities. To the Minister of Education: is he saying that it's more important to have MLAs' offices, wasting \$350 million that could have been used to build 10 more schools? Ten more schools. To the Minister of Education: would the minister . . .

The Deputy Chair: I hesitate to interrupt the hon. member who is speaking, but pursuant to Government Motion 6, agreed to on February 8, 2012, the Committee of Supply shall now rise and report progress.

[Mr. Zwozdesky in the chair]

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Member for Strathcona.

Mr. Quest: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The Committee of Supply has had under consideration resolutions for the Department of Education relating to the 2012-13 government estimates for the general revenue fund and lottery fund for the fiscal year ending March 31, 2013, reports progress, and requests leave to sit again.

The Acting Speaker: Thank you.

Does the Assembly concur in the report? Please say aye.

Hon. Members: Aye.

The Acting Speaker: Those who don't, please say no. So ordered.

Hon. Government House Leader, you caught my eye.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm being pressured to ask for unanimous consent to extend the day, but I think it more prudent to move that we adjourn till 1:30 p.m. tomorrow.

[Motion carried; the Assembly adjourned at 6:04 p.m. to Wednesday at 1:30 p.m.]

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Province of Alberta

The 27th Legislature
Fifth Session

Alberta Hansard

Wednesday, March 7, 2012

Issue 13

The Honourable Kenneth R. Kowalski, Speaker

Legislative Assembly of Alberta
The 27th Legislature

Fifth Session

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Jack Hayden	Minister of Tourism, Parks and Recreation
Heather Klimchuk	Minister of Culture and Community Services
Manmeet Singh Bhullar	Minister of Service Alberta, Political Minister for Calgary

Parliamentary Assistants

Naresh Bhardwaj	Health and Wellness
Alana DeLong	Seniors
Arno Doerksen	Human Services
Kyle Fawcett	Treasury Board and Enterprise
Art Johnston	Executive Council
Barry McFarland	Agriculture and Rural Development
Len Mitzel	Transportation
Dave Rodney	Health and Wellness
David Xiao	Energy

STANDING AND SPECIAL COMMITTEES OF THE LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY OF ALBERTA

Standing Committee on the Alberta Heritage Savings Trust Fund

Chair: Ms Tarchuk
Deputy Chair: Mr. Elniski

Anderson
DeLong
Groeneveld
Johnston
MacDonald
Quest
Taft

Standing Committee on Community Development

Chair: Mrs. Jablonski
Deputy Chair: Mr. Chase

Amery
Blakeman
Boutilier
Calahasen
Goudreau
Groeneveld
Lindsay
Snelgrove
Taylor
Vandermeer

Standing Committee on Education

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Cao
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Marz
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Tarchuk

Standing Committee on Energy

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Hehr
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Mitzel
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Marz
Notley
Ouellette
Quest

Special Standing Committee on Members' Services

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Amery
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Standing Committee on Private Bills

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Deputy Chair: Ms Woo-Paw

Allred Kang
Benito Knight
Boutilier Lindsay
Calahasen McFarland
Doerksen Sandhu
Drysdale Sarich
Evans Snelgrove
Groeneveld Swann
Hinman Xiao
Jacobs

Standing Committee on Privileges and Elections, Standing Orders and Printing

Chair: Mr. Prins
Deputy Chair: Mr. Snelgrove

Amery Mitzel
Boutilier Notley
Calahasen Pastoor
DeLong Quest
Doerksen Stelmach
Forsyth Swann
Jacobs Tarchuk
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Leskiw Zwozdesky
McFarland

Standing Committee on Public Accounts

Chair: Mr. MacDonald
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Allred Kang
Benito Mason
Calahasen Rodney
Chase Sandhu
Elniski Vandermeer
Fawcett Woo-Paw
Forsyth Xiao
Groeneveld

Standing Committee on Public Health and Safety

Chair: Mrs. Fritz
Deputy Chair: Dr. Taft

Bhardwaj
Blakett
DeLong
Doerksen
Forsyth
Notley
Rodney
Rogers
Swann
Woo-Paw

Legislative Assembly of Alberta

1:30 p.m.

Wednesday, March 7, 2012

[The Speaker in the chair]

Prayers

The Speaker: Good afternoon.

Let us pray. We give thanks for the bounty of our province, our land, our resources, and our people. We pledge ourselves to act as good stewards on behalf of all Albertans. Amen.

Please be seated.

Introduction of Guests

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Environment and Water.

Mrs. McQueen: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. I have two introductions today. First, it is an honour for me to rise and introduce to you and through you to all members of this Assembly some outstanding grade 6 students, teaching staff, and parents from Alder Flats elementary school in my constituency. This is the first half of their group. The others will be joining us tomorrow. They are here in Edmonton participating in the School at the Legislature program. I am so proud to have our guests here today, and I would ask them all to rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of the Assembly.

My second introduction, Mr. Speaker. I am so proud to rise today to introduce to you and through you one of my incredible staff members in the office, Rhonda DaSilva. I have to tell you what an honour it has been to have Rhonda in our office working with me for the past five months. Yesterday Rhonda passed a very special milestone, 25 years with the government of Alberta. Rhonda has worked in a variety of capacities at the Legislature throughout the years, ranging from the Premier's correspondence to serving as a legislative assistant, assisting committee chairs, working with the former minister, Greg Melchin, and with the former minister and hon. Member for Medicine Hat. Rhonda has been such an incredible part of our team. We are so proud to have her in our office. I'd like her to rise and get the extreme gratitude of this House for incredible years of service.

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

Mr. Marz: Well, thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It's a pleasure for me to introduce to you and through you today 48 visitors in all, 41 students from the great Deer Meadow school in Olds. They are seated in the public gallery, behind me. I might say that they have my back today. They are accompanied by teachers Mr. Greig Connolly, Ms Julia Robinson, Mrs. Joan Atkinson, and parent helper Mrs. Sandra Leatherdale. I'd ask them to rise and receive the warm welcome of the Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Rocky Mountain House.

Mr. Lund: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It is a great pleasure for me to introduce to you and through you to members of the Assembly some 23 very bright grade 5 and 6 students from the Christian school in Rocky Mountain House. They are accompanied today by their teacher, Mrs. Van't Bosch; assistant, Mrs. Piers; and parent helpers Mr. Harrold, Mrs. deRaadt, Mrs. VanderMeer, Mrs. VanGinkel, and Mrs. Klooster. I would ask them to now rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of the Assembly.

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

Mr. Bhardwaj: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It's an honour for me to rise today and introduce to you and through you 54 students from Meyonohk elementary school in my constituency of Edmonton-Ellerslie. I had the pleasure of meeting these students just before the question period as part of their tour of the Legislature. In speaking with them, I'm assured that the future is in very good hands. They are accompanied today by five teachers – Mrs. Sylvester, Mr. Fairfield, Mr. Xu, Miss Kat, and Miss Houlgrave – as well as three parent volunteers: Ms Hanson, Mrs. Goldthorpe, and Ms Mosher. At this time I would ask all of my guests to please rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of the Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Culture and Community Services.

Mrs. Klimchuk: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure to be able to rise to introduce to you and through you two very noteworthy individuals. These two gentlemen have worked incredibly hard to help pull off a wonderful event that took place February 28 to March 3 in our province, the 2012 Special Olympics Canada Winter Games. Our province had the honour of hosting this event this year, and without the dedication of people like my guests and hundreds of volunteers it would not have been the success it was. There'll be more in a member's statement later.

It's my pleasure to introduce Kirk De Fazio, president and CEO of Alberta Special Olympics, and Dan MacLennan, chair of the Games Organizing Committee for the Special Olympics Canada Winter Games. They are seated in the members' gallery. I'd like them to rise and receive the welcome.

Members' Statements

The Speaker: The hon. Member for West Yellowhead.

Special Olympics Canada Winter Games

Mr. Campbell: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Last week, from February 28 through March 3, Alberta hosted the Special Olympics Canada Winter Games. Events were held in St. Albert and Jasper. It was the first time these two communities had the privilege of hosting Special Olympics winter athletes from across Canada. The province of Alberta was a proud presenting partner of the games.

Over five days 651 athletes competed in alpine and cross-country skiing, curling, figure skating, floor hockey, snowshoeing, and speed skating. These games were a qualifying competition for the 2013 Special Olympics World Winter Games in South Korea. There were cheers, hugs at the finish line, medal ceremonies, and an impressive spectacle at the opening and closing of the games. No less important was a sense of opportunity, achievement, and pure joy that prevailed among athletes, coaches, team staff, and family and friends.

Mr. Speaker, one of the major effects of any type of disability can be social isolation. Any event that highlights the strengths and capabilities of individuals with disabilities is something Alberta promotes and encourages. The Special Olympics movement has made a big difference in making our society more inclusive of all citizens. This was evident in St. Albert and Jasper, where the red carpet was rolled out for the games. In the two communities nearly 800 people stepped up to volunteer their time to make the games a success.

One small but telling example of the priceless social benefit of the games happened in St. Albert. After the last floor hockey event an unofficial pickup game took place between the St. Albert high school students who built the rinks and the Special Olympics floor hockey team from St. Albert. Not so long ago these people might have never met, certainly not as equals on the field of play, but there they were, spontaneously enjoying themselves, living the lessons that our society has learned. This is the legacy of the Special Olympics, Mr. Speaker, one that Alberta is proud to have supported and shared last week.

Finally, I'd like to congratulate the organizers, sponsors, and volunteers for their hard work.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Fort McMurray-Wood Buffalo.

Integrity in Government

Mr. Boutilier: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It's an honour and a privilege for me to rise and say how proud I am to serve the community of Fort McMurray both in this House and as the former mayor and councillor.

I've seen a lot over the years but nothing quite like the culture of corruption that has taken hold of this PC government. It's why I'm now on this side of the House. I've always been proud to stand up for my constituents. That's what I think we're all elected to do, and deep down I think that everyone in here would like to do that, but that's not allowed over there.

I was kicked out for standing up for seniors, for doing exactly what MLAs are elected to do. My colleague from Airdrie-Chestermere and my colleague from Calgary-Fish Creek walked away from this government because they could no longer stand the smell. The former Treasury Board president, now the independent Member for Vermilion-Lloydminster, got sick when the Premier used hard-earned Alberta tax dollars for a \$70,000 pre-election junket at the Jasper Park Lodge.

School boards, municipal politicians, and doctors are now all coming forward and calling this government out for its culture of bullying, intimidation, and corruption. Mr. Speaker, a government that is only interested in power will do anything to try to keep it. That's what Betty Turpin, the superintendent of the Holy Family Catholic school division, experienced when she spoke up for school children. That's what the AUMA president, Linda Sloan, experienced when she told the truth about this government's pork-barrel politics and intimidation of doctors, and that's what Linda Slocombe and the Alberta Medical Association is protesting right now.

It all points to a culture of corruption, Mr. Speaker. The Premier said things would change, but the tone hasn't.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Strathcona.

1:40

Provincial Fiscal Policy

Mr. Quest: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. On a more positive note, today more than ever I am proud to be an Albertan. Everywhere you look, people are working, earning a living, and contributing to Alberta's success. In fact, Alberta is leading this country in economic growth. Alberta accounted for about half of all the new jobs created in Canada over the past year and has one of the lowest unemployment rates in the world, at 4.9 per cent. Furthermore, Albertans continue to earn the highest wages in the country, almost 20 per cent above the national average.

Mr. Speaker, this is no coincidence. This government has created an economic climate where investors are willing to risk their capital, where businesses want to expand, and where people

from around the world want to locate. For one, it's Alberta tax advantage that is a significant component of this success. Albertans and Alberta businesses continue to enjoy the lowest overall tax burden of all the provinces. Albertans and Alberta businesses pay the lowest income taxes in the country, the lowest fuel tax, no payroll tax, no capital tax, and no provincial sales tax. This low tax environment has spurred activity across this province, which is contributing to the revenue that funds the services that Albertans expect. Additionally, Budget 2012 projects a balanced budget next fiscal year and forecasts a surplus of \$5.2 billion for 2014-15.

While the opposition speak gloom and doom about Alberta's prospects, Albertans know for themselves that today's Alberta is one where they can fulfill their dreams and look to the future, knowing that under the sound economic planning of this government, Alberta's best days are yet to come.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Nose Hill.

Les Rendez-vous de la Francophonie

Dr. Brown: M. le Président, aujourd'hui je me lève à l'Assemblée pour souligner le début des Rendez-vous de la Francophonie, une célébration nationale de la culture, de la langue, et du patrimoine français qui se déroulera du 9 au 25 mars. Établis en 1999, les Rendez-vous de la Francophonie témoignent des importantes contributions de 9.5 millions de Canadiens francophones et font la promotion des liens étroits qui existent entre les communautés francophones et les autres groupes sociaux au Canada.

Au cours des derniers jours plusieurs communautés à travers notre province ont organisé des levers de drapeaux à l'occasion des Rendez-vous de la Francophonie. Alors que nous hissons le drapeau franco-albertain à côté du drapeau albertain, j'encouragerais tous les Albertains à réfléchir au rôle important que la communauté francophone joue dans notre province.

Avec plus de 225,000 résidents qui parlent français, incluant notre Première ministre, la francophonie albertaine représente un groupe fort qui se tient ensemble et qui continue de croître, et des événements comme les Rendez-vous de la Francophonie nous aident à rappeler le rôle important que les francophones jouent dans notre société et leurs contributions à notre histoire et à notre croissance continue.

Dans les semaines qui suivront, je souhaite à tous les francophones des bonnes célébrations.

Merci.

[Translation] Mr. Speaker, I rise in the Assembly today to recognize the Rendez-vous de la Francophonie, a national celebration of French culture, language, and history that runs from March 9 to March 25. Established in 1999, the Rendez-vous de la Francophonie reflects the important contribution of Canada's 9.5 million francophones and promotes strong ties between francophone communities and other social groups within Canada.

Over the past few days communities across our province hosted flag-raising ceremonies to kick off Rendez-vous activities. As we fly the Franco-Albertan flag alongside Alberta's flag, I encourage all Albertans to reflect on the important role Alberta's francophone community plays in our province.

With more than 225,000 French-speaking residents, including our Premier herself, Alberta's Francophonie is a strong, close-knit group that continues to grow, and events like the Rendez-vous de la Francophonie serve to remind us of the important role French-speaking individuals play in our society and their contributions to our history and continued growth.

I want to wish all French-speaking individuals de bonnes célébrations in the coming weeks ahead.

Thank you. [As submitted]

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

cSPACE Projects

Ms Woo-Paw: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. Today I'm pleased to stand and speak about a creative initiative for and with Calgary's creative sector. The project is the result of an innovative partnership between the Calgary Foundation and Calgary Arts Development, who together purchased King Edward school, a distinctive heritage building, from the Calgary board of education for cSPACE Projects, founded as a nonprofit real estate enterprise dedicated to developing a network of multidisciplinary creative workspaces across the city of Calgary.

Creative reuse of school facilities for the expansion of the arts benefits our community in immeasurable ways, Mr. Speaker. It will preserve a historical sandstone school. It will ensure that more affordable workplaces exist for artists to create, rehearse, produce, and collaborate, enhancing cultural vibrancy in our city and our province.

As H.L. Mencken said: "The artist is not a reporter, but a Great Teacher. It is not his business to depict the world as it is, but as it ought to be." If artists are teachers, it is only fitting that many of them will soon be walking the halls of the King Edward school building. I truly believe that nurturing the arts in our communities is fundamental to the educational and social development of our citizens as well as the cultural and spiritual well-being of our society. I eagerly anticipate the transformation of this school into an exciting arts hub.

I would also like to highlight to the House that this project would not have been possible without the support of the municipal sustainability initiative, which enabled the city of Calgary to invest \$5 million in support of this project. Our government is proud of the investments we are making in our cities, and I hope to see many more projects like this in the future.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

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

Level of Debate on Health Services

Mr. Snelgrove: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Today I want to make a plea to our colleagues in this House to return the debate on health care to the civil discourse that it needs to enjoy. It's the most important issue that any of us will deal with in our lifetime here and in our private lives. We've let it become a political football that serves no purpose. The questions and responses are unbecoming, in my opinion, of what needs to happen. It is also a little troubling to me when you have an association like the AMA, who complains about political interference, take out an ad a week before an election and pretend that that's somehow not political.

Mr. Speaker, I don't think anyone has ever been elected to this House that didn't come here with the best of intentions, trying to do better for the health care system from every party that's in here, and I think Albertans expect from us the respect that they've shown us in electing us. I would say to those who use the challenges that face health care that those with all the answers don't fully understand the questions. That's the way it is.

I would ask all those who have the interest to get politically involved in health care to take a pill. Let the people who can deal with it deal with it. It's a very good health care system in Alberta.

It can be better, and it will be, but it won't be if we treat it like a second-rate issue in here.

Notices of Motions

The Speaker: The hon. Government House Leader.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise to give oral notice of a motion, which I hope the House will deal with tomorrow pursuant to a memo that you had sent to all House leaders:

Be it resolved that

- (1) Mr. Rick Hansen be invited to the floor of this Chamber to address the Legislative Assembly on Monday, March 12, 2012;
 - (2) This address be the first item of business after the singing of *O Canada*; and
 - (3) The ordinary business of the Assembly resume upon the conclusion of Mr. Hansen's address;
- and be it further resolved that Mr. Hansen's address become part of the permanent records of the Assembly.

I trust we'll be able to deal with the motion in the House tomorrow.

Introduction of Bills

The Speaker: The hon. Member for St. Albert.

Bill 204

Land Statutes (Abolition of Adverse Possession) Amendment Act, 2012

Mr. Allred: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I request leave to introduce Bill 204, the Land Statutes (Abolition of Adverse Possession) Amendment Act, 2012.

Bill 204 would abolish from Alberta legislation all mention of the common law doctrine of adverse possession. This bill purports that the doctrine of adverse possession, often known as squatters' rights, is an outdated law that is arguably incompatible with the land tenure system in the province of Alberta. Abolishing adverse possession would assure Alberta landowners that they will not be at risk of losing land to a neighbour who has accidentally or intentionally been trespassing on their property. Alberta is the only Torrens jurisdiction of land registration in Canada that still recognizes the doctrine of adverse possession. Therefore, Mr. Speaker, Bill 204 seeks to remove outdated legislation, helping to ensure Alberta's laws are current and effective.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

[Motion carried; Bill 204 read a first time]

1:50

Oral Question Period

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

Advocacy to Government

Dr. Sherman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. At Monday's press conference the Premier spoke about the Member for Dunvegan-Central Peace's threatening letter to a local school superintendent. The Premier said, "If I have asked anyone who is a member of my caucus to take on any sort of leadership responsibility, I want their approach [to what they are doing] to reflect my values." To the Minister of Education: when you scolded the Holy Family school division because you didn't like their video showing the truth

about the desperate conditions of the rundown school in Grimshaw, did that reflect the Premier's values?

Mr. Lukaszuk: I don't know, Mr. Speaker, what province the Leader of the Opposition is in that he thinks that I scolded anybody. As a matter of fact, the school board has produced a video. I have indicated to the school board that instead of producing a video, just invite me to the school. They have, actually, and I visited the school. I crawled underneath the gym basement and went into every nook and cranny of that school that you can find. That's how we do business. School boards invite me, I show up, and we work in collaboration.

Dr. Sherman: Mr. Speaker, it was that \$7,000 video and a scolding that was required for the government to look at the school.

To the Minister of Municipal Affairs: when you scolded and bullied the AUMA president, Linda Sloan, and threatened to have the entire government caucus boycott the AUMA breakfast because you didn't like something she said, did that also reflect the Premier's values?

Mr. Griffiths: Mr. Speaker, the Premier's values have always been one of working in collaboration, not working on issues through the media or making insinuations that are completely inappropriate and incredibly inaccurate. We've always taken criticism on the budget or any other issue. But making slanderous accusations that aren't founded or warranted in any way, shape, or form: that's not the way we operate.

Dr. Sherman: Mr. Speaker, only in this Legislature do facts become insinuations.

To the Minister of Finance. Another fact. When you yelled profanities at Airdrie Alderman Allan Hunter at a public meeting because you didn't like the question that he asked you, did your rude and offensive behaviour reflect this Premier's values?

Mr. Liepert: Mr. Speaker, I don't recall this member being at the meeting.

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

Dr. Sherman: Mr. Speaker, a non answer is the only answer they can give.

Judicial Inquiry into Health Services

Dr. Sherman: Thank you. Everybody knows that we have among the best health care staff in the world, and once patients get into their hands, it's great care. Everybody also knows that we urgently need a fully independent judicial inquiry into why our health care system is broken, who broke it, and which politicians are responsible for the bullying of doctors and political interference. The Premier knows it. She promised it. The backroom puppet masters made her back down; another blunder. To the Minister of Health and Wellness. Now that the AMA has taken out a full-page ad slamming the Premier for breaking her promise to include bullying of doctors in an inquiry, tell me: why do you continue to disrespect Alberta's doctors? Why, Minister?

Mr. Horne: Mr. Speaker, this province and this government have a very proud tradition of not only respecting but working collaboratively with our physicians, a history that includes a trilateral master agreement that had eight years' duration, a history that includes an agreement that saw the beginning of primary care

networks, now numbering over 40, across the province. This government does respect doctors. This government is working with doctors. This government is not using our doctors as a political football in this Assembly.

Dr. Sherman: Mr. Speaker, given that we're on the planet Earth, I'm not sure which planet this minister is on. The Health Quality Council clearly stated that there's a culture of fear and intimidation and found "bureaucratic and political interference" in our health system. Could the Minister of Health and Wellness please enlighten this House as to where the political interference comes from and why those guilty of this political interference should neither be investigated nor face consequences? These are bullies.

Mr. Horne: Well, Mr. Speaker, I won't take the House's time by responding to mischaracterizations of the Health Quality Council report offered by the hon. member. The fact of the matter is that the Health Quality Council investigated these allegations thoroughly. They provided a series of recommendations, which the government has accepted, to address that issue. What this government is interested in and what Albertans are interested in is action on those recommendations to improve the culture in which all health professionals practise.

Dr. Sherman: Mr. Speaker, I can't believe the minister just stood up and said that what the Health Quality Council said was a mischaracterization.

Again to the Minister of Health and Wellness. Perhaps it would be better to ask you this. Have you kept the issues of doctor intimidation and political interference out of the judicial inquiry into health care because you and the Member for Calgary-West are too terrified to testify? Come on, Minister.

Mr. Horne: Mr. Speaker, what I find remarkable, as a matter of fact, is the fact that this hon. member, who a little over a week ago dismissed the Health Quality Council report as a whitewash, has the audacity to stand in front of his colleagues today, attempt to cite the report using his own words and characterizations, and cite it as a basis for further action. The government has accepted the recommendations. We accept the findings for what they are, and we're prepared to move forward along with our doctors and other health professionals.

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

Dr. Sherman: Mr. Speaker, the government's handling of the report is an absolute whitewash.

Provincial Budget Advertisement

Dr. Sherman: Well, Mr. Speaker, the blunders just keep coming. The PC scandal of the day: we had Donationgate; now we have Adgate. With an election call merely days or weeks away the government is ripping off Albertans to the tune of \$425,000 by wasting it on pre-election campaign ads. Scott Hennig of the Canadian Taxpayers Federation called this ad, quote, bad in general and horribly insulting, unquote, while the Deputy Premier says that it's not about shameless self-promotion at all. Yeah, right. To the Finance minister. Talk about rude and offensive. Why do you continue to insult the intelligence . . .

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Liepert: Mr. Speaker, when the President of the Treasury Board and I travelled this province in the fall, what Albertans told

us was that they wanted to know more about what the budget would contain. They wanted to have input. They wanted to know if they were listened to. What we are doing is ensuring that Albertans understand what's in the budget, because what we hear from the opposition is clearly not what's in the budget. The one way we have to communicate is directly with Albertans, not through the media, not through the opposition. That's why we are undertaking a campaign to ensure that Albertans fully understand what is in this budget.

The Speaker: The hon. leader.

Dr. Sherman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. To the Minister of Finance, one of the ones who broke the health system: given that, as you may be aware, the budget has not even passed yet, a budget you can't balance because you broke health care – although the good Lord knows this government has the votes to pass it on that side – just whose votes are you trying to buy with this \$425,000 ad campaign mere weeks or days before an election?

Mr. Liepert: Mr. Speaker, this government is very proud of this budget. What I have heard when I've travelled this province since we introduced the budget is that Albertans are very proud and very pleased to be living in this province when you consider what's happening around the world.

You know, it's very interesting to hear this member because we heard this member earlier in this House making a whole bunch of allegations that the Health Quality Council found were inappropriate and outright not provable. Where are those questions these days from this hon. member, who sat in the back making these kinds of accusations, Mr. Speaker? Now he doesn't have the courage to stand up and apologize to this Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. leader.

Dr. Sherman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Put Dr. Winton and Dr. Ciaran McNamee on the stand and you get on the stand, and you'll get the answers.

Given that this PC government passed a law limiting third-party advertising yet according to the report on the March 3, 2008, provincial general election of the 27th Assembly it states on page 77 that the act is also silent on "the suspension of Government advertising during elections," to the Minister of Finance: how many more taxpayer dollars does this government plan to waste on pre-election advertising, and will this government be running election ads during the election campaign itself?

Mr. Liepert: Mr. Speaker, this government asked the Health Quality Council to investigate exactly what the allegations were that this particular member made. The Health Quality Council did an excellent job in reviewing all of the accusations, came forward and said that there was no foundation to the accusations that this particular member made when it came to people dying on waiting lists and doctors being paid hush money. He does not have the courage to stand up in this Assembly and apologize for that, and until he does, we won't respond to those questions.

2:00

MLA Remuneration

Mr. Anderson: It's good to see everybody in such a good mood this afternoon.

This government is renowned for finding ways to give themselves pay increases and then hiding it from the average Albertan. To repeat what the Wildrose has been advocating for the last two years: MLAs should be paid a single, taxable salary – no

extra committee pay, no tax-free allowances, just a monthly paycheque like all regular Albertans – MLA severance should also be cut by two-thirds, and the 30 per cent increase to cabinet salaries voted for by this Premier must be reversed. Premier, will you roll back your 30 per cent pay increase, cut your severance, and combine all MLA pay into one taxable amount that Albertans can easily understand?

Mr. Horner: As I recall, one of the people who asked for the review of MLA salaries was that opposition member and the opposition parties. In fact, our Premier has said that we will have a judicial review of the MLA compensation package, which you yourself, Mr. Speaker, have initiated as chair of Members' Services of this Assembly. We are fully aware of what's going on out there. We anticipate that that report is going to come back through the Speaker, and we will adjust that at that point.

I would point out, Mr. Speaker, that the taxes that we don't pay would actually end up going to the federal government.

Mr. Anderson: That's interesting. I like that one.

Given that this government has found a way to delay having to vote on Justice Major's MLA pay and perks report until – guess what? – after the election, will your government join with the Wildrose Party and commit that should Justice Major's report come back with a net increase in pay or perks for MLAs or cabinet, you will vote against such a recommendation? Show some leadership: you'll only take lower, not higher.

Mr. Horner: Mr. Speaker, I find it incredible that the opposition members would call for an inquiry, call for a justice committee, call for it to be independent, and then say: oh, by the way, whatever he comes up with, you can't accept it.

Mr. Anderson: So you refuse to commit to no new taxes and to not raising your pay. Sounds like a great election platform. Good one.

Given that you claim to be listening to Albertans and given that 79 per cent of Albertans in a public opinion poll released last week want the current MLA severance packages tossed and 85 per cent say MLA salaries should be fully taxed, will this government commit today that you will cut the MLA golden parachutes, roll back your highest in Canada cabinet salaries, and pay MLAs one taxable monthly salary instead of this labyrinth of tax-free allowances and committee pay?

Mr. Horner: Mr. Speaker, this hon. member has just proven why we have to have the advertising and the communication to Albertans. Because he once again is either ill informed or is not telling the truth about the fact that there are no new taxes in this budget. There are no new taxes in this budget.

I say again: what kind of hypocritical party would come out and say, "Get an inquiry going," and then say, "I don't care what it says; you'll do what we say"? Mr. Speaker, they're hypocrites.

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

Full-day Kindergarten Programs

Ms Notley: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. In last summer's bid for the leadership of the Progressive Conservative Party the Premier promised Alberta's young families full-day kindergarten. Well, the budget has come, and once again we see that there's no money for full-day kindergarten and that the Education minister is making no specific commitments for the fall of 2013. To the Education minister: why should young families trust the Conservatives after yet another broken promise?

Mr. Lukaszuk: Well, Mr. Speaker, I had plenty of opportunity to answer those questions yesterday. I have reassured that member and the entire Assembly that the Premier's commitment to full-time kindergarten has not only been met but is being delivered on. We are working with school boards on making sure that they can unroll kindergarten. The member may not appreciate it, but teachers have to be hired, classrooms have to be located, classrooms have to be equipped. We will be rolling it out and making it available to Albertans over time.

Ms Notley: Well, Mr. Speaker, given that 25 per cent of kindergartens in Alberta are already full-day at the expense of the school boards and given that many communities already have more than enough space to accommodate full-day kindergarten, why won't the government at least start to keep their promise by funding these areas this year?

Mr. Lukaszuk: Well, Mr. Speaker, again, having gone over my budget yesterday, I hoped that the member would have noticed that the government of Alberta and the Ministry of Education have increased early childhood education funding to make paying for full-time kindergarten for those parents who are able to enrol their children in this upcoming year available.

Ms Notley: Mr. Speaker, given that the Conservatives were told to start full-day kindergarten as early as 2003 and they've been making Alberta's children wait ever since and given that this minister is clearly ducking and weaving on making commitments for this year or next year, how can Alberta's young families expect to believe they will ever have full-day kindergarten under this PC government?

Mr. Lukaszuk: Mr. Speaker, let me make this perfectly clear to this member. The Premier has made a commitment. I have made a commitment. We are unrolling right now kindergarten through school boards. Kindergarten will be available to any child in Alberta, and it will be rolled out in co-operation with school boards. Twenty-five per cent of school boards already have it. Money is allocated in the budget. I have no idea why this member is concerned.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Mountain View, followed by the hon. Member for Calgary-Mackay.

Judicial Inquiry into Health Services (continued)

Dr. Swann: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. This health minister is clearly in denial and desperately wants this inquiry debacle to go away. He knows that a task force and another plan are not going to create a, quotes, just culture in health care after a decade of abuse. A public inquiry with individual accountability and personnel changes in the system is the evidence that health professionals need to restore trust and start working on the problems together. To the minister: was it the Premier or the cabinet that decided to betray her promise to inquire into bullying and intimidation?

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Health and Wellness.

Mr. Horne: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. Hardly a question of government policy. But for the benefit of the hon. member once again I would submit to him that the findings that are necessary to understand the problem that exists with respect to physician advocacy and the potential problems for advocacy by other health professionals are to be found in the Health Quality Council report.

Everything we have done – the report; the acceptance of the recommendations; the calling of the public inquiry into the remaining, unexplored allegation of queue-jumping; and all of our work with health professionals today – is designed to do one thing which we should all be interested in: improving health care for Albertans.

Dr. Swann: Again, Mr. Speaker, what is the minister trying to protect? Who are you trying to protect?

Mr. Horne: Well, Mr. Speaker, notwithstanding that the insinuations appear to continue, nobody is trying to protect anything. What we have said as a government quite clearly is that we accept the findings in the report for what they are. The Premier said so on a number of occasions last week. We are interested in moving forward. We are interested in moving on the very actionable recommendations. The steps are laid out in the Health Quality Council report. I think that is what our health providers want, and I think that is what results in better quality care.

Dr. Swann: Will the minister finally admit that he has been intimately involved with health care delivery for 25 years in this province, knows about the abuse in health care, and it's you that is trying to protect yourself from the health inquiry? Admit it.

Mr. Horne: This minister, this Premier, and this government are fully accountable for health care in this province, and we will continue to be so in the future. I think where the twisted logic lies, Mr. Speaker, is in the answer to the question: how do we move forward? How do we create the just and trusting culture that the Health Quality Council report talks about? That is what I would expect a health professional, particularly someone who is a health professional and a member of this Assembly, to be most interested in.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Mackay, followed by the hon. Member for Calgary-Varsity.

Cancer Drug Shortage

Ms Woo-Paw: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. A Canadian drug manufacturer has recently ceased production of medications that are critical for cancer patients so that they can manage their pain and nausea. Many Albertans are very concerned that they will not have the right medication for their treatments or that their treatments may even be cancelled. To the Minister of Health and Wellness: can you reassure Albertans that you are working on a solution?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Horne: Yes, Mr. Speaker, and thank you to the hon. member for the question. A generic drug manufacturer in Canada, Sandoz Canada, is currently refitting a number of its plants in Canada and the United States in order to comply with regulations of the federal drug administration in the United States. We are experiencing nationally a shortage of some drugs, not drugs that are used in direct cancer treatment but anti-nausea drugs that are administered to patients prior to chemotherapy. There are a number of other injectable anaesthetics and painkillers involved.

2:10

Ms Woo-Paw: Also to the Minister of Health and Wellness. I've learned that there's a reason that these drugs are injected and not taken orally. Are these substitute medications sufficient for the

pain and nausea that they may experience, and how will Albertans get access to them if they are outpatients?

Mr. Horne: Well, Mr. Speaker, we currently have two anti-nausea drugs that were previously made available to patients through injection, and we have had a situation arise where a number of patients have been asked by their physicians to switch to an oral medication that provides the same effect. This is being accommodated at present. We're monitoring the situation closely. Health Link Alberta is available to any Albertan who has questions about the situation both with respect to the medications that are involved and what other steps they may need to take in terms of contacting their physician to see how this could affect them.

Ms Woo-Paw: To the same minister. These medications are essential in our health care system. Why is it that the province has not sourced drugs from other manufacturers? Why have we put all of our eggs in one basket when it comes to these essential medications?

Mr. Horne: Well, Mr. Speaker, earlier this morning I spoke to the federal Health minister about this very issue. A number of the provinces and territories are looking to the federal government to take a greater role in helping us to collectively secure alternate supplies of many of these drugs. While it is true that Health Canada licensed many companies around the world to produce these drugs, not all of those companies actually produce them because they lack sufficient volume in order to justify their business case to ramp up production. This is an issue that I'll be pursuing tomorrow when I lead a call of provincial ministers from other jurisdictions. It's something that we must address, I believe, nationally.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Varsity, followed by the hon. Member for Calgary-East.

Assured Income for the Severely Handicapped

Mr. Chase: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Vulnerable Albertans waited three long years for an increase in the benefits they're entitled to receive under the province's assured income for the severely handicapped program. Now we learn that residents of long-term care and other continuing care facilities won't be receiving the \$400 a month increase recently announced. To the Minister of Seniors: why aren't those AISH clients who live in our continuing care facilities receiving the increase?

Mr. VanderBurg: Mr. Speaker, as you know, the AISH increase was announced. The cheques will be going out March 27. Those that qualify for it medically and that qualify for it financially will receive their benefit.

Mr. Chase: Why don't they all qualify? Given the Premier's threat to remove the cap on accommodation fees in the province's long-term care facilities, how are vulnerable Albertans supposed to afford the continuing care they need? The sky is the limit.

Mr. VanderBurg: Listen, Mr. Speaker. It's very, very clear that this government protects vulnerable Albertans and low-income Albertans. We have programs in place. We have not changed anything as far as the accommodation rate, and I don't plan on changing anything on the accommodation rate. I've made it very, very clear to everybody that until there is a massive, province-

wide and in here debate on accommodation rates, we'll leave them alone.

Mr. Chase: I hope voters remember those words.

Why have the prescription, dental, and other health benefits AISH provides only been increased this year by 1.8 per cent?

Mr. VanderBurg: Again, Mr. Speaker, the programs that we have under our AISH program are the most comprehensive programs around this country. We stand by them. There's an increase in the budget to make sure that we have adequate supply of supports for our AISH clients, and I stand by them, sir.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-East, followed by the hon. Member for Calgary-Buffer.

Pharmaceutical Benefit for Seniors

Mr. Amery: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. A large number of seniors in my constituency have asked me about the status of the seniors' drug plan that was proposed a few years ago. They remain uncertain about the government's intention about this plan. They don't know whether it was shelved, delayed, or cancelled. To the Minister of Health and Wellness: can the minister provide an update to the seniors in my constituency and to all Alberta seniors about the status of this plan?

Mr. Horne: Mr. Speaker, the government has no plans to make any changes to the seniors' drug plan in Alberta. Seniors continue to receive premium-free coverage for prescription medications, ambulance services, and coverage of \$300 per year for psychological services as well as \$200 per year for home nursing care. The government pays 70 per cent of the cost of each prescription. Seniors pay the remaining 30 per cent to a maximum of \$25 per prescription.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Amery: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. To the same minister. Many seniors who are on fixed incomes are having difficulty paying for their prescriptions and oftentimes are not getting prescriptions refilled because of the cost. Is there any assistance provided through the current plan to assist these individuals?

Mr. Horne: Yes, Mr. Speaker, there is. There's a program called the special-needs assistance for seniors administered by the Alberta Seniors ministry. It provides assistance for what seniors pay for prescription medications who cannot afford to pay the regular copayment. Funding is available for low-income seniors for prescriptions above \$45 per month for single seniors and \$90 per couple.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Amery: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Also to the same minister: can the minister provide the Assembly with greater details about recent enhancements to the seniors' drug plan?

Mr. Horne: I'm delighted to provide that information, Mr. Speaker. Recently we announced funding for diabetic test supplies for insulin-treated seniors in Alberta. This includes coverage of up to \$600 per year. It will be made available to all seniors and their dependants for test strips, needles, and syringes. We believe that if we want people to participate actively in managing chronic diseases like diabetes, we need to give them the tools to do it.

MLA Remuneration

(continued)

Mr. Hehr: Several years ago this government was rightly ridiculed for paying their backbenchers tens of thousands of dollars for sitting on committees that never met, produced no documents, and made no recommendations. To the Deputy Premier. This government has now received the Teddy award for having a standing committee on privileges and elections that has been paid about a million dollars over the last four years for never meeting and never getting to the point of anything. I was wondering if you could comment on this and whether any corrective action will be taken by this government.

Mr. Horner: Well, Mr. Speaker, I'm in a bit of a quandary given the fact that this is an Assembly committee. This is a committee that falls under Members' Services. It's an all-party committee, and as such the committee falls under the purview of yourself.

Having said that, the independent MLA compensation review, that we spoke of earlier today, is going to take a look at all of those committees, and we expect, Mr. Speaker, that there will be some recommendations brought forward that may indeed deal with this issue when it comes forward.

Mr. Hehr: Well, nevertheless, we have no idea what that report is going to say, and this could, in fact, still be an issue outstanding. This issue makes us all look bad, Mr. Deputy Premier. I was wondering if we could get a commitment from you that if this is not dealt with in that report, we could have some sort of situation in place to end this practice, that would stop making us look this bad.

Mr. Horner: Mr. Speaker, whether I agree or disagree with the hon. member isn't the point. If he would like, bring a motion forward to the floor of this Assembly as it relates to the committees of this House or bring a motion forward to the Members' Services Committee. They have members on that committee, and I would encourage them to sit down and have that discussion with yourself.

Mr. Hehr: We also know that our standing committees are a majority vote, and the majority is controlled by this government.

Can we see some commitment by you, Deputy Premier, to maybe lead this charge to eliminate what is seen by the electorate as wasteful spending?

Mr. Horner: Mr. Speaker, again, I seem to be debating something that should be debated at the committees. As I would point out, all of these committees are recorded in *Hansard*, as I understand it, and the public can review for themselves whether or not these hon. members have ever brought this issue up at their committee meetings in the past. I doubt that they have. Playing to the media is not really playing to the Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Lesser Slave Lake, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona.

Safe Communities Initiative

Ms Calahasen: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The \$60 million safe communities innovation fund provided three-year funding to 88 projects to support safe and strong communities by reducing and preventing crime through community and police partnerships. My first question is to the Minister of Justice and Attorney General. How will the recently announced bridge funding make a

difference in Alberta communities, especially those that are within my constituency?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Olson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The safe communities innovation fund is an example of the innovative approach that our government has been taking in terms of crime prevention and crime reduction. The three-year program of the safe communities innovation fund was to find these innovative projects around the province. We're nearing the end of the three years, so it's necessary for us to now analyze the data that's been given to us by those projects that were funded in the early years. We need a little bit of time for them to get their information to us, and we need some time to analyze it, so that's the purpose of the extension.

Ms Calahasen: Mr. Speaker, to the same minister. My organizations which receive this funding want to know: will bridge funding be extended to pilot projects from the second and third rounds once their funding expires?

2:20

Mr. Olson: Well, Mr. Speaker, we're focused right now on the projects that are nearing the end of their three years. We expect that we will not have the same issue in the second- and third-year funding because we will be encouraging, if not requiring, those projects to finish their data presentation at an earlier time so that we have time to analyze it before the end of the year.

Our focus right now is on the 28 projects that were funded in the first year. We're going to give them some extra time. Then if they apply for additional funding, we will be able to help them.

Ms Calahasen: Again to the same minister: given that the safe communities innovation fund is a significant commitment in accountability and transparency, that people are always wondering about, what evaluation tools are in place to ensure that pilot projects are providing value to their communities?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Olson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. That's an excellent question, and it's one that we're working very hard on because we take that part of it very seriously. That's why all of these organizations are contractually obligated to provide us with this information. We are working on a model for social return on investment, which is an innovative model. We would like all of these organizations to then work on a business case so that they can be accountable not only to us but also to other funders in their community.

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

Grimshaw Holy Family School

Ms Notley: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. A school that the Minister of Education admits must be bulldozed is being used to provide education to children. All parties agree this school has serious problems. The minister himself says that it needs to be, quote, junked. Will this minister commit to this project getting under way this year, and if not, will he specifically provide a commitment of a time as to when that school can expect to finally get the assistance and support it needs?

Mr. Lukaszuk: Mr. Speaker, unlike the hon. member my only priority is to make sure that the children receive adequate space for learning as soon as possible, in as short a time period as

possible. I will be working right now with the school board to find out what are the best options. Yes, I am making a commitment that they will have appropriate space as soon as possible. We will be working in collaboration not only with the school board but also with the municipality. We have already engaged in discussions. I wish the member would join us constructively and actually contribute some positive ideas as opposed to trying to turn an issue of kids in schools into a political issue.

Ms Notley: Well, Mr. Speaker, I would suggest that what would be constructive would be getting some specifics out of this minister, oh, just once.

Now, given that it's taken local people to bravely speak out publicly about this unsafe and unhealthy school and given that we've already seen evidence of how this government operates to make sure school boards otherwise stay quiet, how can we believe that the refusal of this Minister of Education to make any kind of solid, specific commitment is anything other than continued retribution for this board's need to speak publicly?

Mr. Lukaszuk: Well, Mr. Speaker, speaking of commitment, this member is the Education critic. I have yet to receive one memo, one letter, one phone call, or a visit to my office from this member to share some positive, constructive criticism or ideas.

As a matter of fact, Mr. Speaker, I'll tell you what I'm doing. I met with that school board on a number of occasions already. I met with the locally elected municipal council. We're looking at a solution to provide children with space that the community will be proud of and that the kids will enjoy on Monday morning going to school.

Ms Notley: Well, Mr. Speaker, given that we've got no commitment yet, clearly, meeting with this minister provides no solution.

Now, given that there have been years of underfunding for maintenance and given that we wouldn't know about the health and safety hazards to the children at Holy Family had it not been for the public advocacy of that school board, why won't the minister make public all other schools where assessments have demonstrated significant health and safety issues that are threatening our children?

Mr. Lukaszuk: Mr. Speaker, obviously, the school board finds a lot of value in meeting with me because they have met with me on several occasions. The school board is as committed as I am to making sure that kids receive adequate and appropriate space in as short a period as possible. We will be working on it.

But I do sincerely try to engage this hon. member. If she has any constructive ideas on how we can provide kids with that space sooner, I would more than welcome hearing them.

Conflict of Interest Guidelines for Universities

Dr. Taft: Mr. Speaker, my questions are to the minister of advanced education. There are concerns about conflicts of interest in Alberta universities where professors and researchers are being paid by both universities and corporations. For instance, when research into lung cancer is funded by a tobacco company, there are pretty obvious problems. To the minister: does this government, which provides billions of dollars to postsecondary institutions, have a policy on conflicts of interest at postsecondary institutions?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Weadick: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. As the member knows,

we have board-governed institutions in this province, and they do manage their internal operations. Many of the professors and researchers do work for a multitude of clients, including private sector and public sector, as they do their research. Often this research is done jointly and even between institutions both within this province and across the country and around the world.

Dr. Taft: Well, given the real-life instance, for example, of the head of the U of C School of Public Policy, Professor Jack Mintz, writing under the banner of the University of Calgary about oil royalties and the need to lower corporate taxes and simultaneously being paid hundreds of thousands of dollars to serve on the board of Imperial Oil, won't the minister admit this is a conflict of interest that should be brought to an end?

Mr. Weadick: Mr. Speaker, the fact that many of our academics and researchers have extreme talents and skills, which can benefit both public- and private-sector members of this country, I believe helps us to maybe get our message out from this province as well as across the country that we have people engaged in all levels and aspects of both business and academia.

Dr. Taft: Given that Imperial Oil is clear that it pays company directors some \$200,000 annually to advance the best interests of Imperial oil, doesn't the minister see that when professors like this get themselves into positions of divided loyalties by taking substantial personal payment directly from private corporations while also holding senior positions at universities, the independence and credibility of universities is cast in doubt?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Weadick: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. I believe that our universities do maintain that academic freedom and that ability to question. These folks will have to be responsible for the decisions that they make with respect to their ethics, but I'll tell you that the institutions that I work with hold high ethical standards, and they expect the same from their employees.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-North Hill, followed by the hon. Member for Calgary-Fish Creek.

Energy Demand-side Management

Mr. Fawcett: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. We've heard a lot of talk in this Assembly and in Alberta in general around the cost of electricity and the need for transmission in this province moving forward. What we do know is that there is going to be a huge increase in demand because of population and growth in the economy. My question is to the Minister of Energy. What demand-side management initiatives does his department have in place that would drive change in consumer behaviour, reducing energy demand overall and at peak times and ultimately reducing cost to consumers?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Dr. Morton: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'd like to commend the hon. member for that question. Demand-side management and other related policies that achieve efficiencies in energy consumption are actually the best way to reduce both cost and emissions. Accordingly, the government of Alberta through Alberta Innovates: Technology Futures is working with both Enmax and EPCOR on studying the benefits of real-time electricity consumption monitors and ways in which this could

help residential consumers reduce their consumption. This work is largely completed, and we expect . . .

The Speaker: I think we'll move on now.

Mr. Fawcett: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. My question is to the same minister. Given that demand-side management is the cheapest cost of electricity that can be brought online to meet growing demand, does it not make sense to send a strong signal to the Alberta Electric System Operator and the AUC to work with electricity and natural gas retailers and distributors on providing appropriate incentives for demand-side management initiatives?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Dr. Morton: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Again, I certainly agree with the hon. member's preamble. With respect to residential customers I've addressed that question in my first answer.

With respect to the larger industrial and commercial users they already have the option to track hourly rates and, accordingly, the incentive and the ability to manage use accordingly. They can go on and off the grid when they think it's appropriate or have local generation and generate locally when they can, when rates are too high, or go back on the grid. So on that score, we're already . . .

The Speaker: The hon. member, please.

Mr. Fawcett: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. My final question is actually to the minister of environment. Given that energy demand-side management is one of the least expensive strategies for consumers and taxpayers in reducing greenhouse gas emissions, will the minister vigorously pursue such initiatives in moving forward the province's climate change strategy?

2:30

Mrs. McQueen: Thank you to the hon. member for the question. I can tell the hon. member that I'm happy to say that through the Ministry of Environment and Water, through Agriculture and Rural Development, through Sustainable Resource Development, and Energy we are going to continue on with the next generation of energy efficient programs in this province. Alberta will remain a national leader. We're going to build on the successful programs that we've had. We've prevented some 1.5 million tons of GHGs from entering the atmosphere, which is equivalent to 300,000 cars on the road. We're looking forward to bringing this program forward and building upon the great work that has already happened.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Fish Creek, followed by the hon. Member for Bonnyville-Cold Lake.

Proclamation of Health Legislation

Mrs. Forsyth: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The problems in our health care system have this government's fingerprints all over them. This government told Albertans that they would have a health advocate and a health charter to turn to when they passed Bill 17, the Alberta Health Act, over a year and a half ago. But here we are today with the law still not proclaimed, with no health advocate, no charter, and our doctors being left behind. Will your minister then please explain to Albertans why this government has put advocacy on the back burner as our health care system continues to suffer?

Mr. Horne: Well, Mr. Speaker, this government did extensive consultation in the development of the Alberta Health Act. We

fully intend to proceed at the appropriate time with both proclamation of the act and, more importantly, the implementation of the health advocate office.

As the hon. member knows, the legislation includes a specific requirement for consultation around any regulations that are introduced as part of that act. In the spirit of what is so often called for on the other side, we intend to honour that commitment to the consultation. It will take place.

Mrs. Forsyth: Given that the health advocate would have given doctors and other health professionals a mechanism to air instances of bullying and political meddling, does the health minister want to explain to Albertans and the health professionals in this province why the Health Act has not been proclaimed?

Mr. Horne: Well, Mr. Speaker, it's a very interesting question given that the hon. member and her colleagues very vigorously opposed the Alberta Health Act and, if I recall correctly, suggested to this House in so many words that the office didn't have sufficient teeth to be of value to our physicians and our other health professionals.

We made a commitment to continue consultation with Albertans on this. We have done so, Mr. Speaker, and when the appropriate consultation is completed, we will bring forward the regulation to this House, and we will proclaim the act.

Mrs. Forsyth: With all due respect, Minister, you're wrong.

Given that over the past year and a half several instances of doctor intimidation occurred on this government's watch, did you not proclaim this bill because you already knew about the bullying and political interference?

Mr. Horne: Mr. Speaker, while it's refreshing to know now that the hon. member is in fact supportive of the legislation and the office of the health advocate, with respect to the hon. member's question, as members will recall, the health advocate was designed to assist Albertans with navigation of the health care system and to provide them with a place to go with respect to concerns that they have with the system. We intend to proceed with that act.

We also intend to proceed with the recommendations in the report that call for the creation of a just and trusting culture for our physicians and other professionals.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Bonnyville-Cold Lake, followed by the hon. Member for Calgary-McCall.

Keyano College Land Trust

Mrs. Leskiw: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My first question is to the Minister of Infrastructure. Two weeks ago this government announced the transfer of land into the land trust for Keyano College in Fort McMurray. This is obviously a great step for this postsecondary institution that will generate a long-term revenue for the college. Will this land be used to help address the needs for more housing in Fort McMurray?

Mr. Johnson: Mr. Speaker, it certainly is a great step, and I was very pleased to be in Fort McMurray a short time ago with the minister of advanced education to announce this. The college plans to use the 600-acre trust for much-needed new residential and commercial development in addition to the revenues it'll generate for the college. It's an innovative move. It's a testament to the collaboration between our government and the institution and the community and is a real testament to board chair John Wilson and President Kevin Nagel and all the folks with the

Alberta government and the oil sands secretariat that worked hard on this.

The Speaker: The hon. member, please.

Mrs. Leskiw: Thank you. To the same minister: given that that Keyano land is just part of the land in the Saline Creek area that could be opened up for development, is the government planning to release more adjacent land in the area for Fort McMurray?

Mr. Johnson: Yes, Mr. Speaker, indeed. We're preparing and working hard on a strategic land release. We're going to do it in a strategic way, and we hope to do that very, very soon. The people of Fort McMurray deserve to see a plan, a plan that outlines what land will be released and in what phases. This strategy will help stabilize land prices, result in more housing and retail spaces at affordable prices, and help Fort McMurray keep affordable and sustainable as a community for years and generations to come.

Mrs. Leskiw: Thank you for that.

My last question is to the Minister of Advanced Education and Technology. How will Keyano College use the additional funding they are getting from this land transfer?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Weadick: Thank you very much. I've got to tell you the smile on Mayor Melissa Blake's face when the Infrastructure minister and I were in town a couple of weeks ago to announce this was unbelievable. To a packed room we announced that this land trust was going to go ahead. I'll tell you that it was a very exciting time for me. It allows us to fulfill a promise that we made to Fort McMurray to create land availability that would allow them to develop residential and commercial.

On top of that, Mr. Speaker, this relationship between Keyano and the town will also provide an \$80 million to \$120 million endowment to the Keyano College.

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

Impaired Driving Legislation

Mr. Kang: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. A few short months ago this government pressed ahead with new impaired driving legislation. The reason for the new law was to save lives. The Minister of Transportation spoke passionately on how this new bill would protect Alberta's citizens. To the Minister of Transportation: if this bill was passed to save lives, why is it not in force on our streets today?

Mr. Danyluk: Well, Mr. Speaker, as I said in the House when the bill was brought forward, the bill is going to be brought forward in stages. It does take time to bring bills forward. We need to go through the education portion. We need to have consistent training. We need to work with our traffic safety partners. We need to also work on a tracking system and consultation.

Mr. Kang: Mr. Speaker, my understanding was that the bill was supposed to be in force before the Christmas season to save lives. To the minister again: well, sir, what was the rush to pass the bill if this government had not properly consulted on the implementation of the bill with the public, industry groups, other stakeholders, or the education process you were talking about? What was the rush?

Mr. Danyluk: Well, Mr. Speaker, I think I've been very clear

about what was necessary to bring this bill forward. I will say that the penalties for the .08 and above will be in place around July 1, and we're hoping that the .05 impairment penalties will be in place around September 1.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Kang: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. To the same minister again: with the deepest of respect, do you not find this a bizarre situation, having a law that was passed in the House to save lives still not implemented because of a lack of consultation or any other issues you have with it?

Mr. Danyluk: Mr. Speaker, I think this is very interesting coming from the hon. member because some members opposite say that it's too soon, as the hon. member did. Some say it's taking too long. Some say it shouldn't. This bill is about saving lives. This bill is about safety on our roadways. We need to get it right, and we need to ensure that we are consulting with the stakeholders. We need to ensure that all of the stakeholders know what the process and direction are.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for St. Albert.

Parent Link Centres

Mr. Allred: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My question is to the Minister of Human Services. Parent link centres have been established in the Edmonton area and, I presume, throughout the province to provide assistance in parenting, particularly to new parents. I understand that no new funding has been allocated for new PLCs since 2006-2007. Is this program being mothballed?

Mr. Hancock: No, Mr. Speaker. The parent link centres are very important. There was a plan to create 60 new parent link centres across the province. In fact, 46 centres have been established. We know that access to parent link centres is doing great things, helping parents with the assistance they need in special circumstances. We're working with the 10 child and family services authorities to identify locations for new centres, and we're reviewing our existing programs, including parent link centres, to determine how well they're meeting the needs of young children, youth, and families in Alberta communities. There's no plan to mothball them. In fact, helping families raise their children, helping them with the struggles that they have is a very important part of what we need to do.

2:40

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Allred: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The minister mentioned that only 46 have been established, but the original plan was to create 60 new parent link centres. What is the plan for the future expansion of the program?

Mr. Hancock: Well, at this point there have been additional areas identified such as southwest Edmonton, St. Albert, and other areas in the province. We've been working with other organizations. For example, through the CFSA in St. Albert the St. Albert family resource centre is providing some of the services.

It's a matter of making sure that communities have access to the services that they need, that parents and families have access to the services that they need. If the parent link centre is the best way to do it, then that's what we'll proceed with. If we can collaborate and work with others who are already in the community doing it, that's what we'll do. There's not a one size fits all, but we're committed to

the concept that if we can assist parents in the struggles that they have from time to time and the particular things that they need to help support their families, that's what we'll be doing.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Allred: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I think the minister has almost answered my question in mentioning St. Albert. Given that there have been considerable requests to provide services in St. Albert and that Edmonton PLC offices often refer St. Albert residents to the St. Albert family resource centre for parenting assistance, can St. Albert expect to get funding for a parent link centre in the very near future?

Mr. Hancock: As I said, Mr. Speaker, what we're trying to do is not necessarily establish new situations where there's somebody already doing the job but work collaboratively with the resources that are in the community, map the resources that are in the community so that we know what communities are missing and help to build on those resources. The family resource centre in St. Albert is doing a great job with assistance from the child and family services authorities. We are helping fund through the student health initiative partnership to train two staff members to deliver the Stepping Stones Triple P program, which is a parenting program for families who have a child with a disability. There's also online at www.parentlinkalberta.ca or www.triplep-staypositive.net. There are resources available, and we're working to continue to build right across the province a good network of supports so that parents can raise their children and get the help they need when they need it.

The Speaker: Hon. members, that was 18 members who were identified today to participate, 108 questions and responses.

In a few short seconds from now we will continue the Routine.

Tabling Returns and Reports

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

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm tabling the appropriate number of documents to support the question I asked in question period today. The document is form 10-K of the United States Securities and Exchange Commission, dated December 31, 2010, for Imperial Oil Limited. It explains the philosophy and objectives of Imperial Oil's directors' compensation program, which is to ensure alignment with shareholder interests. It indicates J.M. Mintz received \$218,000 in total compensation that year and has a total combined at-risk value of holdings valued at \$636,000 at the time of this filing.

Thank you.

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

Mr. Chase: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I have three sets of tablings. I am tabling e-mails and letters from the following individuals who are concerned about the proposed logging in the west Bragg Creek area, all of whom believe clear-cutting will damage essential watershed and recreation area that thousands of Albertans use to promote health and fitness and be detrimental to wildlife and natural species. These come from Brian Rossetti, Susan Belyea, Joan Stauffer, Dean Cockshutt, Stephanie Hrehirchuk, Josefine Singh, S. Lawrence, Leanne Ross, Michele Hardy, Tania Sablatash, David Taylor, Tim O'Sullivan, Sharon Bayer, Eric Lloyd, Emma Barry, Nora McTague, Bill and Kitty Stillaway, Stu Schultz, Shelley Armeneau, and Mike Medwid.

My second tabling, Mr. Speaker, is a letter and a notice from Robert Lee, chair of the Elbow River Watershed Partnership, addressing misleading and false information contained in a letter from SRD and sent to members of the public with concerns about the proposed logging in the Bragg Creek area. The partnership was not presented with the harvest plan and has not undertaken any assessment of the impact of the forestry activities upstream from Bragg Creek, as SRD claimed in its letter.

My last tabling, Mr. Speaker, is a retabling from Maurice Gaucher, Adam Storms, Susan O'Shea, Laryssa Warne, and Eric Tromposch, concerned about the west Bragg Creek area.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

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

Mr. Hehr: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. I have four sets of tablings. The first one is from Mr. Doug Moston, who is concerned about AISH and his federal pension being continued until age 67 should and when the federal government makes changes to OAS.

I have an e-mail from Mr. Mike Perz. He's concerned about logging in the Castle special management area.

I have a copy of a letter sent by Mr. Jim Pissot to the hon. Premier in regard to the bear population and how it can be compromised by logging in the Castle-Crown area.

I have a copy of an e-mail sent to me by Brenda and Dave Pernitsky, and it's regarding an issue they have with the motor vehicles complaint review process, considering it redundant and a switching of money and are suggesting improvements to the way the system could be handled.

Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

Tablings to the Clerk

The Clerk: I wish to advise the House that the following document was deposited with the office of the Clerk. On behalf of the hon. Mrs. Klimchuk, Minister of Culture and Community Services, additional information pertaining to Motion for a Return 4, asked for by Ms Blakeman, the hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre, on March 21, 2011.

Statement by the Speaker

Calendar of Special Events

The Speaker: Hon. members, on a monthly basis I usually read into the record the daily events or the weekly events or the monthly events that occur as some members do get up and do offer extensions of congratulations, but to make sure that no one is left out, might I just bring to the attention of all members that March is Colorectal Cancer Awareness Month, Fraud Prevention Month, Juvenile Arthritis Awareness Month, Kidney Health Month, Liver Health Month, National Engineering & Geoscience Month, National Epilepsy Month, National Social Work Month, Nutrition Month, Youth Science Month.

There are designations awarded to a number of days. March 1 was Self-injury Awareness Day. March 2 was the World Day of Prayer. March 4 was the International Children's Day of Broadcasting. March 4 to 11 was International Women's Week. March 4 to 10 was National Social Work Week, as it was Pharmacist Awareness Week. March 8 is Holi in the Hindu culture. March 8 is also International Women's Day and is also Purim, a Jewish observance. It's also World Kidney Day.

March 9 to 25 is Semaine nationale de la francophonie. March 11 will be daylight saving time, as it begins once again. March 11 to 17

is also Canadian Agricultural Safety Week, as it is World Glaucoma Week. March 12 is Commonwealth Day. March 12 to 18 is Brain Awareness Week. March 14 to 20 is National Farm Safety Week. March 15 is World Consumer Rights Day. March 17 is St. Patrick's Day. March 18 to 24 is National Poison Prevention Week. March 19 is Sun-Earth Day; that's the annual equinox celebration. March 20 is French Language Day at the United Nations. March 20 is also Journée internationale de la Francophonie, as it is also spring equinox, as it is World Storytelling Day.

2:50

March 21 is International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, as it is the International Day of Nowruz, as it is World Down Syndrome Day, as it is World Poetry Day. March 21 to 27 is the Week of Solidarity with the Peoples Struggling against Racism and Racial Discrimination. March 22 is World Water Day. March 23 is World Meteorological Day. March 24 is World TB Day. March 24 is also the International Day for the Right to the Truth Concerning Gross Human Rights Violations and for the Dignity of Victims.

March 25 is the International Day of Remembrance of the Victims of Slavery and the Transatlantic Slave Trade, as it is also the International Day of Solidarity with Detained and Missing Staff Members. March 26 is Purple Day, the global day of epilepsy awareness. March 26 to April 1 will be World Salt Awareness Week. March 27 will be World Theatre Day, and on March 31 at 8:30 p.m. we will celebrate Earth Hour.

Orders of the Day

Committee of Supply

[Mr. Cao in the chair]

The Chair: Before the chair gets on to the business, I would like to ask for your consent to briefly revert to Introduction of Guests.

[Unanimous consent granted]

Introduction of Guests

(reversion)

The Chair: The hon. Member for Calgary-East.

Mr. Amery: Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and thank you to all hon. members for the unanimous consent. I'd like to introduce to you and through you to all members of the Assembly two gifted, intelligent, and famous poets all the way from Lebanon. As you know, Lebanon is my birthplace. Today we have with us Mr. Tali Hamdan and Mr. Victor Mirza. These two individuals have written so many books over the years that really enriched the arts and culture in the Middle East. Accompanying our guests we have Mr. Nizam Saab, the president of the Yanta community association, and Mr. Kumal Shtay, the vice-president of the association. We also have Ziad Abultaif, Hayel Shtay, and Wasseem Jaber, very prominent members of the Lebanese business community. My guests have risen. I would like to ask all members to give them the traditional warm welcome of the Assembly. [Remarks in Arabic]

The Chair: The chair shall now call the Committee of Supply to order.

Main Estimates 2012-13

Health and Wellness

The Chair: Hon. Minister of Health and Wellness, before I

recognize you, I want to remind you that we have 20 minutes for the Wildrose Party, 20 minutes for the NDs, and the first hour is for the Official Opposition. Also, for the exchange between the minister and the other members you can have a choice of 20 minutes in combination or 10 minutes each, so let the chair know that in advance. Before I call on you to start your speech, you may want to introduce your staff.

Mr. Horne: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair. I'm very proud to introduce staff from my department and staff from my office as well who are here today: Marcia Nelson, Deputy Minister of Alberta Health and Wellness; David Breakwell, assistant deputy minister of financial accountability; Line Porfon, acting assistant deputy minister of health policy and service standards; Glenn Monteith, assistant deputy minister of health workforce; Martin Chamberlain, assistant deputy minister of corporate support; Margaret King, assistant deputy minister of community and population health; Mark Brisson, assistant deputy minister of health information technology and systems; and Charlene Wong, executive director of financial planning for the department.

I'm also very proud, Mr. Chair, to introduce members of my staff who are seated in the members' gallery: Dr. Carol Anderson, my executive assistant; Mr. Matthew Hebert, who is a special adviser in our office; and Ms Lindsay Wozney, who is a special assistant in our office. I'm very pleased to have all of them here today as well as my communications director, Mr. Andy Weiler.

The Chair: All right. Minister, now you have the floor for 10 minutes.

Mr. Horne: Well, thank you very much, Mr. Chair. I certainly appreciate the opportunity to make a few opening remarks and then, of course, look forward to the main purpose of this exercise, to answer the questions of my colleagues opposite and in the government caucus as well.

Mr. Chair, the 2012-13 Health and Wellness budget will make investments in people and communities. It reflects our government's commitment to making fundamental services in our health system work better. It will give Albertans more access to the health system close to home, will support greater services in mental health and addictions, and will enhance home care so that seniors can stay in their own homes, where they'll maintain their independence and are, of course, most comfortable.

Mr. Chair, there are many priorities outlined in the budget that is before the House at this time for Alberta Health and Wellness. As I said, it focuses on services that meet local community needs, promote wellness and supports, and also enable Albertans in the choices they make for themselves and their families as we all strive together to achieve better health. The proposed budget makes three key strategic investments – primary health care, addictions and mental health services, and continuing care – and I'll talk more about each of them a bit later.

Total spending in 2012-13 will be \$16 billion, an increase of \$1.2 billion, or 7.9 per cent, from 2011-12. This includes \$15.9 billion in operating expenses and \$118 million in capital equipment grants, amortization, and vaccine usage. The largest part of the budget, \$10.2 billion, or 64 per cent, will be allocated to Alberta Health Services to deliver health care to Albertans.

Alberta Health Services will also be receiving an additional \$0.3 billion, or 2 per cent of our budget, for operating costs at the south health campus in Calgary and at the Edmonton clinic south, both due to open later this year, and \$3.4 billion, or 22 per cent of our budget, will go towards physician compensation and development. As you know, I recently announced a one-year

funding increase for physicians in our province that will go into effect on April 1. There will be a primary care network per capita funding increase of \$12 per patient from \$50 to \$62. Fee-for-service and alternate relationship plans will increase by 2 per cent. The total increase in support for physicians resulting from these changes will be \$93 million, Mr. Chair.

3:00

We will also extend funding for all other programs and benefits currently in effect until March 31, 2013. We anticipate that our ministry will be able to find the additional \$93 million in our 2012-13 budget. We'll look at demand-driven programs that may come in lower than we had estimated, and we will reduce discretionary spending as much as possible. The ministry will evaluate its financial position in late 2012, and in the event we cannot fund the additional \$93 million, we will discuss options for Treasury Board as well as any other discussions that may be necessary in the event a long-term agreement is reached.

One billion dollars, or 6 per cent, of our budget will go toward drugs and supplemental health benefits for Albertans, including pharmaceutical assistance, cancer therapy drugs, specialized high-cost drugs, ground ambulance, prosthetics, and orthotics. The remaining \$1.1 billion, or 6 per cent, of our budget is spent on everything else we do, from vaccination programs and tissue and blood services to healthy living programs and cancer research.

Looking at Alberta Health Services, they will receive \$10.2 billion in base operating funding for front-line health services, which is a \$578 million, or 6 per cent, increase. Mr. Chair, 2012-13 marks the third year of a five-year funding commitment that will see Alberta Health Services receive 6 per cent base operating increases in each of the first three years and 4.5 per cent increases in years 4 and 5. This is the first long-term stable health funding arrangement of its kind in Canada. Two hundred thirty-two million dollars will also be provided to Alberta Health Services for operating costs at the south health campus in Calgary and \$35 million for operating costs at Edmonton clinic south. The funding reflects a commitment made to Albertans last year that when the south Calgary hospital and all other new facilities are ready to come on stream, the operating funds will be there in stages as they are needed.

As I said, one of our top priorities is increasing Albertans' access to primary health care. Improving primary health care is about providing more front-door options for Albertans so they can make that first point of contact with the health system. Through this proposed budget we're investing in people and in programs that will mean more ways to go through that front door. We will provide \$75 million for projects that will strengthen primary health care throughout Alberta. Funds will be used for a range of innovative health care approaches such as enhancing our very successful primary care networks or adding more community-based primary health care providers.

In addition, Alberta Health Services will be using \$15 million of its existing budget to establish three pilot family care clinics that will be operational by April 1. They will address local community needs through teams of health providers working under one roof to provide individual and family-focused care. Family care clinics will include an emphasis on wellness, addictions, mental health, and chronic disease prevention and management. We'll be announcing more details on these pilots very soon.

Another way we will improve primary health care is to enhance the role of our pharmacists. Starting July 1, Albertans will be able to go to their local pharmacist for prescription renewals. The change means Albertans will have more access to the health care system, more timely access to medications, and more

convenience. Pharmacists will be finally recognized, Mr. Chair, as a full part of Alberta's health care team by working to the full extent of their education, skill, and experience. We will spend \$20 million to compensate pharmacists for this service and enable them to continue their collaboration with physicians in delivering care of the highest quality.

Investments in pharmaceutical programs will come from savings by negotiating better prices for generic drugs. To help pharmacists in Alberta's remote communities expand their services and adjust to the lower generic drug prices, \$5.3 million will be available in 2012-13 as part of a new three-year, \$16 million remote pharmacy access grant.

Mr. Chair, a second priority for our ministry is to build healthy communities by increasing access to addictions and mental health services. I announced details about this \$25 million investment on Monday. Initiatives include increasing access to psychology and other counselling services in primary care networks, expanding addiction and mental health capacity in our schools, investing in housing supports and homeless initiatives, and providing support for complex needs in the community and at facilities through Alberta Hospital Edmonton.

Our third priority relates to continuing care. We will invest \$25 million in enhanced home care and rehabilitation services so seniors can stay in their own homes longer and avoid premature or unnecessary admissions to continuing care facilities and, most especially, our hospitals. To help seniors maintain their good health, we will also invest \$7 million in subsidized chiropractic services for seniors, effective July 1.

To conclude, Mr. Chair, this budget supports our goal of more community-based care. It will give Albertans more and better access to the health system close to home. It will support greater access to mental health and addiction services. It will enhance home care so seniors can stay in their own homes, where they will continue to maintain their independence and where they are most comfortable.

Thank you very much, Mr. Chair. I look forward to the questions from my colleagues.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

The next hour is reserved for the Official Opposition. Hon. Member for Calgary-Mountain View, do you want a 20-minute dialogue?

Dr. Swann: I would appreciate an exchange so that we can actually have specific questions and specific answers if that's possible for the minister.

The Chair: All right. Go ahead with 20-minute chunks for an hour.

Dr. Swann: Very good. Thanks very much, Mr. Chairman.

Health is obviously on the minds of all Albertans. It's the largest budget item, it's considered the major issue for all governments, and it's a great concern to the professionals working in the system also. Three things we look for: access, quality, and cost-effectiveness. Those should be the basis for our measurements, our outcomes, and those are the standards to which we should be measuring ourselves.

Overarching all of this, of course, in the present context is the current focus and concern about the intimidation and bullying within the health care system over the last decade and the tremendous challenge this minister has had in dealing with this issue. Not only was I experiencing it, but others have come forward increasingly over the last decade and have raised the important initiative of a public inquiry – the Medical Association,

the Health Sciences Association, together representing about 30,000 people in this province, those working on the front lines – indicating that there is only one way to restore confidence and trust in the system, and that is to hold a public inquiry.

Unfortunately, the Premier has betrayed those health workers by initially, during her campaign, saying yes and now saying no. I'm afraid to say that this minister, too, who was proud, and said so last night in the forum, of 25 years of contributing to health care policy and involved intimately with the health care system, has not removed himself from the decision-making and is in conflict over this very issue and avoiding the notion of a public inquiry at which he himself would be forced to testify.

This places a real conflict for Albertans and for the health care professions in looking at this minister, who continues to argue that there was no commitment, in the first instance, to a public inquiry looking into bullying and intimidation and, in the second instance, that he has no conflict of interest around this. It clearly smacks of disingenuity, lack of serious commitment to the role and the responsibility he has taken on, and an unwillingness, in the first instance, to put himself on the front line to address some of the questions and challenges that only people under oath would be able to raise and question. This colours everything, I think, in this coming year, and it has no direct bearing on the budget except to say that without a public inquiry we will not get to the kind of quality, access, and cost-efficiency that I think we all want to see.

So I leave that question with the minister and entreat him to recognize that you do not create a culture of trust and justice and camaraderie by setting a task force to draft new guidelines and new plans for those working in the system. When those workers are going back into the situations where they experienced abuse, where they saw abuse, where they saw the promotion of the very people that were guilty of the abuses, you do not fix a system this way, and you perpetuate a sense that there is no accountability, no transparency in this ministry and no ability to actually solve problems and move on.

3:10

This minister continues to protect those in his cabinet who were involved over the past decade, the Premier herself, and himself. It's a shame for the people of Alberta that we cannot move to what has clearly been a commitment and now a betrayal and has been recommended very strongly and demanded by those working on the front lines.

Having said that, I think one of the challenges that this ministry continues to face is clarifying roles and responsibilities between Alberta Health and Wellness and the Alberta Health Services Board. Part of the challenge has been ambiguity, interference to some extent, some ministers taking a larger role since 2008 and some a smaller role, some intervening when the heat is turned on in a specific area. We saw the results of that with the resignation of some board members over the past few years.

It also reflects, I think, the way the original constitution of the Health Services Board was created without adequate health services expertise. I think that continues today. I think we've had too strong a focus on business acumen, business background and not enough on a clear sense of management relative to policy at the health department, too strong an emphasis on bottom-line dollars and not on relationships and clear roles and responsibilities and accountabilities within the system.

As a result, I think we're going to limp along until that kind of clarity and that kind of expertise are there on the Health Services Board, so I would enjoin the minister to look seriously at how critical these next couple of years are. I think he knows very well the kinds of disasters that are emerging in our

system because of those two areas, the lack of clarity around roles and responsibilities and adequate health services expertise and research infusing the Health Services Board.

In terms of questions about spending, it's clear from looking at some of the data that our health system is shifting in terms of its public-private ownership. According to a recent publication Canada ranks fifth after the United States and Switzerland in terms of its investment in private health services in Alberta. I guess that's a challenge to us to have said that we are committed in Alberta to a publicly funded system when we rank actually fifth in terms of the amount of investment in private health care. We are actually 18th globally in terms of per capita funding for publicly funded services, so anyone who says that we are dominated by too much socialism in this province or too much publicly funded service I think has to look at those statistics.

In the transition, also, between the original Alberta Health and Wellness and the nine regions to the Health Services Board there was a notion and an argument by the former health minister that we'd be saving some money. We would reduce administration. We would reduce boards and oversight, administration. In fact, we overspent by \$1.3 billion just in making the transition, and given the consistent increases year to year – and we're now committed to four or five years more of consistent increases – I don't see that we have saved anything on administration.

I'd be interested to hear the minister's comment on how much now has gone into front-line services versus administration in our current system. I see that almost two-thirds of the budget is under Alberta Health Services. They're not here to answer to questions, so all we can do is hope to get them to Public Accounts at some point. They take the lion's share of the budget, and they're not accountable to Albertans, so that means that the minister has to be for why we're spending the same or significantly more and what we're getting for that in terms of front-line services. Might this not have something to do, then, with the delays in access and concerns about quality as well as cost-efficiency?

I'll maybe leave it there, Mr. Chairman, and see if the minister wants to respond to any of those concerns.

The Chair: The hon. minister.

Mr. Horne: Okay. Thank you very much, Mr. Chair. I'm pleased to respond to all of the things that the hon. member raised in the first 10 minutes. I'll begin with the first issue he raised, which is his desire for a public inquiry to include investigation into physician advocacy and allegations of intimidation in our health system. As we have said, we asked the Health Quality Council, with the support, I believe, of all members of this House on all sides, to look into the allegations that were made.

This was not the only one, of course. There were other allegations that were made with respect to deaths on an alleged waiting list for lung cancer surgery, for example, that were found to be unsubstantiated in the review. There was an allegation with respect to harmful effects of extended emergency department wait times on patient care. That was investigated thoroughly. The report of the Health Quality Council made 21 recommendations, Mr. Chair. The government has accepted all 21.

With respect to the specific issue around the public inquiry I will say again that the government accepts the findings in the report with respect to physician advocacy. We intend to act immediately on all of the recommendations that were put forward by the Health Quality Council.

With respect to the process of the inquiry I'd remind the hon. member that this House, in fact, passed a bill last fall called the Health Quality Council of Alberta Act. It confers upon the Health

Quality Council a number of new duties and responsibilities. At the request of cabinet that includes the requirement to appoint a board to conduct a health systems inquiry. The powers of that panel, once appointed, include many of the same powers that are found under the Public Inquiries Act; namely, the ability to compel witnesses. I would remind the House, Mr. Chair, that anyone, including any member of this Assembly – be they a member of Executive Council, be they a private member in the government caucus, or be they a member in one of the opposition caucuses – equally has the potential to be called and the duty to appear if subpoenaed by a panel under the Health Quality Council of Alberta Act.

With respect to the hon. member's specific concern around how the allegations with respect to intimidation of physicians and impediments to their ability to advocate for patients could be addressed, this panel has every opportunity to look at that issue as it relates to allegations of improper preferential access to health care treatment. If there are physicians in this province, Mr. Chair, that have been threatened or influenced or intimidated or otherwise prompted to act to make a decision to refer someone for medical care that they ought not to have made – in other words, a decision that is not based on assessed medical need – then this inquiry is going to have the ability to discover that. And any member of this Legislature could potentially be called to testify in that or in any other regard.

The point of the legislation, Mr. Chair, as you know, was to set up an independent process – independent of government, independent of the Assembly – to carry out these sorts of investigations. We have every desire and every intention on this side of the House to respect that legislation, to respect the independence of the panel, and to allow them to carry out their work without interference by way of public comment, without interference by any other means. We look forward to them presenting their report, which they are required by law to table with the Speaker of the Legislative Assembly by the deadline of April 2013.

The hon. member also talked about the issue of roles and responsibilities of the various stakeholders in the system: Alberta Health and Wellness, Alberta Health Services, the College of Physicians & Surgeons, and, I dare say, many others that are involved in the provision of health care or the governance of our health care system. I think the hon. member would probably know that the Health Quality Council dealt with this quite extensively in their report. They made a very specific recommendation about a task force to address this question of role clarity.

I will say to the hon. member that I do think it is a significant issue. We look back to the decision to form Alberta Health Services. We've seen many benefits as a result of moving to one health region for the entire province, but the Premier and I and many of my colleagues have acknowledged that the time for the transition was very short. As we've seen in the discussion about the cultural dimension of the health care system as outlined in the report, there was not a lot of time for our physicians and our other health professionals to have what they might consider meaningful input, an active role in making decisions about how this new entity would be shaped, and, most importantly, what kind of culture they wanted to build for themselves in order to support the delivery of the excellent care that Albertans receive each and every day in our health care system.

3:20

This is one of the 21 recommendations that the government has accepted. We intend to move on it quickly. I can report to the hon. member and to my colleagues that this is something that I've

discussed extensively with the board of the Health Quality Council, I've discussed it extensively with the board of Alberta Health Services, and I've had some discussions with the College of Physicians & Surgeons as well. All are in agreement, Mr. Chair, that this is absolutely a critical issue.

One of the things that arises from this – and I think the hon. member mentioned it in his speech – is the question of who is responsible for assurance in our health care system. That responsibility, in my view, Mr. Chair, is that of the government. The assurance that the services provided are safe, that they are of high quality, that they are delivered in an appropriate manner, that there is appropriate funding for them – and we do have the first five-year funding plan in Canada to support the delivery system in health care – all of those things are clearly the purview of government.

In addition to that and, I think, arguably just as important, the role of the long-term policy direction for the health system is also the role of government. I take great pride in the work that my department continues to do to plan not only for the needs of the health care system in the next two years and three years and five years but, in fact, looking 20 years down the road, taking an active role in the mandate of the Minister of Human Services to develop a social policy framework for this province, looking at best evidence and applying that evidence to decision-making, including decisions that I need to make as Minister of Health and Wellness so that Albertans can have confidence that the services we offer are comparable to the best anywhere in Canada and beyond. I'm very proud of that.

The hon. member also made some comments with respect to the board of Alberta Health Services and expressed an opinion that the role of the board should not necessarily be a corporate responsibility in the traditional sense or in a business sense, that the board actually has a responsibility to chart the future course of Alberta Health Services, to understand quality as it relates to health care delivery at the community level, to have an understanding of quality factors that need to be addressed in our system on an ongoing basis, to have an understanding of what it takes to build a just and trusting culture for health professionals.

In that regard, our current board membership includes a third of members whose terms come up every year. Each year we work with the board to identify the necessary skill sets and capacities and then recruit suitable individuals to fill those needs. I think the knowledge component of the board in the future with respect to health care is going to be increasingly important, and in that respect I agree with the hon. member that these competencies need to be well represented on our board.

Equally, Mr. Chair, the stewardship of a budget of well over \$10 billion is not a small responsibility. We do need people with appropriate financial expertise. We do need people who understand appropriate performance indicators, who understand governance issues at a high level, who are in a position to ensure that the stewardship of the vast majority of our health care resources that are afforded to Alberta Health Service are used wisely. I view it very much as a role of the board to not only fulfill that responsibility as it relates to AHS but to assist me in my role in being ultimately accountable for the health care system in Alberta.

So we intend to continue this discussion through the task force about the competencies that are needed on the board, about role clarity among the various stakeholders that I mentioned earlier, and to continue to pursue issues that were not addressed in the transition that need to be addressed in an inclusive way, involving not only the board and the stakeholders I mentioned but, most importantly, the very health professionals that deliver the care.

With that, Mr. Chair, I'll take my seat.

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

Dr. Swann: Thanks, Mr. Chairman. Thank you to the minister. In his message last night the minister highlighted the risks to the coming generation, alluding to the fact that they may be the first generation to have a lower lifespan than the current generation, and I agree with that. With 3 per cent of our budget invested in prevention, how do you explain this as a priority to Albertans, and what level of support are you currently giving to high-risk groups in the province to try to reduce the toll on our young people but also on our health care system?

What kind of support for change in terms of these health risks are we investing in schools, workplaces, and communities? I see that you've provided a 22 per cent increase in community programs and healthy living. What does that mean in concrete terms, and how are we measuring outcomes in terms of that investment? I see a 72 per cent increase in immunization support. Where is this going?

Perhaps we could focus for the next 10 minutes on some of the prevention and health promotion issues and how well we're moving in that direction.

The Chair: The hon. minister.

Mr. Horne: Thank you, Mr. Chair, and thank you to the hon. member for raising issues that I know we mutually care about quite deeply. Specifically with respect to the last few questions Alberta Health and Wellness is currently working on a number of prevention initiatives.

Here are a few examples of some of them: the provincial healthy weight strategy for children and youth, which has been developed and is in the government of Alberta approval process; the aboriginal wellness strategy, which I think is well known by many members. A new version is under development with a purpose of creating a collaborative and more comprehensive strategy and action plan to improve the wellness of aboriginals living in Alberta. The Alberta nutrition guidelines for children and youth and the Alberta nutrition guidelines for adults assist Albertans in making healthy food choices. They promote appropriate portion sizes and set out ways to recognize foods that meet the criteria of the choose-most-often, choose-sometimes, and choose-least-often selections. The Healthy U food checker is another example.

With respect to immunization Alberta Health Services delivers immunization programs, as the hon. member likely knows. When influenza immunization was made universal by this government – that is, immunization being available to all Albertans six months of age and older – Alberta Health Services requested \$9 million for the 2010-11 fiscal year based on predicted expenditures to administer the influenza vaccine. AHS used approximately one-third of this funding during the 2010-11 flu season. The remainder was carried over to support immunization during 2011-12. AHS has indicated that they will be using the entire amount and will provide a full written report by June 30 of this year. We anticipate the need to provide additional support of approximately \$3 million for the 2012-13 influenza season.

Just on this point, Mr. Chair, one thing that we are concerned with and we continue to investigate ways to improve is the take-up, if you will, of the influenza vaccine among our population. As I've just mentioned, we have had less than predicted expenditures in the past on immunization in Alberta. We're working very vigorously with Alberta Health Services to investigate ways that might further incent Albertans to take up the vaccine themselves as well as to look at opportunities for their children and their

parents to take the vaccine. I think so far this flu season, based on the reports that have been provided to me by the chief medical officer of Alberta Health and Wellness, we have fared fairly well with respect to the incidence of influenza although we have seen situations within continuing care facilities where there have been outbreaks that have resulted in temporary disruptions to access to continuing care beds, and that is of concern for the future.

If we take a moment to look at some of the selected health indicators among our population, we can see some tremendous progress. We can see cancer neoplasms at a rate per 100,000 of 144.26. I believe that places us second in the country. We can see a continued decrease in diseases of the circulatory system, specifically the heart. We are the number one jurisdiction in the country with respect to morbidity and mortality in this area. I think that's largely a reflection, Mr. Chair, of the vast investment that we have made in acute-care capacity and surgical capacity as well as prevention initiatives as they relate to heart disease, and I think Albertans should take great pride in that.

With respect to life expectancy in Alberta in 1996 the overall life expectancy was 77.2 years. In 2010 that has risen to 81.6 years, and that compares to the Canadian average, a lower number, of 80.7 years. So we are slightly better than the national average, Mr. Chair, but most importantly we have seen over that period of time, from 1996 to 2010, an over four-year increase in life expectancy for our population. I know the hon. member would agree with me that some of these morbidity and mortality indicators and life expectancy indicators, while long-term projects to try to show improvement, are very important indicators of the effectiveness of our overall health care system. So we continue to focus on the importance of public health.

3:30

Just a final comment, and I'll make this because the hon. member and I participated in a panel discussion last night in Calgary. One of the questions that was raised was with respect to the percentage of the public health budget that is devoted to wellness initiatives. That has been a traditional measure of the focus of the health care system on, specifically, the area of wellness. I think what we're going to see in the future, Mr. Chair – and we had a good discussion about this last night – is that, in fact, wellness can be defined in many ways, including the capacity of a population to manage chronic disease over time.

We are seeing higher and higher incidences across Canada of heart disease, of cancer, of chronic obstructive pulmonary disorder, and, most importantly, of recent note type 2 diabetes in our population. Our 40 primary care networks and our future pilot projects for family care clinics are going to place an increasing focus on supporting Albertans for them to actively manage new chronic diseases that they face living with for extended periods of time. That spells out an investment in the involvement of other health professionals working as part of multidisciplinary teams: nurse practitioners, dietitians, and others. It is seen in some of the innovative programming in our primary care networks across the province.

It is seen in initiatives at the primary care level that focus on early intervention for children and youth, not only helping children and youth to develop healthy behaviours at a young age but also helping the increasing number of them that are faced with mental health challenges. The opportunity to intervene earlier, Mr. Chair, is the best hope that any population has to improve its health status over time. I know I'm speaking on behalf of the Premier and the government when I say that we share the belief that ultimately the purpose of a public health care system is not

only to take care of us when we are ill but to improve the health of the generation that follows us.

One of the statistics we talked about last night that certainly concerns me is the fact that the current generation of youth in Canada is the first generation in Canadian history that has a life expectancy that is lower than the generation that preceded it. It's a very, very startling statistic and quite a wake-up call, Mr. Chair, I think, for all governments and for all citizens across the country.

To sum up with respect to public health, the expenditure out of the budget formerly under the public health budget for wellness is about 3 per cent, but as hopefully I've been able to describe to my colleagues, wellness is embedded throughout not only my ministry in terms of the primary care system but also through many other ministries, including Justice and Attorney General, Human Services, Education, and others that have a direct role in influencing the social determinants of health.

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

Dr. Swann: Thank you, Mr. Chair. Well, manpower is the key issue for the current state in our health care system. It consumes roughly 70 per cent of budgets. It's clear that we need to have some sense of where it's going and how we're going to fund it and whether people are actually going to want to come here. If they do come, will they stay? I guess I'd like to hear a few comments from you about it, especially with the culture of bullying and intimidation and the low morale in our current staffing and, parenthetically, the need to survey the state of staff morale in this province and make some comparisons over the last two years.

I think it's important that we address some of the insecurity that many of us feel around many of these services, particularly the lack of continuity, the lack of stability in the workforce, the part-timers, and now, as it appears, less and less commitment to the values and principles of Alberta Health Services because of this culture of fear and intimidation. I think it's going to be more difficult to both recruit and retain people.

Perhaps the minister can say something about what that means in terms of south campus opening and staffing in this coming year. Perhaps he can say something more about staffing for EMS and what that's looking like in the next year to take at least some immediate pressure while we await a more comprehensive review of EMS services, some comments about mental health and the shortage of community care as well as in-patient capacity. Last week, for example, I heard Calgary had to transfer four acute psychotic patients down to Medicine Hat because they simply didn't have the space.

So there's a need to address a number of issues around staffing, around manpower and, in a related way, to think more proactively about foreign medical graduates, foreign nursing graduates, why we cannot be more able to be flexible with some of the foreign graduates and customize their integration into the western medical framework. Many of them are frustrated with not being able to work, and many of their culture would welcome the chance to have a doctor or a nurse from their own culture with language skills and culturally appropriate understanding.

Those are some of the issues that relate to manpower and manpower planning. I hope the minister is giving that due consideration and can reassure us about how we're going to deal with this in the next six to 12 months with the growing demands both in population and aging and the morale issues that we're struggling with.

The Chair: The hon. minister.

Mr. Horne: Okay. Thank you very much, Mr. Chair. I'm really pleased that the hon. member has raised the question of how we

better support and grow and retain our health workforce in Alberta. I know it is an issue for every province, but it becomes a particular issue in Alberta when we go through periods of high economic growth. I know in 2006 Alberta experienced significant challenges in recruiting licensed practical nurses and health care aides and a number of other health professionals from other disciplines as our economy grew very rapidly. We're certainly in line for rapid expansion of our economy again, and I think we'd do well to revisit this question each time that cycle ramps up.

First of all, just in terms of the workforce today – and I can provide more numbers to the hon. member if he wishes – I think it's helpful for all members to be reminded just about the volume of health professionals that are actually working in our province of 3.8 million people. We currently have, for example, 20,367 health care aides across the province, 32,400 registered nurses, 3,603 paramedics, a total of 8,045 physicians, 2,225 physiotherapists, of which my wife is one, 2,221 psychologists, almost 6,000 social workers, and the list goes on. So we have a very large health workforce, Mr. Chair.

I think the most important way – and I think the hon. member has described this – that we become competitive with respect to recruitment and retention of our health care professionals is to provide them with as ideal an environment as we possibly can for them to practise. The hon. member made a comment about the commitment to the values of Alberta Health Services and the ability for a health professional to be able to identify in a positive way with the values and principles of the organization that employs them. I think what binds all of them together, Mr. Chair, is simply the desire to help people, to deliver good care, and to go home each day feeling that they have made a difference.

I would be remiss if I didn't take the opportunity to actually acknowledge all of the health workforce in Alberta, both people who work in the professions and the people that we don't often talk about, the people who work in dietary, the people who work in housekeeping, the people who provide all of the support services that make it possible for people with a health professional designation or degree to be able to deliver care.

A number of specific issues were raised by the hon. member, and I'm pleased to try to address some of those here today. With respect to the south health campus I continue to receive positive reports that we are on track with respect to staffing for the south health campus. It is opening through a phased approach. It's a very large facility, Mr. Chair. It begins with the opening of family outpatient clinics. That's followed by the opening of the emergency department and then from there all of the in-patient beds in the facility. We are on track with respect to the professionals that are required, including physicians, to open on time and to open in accordance with the plan that has been laid out.

3:40

With respect to emergency medical services staff I think this is an issue in Alberta, Mr. Chair, as I discovered myself through a ride-along I took recently in Edmonton. I have asked the Health Quality Council to review EMS operations across the province. I've asked them to look at a number of issues. Resources and staffing is a significant one, particularly here in Edmonton as volumes increase. I've also asked them to look at integrated fire and EMS services across the province and what impediments the new model, if any, posed for the continued very successful operation of integrated fire and EMS services, which have actually been part of the very proud tradition of Alberta in delivering first responder services to our communities. We'll continue to look at ways to bolster the EMS workforce.

One particular thing I learned on my ride-along that was quite interesting was that there are a large number of emergency medical technicians that are working in our system that currently don't have access to a bridging program that allows them to become a paramedic. I think this is something that we need to pay attention to. I'm going to be talking further with my colleague the hon. Minister of Advanced Education and Technology about this. In many cases we do provide bridging programs for other health professionals. For example, we provide extensive assistance for health care aides who want to take additional education and training in order to become licensed practical nurses in our system.

We need to continue to make this province a destination of choice for health care professionals. I think that means certainly focusing on competitive wages but also focusing on the opportunities that exist to make every health care position a position on a career ladder, a position that capitalizes on that individual's desire to provide good care, to make a career investment of not a year or two but, in most cases, a lifetime commitment to deliver good-quality care to our fellow citizens.

With respect to mental health and the availability of mental health services I think the announcement earlier this week of 80 additional beds at Alberta Hospital Edmonton is going to be important in a number of ways. It's going to add resources to the facility, obviously, but these particular four units are also going to play a key role in supporting transition of patients from the hospital out to the community.

We have heard many examples in the House here over the years, Mr. Chair, of patients with mental illness or with addictions issues being returned to the community without the optimal supports in place to enable that person to live independently and to become resilient in doing so. One of the initiatives we announced earlier this week in connection with the budget was the investment of dollars to support complex patients with mental health issues who live in the community. If we look at, for example, the inner city here in Edmonton, we know that there are somewhere between 300 and 400 people who have been traditionally caught in a cycle between the emergency department in a hospital, Alberta Hospital Edmonton, interaction with the justice system, shelters, and other community organizations.

The dollars that we announced as part of this budget, Mr. Chair, are going to go to support people in place. Many of these individuals are taking advantage of the many affordable housing spaces that have opened up in Alberta as we continue to make progress in our 10-year plan to end homelessness. The challenge in this particular instance is to make that affordable housing spot a home, a sustainable home for an individual who is suffering from a complex psychiatric illness. That means using these dollars to provide more assertive community treatment, to provide peer counselling and support, to provide other measures which on a wraparound basis provide that individual with the assistance they need to make that temporary housing spot an actual home for them for the long term.

Approximately \$450 million is spent annually from this budget, Mr. Chair, on mental health and addictions. The \$25 million I've just talked about supports some of the initiatives I've mentioned. In addition, my ministry supports the safe communities initiative under the Minister of Justice and the Attorney General, providing \$42 million to focus on prevention and community-based services throughout Alberta in many communities. Many of us as members know these projects because they have been funded in our local community through the SafeCom initiative.

To sum up, Mr. Chair, on this topic, then, with respect to workforce, there is further work to do. I would agree with the hon.

member that the culture that we offer to people to work in is paramount. That is why acting on the recommendations of the Health Quality Council is so important. It's important for doctors, but it's also important for all other health professionals. I'm very confident that the steps that are laid out here in addition to the very good work that's being done by our professional colleges and government and Alberta Health Services will help us to continue to build a culture that is stable, that is predictable, that is supportive, both for the care that is delivered and for the role of health care professionals, the legitimate role and the very necessary role they have in advocating for their patient needs.

I'll just make one final comment, Mr. Chair. The hon. member raised the issue of hospital capacity, in-patient capacity. As part of the response to the Health Quality Council of Alberta report I have asked Alberta Health Services to look specifically at how we can better manage our acute-care bed inventory across the province. There is certainly no question – and we talked about this last night – that the new beds coming online in the south health campus, those new acute-care beds, are very much needed and they will do a great deal along with the 30 treatment rooms in the new emergency department to support extended capacity within the hospital.

The Chair: This is the last 20 minutes. So carry on, hon. Member for Calgary-Mountain View.

Dr. Swann: Thank you, Mr. Chair, and thanks to the minister. Just before we leave the topic of beds and mental health, I hope the minister is aware that in terms of mental health if the temporary psych beds at the Rockyview are closed with the opening of the psych beds in the south Calgary campus, there will be a net loss of six mental health beds. So we've got some serious problems building towards mental health in-patient services in Calgary, and I hope we're addressing that. We have a larger population in Calgary and fewer psych beds, that I think are going to be creating more and more of a problem there.

I wanted to get on the record some of the issues around primary care network funding. I think I've already raised issues with the minister in question period about the timing of this injection for primary care networks. After nine years of no funding, what was the rationale behind giving the funding just now? What is the priority for primary care networks? How do they differ from family care centres? What is the need to try another experiment in the health system that looks so much like primary care networks but somehow needs to be seen to be unique and different? Perhaps you could comment on that, and then I'll come back with some others.

The Chair: The hon. minister.

Mr. Horne: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I'm delighted that the hon. member has raised this topic because I want to take the opportunity to do a number of things here. First of all, I want to once again acknowledge the excellent work that has been done by Alberta's 40 primary care networks. We have greatly appreciated the opportunity to support this initiative.

It has its roots, as a matter of fact, in the physician agreement, the trilateral master agreement between Alberta Health Services, Alberta Health and Wellness, and the former health regions, that was developed in 2003. That initiative, Mr. Chair, resulted in the recognition that team-based care was the way of the future in terms of leveraging the expertise of our health professionals further, particularly the expertise of our physicians in terms of better supporting our physicians to deliver the more complex care that is required in the primary care environment today as more

patients present with multiple chronic diseases, as more patients come in who are older and who have other challenges, including mental health. I think we should all take great pride in the success of our primary care networks.

The program itself is part of the former trilateral master agreement. The government of Alberta, as we work toward negotiating a new long-term agreement, has continued funding for our primary care networks. As part of the announcement that the hon. member referred to, we announced a continuance of funding for all programs and benefits under the former agreement until March 31, 2013. The reason, Mr. Chair, for doing this was actually stated by the hon. member. The primary care networks themselves have not received a per capita increase since 2003. The increase that was announced moves the per capita amount from \$50 to \$62, for a total of \$33 million over the one-year period.

3:50

The hon. member has expressed some reservations about the timing of the funding increase. What I'd say to the hon. member is that, you know, when I was appointed to this position by the Premier, I said that stability and predictability in the health system was our number one priority. I have tried my best to make a point of telling any audience I speak to or any Albertan I speak to that this government has no intention of restructuring or reorganizing or otherwise disrupting the structure of our health care system. I think that's very, very important.

So in the absence of a long-term agreement, as we continue to work toward that over the next few months – and I would reiterate that our discussions have actually been very productive, and primary care is a major focus of these discussions – it is necessary, if we're going to have stability, to provide physicians with additional financial resources to support their work. The \$33 million that's supporting primary care networks over the next year will support physicians in terms of their ability to recruit other health professionals from other disciplines to work with them. We named some of them earlier – nurse practitioners and pharmacists and mental health workers and others, psychologists – which are now going to receive greater financial support.

It will assist the PCNs to further enhance some of the innovative programming they've put in place, to help develop support groups for patients suffering from chronic diseases, to help support specialized training programs for patients who are newly diagnosed with a chronic disease, and I think very, very importantly, Mr. Chair, to enhance their ability to intervene with patients who are on the threshold – patients who are on the verge of developing type 2 diabetes, patients who are experiencing borderline hypertension – assisting those individuals to pull themselves back with supportive staff and evidence-based techniques made available to them, to not in fact develop those chronic diseases and potentially suffer the complications of those chronic diseases that we see far too often show up in our emergency departments and in our acute-care beds, perhaps unnecessarily in some cases.

The hon. member also talked about family care clinics, and I'm delighted to spend a few minutes talking about these. As the hon. member knows, these were an initiative of Premier Redford. It is a concept that is very much in development. Contrary to popular opinion in some quarters in the House here, we actually have been working directly with physicians in the three communities where we will open pilot projects by the end of March, and we are hoping that those family care clinics will be sustainable. We have been working very closely with physicians at the community level. We have also involved the Alberta Medical Association, in direct consultation through my deputy minister and as part of an

advisory committee to me, as an organization at the table, talking about how we are going to implement and evaluate these three pilot projects.

I guess, Mr. Chair, we may have a difference of opinion in terms of how good quality primary health care evolves in a province. I'm a minister who believes that we should be open to all models of care that are offered and that the most important standard of measure in any model should be: is it responsive to the unique needs of the community or the communities that it serves? I think that is very much true of the primary care networks in place today, I think it likely will be true of the family care clinics, and I think it is true of many of the other models that exist out there in Alberta to deliver high quality primary health care.

Our goal as a government – and I can't repeat this often enough – is to give every Albertan a primary health care home within the health care system. Many of the concerns we hear about or I guess the anecdote that we hear most often as members of this Assembly from our constituents is: "Once you get into the system, the care is great. It's excellent. I was never treated better. But my difficulty was getting into the system." We believe very much, as a result of the work on the Minister's Advisory Committee on Health and the principles laid out in the Alberta Health Act and all of the reports and investigations that have been done over the last several years, that ultimately the solution is to give our citizens an opportunity to be attached, to have a home within the health care system, a home that is in or near their home community.

Those needs can be served in a variety of ways, Mr. Chair. We are very much a government that is open to innovation. We are open to solutions that are customized to meet the needs of the communities they serve. We will continue to support our primary care networks and assist them to continue to evolve, to grow in number. We will look at family care clinics through the pilot projects that I've mentioned.

We will look at any other model that our health care professionals tell us they believe could have a meaningful impact on things such as the incidence of chronic disease, incidence of and support for people suffering from mental illness and addictions, models that can support better prevention and early intervention, particularly for children and youth, and models that can also support connections to community organizations that directly influence the social determinants of health. Of course, I'm talking about community agencies that deliver housing and income support and education and justice support programs and many of the other things that position us as citizens to enjoy the best possible health that we can.

We will continue to support our in-patient care through both the expansion that we've talked about with respect to the south campus and the new Edmonton clinic resources that will come online. But as much as possible, Mr. Chair, we want to strive to be doing things in the community that do not need to be done in a hospital. Again, that goes back to the basic principle of giving people a home in their health care system and appropriately equipping our professionals from all disciplines to support people in achieving the best possible health status they can achieve.

Thank you.

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

Dr. Swann: Thank you, Mr. Chair. Well, it's still not clear to me what the difference is that the minister is talking about because the primary care networks are charged with much the same role as the family care clinics and are potentially going to be seen as undermining the roles and responsibilities of primary care networks. I think it needs to be carefully thought through and built

into the local regions, how they're going to relate to the primary care networks and the kinds of interrelationship of IT and communications and planning together.

It may well be possible for them to complement each other and to take on some of the preventive and community health kinds of initiatives that are missing from a particular PCN. But from the outside it certainly looks like an attempt to try something that looks new but isn't really new, that needs a new face, a new image, and something that the government can highlight at the expense of potentially eroding further the confidence of those working in the primary care networks who have looked at almost a decade of no increases and suddenly the new kid on the block looks a lot like the old kid. I would caution the minister on some of the impact of that decision, but I'll leave it there.

The minister didn't relate to the foreign medical graduates and foreign nursing graduates, but one of the barriers for foreign medical graduates is residency positions. I think if we're going to get culturally appropriate and well-trained physicians, we need to establish some new residency positions, funded positions, and support for foreign medical grads. I won't ask any more questions about that. That's just a suggestion and a reality that I'm hearing about.

Medical research in the province has been greatly destabilized as a result of the disruption of the heritage medical trust. Many world-renowned researchers have left or are planning to leave. Some who have considered coming here are no longer planning to come here because of the uncertainty of funding and uncertainty of commitment through Alberta Innovates: Health Solutions, which is the new iteration of the heritage trust fund.

The instability and the lack of professional oversight, I guess, has also been a concern. Many of us have felt that the expertise in the heritage medical trust fund was next to none and now the question of politicization or lay involvement in the research agenda for medical research is not what it should be. We need to ensure that the very highest of standards and the very highest of expertise go into establishing what the priorities are in medical research and how we can gain more stability there to assure a more long-term commitment to research.

For the record, as I may be cut off soon, I also wanted to raise questions about how we're doing with our tobacco reduction program. It's at the end of its 10 years. I was involved, actually, in the inauguration of the strategy some 10 years ago, and I'm glad to see it's had some impact. I'm a bit disappointed to see the teen smoking rates go from 11 per cent back up to 14 per cent in the last couple of years, so we do need to redouble our efforts around prevention and tobacco reduction. I know the Premier has committed some resources, and I hope that as this current strategy expires, we'll see more commitments there to the tobacco reduction strategy.

4:00

In terms of seniors' care I know you've heard this ad nauseam, but the opposition is concerned that we have quality and affordable long-term care and that there's evidence that some people are being left out as a result of the costs of long-term care and that the private, for-profit long-term care may not be the best approach for those with medical needs. For those with medical needs I think we as a government have taken a commitment to provide for medically necessary services for all citizens, including seniors, and I want to be sure that we honour that commitment. I noticed that the seniors' drug benefits program was cut by \$7 million. Maybe the minister could explain something around that reduction in the seniors' drug benefit plan when the numbers of

seniors and, presumably, the numbers of prescriptions must be going up.

That covers the significant questions that I had, Mr. Chairman. I open the floor to the minister again.

The Chair: The hon. minister.

Mr. Horne: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I'll use the remaining few minutes here to try to answer as many of the questions raised by the hon. member as I can.

First, with respect to his question around the reduction in the budget for the seniors' drug plan, that reduction is actually as a result of the reduction in generic drug prices that Albertans are now paying. That has resulted in savings not only in this program but in a number of other drug benefit programs that are in fact administered by other ministries. I think that's a very important development, not only from the perspective of the taxpayer but from the opportunity that it affords us to fund a new pharmacy services framework, which will be announced very soon, that compensates our pharmacists as full health professionals delivering a broad range of health care services in partnership with physicians and other health professionals to Albertans. I'm actually quite pleased to see that that reduction in generic drug prices that are paid by government programs is resulting in some of these new opportunities.

The hon. member also talked about academic medicine and research in Alberta. I guess a recent development that I am particularly pleased with is the establishment of the framework for the provincial academic alternate relationship plan. As the hon. member would know, Alberta traditionally has been highly competitive because of our alternate relationship plans. These are compensation packages, Mr. Chair, that combine research duties, teaching duties, and clinical duties for physicians. Our success with these – and it is due in large part to our partnership with the Alberta Medical Association – has resulted traditionally in us being one of the most competitive jurisdictions in Canada and in North America to recruit the top talent in both research and medicine.

As the hon. member mentioned, the reorganization of research services a number of years ago brought with it a new structure to the awarding of research grants. When I was appointed as minister, one of the things I was very mindful of was that the transition funding from our former Heritage Foundation for Medical Research, of which we were all very proud, was set to expire at the end of March this year. Working collaboratively with my colleague the Minister of Advanced Education and Technology, our deans of medicine, the deputy ministers from both ministries, the provosts from our two largest universities, and other stakeholders through a group called the Committee on Academic Medicine, we were successful in completing and jointly announcing with my colleague the minister of advanced education a new provincial academic alternate relationship plan framework for our academic physicians. This includes the contributions of the two medical schools, the College of Physicians & Surgeons, Alberta Health Services, and many other stakeholders.

I think what's important to recognize here, Mr. Chair, is that we were able to do this in such a way that the new provincial framework takes into account all of the major disciplines represented in the medical profession, including family physicians, which was something that was extremely important. A total of 700 MDs are part of this provincial academic alternate relationship plan now, and we expect that to increase to up to 1,300 in the coming years.

So we have re-established ourselves with an appropriate provincial framework that retains our competitive position, and I think, based on the feedback that I'm getting from some of the stakeholders I mentioned, it will allow us to grow in the future and bring in other disciplines to be part of this very important framework.

I guess we're nearing the end of the time here, but I just don't want to leave off without talking about tobacco reduction. We are in the process of updating the Alberta tobacco reduction strategy. We have had great success not only as a result of that strategy but as a result of some legislation that was brought in by a former Minister of Health and Wellness a few years ago that dealt with the issue of smoking in public places, the sale of tobacco in pharmacies, and many other issues that contributed to our success.

But as the hon. member mentions, there is certainly more to be done, and as we renew the strategy, I want to make it very clear that we will continue to look at things such as exposure of children to second-hand smoke in vehicles, the sale of flavoured tobacco products, and other issues that are before us.

Thank you.

The Chair: Well, the first hour has been reached.

Now we're going to the Wildrose Party. You have 20 minutes with the minister or 10 minutes each. Do you want to combine?

Mrs. Forsyth: I think I'll try the 10 minutes, 10 and 10, and then if I may ask the minister to provide things back in writing on things that he doesn't get to, because 10 minutes can be quite lengthy.

The first thing I would like to ask the minister. Yesterday at the forum we attended we had a disagreement in regard to the consultation on the five-year mental health strategy. I've been told by now five different psychologists, psychiatrists, and mental health workers that they were not consulted, including another doc in the mental health field that has just e-mailed me today and said that he is not aware of any of his colleagues being consulted. What they've asked me to do – if you would please table whom you consulted with on the mental health strategy, what psychiatrists, what psychologists you consulted with, then I can let them know. I know that they are listening in *Hansard* right now, and I know that they were listening last night because when we were actually coming home, they were already calling me to say that they needed an answer.

You alluded to the member with regard to the staffing for the south campus hospital. We would like to know where that staffing is coming from. What we're hearing – and this has been brought up in the Legislature before – is that staff are coming from other hospitals, whether it's the Peter Lougheed Centre, the Rockyview general hospital, et cetera, vacancies appearing there and not being able to be filled.

Minister, on February 17, 2010, the previous minister promised a cost-benefit analysis on hip and knee surgeries. We're still waiting for that. We wonder if you wouldn't mind tabling that in the Legislature and providing us the information on that cost-benefit analysis.

The other thing we want to know is about the family care clinics and financially how they're going to be funded. We talked about that briefly last night, and I think, if I recall, that during the health forum debate you talked about that they're going to be using existing health facilities. We want to know the costs in regard to the renovations and the infrastructure on the health facilities and also the wages that you're going to be having to pay along with the benefits for your nurse practitioners. We want to know if you're going to have a physician in there, how you are going to be

paying them. Is it going to be through an ARP? Is it going to be fee for service, that kind of thing?

4:10

You were talking about seniors' drug benefits and the generic drug prices and the savings that have occurred. I can tell you, from what I'm hearing from some of the seniors that I'm dealing with at this particular time, the costs that they're incurring if they cannot take a generic drug. One of those generic drugs that some of the seniors are calling us about is blood pressure pills. While they appreciate the fact that it's better to take a generic drug – and I don't think anybody is arguing that fact – if a particular individual can't take that particular generic drug and they want to go back to the brand-name drug, they're being told that it's not covered under Alberta health care and that they would have to pay for it themselves. So I really would like some clarification.

I am dealing with a senior, actually, in Edmonton who's had three different prescriptions for three different generic drugs in regard to her blood pressure medication. It has caused her endless problems, even getting gout. So if you could please provide that.

We would like to know how many acute-care beds there were in Alberta as of December 31, 2011.

Again, back to the mental health beds. This is from the mental health providers and psychiatrists: how many mental health beds are in Alberta as of today?

That takes me to – and we discussed this yesterday and spoke again to a reporter – the long-term care beds. How many long-term care beds do we have as of today? How many assisted care beds do we have as of today? How many lodge beds do we have today? We've now gotten on the long-term care beds probably five different numbers in five different places, whether it's in *Hansard*, whether it's in the paper, or whether it's the numbers that you were given by your department last night.

I want to briefly talk about priority 1.1, and that's about clarifying the roles, relationships, and responsibilities of the ministry and Alberta health. Both you and I know that, actually, this was brought up in the Health Quality Council investigations, our doctors talking about intimidation. The report covered intimidation, the culture within Alberta Health Services, privileges, positions, contracts threatened. It just goes on and on.

Now, we had a report in 2007 that dealt with that. We had another one. The previous minister signed the Alberta Health Services mandate and roles document on December 2, 2010. The roles were very clearly defined then. I'd like to know why we are sending out a task force and yet another investigation when we've clearly had a minister that signed the mandate and roles document on December 2, 2010.

I've asked you about the long-term care beds. I'd like to talk to you briefly about patients waiting too long for surgeries. The target for hip replacements was 33 weeks last year, when it was actually 41. This year the target is 27 weeks. Last year it took 49 weeks to get a knee replacement, and that's from the December 2011 Alberta Health Services update. The target was 42, and now the target is 35. The government isn't meeting their target plans on what you're going to do. It goes back to the cancer patients. Radiation is four weeks this year. Last year it was actually six weeks to see a radiologist/oncologist from the time of referral. What are you doing about that?

Strategy 3, strengthening primary care. We know that you just increased the primary care network per capita fee. How do family care clinics improve the primary care networks? If you'd please answer that question.

Minister, I know we're throwing a lot of questions at you, and we appreciate that your staff is trying to get you all these answers.

Honestly, if you could just kind of provide us some of it in writing, we'd be more than pleased to see that. If we can have it in the next, you know, week to 10 days, I'd appreciate that.

Let's just talk for about a minute in regard to the budget and 1.1, the minister's office, the increase from \$592,000 to \$639,000, the deputy minister's office from \$711,000 to \$751,000, communications from \$2.240 million to \$2.740 million. Some of that, I know, is on the contract that has to do with staffing, but I can't believe that a lot of that has to do with all of the agreement.

A hundred million more for primary care, addictions, and mental health: the line item is new this year, yet primary care networks have been around since 2005. How is the funding broken down by objective? If you could provide me with that information, please.

I want to talk briefly about number 2, physician compensation and development. We understand that you're in negotiations with the AMA and have been in negotiations for the last year. You've said on the floor that you're in constant contact with Dr. Slocombe in regard to the negotiations of the AMA. I guess my question is that you show no increase whatsoever. What happens if, say, three weeks from now you get an agreement with the AMA in regard to some of the things? On the \$93 million that you talked about giving to cover the increase in primary care – and some of that, I understand, was from last year's budget if I'm correct – I'd like to know where in the budget you receive that. We couldn't find this \$93 million anywhere in the budget. Is it a cost saving that you somehow got from last year's budget?

If you could talk about some of the increases under your ministry support. We understand the Health Facilities Review Committee and an increase in that. Is that for them to go look at more health facilities? We've heard some horrible stories in regard to some of things that are happening.

The Chair: Hon. member, your 10 minutes are completed.

The hon. minister.

Mr. Horne: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair, and thank you to the hon. member for the questions. We do aim to please here, so we will try to answer as many of these as we can, and we'll be pleased to follow up in writing with the ones that we can't answer.

Some of the numerical questions. There are currently 8,037 acute-care beds in Alberta; that is as of September 2011. Specifically with respect to mental health beds, we are looking at in psychiatric stand-alone facilities 913 across the province, 617 acute-care psychiatric beds – these are beds in community general hospitals – and with respect to addiction treatment beds 817 across the province. We will follow up with a specific breakdown by zone for each of these and provide that information to the hon. member.

There were a number of questions that were raised here with respect to the cost-benefit analysis. We will be pleased to provide that in writing.

I wanted to take a moment to address the hon. member's question regarding the seniors' drug benefit plan and what happens in the event that an individual is actually prescribed a brand name drug and finds himself or herself in a position where they're only offered the generic equivalent. I've encountered this myself in my own constituency office. There is an exception process for this on a per patient basis. My department will get back to you directly to explain how that works. There is a process through Blue Cross. There are instances where physicians want their patients to receive a specific brand name drug for specific reasons as opposed to a generic, and our Blue Cross plan for seniors does accommodate that.

The hon. member talked about a number of other issues here. With respect to physician services and where the budget for that comes from, I think I mentioned earlier that the per capita rate for primary care networks hasn't been raised since 2003. The \$12 per capita increase is equivalent to \$33 million, the 2 per cent increase that is going to fee-for-service and alternate relationship plans is equivalent to \$60 million, Mr. Chair, so it's a total of \$93 million in additional financial support that is being provided to physicians as a bridge for this year while the negotiations on the long-term agreement continue.

4:20

With respect to the questions around the next long-term agreement the answer is quite simple, Mr. Chair. We don't know what the terms of that long-term agreement are going to be until the time – and I hope it is very soon in the future – we have a tentative agreement in place, where we're aware of all of the program elements as well as the fee-for-service elements and other elements that make up a master physician compensation agreement. It is not possible for us to project what the dollar amounts associated with that will be, so we will have to wait and see what the terms of the agreement are. Then I will obviously have to look within my budget to see what resources are available to me or what additional resources I may need to seek in order to be able to fill the terms of the agreement.

With respect to the \$93 million that I mentioned earlier, that money will be found within the budget that is currently before the House. We have a number of demand-driven services that are within our health care budget. In many years those are underspent. We have factored in in physician compensation allowances for volume increases. There are a number of places, Mr. Chair, in the \$16 billion budget for health care where we believe we can accommodate successfully the \$93 million in that additional financial support.

The hon. member also asked for some clarification around the funding for family care clinics, and I wanted to spend a couple of minutes on that because I think it's important. The three pilot projects that are going to be opening by April 1 will all be funded by public funds through Alberta Health Services' existing budget, so within their current envelope. The approximate cost of each pilot is \$5 million. That money, as I said, is within their current envelope.

The point, I guess, I would like to make, Mr. Chair, is that in the future we certainly hope there will be others who will come forward with other ideas about how family care clinics or other primary care delivery models could be formed. In the case of FCCs that could include community-owned family care clinics. It could also include physician-owned family care clinics that are perhaps directly affiliated with primary care networks.

As I said before, Mr. Chair, we are a ministry that believes strongly that form should follow function. The prime criteria for us is not to come up with a single cookie-cutter model and implement that across the province. We are here to enable models of care that can respond to the needs of specific communities, and to the extent that our health professionals, including our physicians, are willing to work with us on that, we're happy to do whatever we can through financial resources and through other means to support better primary health care for all Albertans, trying to fulfill that vision of a home within the health system for our citizens.

The hon. member also referenced the roles and relationships recommendation in the Health Quality Council of Alberta report. I would certainly agree with the hon. member that in the many reports that have been written about our health care system over

the years, this question has arisen. It has not only arisen since the creation of Alberta Health Services. My interpretation of what the Health Quality Council is telling us is that we still lack sufficient clarity. I think it's reasonable for people to think that when we create a larger organization, in fact a single health region for the entire province, the size of the organization on its own requires some special attention to clarify around roles and responsibilities and relationships.

I know that in my own ministry my executive team and all of the 850 staff that work in this department are very committed to increasing the policy capacity within the department so that they can support not only short-term decisions that need to be made about the health system but, in fact, are taking a long-term view and working with other ministries such as Human Services to try to shape the health system and, in fact, the social services system of the future. So I support the recommendation and the need to provide further clarity around those roles and relationships.

I think the other thing that I certainly don't mind mentioning – and it was a key finding of the report – is that for health professionals that work in the system, particularly in the early days of Alberta Health Services, there was a significant lack of clarity about whom they were to go to with a question about how a decision was to be made or a question or concern with respect to a patient or a number of other matters. I think that confusion resulted in some of the problems that we saw that were identified by the Health Quality Council report.

As much as this may seem to some as an issue that is studied often, I think it is a critical issue to not only address the concerns that were raised in the Health Quality Council report but to put us on a solid course for the future, where people have a very clear idea about how things work, about whom they go to when they have a question or concern, about how they advance an idea or an innovation about health care that they may think is critically important for the future. I support that, Mr. Chair, because I believe it supports cultural change and cultural improvement within our health care system, and we will vigorously pursue that recommendation to those ends.

There were a number of other issues that were raised by the hon. member. Again, as I mentioned in answer to a previous question, with respect to staffing for the south health campus this has been something I've been keeping a close eye on. I have been assured repeatedly by Alberta Health Services that the recruitment process is moving along well, that it is not simply an attraction of staff from other sites within Calgary but that, in fact, this new facility – and if members haven't had a chance to tour it, I strongly recommend it – is going to be a destination of choice for many of our new graduates both from within Alberta and from outside the province. It is an amazing place for people to work not only because of the excellent clinical facilities but also because of the focus on wellness and wellness-related programs.

For members that don't know, there is a complete YMCA facility that is going to be located within the new south health campus. There are very strong linkages between the family outpatient clinics and the local primary care network that will support a smooth transition from community-based primary care to specialist care within those outpatient clinics to other clinical services within the hospital. As with most innovation in health care, Mr. Chair, the focus here is on integration, and that means appropriate staffing and staff working together.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister. The 20 minutes for the Wildrose Party has been reached.

Now the chair shall recognize the hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands-Norwood. Do you want 20 minutes together or 10 minutes?

Mr. Mason: I think I'll take 10 minutes. If the minister is unable to answer in his 10, he can provide it in writing, and that would be great.

The Chair: So 10 minutes.

Mr. Mason: Thanks very much, Mr. Chairman. Mr. Minister and your staff, my first question is about the East Edmonton health centre, which was intended to provide urgent care. Today, almost two years after it officially opened, many of the centre's facilities sit empty, including the urgent care clinic. There's clearly a need for urgent care in northeast Edmonton to alleviate the strain on the Royal Alex emergency department. My question is: given the wait times and that the Royal Alex has continually missed the AHS targets by a wide margin, when will the East Edmonton health centre's urgent care facility open to provide people on the north side of Edmonton with emergency care times and the urgent care that they require?

Does the health minister know what the cost is of leaving the urgent care facilities in the East Edmonton health centre dormant year after year? Has he considered the cost of opening the urgent care clinic against the much greater costs to the health system of the continuing overload of the Royal Alex ER?

The next section is on physician compensation. Physician compensation is budgeted at \$3.2 billion, an increase of \$110 million from last year's budget. On February 27 the minister imposed a one-year compensation arrangement which will increase per capita funding for the primary care networks from \$50 to \$62 and a 2 per cent increase in fee-for-service and alternate relationship plans. The increase for PCNs will cost \$33 million, and the increase in fee-for-service and alternate relationships will cost \$60 million.

The AMA said that these increases were insufficient. From the AMA's The President's Letter on February 28: "The 2% increase in fee-for-service funding and alternate relationship plans will not cover the increases in office overhead costs for the two years of the imposition." And further: "The increase in funding for PCNs to \$62 per patient will help, but the \$12 is no more than an inflationary adjustment to the original \$50 set nearly nine years ago." The question is: does the budget cover the \$93 million it costs for the compensation arrangement that the minister announced last month?

4:30

The president of the AMA, Dr. Linda Slocombe, has said that the AMA's main priority is to have physicians at the table where the key decisions about health care are being made. The question is whether the AMA did have any say in the compensation arrangement that's been imposed on them. I'm not talking about previous negotiations here, Mr. Minister, but the decision to impose an agreement.

The Canada Health Act requires that health professionals receive reasonable compensation for the health services that they provide. The act also states that disputes over compensation will be settled by conciliation or binding arbitration. The AMA has signalled its willingness to submit the dispute to binding arbitration. So the question is: why has the government rejected binding arbitration to settle the dispute? Is the government concerned that the failure to arrive at an agreement with the doctors could put it in violation of the Canada Health Act?

With respect to emergency room wait times and long-term care under the five-year funding commitment for Alberta Health Services its base operating grant will increase by 6 per cent, from \$9.6 billion to \$10.2 billion. The Health Quality Council of Alberta's report found that the delay in ED patients being moved to an acute-care bed after a decision has been made to admit them is the greatest constraint and, therefore, the issue that needs to be addressed first. Acute-care services are increasing \$220 million, or 6 per cent.

Emergency room wait time numbers for last week remained well below AHS targets. The AHS target is that 75 per cent of patients are discharged within four hours by March 2012. In the Edmonton area only the Stollery children's hospital met the target. AHS also has a target of 60 per cent of patients being admitted within eight hours by March 2012. No hospital in the Edmonton area came close to the target.

Mr. Chairman, one of the Health Quality Council report recommendations for reducing waiting times in emergency departments is for Health and Wellness and AHS to review the need for long-term care and supportive living based on detailed forecasting methods. The most recent AHS performance report indicates 675 people waiting in acute or subacute beds for a placement in continuing care while another 1,140 are waiting in the community. The question. In the past few years we've seen the government back away from its previous commitment to expand long-term care. This shortage of long-term care is key to reducing ER wait times. What steps is the ministry taking to provide spaces for those individuals who have been assessed as requiring long-term care and are waiting in acute care or in the community? What is in this budget that will address the long waiting list for long-term care?

In terms of continuing care two years ago residents of the Edmonton General continuing care centre were told that they'd be moved to a new long-term care facility, Villa Caritas. That facility was then changed to a geriatric mental health facility. As a result, the Edmonton General residents have been left in a residence that is in serious disrepair, with leaky roofs, an elevator that often breaks down, and doors that won't open for wheelchairs. My question is: is there anything in the budget to give residents at the Edmonton General reason to hope that the problems in their facility will either be fixed quickly or that they'll be able to move to another long-term care centre?

The Health Quality Council report's recommendations concerning cancer surgery wait-lists are that AHS standardize surgical wait-lists and make surgical oncology wait-lists a priority, that it invite stakeholders to participate in the lung cancer surgery project so that stakeholder needs are considered, and that it develop a comprehensive physician staffing plan to ensure long-term viability of its lung cancer surgery project.

The most recent AHS performance report shows that the wait time for referral for radiation therapy to first consultation with a radiation oncologist is six weeks. The target is four weeks. The reported wait time from ready to treat to first radiation therapy is 3.6, which exceeds the target of four. Question. The performance report indicates the problem area is in wait times for a consultation with a radiation oncologist. What in this budget will help assist with an attempt to reduce those particular wait times?

According to the most recent AHS performance report hip replacement wait times were 39.7 weeks. The target is 27. Knee replacement is at 49.9, and the target is 35 weeks. Cataract surgery wait times are 36, but the target is 30 weeks. The difference in wait times between the zones is often significant. For example, the year-to-date wait time in Calgary is 44.1 weeks while in Edmonton it's only 35.9. The question is: does the greater reliance on private surgical facilities in Calgary for cataract surgeries have

anything to do with a significantly longer wait time in Calgary as compared to Edmonton?

In terms of drug benefits for seniors: \$552 million in Budget 2012, which is a decrease of 7.2 per cent, or \$43 million, over the previous year. The government has made no changes to the seniors' drug benefit, notwithstanding that they've made a couple of false starts with respect to that, and the government is estimating a reduction of \$43 million on seniors' drugs this year. The question is: given the increasing size of the seniors population and the increasing costs of prescription drugs can the minister give an indication of why the government's costs for seniors' drugs are decreasing by \$43 million?

The Health Resource Centre in Calgary was a private surgical facility providing knee replacements. It closed in November 2011 after a legal dispute with Alberta Health Services, which ended in an out-of-court settlement. Earlier in 2012 AHS agreed to provide funds to the HRC to help it stave off bankruptcy. The media reported that costs to AHS could have been up to \$4 million.

Network, the company that owned the HRC, claimed that AHS was the cause of its financial problems because it entered into a long-term lease agreement with the understanding that AHS would contract them with 3,500 procedures, which is triple the number they were performing in 2010. AHS disputed this and said that they honoured all contractual obligations. My question is: what were the costs to AHS in terms of legal fees and receivership fees in the Health Resource Centre case? How many hip and knee replacement procedures could have been performed with that money?

Mr. Chairman, that concludes my questions.

The Chair: The hon. minister.

Mr. Horne: Thank you, Mr. Chair, and thank you to the hon. member for the questions. There are quite a number of topics raised there, and I'll attempt to address as many as I can here in the time that we have.

First of all, the hon. member inquired about the status of the urgent-care centre in his constituency at the new East Edmonton health centre. I'm pleased to tell the hon. member that I have been following up on this specifically over the last few months since I have been the Minister of Health and Wellness. The government is committed to opening that urgent-care centre. I hope to have some additional news about this very soon for the hon. member. As I think many people know, this is a tremendously needed health centre that serves a part of the city that has a very high number of unattached patients. What I mean by that, Mr. Chair, is that there is a large number of people in that community who are relying primarily on emergency departments, specifically at the Royal Alexandra hospital, in order to access health care, frequently on an episodic basis when a specific or an urgent need arises, without the opportunity for follow-up as we would like at the primary care level.

Part of the importance of that follow-up is the availability of nonemergency care, so urgent care, as the hon. member describes. I think that once the urgent-care centre is open and fully operational, we will begin to see a much better opportunity for residents of that community to be more connected on a more frequent basis to a health care provider in or near their home community. I think that is very good news and something, certainly, that we want for all Albertans.

The hon. member also questioned the reduction in projected costs for generic drugs as part of the Alberta Blue Cross for seniors plan. The projected reduction is \$7 million. It's not \$43 million; it's \$7 million. The reason for it, hon. member, is that it is a result of the government's previous decision to pay less for generic drugs for government-sponsored programs.

We have been reinvesting these savings in a number of ways. One that was talked about earlier in the discussion this afternoon is in support for pharmacists, to offer them a full-scope pharmacy services framework that, in fact, recognizes their status as full partners of the health care team, offering a range of professional services to their clients and not simply the traditional notion of pharmacists as simply dispensers of medication. I am looking forward as we go into the future to looking at how we can invest some of these savings in other ways.

I'd point out to the hon. member that in this current budget before the House the projected savings on drug costs in other ministries is, I believe, in the order of \$15 million. It's not only a savings experience within my ministry but in other ministries such as Human Services and Seniors that actually also have drug benefits programs for the Albertans that they serve. Again, I think that is good news.

4:40

The hon. member – and I want to spend a little bit of time on this – also talked about emergency department wait times. It is obviously an issue that we are all concerned about in Alberta. While I want to get to some of the specific strategies here in a minute, I think it's important to note for all hon. members that the volume in our emergency departments, the number of visits, is increasing. In the last year it increased by an average of 17 per cent across the province. That is certainly in part a function of the demand for emergency room care, but as the hon. member I think also pointed out by way of his last question around the East Edmonton health centre, it is also a testament to the need for more primary care available to our citizens close to home.

While it is true that the acuity level of patients who come into many of our emergency departments is very high, we believe that often that acuity is a result of not being able to have regular interaction with a physician and with other members of a health care team that can help someone manage a chronic disease to avoid an acute episode that results in the need to visit an emergency department. So improving the availability of primary care is absolutely one of the key strategies to reduce emergency department wait times.

We have also seen strategies that include search capacity protocols to meet demand, the real-time emergency department patient access and co-ordination system, to direct patients to emergency departments with shorter wait times, and new smart cards that provide emergency department physicians with quicker and secure access to patient health records. We are reporting real-time wait time information to the public for Edmonton hospitals to help patients steer themselves to facilities with shorter wait times.

Within the emergency department itself – and this is a credit to emergency department physicians and other staff – we have seen many innovations that reduce length of stay although the length of stay still varies across sites. I'm talking about length of stay within the emergency department. The volume of patients is also a factor in this, the complexity of patient conditions is a factor in this, and capacity limitations. We have seen greatly increased operational efficiency.

Those numbers don't always show up, Mr. Chair, when we look at the two key indicators that the hon. member referred to, and I can give you a very specific example. In one of my recent meetings with emergency department physicians and AHS they pointed out that there was actually quite a large number of patients who present at the emergency department with a specific need but that require assessment by specialists and require access to diagnostic equipment, to diagnostic processes within the hospital to provide the necessary information for a decision to admit or not

to admit to be made. In some cases the time to do this exceeds the eight-hour target that we have set as the outer limit for admission of emergency in-patients within the hospital environment.

So one of the new initiatives that will be rolled out quickly is the development of what are called clinical decision units. These are separate areas outside of the emergency department where patients who are awaiting this extra assessment and diagnostic workup can be seen appropriately and cared for appropriately until such time as there is enough information to enable a decision to admit.

While some people, Mr. Chair, might think this is, you know, an unnecessarily detailed and arduous process, I think we have to remind ourselves that our population is aging. There are much higher numbers of people with not only one chronic disease but two and sometimes three chronic diseases, on a variety of medications, and some without attachment to a primary health care provider. What this results in is a much higher level of complexity for quite a few people that present at an emergency department. So I think this step, along with the others that we've mentioned, is absolutely key in reducing emergency department wait times.

The other thing I'll just mention quickly on this theme because it is such an important topic is the Health Quality Council's comments about the occupancy rates in our acute-care beds. While we have focused extensively on these two targets in the last year, the eight-hour target and the four-hour target – and they are very important – the quality council says that we need to do a better job of managing our acute-care inventory across the province.

Now, in Calgary there is a shortage of acute-care beds, and that will be greatly alleviated with the opening of the south health campus. We have seen a number of our facilities operating at 100 per cent, 110 per cent of occupancy for quite an extended period of time. That's due to volume increases, but there are also things that we can do, that were discussed in this report and that I've discussed with Alberta Health Services, to make better use of those beds.

Those include, certainly, attention to people who are waiting in acute-care beds – and I'm going to differ in language with the hon. member, and I'm sure that he anticipates this anyways – who are waiting for admission to continuing care or who are awaiting sufficient home care support at home because they don't have it through family or other means to be able to return home.

So the \$25 million in this budget on top of the \$450 million that Alberta Health Services already spends on home care we think is going to certainly make an impact for those patients waiting in hospitals who could return home if for nothing else than having a higher level of support. But we do need to keep the focus on this.

The last time I discussed this with Alberta Health Services, 8 out of 10 placements to continuing care in Alberta were going to people who were awaiting acute-care beds in our hospitals. Now, I say that knowing that we have to also meet the demand that is in the community for access to these spaces as well. We certainly can't forget about those people. But the priority for placement to continuing care is about 80 per cent for patients that are waiting in those acute-care beds.

The other thing that is being discussed that is going to be a function of the physician leadership and working with other professionals is optimizing discharge practices in our hospitals. Now, that does not mean sending people home before they are ready. It means sending them home in a timely way when the supports are available to them.

The Chair: Your 10 minutes are up.

You still have about a minute.

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much. I will thank the minister for his comments with respect to the East Edmonton health centre, the

urgent care centre. I await with great anticipation that happening because it is, as the minister mentioned, a very underserved part of the province in terms of health care professionals, and that is why they overutilize the ER. I hope this will go a long way towards helping the general health of the population in the area that I and some other members represent. So I thank him for that.

I just want to follow up with the long-term care thing. For the life of me, I can't figure out why the government is doing what it's doing when this is so key to solving the ER problem, which I think they actually would like to try and figure out how to do. So does this mean that the whole definition of long-term care is being thrown overboard by the government, that it's no longer a valid definition that you are using which involves nursing care and so on?

The Chair: Thank you, hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands-Norwood. That completes the 20 minutes between you and the minister.

The next 20 minutes is for the hon. Member for Calgary-Currie. Do you want to use the 10 and 10 or 20 together?

Mr. Taylor: I think we'll go with the 10 and 10. I've been listening to the debate so far this afternoon, and the minister is giving rather complete answers, and I think there's some useful information in there. I'd rather take that approach than try to do it back and forth in a relatively short period of time, which is what 20 minutes is.

I'll start out by saying that there certainly is no shortage of money in this budget, certainly no shortage of money being added to this budget compared to last year. If money was all it took, I guess we would have a phenomenal health care system in the province of Alberta, one where not only everybody talked about the quality of care once they find the magic words to get into the system but where we wouldn't need magic words to get into the system, where we'd actually be able to access it and get appropriate care and timely care whenever we needed it. But the minister and I and everybody else in this House and everybody in Alberta knows that that, unfortunately, is not the case.

4:50

As I've been sitting here, Mr. Chair, listening to the debate so far this afternoon, it hasn't exactly sparked a whole lot of optimism and hope in me. It's not for lack of trying. I mean, the minister just a few minutes ago ran through quite a number of initiatives that he intends to try. The minister and the government have also adopted all 21 recommendations of the Health Quality Council of Alberta report. I want to acknowledge that because in the controversy around the limited terms of reference on the public inquiry that is to follow this, I don't think the government and the minister have been given enough credit, quite frankly, for saying that, yes, all 21 of those recommendations are valid, and we will accept them all, and we will act on them all.

Part of what troubles me here, Minister, is that when the Health Quality Council released this report, Dr. Cowell was asked in the media conference: if every one of these recommendations was adopted and acted upon, how long would it be before the people of Alberta actually saw tangible results, actually saw a noticeable difference to the better in the way our health care system operates? If I remember correctly – and I think I do – the answer came back from Dr. Cowell that it would be something in the neighbourhood of five years plus.

He referenced some of the practices of the old Chinook health region, which he referenced frequently throughout his media conference as a model for where we want to go. In answer to that

specific question, Minister, he referenced the Chinook health region in terms of it taking two years for the initiatives that they took to make a significant difference in their region. That was one region out of what used to be nine, out of what used to be 17 before that. We're talking about a whole province. You want to talk about chronic, complex conditions. The province of Alberta, if it were a patient, would be a real challenge for its doctor, I'm afraid, where the health system is concerned.

I'm going to pull together here a few things that don't necessarily right at first glance look like they're meant to go together. This is mostly from the business plan, starting on page 39. I'll start with goal 1.1.

Ensure effective governance and accountability of the health system by clarifying the roles, relationship and responsibilities of the ministry and Alberta Health Services; providing health system policy direction and oversight; and strengthening the measurement and reporting of health system performance.

Then I will jump to and just throw in here goal 3.2. "Begin implementing Family Care Clinics." I'm still not clear, Minister, what these family care clinics are going to be, how they're going to operate, what they will consist of, what their goals will be. Most importantly, I haven't the foggiest idea how Alberta Health and Wellness and Alberta Health Services intend to measure the performance and the success of these three pilot clinics so that they'll know at the end of the pilot project whether this is a route that we want to go or not.

Also, goal 3.5, "Provide appropriate access to services across the continuum of care by increasing coordination of health and social support systems," which certainly sounds like a worthwhile initiative. I mean, the minister and I have been talking probably more frequently than he would like this close to an election about my proposal to move support services for the brain injured from Alberta Health Services to Alberta Seniors, where the model as practised by PDD, which lives under Alberta Seniors, is more of a community model versus the medical model that Alberta Health Services in many cases rightly practises, but in some cases it's not the most appropriate way to go.

As I look at this, I'm seeing a little sense here that Alberta Health and Wellness and, presumably, by extension Alberta Health Services – I'm never really sure where the lines are and the boundaries are and where they get crossed between AHW and AHS, and that brings me back to goal 1.1. How is this going to be defined, and how are you going to ensure that you've learned from your past errors, because there have been plenty, and how are you going to make sure that you actually improve the system with a little bit of political oversight, without political meddling, et cetera, et cetera? How are you going to restore the confidence of the people of Alberta, who, I think, feel that a good part of the problem with the health care system in this province is that politicians have been involved and have been messing it up?

This notion now that you're going to take a system that has been geared to the medical model, which is diagnosing what's wrong with the patient and curing the patient, and try to move it to more of a community model, that recognizes that sometimes the patient can't be cured, that sometimes the chronic condition or conditions the patient is suffering from have to be managed and sometimes the patient has to be managed in a different context, in a different environment – it's a different attitude from fix what is broken. Fix what is broken is so culturally entrenched in the health care system in this province now that I'm very intrigued to hear how this effort to co-ordinate between health and social supports is going to reframe the culture, reframe the mentality inside the health care system.

We have to touch on continuing care because if we've been paying attention, we have known for years and years that the population is aging, and as it ages, it is developing chronic illness and becoming more complex and more expensive for the health care system to manage. We've known that there is a looming shortage of continuing care beds, both nursing home and long-term care beds, and assisted living beds. We've known that there's a shortage of home care, yet we are spending \$450 million on home care and adding another \$25 million to that. What are we getting for the money that we're spending there?

Sometimes I can be a pretty black-and-white, simple, straightforward kind of thinker, to my detriment, but it strikes me that maybe part of the problem with this system, this monster that we've built here and its nearly \$16 billion budget, is that we overthink a lot of stuff. I mean, if there's a blockage at the front end with emergency care because there's a blockage at the back end with people tying up acute-care beds because they can't get into long-term care because you haven't provided enough of it, isn't the answer rather self-evident, that at the tail end, if you will, you need to focus on providing the long-term care access and space that an aging population needs so that you don't clog up the system?

And, please, let's not refer to them as bed blockers because that blames the victim. The people who are stuck in these acute-care beds waiting for a placement somewhere in long-term care, we hear them referred to as bed blockers, and that's really a tragedy. That adds insult to injury because there they are completely powerless, and they're getting blamed for all the backlog, all the stoppage in the system because of that. I'd like to know why there is not more focus on that. I'll turn it over to the minister.

The Chair: Hon. member, your 10 minutes have been reached.

Hon. minister, you have the next 10 minutes.

Mr. Horne: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair, and thank you to the hon. member for the questions. I will endeavour to provide as many answers as I can.

I guess the first theme – and this was actually a theme, I think, throughout what I heard from the hon. member – was his concern with the total cost of the health care budget. The budget before the House, Mr. Chair, is for \$16 billion. That is a very significant amount of money. It is, in fact, the highest spending on a per capita basis on health care in Canada, second only to Newfoundland and Labrador.

One of the things that I've observed over the years and also now in the role as minister in discussion with other ministers is a new way of looking at this issue. Traditionally we've talked about spending as a percentage of the total provincial budget; in this case, we're looking at almost 40 per cent of the budget. Ontario and Quebec are nearing 50 per cent of spending of their provincial budgets on health care. It's a lot of money, and it's a lot for people to deal with conceptually in terms of how to use the resources to improve the system.

What we know, Mr. Chair, very clearly now, based on the evidence, is that the outcomes from the health care system in terms of the health status of the population, health care outcomes as a result of the interaction with the system, and health system performance overall in terms of the broader performance indicators are not directly related to the amount of money that is expended on health care services. In the case of Canada, for example, we are the third-highest per capita spender in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development countries, but our performance indicators in areas like health status and health system performance are consistently at their best in the middle of the pack.

5:00

That is not to say that you don't need sufficient resources in government in order to deliver high-quality care, and we are very fortunate to have been able to do that in Alberta. But I think the discussion has shifted across the country from only the issue of cost to the issue of the value that is attained from the health care dollars that are expended. Those value indicators are in the areas of things such as wait times for care, but they are also expressed in the health status of our population.

As I said earlier this afternoon, a concerning fact for me, certainly, in my role is that this generation of children in Canada are expected to have a shorter life expectancy than the generation that preceded them. That tells me that we're not doing enough to prevent children from developing conditions which lead to chronic disease, conditions like obesity. It tells me that we still need to do more in the area of mental health and addictions. There are many things that we need to do, in fact, in some cases just doing more of what we know works, to provide the interventions that are necessary to show a marked improvement in the health status of our population.

As I discussed in answer to an earlier question this afternoon, from 1996 to 2010 the life expectancy of Albertans has increased. That is good news, but we also need to keep a check on many other factors that have an influence on our health status.

We talked a lot this afternoon, Mr. Chair, about strategies to reduce wait times in emergency departments, and I won't cover that ground again.

In terms of the Health Quality Council report and the health system as a whole I guess what I would like to say to the hon. member and, I guess, through him to anyone who may be monitoring this discussion is that the Health Quality Council in no way suggested that the entire health care system in this province is broken or dysfunctional. They were asked to look at three specific areas: emergency department wait times; allegations with respect to the deaths of patients on waiting lists for lung cancer surgery, which were found to be unsubstantiated; and thirdly, issues with respect to physician advocacy in the health care system. While those are three very important areas and they were areas that were thoroughly investigated, those findings are not an indication that we have not achieved and continue to achieve very significant success in this province in terms of what we're offering to Albertans.

If we take a moment, Mr. Chair, to look at the volume of services that are being provided, we can see that for the fiscal year ended March 31, 2011, we had 364,000 hospital discharges in this province. We had 117,000 urgent-care centre visits, 758,000 calls to Health Link, 3,156 primary hip replacements performed in a province of 3.8 million people, 4,395 knee replacements, 33,700 cataract surgeries in a single year, 333,000 CT examinations completed, and 177,000 MRI exams. The number of services on a per-patient basis in Alberta for the year ended March 31, 2011, was 12.37 services per patient. That compares to 11.95 in the fiscal year that ended March 31, 2007. So the volume of our health care services continues to increase.

One thing that we as a government are quite mindful of is the proportion of that volume that continues to increase in hospital-based care and acute care versus the increase in the volume of care that is delivered in the community. We are working very diligently with the various health professional faculties, with Alberta Health Services, with the quality council, and with other stakeholders to try to identify opportunities where we can provide care in the community that had previously been provided in hospitals.

We think this supports a better quality of care, Mr. Chair, where it's deemed appropriate for the patient by a health professional. It

obviously supports the delivery of care closer to home. It supports a higher degree of attachment between the citizen and a family and a team of health care providers, doctors and nurses and others, that are trying to meet the needs of a given community. We think it gives our health care system the best opportunity to influence better health status for our population with respect to future generations. It really gives us an opportunity to get a handle on chronic disease management, to reduce the incidents there, to provide early intervention in mental health and addictions, and to do so much more because of the fact that we're working in a team-based care environment and that we're delivering as much of the care as possible close to home.

It also affords an opportunity, Mr. Chair, to improve linkages between the primary care system and the acute-care system. We have very successful examples of primary care networks in Alberta that have developed specialist linkages. They have negotiated relationships with individual specialists across disciplines that allow for speedier access to specialists by citizens who are part of the primary care network. We want to build on this as part of the family care clinics in the future.

The hon. member also inquired about differences between family care clinics and primary care networks. There are a number that I discussed in answers to earlier questions this afternoon. I would sum it up again, Mr. Chair, by saying that the attempt here is not to develop yet another cookie-cutter model and attempt to implement it in a uniform way across the province. Our family care clinics are noted for their innovation, for their unique programming. In the same way that primary care networks have been successful in this regard, family care clinics will be equally successful in the future.

The three pilot family care clinics will be owned and operated by Alberta Health Services, but opportunities do exist, Mr. Chair, for the FCCs to be community owned in the future and to be physician owned. That is a distinct difference from the current primary care networks, which are a program that is embedded in the former trilateral master agreement.

Through FCCs Albertans will have access to a wider range of care providers who are working in teams, including nurse practitioners, registered nurses, mental health workers, dietitians, physical therapists, pharmacists, and family physicians. That is not to say that other disciplines aren't represented in our primary care networks now, but we see an opportunity here, Mr. Chair, to expand that further, to provide Albertans with more direct access to those other health professionals, not always through a physician.

We see opportunities to improve linkages between family care clinics and community organizations that are not health-specific. I'm talking about organizations like the Canadian Mental Health Association, the Salvation Army, community housing organizations, employment training organizations, peer counselling and support organizations, our schools, and other organizations that have a bearing on the success we hope to achieve in primary care.

The Chair: The next hon. member on my list is the hon. Member for Calgary-Foothills. You have 20 minutes with the minister or just 10 minutes for you.

Mr. Webber: Well, let's just do the 10 and 10, Mr. Chair. That would work for me. I don't even know if I'll take the 10, but I'll focus on this.

I do have a couple of questions for the hon. minister regarding specifically organ transplants here in the province of Alberta. First of all, I want to share some statistics with regard to organ transplants here in Alberta. In the past five years, Mr. Chair, 214 people have died waiting for organ transplants here in the

province. That is the third-highest number among provinces here in Canada. There are currently about 556 patients waiting right now for transplants here in Alberta, and that waiting list has doubled within the last 10 years here since 2002. Also, family consent has gone from 80 per cent down to 45 per cent since 2002.

5:10

Back in 2002, hon. minister, Alberta's organ donor rate was about 17 donors per million population. That, of course, has steadily decreased, and currently the Alberta rate is at about nine donors per million, which is, Mr. Chair, the worst in Canada. The national average was about 14 donors per million back in 2009.

Now, Ontario, British Columbia, and Nova Scotia currently do have organ donor registries, and Manitoba is currently setting one up. Of course, Alberta has a population of about 3.7 million people and recorded over a hundred thousand deaths from all causes in the past five years. Of those deaths, Mr. Chair, only about 180 donated their organs. That is less than .2 per cent of the population. As a comparison, British Columbia has a population of 4.5 million and has recorded 117 people who died while waiting for transplants within the past five years.

The current situation here in Alberta, Mr. Chair, is that in order to donate organs upon death, Albertans have to sign the back of their health care cards, of course, before they die. When donors pass away, the onus is on hospital staff to approach grieving family members to consider consenting to organ donation. Even if the card is signed, though, families have the final legal say as to whether or not they want their loved one to donate their organs and tissues.

The proposal that is out there, Mr. Chair and hon. minister, is to create a provincial government organ donor registry system to allow Albertans to register online their willingness to be a donor. It's definitely an opt-in way of indicating that you want to donate your organs. In this manner when donors die, hospitals can immediately access registry records rather than searching through to try to find their health care cards to see if they've signed the consent.

There are many benefits with regard to having a registry system here in the province, Mr. Chair. It will certainly ease the task, of course, of front-line health care workers who have to approach family members by demonstrating the prior consent of their loved ones. There is a consensus in the organ transplant community that a registry together with an awareness campaign is definitely necessary. An Alberta organ donor registry website could be linked to the already existing e-health records network to create a central database accessible to critical care staff.

The Alberta government has already agreed to an approved donation strategy, but it was never implemented. The report from the Alberta Advisory Committee on Organ and Tissue Donation and Transplantation was never implemented.

The Alberta government already does collect personal information on residents via registries, so it would be straightforward to co-ordinate the donor registry with Service Alberta or with Alberta Health and Wellness.

B.C., Ontario, and Nova Scotia already use this system to successfully manage a donor registry program. Of course, the costs of running a registry, I would think, would be considerably minimal compared to the escalating costs of keeping patients alive through incredibly expensive dialysis or ventricular assistive devices and, of course, hospital stays.

I guess what I have to ask the hon. minister is: where are we with moving forward and creating an Alberta organ and tissue donor registry, and can we expedite this process at all? Those would be my questions, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: The hon. minister.

Mr. Horne: Thank you, Mr. Chair, and I really want to thank the hon. Member for Calgary-Foothills for raising this issue. It is something that we have started to discuss between ourselves fairly intensely over the last few weeks, and I expect we'll continue to do so in the future.

I think the other thing I would want to acknowledge is that there are members on all sides of this House that have done extensive work on this issue over the years. The notion of a provincial organ and tissue donor registry is not a new idea to be discussed in this House. That being said, I began some investigation into this area. I think one misconception that I became aware of, actually, as a result of my discussions with the hon. member was that the leadership for the development of provincial organ and tissue donor registries was actually coming from Canadian Blood Services, and while it is true that Canadian Blood Services has an organ and tissue donation strategy developed, they are very much focused on connecting provincial and territorial organ and tissue donor registries through the expenditure of funds that have been allocated for that initiative.

As the hon. member said, a number of our colleague jurisdictions have actually developed electronic organ and tissue donation registries with great success. As he said, the purpose of the registries is to allow citizens to affirmatively register online their intent to donate organs and tissue in the event that their organs and tissue become available through accident or through other unfortunate circumstances.

I think that when we listen to the statistics that the hon. member presented and listen to some of the personal stories, that he is aware of, of individuals that have been waiting for long periods of time for transplants, I think we have to take serious note, Mr. Chair, that this is an unmet need within our province and that the trend, in fact, as the hon. member pointed out, to donation is decreasing.

When we talked about this the first time, I asked him how that was measured. It's actually measured on the basis of the response of individuals at the time family members are asked whether or not they would consider organ and tissue donation. As we've heard and, I think, as all members know, all too often there is no affirmative declaration of intent on the part of the person because of the failure to sign the back of the organ donor card or lack of clarity or communication with family members about the specific wishes of an individual in the event they are placed in that circumstance. So I think there is a huge need for us to pay some immediate attention to this issue.

One of the things I haven't had the opportunity to do quite yet is to talk to some of the other ministers in the jurisdictions that have implemented the electronic registry. We've expended a lot of money in this province to develop Canada's first electronic health record. It would seem to me a logical conclusion and perhaps an expectation of Albertans that that electronic health record could be used to support this type of initiative. That being said, I know that it's a complex issue, and I am not yet in a position to say that I have a complete understanding of all of the issues that are involved.

Quite often in our discussions issues such as confirmation of the declaration of intent as an individual ages over time are sometimes raised. We also have to consider the plight of emergency room physicians and other staff who are charged with making requests of family or, in the absence of family, of other people who know the individual and the challenges there again sometimes in establishing the competency of the individual at the time they made their declaration known. I need to make more study of this, but I'm sure there are also challenges embedded in legislation in this province that govern patient confidentiality and privacy.

As much as I agree with the intent and the need, I need an opportunity to better understand the complexity, but it is something that I am committed to pursuing in Alberta. I am going to need the support of colleagues on all sides of the House to raise awareness about it and to deal with particularly the area of any legislative or regulatory barriers that may be in place. I think we have to look to our own citizens, the people that we serve, our constituents, to do the necessary consultation, to build on the consultation that has been previously done by others in this House, and to make sure that we have a clear sense of where Albertans want us to go on this issue.

I don't know any of my constituents or any of my friends or family that would not be alarmed by the statistics that the hon. member presented when he asked these questions. That decrease in the willingness to donate is something that we must be prepared to address.

5:20

As much as the information technology and the legislative and regulatory considerations and all of those other processes are a factor in this, I think a renewed public dialogue on this issue is also important. It will help to establish the case for what needs to be done. It will likely give us confirmation, I think, of the intent or the desire of Albertans to see government move on this issue, and it will propel us to find a solution faster rather than simply prompt further study on an issue that, in my personal opinion, has been quite extensively studied in this province.

I look forward to pursuing investigation of this further with the hon. member and to learning from him, learning from others in this House who have taken a close look at this over the years, and to establishing through dialogue with our constituents the intention and the willingness of Albertans for us to move forward on this as quickly as we possibly can.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Hon. member, you still have some minutes. Okay.

Then I shall recognize the hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview.

Dr. Taft: Thanks, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Do you want 10 minutes?

Dr. Taft: Well, if I could ask the minister: if I promise to not make my questions too long, do you promise to not make your answers too long so that we can have a few exchanges? Okay. I appreciate that.

The Chair: So the dialogue will be 20 minutes.

Dr. Taft: We'll go for 20 minutes. That's right. So now the pressure is on me to be to the point. I'll do what I can.

First of all, I missed the introduction of your staff. I want to open with a couple of comments. I appreciate the minister's comments over the last few months since he became minister about the need for stability. Your deputy minister is now – I've kept track – the 13th deputy minister in 20 years. I hope she has a longer life expectancy than previous ones. This minister is at least the fifth minister in the 11 years that I've been an MLA. Stability would be welcomed, and I agree with the minister that that's important.

I also noticed the minister in response to one of the other questions talking about overall spending in Canada on health care compared to OECD countries. I want to start with this general comment just as a piece of information that I think is important for all of us to know. I was startled in doing some research last year

that the CIHI actually compares Canada's spending on health care to other countries, as you say, and in total we're high. But what was startling to me was that the reason we're high is that we have a far larger private health care sector than I appreciated. So CIHI – and this is from their National Health Expenditure Trends, 1975 to 2011, which they published, I think, last year, and I'm just going to quote from that. "Canada, with private-sector per person spending of US\$1,282, is among the top three countries with the highest per capita health spending funded by the private sector."

Actually, when you look at Canada's public-private portion – again this is straight from CIHI – Canada ranks 18th in the developed world for the portion of total health spending that comes from the public sector. That's just really important background, I think, for us when we talk about the need to introduce the private sector and so on and contain public health spending in Canada. Actually, I'm concerned that we've introduced a kind of a Pandora's box into Canada's health care system by opening it up to so much private health care spending and that that's driving some of the increases in costs. So that's a bit of background.

I also suspect that the large portion of private health care spending in Canada may correlate to our relatively weak performance. There is extensive research, despite some statements otherwise, that for-profit health care delivery tends to be more costly and lower quality, and we've got a very large portion of that.

Mr. Minister, with those background comments I want to ask this question. Over and over the Premier and the government talk about their support for publicly funded health care delivery. My concern is that it be publicly funded and publicly delivered. My question: does it make a difference to this government's policy whether it's publicly delivered or privately delivered for-profit or privately delivered not-for-profit?

The Chair: The hon. minister.

Mr. Horne: Thank you, Mr. Chair. Thank you to my hon. colleague for the question. You know, with respect to your opening comments about the source of funding and a comparison to other countries I take the information that you presented at face value. I haven't had a chance, obviously, to read it.

I guess what I would say in terms of my approach to this is that, first of all, I'm not sure I would agree that the source of the funding is always what necessarily makes the difference in terms of the quality of care that's delivered. I recognize there's a high degree of sensitivity around this, you know, across the country in different areas.

My thinking, actually, in recent years is that too much of the focus has been on the question of the total cost of care, both from public and private sources, and not enough focus has been on the value achieved from the expenditures that are made both in terms of the health care outcomes for the population and the indicators associated with someone's interaction with the health care system for surgery or, you know, for any reason. So I'm actually trying to take that approach to my role now. I think that value is really where we need to be focused.

Again, you're obviously well read and learned in this area yourself, but I'm not of the opinion that simply increasing funding, whether it's from the private or public sector, necessarily equates with better outcomes in the system. I'm sure you would be in agreement with that.

I can tell you that there have certainly been shifts in recent years in what the cost drivers are in the health system. In Alberta I'm told that currently pharmaceutical spending is 15 per cent of all spending. The private-payer portion of that cost is 55 per cent. So from the

perspective of opportunities for other private funding sources in the marketplace to contribute toward high cost drivers in the system, particularly pharmaceuticals, I guess I'm not of the opinion that we want to discourage employers and others who sponsor these benefit plans from providing this coverage because when we are dealing with something that is as high cost as health care, of course, the dollars that we don't take advantage of from those other sources become an opportunity cost for things that we could be doing in other areas of the health care system like prevention.

Your specific question about publicly delivered. I know this is something that's been debated in the House before. My notion is that the role of government in health care is primarily one of assurance. That means ensuring the appropriate regulatory frameworks. Obviously, it entails making sure that the services provided are safe and that they're of high quality. It involves making sure that programs are sufficiently funded and, most of all, that the regulatory framework that applies in the delivery of health care is the same regardless, that the regulatory framework and the quality measures are identical and that they are, in fact, indifferent to the sources of funding.

I'll just close because I promised to try to be brief. I think one area where Alberta has a proud tradition – and nobody ever really talks about it. We talk about private, but we don't always talk about not-for-profit. If we look at the history of continuing care across the country and particularly in Alberta, the early pioneers in this area that were investing capital were, in fact, not-for-profit organizations like the Good Samaritan Society, like the Bethany Care Society in Calgary. I think, you know, it's clear today that the same standards in those facilities apply in Carewest or Capital Care facilities. The inspection process is certainly as onerous for the operators regardless. My parliamentary assistant, the Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie, is doing some work with the parliamentary assistant for Seniors to see what can be done to try to streamline some of those inspection processes and make them more effective but less onerous in terms of the demand on the operators.

I guess I don't share the opinion that the prime differential in the quality of care that's delivered boils down to the private versus public funding side. That's my view.

5:30

Dr. Taft: I'm not surprised. We'll just have to agree to disagree. I would take the position that it does matter who or what kind of organization is delivering that, and it matters for a number of reasons, but we won't belabour that in this setting because the time is so short.

I want to just go from those broad issues to a very, very specific one which illustrates perhaps some of the challenges between the private and the public systems. I have a constituent who over the last few weeks has had a very trying time with her father's care. He lives in I guess it's an assisted living, private, for-profit facility. It's a lovely facility. You walk through, and it's quite attractive. The staff are pleasant. But as soon as anything medically goes wrong at all, their response, since they have no medical staff, is to call 911, and then the person ends up in the emergency ward of a small rural hospital.

The hospital itself is filled, so the emergency room is backed up. I was there myself, and a person had been there for four days, in an emergency room in a small rural hospital. Something is wrong here. Part of the problem with the assisted living facility is that as soon as anything got at all complicated, their response was 911 – that was it – and the number of 911 calls is quite remarkable.

So there's a breakdown in the fit and the co-ordination, even in the very incentives between the two organizations. It's very clear

that the quality of care suffers but also that the costs are ridiculously high. What mechanisms are in place to help resolve those kinds of issues? How do we know that all across this province the private assisted living facilities aren't just treating 911 as their kind of instant parachute whenever there's a problem?

The Chair: The hon. minister.

Mr. Horne: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I would be very concerned about hearing about that sort of situation from a constituent myself. I guess there are a few things that come to mind and things that I don't necessarily know about the assisted living facility. If the facility is under contract to provide designated supportive living with Alberta Health Services, it is subject to a contract for the provision of that health care. That contract is backed by supportive living accommodation standards and continuing care health standards, which come under the purview of my ministry. Those standards apply to any facility in Alberta that is offering care.

In this particular case, you know, one thing that comes to mind for me is that if this facility is under contract, is it in a position to adjust the health care that they're delivering to residents as the residents' needs change over time? It sounds like that is probably not the case.

The hon. the Premier has introduced a concept called continuing care centres. A few months ago we announced two pilot projects in this area, one in Red Deer and one in Calgary. The continuing care centres are designed to facilitate aging in place. Hon. member, these two particular centres are going to be built by Covenant Health with support from the affordable supportive living initiative under the Minister of Seniors.

These facilities are actually built in such a way that the structure can be scaled up to offer someone what we have been calling in this House long-term care or a very high level of care in addition to supporting people with minimal needs. They assist in keeping individuals in their home communities and keeping couples together, and most importantly they're a model that is designed to allow for that flexibility to scale up care as someone's needs change, whether it's a gradual increase over time or whether it's in response to a specific episode, perhaps a complication from a chronic illness.

I don't know what happened in the particular case that you mentioned, but I think the way of the future and what I've tried to get across during question period is that we are trying to support a range of affordable living options for our seniors that bring health care to them in place. It is completely unacceptable that someone would have the experience that you just described.

Thanks.

Dr. Taft: How much time do we have left?

The Chair: You have six minutes.

Dr. Taft: Okay. Thank you.

My point with this is that we have fragmented the system, in my view, and in greater or lesser degrees I've kicked around the health care system for a very long time. We've fragmented those edges of the health care system, and it's very costly, and it's also very painful. Maybe we need stability, but there needs to be a much better meshing here.

I'm guessing that with just a few minutes left, this is going to seem like an odd question, but as I reflect back over the experience of regionalization now over 17 years or whatever it is, I find myself increasingly doubtful. Initially I thought: well, this makes a lot of sense. Then as I experienced the system from the bottom, I'm concerned that we may have lost the class of people

who used to make the hospital system run so well, and those were the local hospital administrators and directors of nursing. What's brought this to me is spending time in this smaller hospital and just watching the problems there, where you have people staying four days in an emergency room, ambulances coming and going from, you know, the assisted living centre and elsewhere, all kinds of local issues, and apparently no one clearly in charge at that site.

Now, that's an impression. I might be wrong. My question, then, is: with all of that background, who is in charge of those individual hospitals that are spread all over Alberta? Is there still a hospital administrator equivalent and a director of nursing, or have we pulled that whole class of people out? Are they now somehow reporting to somebody much higher up?

The Chair: The hon. minister.

Mr. Horne: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I'm really glad that the hon. member asked this question. I think there may be a chance that he believes, like me, that health care systems are actually made up of individual clusters in a community of related facilities and providers and community organizations that work together to provide a continuum of care for a community. It's my belief – and this is simply my own opinion – that in the early days of Alberta Health Services one of the problems that we observed was quite a rapid centralization of decision-making authority that was quite a departure from the former regional health authorities or even, you know, the previous days of local hospital boards. I think that the current chief executive officer, Dr. Eagle, has done an awful lot to change that.

I'm not aware of what the position names are in the local hospitals – I've heard site manager; I've heard other titles – but I think the important thing is that we are seeing a trend toward restoring some of the basic decision-making authority around resource allocation, around staffing, and around other basic decisions that need to be made on a day-to-day basis to deliver care, the restoration of that authority and the accountability that goes with it at the site level, and I am very, very pleased to see that.

You know, once you have this in place and with the power of a common platform like Alberta Health Services, it is actually possible to take some pretty significant policy initiatives that have been developed, both short term and long term, and implement them in such a way that all Albertans can benefit equally. Far too often in the past, in my personal opinion, we saw excellent innovation in our local regional health authorities but not a lot of attention to or necessarily success in leveraging that best innovation for the benefit of the whole system. I think that with the right balance of local authority for basic decision-making about patient care and very strong attention and strong policy capacity in government, we can actually have the best of both worlds, so that's what I'm hoping to see more of in the future under Dr. Eagle's leadership.

5:40

I know I've had the opportunity to talk about this with the board of Alberta Health Services on a couple of occasions. You might have noted in the throne speech that there was specific mention made of enhancing the role of our local health advisory councils. Currently those councils are set up to advise Alberta Health Services on operational matters within the local community, which is an important role, but in my opinion the element that is missing and the element that I want to talk to the chairs of those councils about is their role in long-term service planning for their own community.

If we live in a community with a very small hospital, for example, that's serving an aging population that has more episodic

need for acute care, how do we plan for that as a community? What are the other options that are available to support that individual and perhaps avoid that hospital admission if it's not necessary? I think there are lots and lots of opportunities for those councils to play a greater role in the future.

I go back to my initial comment in this segment about the health system being a network of networks, if you will. I think many of the people that are serving on these councils are very key connectors in their local community. I think they're looking for a greater role, a meaningful role that recognizes their desire and their willingness to take on the responsibility for planning at the community level. In terms of the go-forward I will be doing all I can to support these improvements, hopefully resulting in the outcomes that you're looking for.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister. We've finished the 20 minutes.

Now I would like to recognize the hon. Member for Calgary-North Hill. Do you want 20 minutes or 10 and 10?

Mr. Fawcett: I think we'll go back and forth. There are a couple of issues that I would like to engage the minister on.

The Chair: Okay. Go ahead.

Mr. Fawcett: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair. I want to first of all congratulate the minister for delivering his first budget as the health minister. He probably has the toughest job amongst all of those along the front bench. There are a number of challenges, obviously, within his department both from a delivery and access point of view as well as from a financial point of view.

When I was elected to this Legislature back in 2008, I believe the percentage of the budget that the health care budget took up was about 33 per cent, about a third, and I think that with this budget it's up to 40 per cent. I know that I've made statements in this House before about studies out there that have been done by some of our universities and that sort of thing that show that in many of our provinces there's a good chance that sometime between 2020 and 2030 health care costs could take up close to 90 per cent of provincial budgets. I don't think we should allow those concerns to fall on deaf ears. You know, we do need to address those, and that's where I think the minister has a huge, huge challenge.

We know that at some point we've got to talk about cost containment within the health care system so that it is sustainable for future generations, but we need to do that at the same time as delivering services for what Albertans need today. That's a formidable challenge. I'd like to, like I said, commend the minister for trying to find that balance.

I guess the first question I would like to ask the minister is a pretty high-level question around the budget. What sort of initiatives, moving forward, can he undertake or is he starting to undertake that will find that balance in delivering greater access and health care outcomes for Albertans while ensuring that the financial costs of health care to us in this province aren't something that is going to cause us problems into the future and be unsustainable at a certain point in time? I just wanted to ask the minister to provide some feedback on that particular issue.

The Chair: The hon. minister.

Mr. Horne: Thank you, Mr. Chair, and thank you to my colleague for the question. We had some earlier discussion in the course of these proceedings today about the costs of health care. They are continuing to rise. To be quite honest with the hon. member, I think that they always will continue to rise somewhat above the level of inflation and population growth. I can tell you that in

Alberta the average rate of growth in health expenditures over the last decade has been in the order of 10 per cent. That is similar to what we see in other jurisdictions across the country. In some it's actually growing higher. So I think the answer to this is not so much how you on an immediate basis contain the cost of care – and you acknowledged this – but I think it's how you begin to actually tackle slowing the rate of growth in costs in some specific areas as opposed to the system overall.

One area, that I think is interesting, that we can focus on – and it is acknowledged as a cost driver in health care systems everywhere – is information technology. If we take, for example, magnetic resonance imaging, there's a technology that's able to do all sorts of investigative scans that address different diseases, skeletal and muscular disorders, and many other things. If we look at the incidence of the use of magnetic resonance imaging in Canada, we can see that no matter how many more MRI units we put in place in our hospitals, the utilization of those units continues to increase.

A statistic that really worried me was actually a finding of our own Health Quality Council in 2007 when they found that 10 per cent of Albertans had actually had an MRI in that year. Ten per cent of our entire population. So what that says to me is not necessarily that we are irresponsible in our use of the technology but that we need to work with physicians and with other health professionals to develop some clinical protocols that clearly dictate the appropriate use of that technology in specific circumstances.

The really interesting thing is that our doctors are not at all resistant to that notion. In fact, if you look not just in Canada but in other countries like the United Kingdom, in many cases the approvals for the use of technology or the use of specific drugs or the use of clinical protocols in the treatment of disease are actually tied to adherence to evidence-based processes, and that can include the use of technologies. So I think you raise a really important point.

To go back to sort of my philosophy, it is about cost. But to actually get at cost, you have to get to the question of value. To get to the question of value, you have to take a really hard look at how you're using the resources that currently exist in the system, making sure that they're used responsibly but also making sure that you're using them based on well-supported evidence.

One of the recommendations of the Minister's Advisory Committee on Health was the establishment of an entity to support evidence-based decision-making in our health care system. One of the advantages of having a single health region to serve the entire province is that when we make those determinations about what the evidence actually supports, and that includes the cost-effectiveness, we can implement that on a province-wide basis. We don't have to go through a process of negotiating it and implementing it with individual health regions. So I think there's a lot of promise on that front.

The other thing, and I know my hon. colleague appreciates this very much, is that one of the distinguishing features of Alberta – and I can say this because I came from another province originally – is our strong sense of responsibility for taking care of ourselves, taking responsibility for our own health. Now, I say that acknowledging that people in society have different capacities to take that responsibility. Obviously, people who are severely ill, perhaps people who suffer from mental illness, or for other reasons, don't have the same capacity as most of us in the Legislature here today to take that responsibility. But I think we can capitalize on that Alberta value.

I think Albertans are very willing. They want to be informed. We see that. We see them wanting to ensure when they're diagnosed with something that they have all the information about

the resources and medication and other things that are available to them. By and large, they have a really strong interest and a commitment to following prescribed courses of treatment, to connecting with community agencies that can help support them, to becoming informed and educated about their own health.

I'll sit down so that you can ask another question. That would be a beginning answer to your question.

5:50

The Chair: The hon. Member for Calgary-North Hill.

Mr. Fawcett: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair. That was very informative. I think that actually strikes a chord that I do get from a lot of the constituents in my area that are concerned that one of the big cost drivers within our health care system is that when it comes down to the management of the system, we're not making evidence-based decisions. You know, if only we could manage the system better, manage the utilization of MRIs and understand a little bit better as to when that is necessary and not necessary and know when it might be a bit excessive to utilize that in certain circumstances as opposed to others. I do think that's very important.

I'm going to touch on two things here for the minister. One of the biggest concerns, at least from my perception as well as from my constituents, within our health care system – and I know the minister is well aware of this; again, I've asked questions about this in this House before – is the utilization of our health care workforce. Investment into the primary care networks, into the pilot projects that the Premier has committed to as far as family care clinics in our communities: I think those are, obviously, good initiatives that will look at how we better utilize our workforce.

I know that when the minister was doing the Alberta health consultations, he had met with a number of constituents of mine in my office. We had a board from the College and Association of Registered Nurses, or CARNA. We had a physician, a former AMA president, I believe, at that meeting. We had the registrar for respiratory therapists here in the province as well as a constituent of mine, who I've introduced in this Legislature before, by the name of Schad Richea, who is the assistant athletic therapist for the Calgary Flames. I thought I was busy these days, but looking at their injury report, he seems to be a very, very busy guy.

The point of having this meeting with the minister, who at that time was, I believe, a parliamentary assistant and doing consultations on the Alberta Health Act, was to get a number of professionals in a room and talk about the issues. So, you know, what can their specific professions bring? The challenge I find is that as much as we as a government say that we need to utilize the workforce better to improve efficiency within the system and deliver better access, better health care outcomes, we also have to get their associations onside and get their associations in a position where there is less turf protection around specific roles, responsibilities, and authorities as to what they do.

My question to the minister is: I know we've gotten the primary care networks and the family care clinics to utilize more multidisciplinary teams, but what are we doing as a government to encourage the professions themselves to break down those walls, those silos, and allow greater participation of a much wider group of medical professions within the medical system?

That's one question. I guess we'll leave it at that. I'll let the minister answer, and I have one more short one afterwards.

The Chair: The hon. minister.

Mr. Horne: Thank you, Mr. Chair. Well, there's a lot being done with respect to the evolution of expanded scopes of practice and team-based care in our health care system, and I remember the conversation that you referred to.

What I'm finding is a tremendous amount of interest across the province in this. My own department is co-chair of the Collaborative Practice and Education Steering Committee, and they're also currently serving as chair of the internationally educated health professional recruitment forum. These are committees that include representatives from postsecondary institutions, the regulatory colleges, and other ministries in the government of Alberta in addition to employers in the health sector, AHS being one, Covenant Health being another. These groups are looking for the opportunities that you're speaking about, opportunities to enhance scope of practice as appropriate.

I think an interesting observation, perhaps not surprising, is that many of the young graduates that I meet or students who are about to graduate are very interested and, in fact, motivated by the opportunity to practise in teams and to work in an integrated way with other health professionals, and I think that bodes well for the future of our health workforce.

The other thing I'm finding is that there's a tremendous amount of interest in the question of: what is the value proposition for team-based care versus simply the value inherent in a number of different health professionals offering services independently but being co-located? What is the value of the team compared to the sum of the individual parts or the sum of the individual members of the team? It's actually the subject of a lot of research and discussion in Canada and other jurisdictions. Thank you for raising it.

The Chair: The chair hesitates to interrupt the hon. minister, but pursuant to Government Motion 6, agreed to on February 8, 2012, the committee shall now rise and report.

Before we do that, we'll have time for the staff to leave the Assembly.

[The Deputy Speaker in the chair]

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-North Hill.

Mr. Fawcett: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. The Committee of Supply has had under consideration resolutions for the Department of Health and Wellness relating to the 2012-2013 government estimates for the general revenue fund and the lottery fund for the fiscal year ending March 31, 2013, reports progress, and requests leave to sit again.

The Deputy Speaker: Having heard the motion by the hon. Member for Calgary-North-Hill, does the Assembly concur in the report?

Hon. Members: Concur.

The Deputy Speaker: Opposed? So ordered.
The hon. Government House Leader.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I move that the Assembly adjourn until 1:30 p.m. tomorrow.

[Motion carried; the Assembly adjourned at 5:59 p.m. to Thursday at 1:30 p.m.]

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Province of Alberta

The 27th Legislature
Fifth Session

Alberta Hansard

40 YEARS
1972-2012

Thursday, March 8, 2012

Issue 14

The Honourable Kenneth R. Kowalski, Speaker

Legislative Assembly of Alberta
The 27th Legislature

Fifth Session

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Legislative Assembly of Alberta

1:30 p.m.

Thursday, March 8, 2012

[The Speaker in the chair]

Prayers

The Speaker: Good afternoon and welcome.

Let us pray. As we conclude for this week our work in this Assembly, we renew our energies with thanks so that we may continue our work with the people in the constituencies we represent. Amen.

Please be seated.

Statements by the Speaker

40th Anniversary of *Alberta Hansard* and Broadcasting

The Speaker: Hon. members, before the Clerk gets us into the Routine, I would like to make mention of a number of historic events.

First of all, 40 years ago today, on March 8, 1972, a motion was put forward as Government Motion 1, which read in part:

There shall be a printed record of the deliberations and proceedings of the sittings of the Assembly to be known as the "Alberta Hansard" which shall be compiled, edited, printed, distributed and administered under the direction and authority of the Speaker, in accordance with this rule.

Today, 40 years later, our *Hansard* has continued to produce transcripts for this House for 3,650 House meetings and 1,975 standing and select special committee meetings. To commemorate this special occasion, a special cover will be produced for today's *Hansard*.

The second thing that occurred 40 years ago was unique, in essence, in that it provided for broadcasting of the meetings of this Assembly. Alberta became the first jurisdiction in Canada to broadcast their proceedings. The motion was introduced by Mr. Lou Hyndman, who was then the minister of education, and it was seconded by the hon. Don Getty, minister of federal and intergovernmental affairs, who at the time stated:

At a time in our history when Albertans can marvel at the view from the moon in their own living rooms, it is absurd that they are not able to watch their own Legislative Assembly.

So a bit of history with respect to that.

Member Anniversaries

The Speaker: On March 11, a few days from now, eight members of this Assembly will celebrate their 15th anniversary of service as an elected member of this Assembly. March 11, 2012, will mark 5,479 days of service for these eight individuals, and each of them has distinguished themselves in this Assembly over the years. I'm going to mention their names, and I'm going to have a page deliver a special 15-year Mace pin to each of them: first of all, the hon. Member for Edmonton-Whitemud, who was elected 15 years ago to represent the constituency of Edmonton-Whitemud and remains as the representative for the constituency of Edmonton-Whitemud; the hon. Member for Sherwood Park, who was elected 15 years ago to represent the constituency of Sherwood Park and remains the representative of this constituency that bears the same name; the hon. Member for Calgary-Fort, who was elected 15 years ago to represent the constituency of Calgary-Fort and remains today as the representative for the constituency of Calgary-Fort; the hon. Member for Banff-Cochrane, who, once

again, 15 years ago was elected to represent the constituency of Banff-Cochrane, a constituency that bears that same name today; the hon. Member for Olds-Didsbury-Three Hills – again, the constituency name has not changed in 15 years, and 15 years later we welcome and congratulate him today – the hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre, again the same constituency name for 15 years. The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar was elected 15 years ago as well, as was the hon. Member for Fort McMurray-Wood Buffalo, but 15 years ago the constituency name was Fort McMurray.

Would you join me in congratulating all these members.

Introduction of Visitors

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

Mr. Amery: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It is my pleasure and honour to introduce to you and through you to all members of the Assembly two visitors from the country of Lebanon, Dr. Assem Araji, Member of Parliament representing the Bekaa Valley, and Mr. Khaled al-Daher, representing the province of Akkar in northern Lebanon. The two hon. MPs are members of the largest political party of Lebanon, headed by the former Prime Minister, the Rt. Hon. Saad Hariri.

Mr. Speaker, the Lebanese community in Alberta has a very proud and long history in this province. As a matter of fact, the first Lebanese arrived in Alberta around 1860. Today I am proud to say that almost 42,000 Canadians of Lebanese descent proudly call Alberta home.

Accompanying our visitors are their administrative assistants and tour organizers: Mr. Omar Kaddah, Mr. Ibrahim Taliani, and Mr. Akl Kharib. They are seated in your gallery, Mr. Speaker. I'd like to ask them to rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of the Assembly.

Introduction of Guests

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Justice and Attorney General.

Mr. Olson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure today to make an introduction on behalf of my colleague the hon. Member for Drayton Valley-Calmar. We have 10 students and three adults with us from Alder Flats elementary school. They're in the members' gallery. They're participating in School at the Legislature this week, and the first half of their group was actually here yesterday and was introduced by the hon. member. I am pleased to introduce these guests, and I would ask that they rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of this Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Municipal Affairs.

Mr. Griffiths: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's a distinct and great pleasure of mine today to rise and introduce to you and through you to members of this Assembly 20 special people. They are interns with the municipal internship program who have almost completed the program. The program has provided them with an opportunity to gain real-life experience within municipal government, supporting our province's towns, villages, counties, and cities. They will join more than 150 interns who have completed the program since 2002. This Municipal Affairs initiative ensures continued strength and success of our municipalities with employees who are trained and skilled professionals. These 20 people will be fundamental to building better communities going forward. They are joined by three exceptional Municipal Affairs staff: the manager of internships,

Wendy Peters, and internship advisors Melanie Wood and Valerie Hope. They're seated in the members' gallery, and I ask them to rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of this Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Strathcona.

Mr. Quest: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It gives me great pleasure to introduce to you and through you to all members of this Assembly a group of students from Strathcona Christian Academy in my constituency. They are accompanied by teachers Jaime Peters, Alison Amos, and Ann Elzinga and parent helpers Kevin Wiens, James Vanderland, Shannon Stewart, Dan Tchir, Helena Myschuk, Judie Swinton, Maureen Kaczynski, Denise Wigmore, Pam Cholak, Patricia Stoddard, Jim Drew, Wanda Benterud, Donna Dziwenka, and Cathy Douglas. They are seated in the public and members' galleries because it's such a large group.

I'd also like to mention a couple of the students. Alyssa Stoddard and Alexis Myschuk are members of the Strathcona Basketball Association bantam Stingers, who just won a silver medal the other day, so congratulations to you. Again, they are seated in the public and members' galleries. Mr. Speaker, I'd ask them to rise and receive the warm welcome of this Assembly.

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

Mr. Rodney: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It is a great privilege for me today to introduce two extremely impressive Albertans that I'm very proud to call my friends. Debbie Bosomworth was born and raised in the Lassiter-Rycroft area but has been proud to call Calgary home for the past 25 years. Her love of travel and meeting new people and entertaining has proven to her how fortunate we all are to be living in this wonderful province. She doesn't mind our snow, but she loves our summers, when she gets back to her farming roots in her garden. Debbie is a tireless worker. She has served as the treasurer for the Calgary-Lougheed PC Association for over a dozen years.

1:40

Jeanne Carter grew up in Calgary. She's lived in Canyon Meadows for over 20 years and been a member of the Calgary-Lougheed PC Association for over 25 years. She was encouraged to join our PC association by her daughter Nadine, who was the president of PCYA. She has served as our membership chair and is involved in provincial elections and obviously enjoys yoga and working out.

Mr. Speaker, Debbie and Jeanne have both climbed medical mountains in their lives. I would ask all hon. members to honour them with the warm welcome of our Legislature.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Human Services.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Today I had the privilege of serving breakfast, making pancakes for social workers working for the Department of Human Services in the north part of Edmonton. Today we have with us in recognition of National Social Work Week a number of registered social workers from the ministry.

Social workers play a vital role in Alberta communities. Their contribution to the health and well-being of our citizens deserves to be recognized not just during this special week but all year long. These particular staff work in some of the most challenging jobs in the field, supporting families so they can stay together or raise their child with a disability, helping to reunite families after they've addressed concerns related to the children's safety and well-being, and when needed finding loving families for children who've come into care.

Mr. Speaker, we have with us today Gail Appelgren, a child intervention supervisor in Edmonton; Leigh Chisholm, a child intervention caseworker from Rocky Mountain House; Laurie Lancaster, a family support for children with disabilities supervisor in Killam; Luisa Loria, a supervisor in the youth services unit in Red Deer; and Lisa Winsor, a child intervention caseworker in Edmonton. I'd like to ask them to rise and through them receive thanks from all of us to all social workers in Alberta, who do such great work for our children and families.

Mr. Speaker, if I may, a second introduction on behalf of the Minister of Health and Wellness and the Member for Edmonton-Rutherford. I'd like to introduce to all members of the Assembly five members of the Kidney Foundation of Canada, northern Alberta and territories branch, from here in Edmonton. They're here with us today to hear a member's statement from the Member for Bonnyville-Cold Lake for World Kidney Day, which is today, March 8. Heidi Erisman, Flavia Robles, Don Charnaw, Tammy Fifield, and Sheelah Zapf, could you please rise and receive our traditional warm welcome.

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

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I'd like to introduce to you and through you to this Assembly several social workers. Shamanthi Cooray and Heather Sweet are both social workers with the Ministry of Human Services, and both are active members of the Alberta Union of Provincial Employees. Lori Sigurdson is a faculty member at MacEwan University, vice-president of Public Interest Alberta, and the professional affairs co-ordinator for the Alberta College of Social Workers. She is also the NDP candidate in Edmonton-Riverview. With them is Erica Bullwinkle, who is Lori's campaign manager for the upcoming election. I would now ask my guests to rise and receive the warm traditional welcome of the Assembly.

Members' Statements

International Women's Day

Ms Tarchuk: Mr. Speaker, I'm pleased to rise and recognize International Women's Day. Today provides us with an important opportunity to reflect on women's progress in various fields and industries and all aspects of society. This year's national theme is Strong Women, Strong Canada – Women in Rural, Remote and Northern Communities: Key to Canada's Economic Prosperity.

The Alberta government applauds the important contributions of women in both our rural and urban communities to all areas of society, including the economy. We also recognize aboriginal women, who constitute a vibrant and highly diverse segment of Alberta's population.

Mr. Speaker, the province has a number of initiatives that support the progress of women. For example, we recently announced a \$17 million increase to the child care subsidy program, which will support a 42 per cent increase in income thresholds for those eligible for maximum child care subsidies. This increase strengthens our support for the participation of women in the workforce and their ability to access quality, affordable child care.

I'm pleased that our government also provides the Persons Case scholarships, which are awarded every year in honour of the Famous Five, the pioneering Albertans who fought for women to be deemed as persons under Canadian law. These scholarships award a total of \$100,000 to several students whose studies and career goals contribute to the advancement of women or to those who are studying in fields that are not traditional to their gender.

The advancement of women is evident in Canada with more women continuing to enrol in postsecondary programs after completing high school. A greater percentage of women are also leaving these programs with a completed diploma or degree.

Mr. Speaker, women have come a long way in Alberta, and it is important that we continue to recognize their vital contributions to our province. We know that in order to have a strong Canada and a strong Alberta, we must continue to celebrate and support strong women.

Thank you.

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

Women's Equality

Ms Notley: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Since 1977 the world has used this day to focus attention on the lives of women. So let's pay a little attention today.

For women in Alberta the wage gap shows women earning only 68 cents for every dollar a man earns. This is the very bottom in Canada, and it compares shamefully to Canada overall, where women earn 78 cents to the dollar of men's earnings. Women who graduate from postsecondary education here in Alberta have even more discrimination to look forward to. These women earn only 63 per cent of what men with the same education earn, and as women get older, the national average is that the wage gap diminishes so that women earn 80 cents on the male dollar, except in Alberta. Here older women only earn 67 cents for each dollar earned by a man.

When International Women's Day began, women were earning 62 cents for every dollar of male earnings. No other province in this country has made so little progress in 35 years. These startling statistics in 2012 must be considered by thinking of the human lives involved. Girls are growing up today facing an economic injustice that will hurt their achievement over their lives, and poverty among women means poverty among children.

We need to ask ourselves tough questions about why this government has not addressed the issue properly. Answers are near at hand. Alberta is the only province with no minister responsible for the status of women and no advisory council. Alberta is one of three provincial holdouts for a child benefit, a simple measure that addresses child poverty, which is more prevalent in single families led by women.

These things do not change by some matter or some chance of evolution. Government needs to say that this matters, that this is unacceptable. Government needs to develop long-term, sustainable plans to change the situation and then keep that promise.

In this House we need to pay attention to the limited number of women in politics. I'm very proud to say that nearly half the people seeking election with the NDP in this spring's election are women. Overall, however, it takes more than inspirational seminars to see women being elected to public office or achieving equality in the workplace. It takes commitment, accountability, and work . . .

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Lesser Slave Lake.

REDress Project for Aboriginal Women

Ms Calahasen: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Today on International Women's Day I am wearing a pretty red party dress. I believe I look pretty. That's how I'm sure many aboriginal women felt as they went on their last date.

This red dress I am honoured to wear is about all the forgotten aboriginal women who've gone missing in our country. In Canada young aboriginal women are five times more likely than other women to have their lives ended by violent means. Across the country there are 600 cases of missing or murdered aboriginal women, half of which have not been solved. This is heartbreaking and unacceptable. These women are valuable members of our communities and deserve respect and protection. These women are daughters, sisters, nieces, aunts, and mothers. They have families and friends who miss them dearly.

This is the reason that the incredible Métis artist Jamie Black started the REDress project. Ms Black has been collecting and displaying red dresses to symbolize women of the red nation, their lifeblood, which has been shed all too often, and women's ability to give life. Since 2010 she has collected and displayed hundreds of dresses, and now the project is catching on. Just this week students at the U of A collected and displayed over a hundred red dresses across campus to raise awareness about this important issue. This show of solidarity with our sisters not only warms my heart, but it gives me great hope that the future will be brighter for aboriginal women in Canada.

In the spirit of International Women's Day I will say that we must stand up for women not only internationally but right here at home. Our stolen sisters deserve to be found and their spirits laid to rest, knowing that our governments and our communities will do whatever it takes to honour and protect our aboriginal sisters.

1:50

Oral Question Period

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

Provincial Budget Advertisement

Dr. Sherman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. In yet another clear example of how this government continues to bully and intimidate anyone who questions them, the Minister of Finance showed his disdain for accountability by braying about how the government won't respond to any more questions until I apologize. But I'm not going to be quiet, and I'm not going to apologize for standing up to this government on behalf of Albertans who deserve answers. To the Minister of Finance. Minister, let's try to stick to your ministry this time and answer the question. How much more taxpayer money does this minister plan to waste on pre-election ads, tours, and other schemes just to buy votes?

Mr. Liepert: Mr. Speaker, about a year and a half ago this hon. member stood in his place in this Assembly and made some allegations that proved to be unfounded. The government moved forward in the way it should to investigate those allegations. They found that there was no foundation to them. I want this member to tell this Assembly: how much did it cost Alberta taxpayers to check into the unfounded allegations that this member left on the floor of this House and has not yet apologized for?

Dr. Sherman: Mr. Speaker, we have young children here. The minister needs to teach them to exercise the art of listening. The question, Minister, was to your ministry.

The question again to this minister, whose rude and offensive behaviour to Albertans clearly reflects this government's warped values: how can your government justify wasting 425,000 taxpayer dollars on PC ads, trying to peddle your fudge-it budget?

Mr. Liepert: Mr. Speaker, it's important that Albertans know what's in the budget. We've got an election coming up, as the

member rightly admits to. We have to ensure that our messages are communicated, whether there's an election or there isn't an election.

But I come back to it, Mr. Speaker. He's talking about taxpayer dollars. I'm asking him whether he's going to apologize to this Assembly for the taxpayers of this province sending the Alberta Health Quality Council on a wild goose chase based on unfounded allegations.

Dr. Sherman: Mr. Speaker, I will not apologize for something that led to evidence that this government has broken the health care system and caused intimidation of doctors.

Given that that question led to the truth coming out, Minister, and given that the AMA has taken out a full-page newspaper ad to tell the truth about this government's record of intimidation and bullying and this minister's record, how much taxpayer money is the Ministry of Finance, you, planning to spend on a PR campaign trying to make these doctors go away, the champions for Albertans?

Mr. Liepert: Mr. Speaker, we've been very clear and open about what our advertising campaign cost. This member has not been clear and open about the allegations that he laid on this floor, and I'm asking him to apologize to this Assembly, apologize to the taxpayers of Alberta for sending the Health Quality Council on a wild goose chase on allegations that were not founded.

The Speaker: Second Official Opposition main question. The hon. Member for Calgary-Mountain View.

Judicial Inquiry into Health Services

Dr. Swann: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. In 2010 the Leader of the Official Opposition received an e-mail from Dr. Mark Joffe, the president of the Capital health region at the time. In his e-mail he conveyed the support of himself and Dr. Tim Winton, another physician, who "knows what it is like to [be] isolated, marginalized and challenged, even [when] you are right." To the Premier: will you now expand the terms of reference for the public inquiry to allow Drs. Joffe and Winton and other bullied health workers to tell their story?

Mr. Horner: Mr. Speaker, we've answered this question a number of times in this House. The Health Quality Council did their analysis of the intimidation allegations, as the Minister of Finance has noted, the unfounded allegations that were made. The Health Quality Council has actually said in their report that no public inquiry into doctor intimidation was required. The resources that the hon. member is asking us about in terms of media, the resources that would be used up and that should be used to build the task force around advocacy, that doctors want to do . . .

The Speaker: The hon. member, please.

Dr. Swann: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Why does this government dismiss the calls of the Alberta Medical Association, the Health Sciences Association, approximately one-third of the health staff in this province represented here, all of whom want a comprehensive inquiry into this health care system and intimidation and misconduct?

Mr. Horner: Well, Mr. Speaker, as I was saying, the Health Quality Council has asked in their recommendations – part B, 7 to 9, I think, are the recommendation numbers – that a task force should be created to clearly delineate what is advocacy for a

patient, what is advocacy on behalf of another doctor, what is the advocacy in the College of Family Physicians, what is the advocacy of the AMA? The AMA is in a bargaining position right now. We understand that. That's partly what's going on here as well. But we're going to go ahead with those recommendations. We've said yes.

Dr. Swann: Is this Premier trying to protect current and past ministers of health, the former board chair and CEO of Capital health, the chair of the Health Quality Council, the college registrar, or all of the above?

Mr. Horner: Mr. Speaker, the Premier has been very clear that there is going to be a judge-led inquiry into the allegations that were levied in the past by these hon. members about queue-jumping. If there was intimidation that was related to queue-jumping, as the hon. members have suggested there was, this inquiry has the ability and the terms of reference to dig into that on behalf of all Albertans. The Premier made a commitment; she's following through on that commitment.

The Speaker: Third Official Opposition main question. The hon. Member for Calgary-Mountain View.

Dr. Swann: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Three months ago in this Assembly we passed Bill 24, the Health Quality Council of Alberta Act, legislation that allows the conduct of health system inquiries by panels empowered to compel evidence even from parties with nondisclosure agreements. Back to the Deputy Premier. Has the Premier broken her promise and narrowed the terms of reference of the recently called health system inquiry so that doctors McNamee and Winton, who were bullied into nondisclosure agreements, will never be called as witnesses?

Mr. Horner: Mr. Speaker, the terms of reference are very clear, what the Premier has said is very clear, what her promise was is very clear about the allegations, again, made by the hon. members across the way here about queue-jumping and if there was intimidation around that queue-jumping. That promise was made; that promise has been kept.

Dr. Swann: Mr. Speaker, will this government finally have the courage to commit today to comprehensive terms of reference that would require prominent government members, former ministers, the former board chair and CEO of the Capital health region, the chair of the Health Quality Council, the registrar of the college of physicians to disclose this government's widespread practice of bullying and intimidation in the health system?

Mr. Horner: Again, Mr. Speaker, the inquiry is going to have the ability to look at any evidence related to queue-jumping. If doctor intimidation or political interference is identified, then it will be looked at. The promise was made; the promise was kept.

Dr. Swann: We know, Mr. Speaker, why there's not going to be this kind of quality of account with this kind of public inquiry. This government are cowards.

Mr. Horner: Well, Mr. Speaker, it's interesting. You call for an inquiry, we do the inquiry, you don't like the answer, so we become the cowards. I would call them hypocrites.

Alberta First Nations Energy Centre

Mr. Hinman: Mr. Speaker, we're dealing with another case of cover-up and backroom deals that smell of corruption, and the

only way out of this for the government is to table their own reports and be open and honest. This government recently withdrew support of the Alberta First Nations Energy Centre, a \$6.6 billion refinery project here in Alberta. The Minister of Energy claims it's not economical, while the minister of aboriginal affairs tells the treaty chiefs they did not get a good enough deal for the people. Madam Premier, which of these phony excuses are you going to stand by?

Mr. Horner: Well, Mr. Speaker, I'll let the Minister of Energy respond as well, but I believe that the hon. member might want to get his facts straight. Perhaps the Minister of Energy might want to clarify that for him.

Mr. Hinman: Yes. Table them – and we'd be thrilled – your behind-the-room deals.

Given that Engineers India Limited have completed an exhaustive 1,200-page, \$15 million plus report that is also supported by Senator St. Germain, the China National Technical Import & Export Corporation, PricewaterhouseCoopers and even your own ADM of Energy's briefing report supported the project, would the Premier please be honest with AFNEC and all Albertans and explain the political meddling, and who is the chosen company that you're tossing AFNEC aside for?

2:00

Dr. Morton: Mr. Speaker, it's interesting to hear the members of the third or fourth party suddenly encouraging government involvement in upgrading. It turns out that the project they're referring to is modelled directly after the North West upgrader, the one they were denouncing so strongly before Christmas.

I would simply say that there are billions of dollars at risk here, and the program that was being proposed had not reached the point of development in terms of engineering, financial support, and so forth where the benefits outweighed the risks.

Mr. Hinman: That's a poor excuse. The fact is that they're guaranteeing feedstock price, which isn't what we're talking about. We're talking about the BRIK program.

Given the track record of broken promises, including a judicial inquiry into doctor intimidation, critical power lines, fixed election dates, to name a few, and given this government continues to break deals and fails to deal in good faith with the people and businesses of Alberta, how are we going to attract investment to Alberta when this Premier and this government keep breaking their word? You need to return to the table with AFNEC.

Dr. Morton: Mr. Speaker, I think money talks louder than the words from this man over here. Investments in the oil sands in the past year: \$19 billion. Land sales for the year that we're just finishing: 3 and a half billion dollars. Investment confidence has never ever been higher in Alberta than it is today. They better pay attention to the facts. [interjections]

The Speaker: Okay. Hon. Member for Calgary-Glenmore, I know there's a sunburst out there, and I know there's a full moon, but let's remember where we are.

The hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands-Norwood.

Drilling Stimulus Program

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. In 2009 this government instituted a drilling incentive program that went over budget by 60 per cent and ended up costing taxpayers \$2.9 billion. In the meantime the industry lost over 10,000 jobs. This was the

biggest corporate welfare program in years. To the Minister of Energy: who is accountable for a drilling incentive program that had exceeded its budget by a billion and a half dollars while doing nothing to increase employment in the oil and gas sector?

Dr. Morton: Mr. Speaker, I'd remind the hon. leader of the fourth party that this wasn't just a drilling stimulus program; it was a job stimulus program as well. Did it spend more than we anticipated? Yes. But it created more jobs than we anticipated, 75 direct jobs, 60 indirect jobs for every well drilling every day for every Alberta family.

Mr. Mason: Mr. Speaker, you know, the minister should know that Stats Canada data shows a loss of 10,000 jobs in the oil and gas sector during this program's existence.

Given that the far-too-cozy relationship between the Tories and the oil and gas industry is well known, it's no surprise that this program contained loopholes allowing companies to trade drilling royalty credits in an extra-legal market, allowing them to receive taxpayer cash they didn't deserve. Will the minister take action to recover those funds that some companies received by exploiting loopholes in your program?

Dr. Morton: Mr. Speaker, let's go to StatsCan and remind the hon. leader of the fourth party that unemployment went over 7 per cent – over 7 per cent – that year. The price of energy in 2008 dropped from \$147 a barrel to \$34 a barrel. Wells stopped drilling. I know this may come as a shock, but when wells aren't drilled, there are no jobs and there are no royalties.

Mr. Mason: Mr. Speaker, they gave \$3 billion away, and it cost 10,000 jobs.

Given that the drilling incentive plan went way over budget and given that the government knew about it at the time, will the minister admit that while the Tory government imposes tough fiscal discipline on seniors and special-needs children, it recklessly pours billions of dollars into corporate welfare for its friends in the oil patch?

Dr. Morton: Mr. Speaker, I don't quite understand what he doesn't understand. No drilling means no royalties and no jobs – no jobs – so we're not going to apologize for creating jobs during a period when unemployment in Alberta went over 7 per cent.

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

Logging in the Bragg Creek Area

Mr. Taylor: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My office has been flooded in recent weeks with calls and e-mails from concerned citizens who are expressing their deep distress at the proposed logging in west Bragg Creek. The minister wrote me on February 15 that the proposed harvest blocks are all about fire containment, but on February 23 he told U of C professor Dr. Ralph Carter, in front of witnesses, that logging is about ensuring that the government's contractual commitments to logging companies are honoured and that the other arguments, including fire risk, are of minor importance. To the minister: which is it?

Mr. Oberle: Well, I can assure the hon. member that I said no such thing, Mr. Speaker. What I will tell him is that there is an allocation of timber that is allocated to Spray Lake Sawmills, that employs people, Alberta families. It sustains Alberta communities.

In addition to that, the harvest design on that landscape is there partially to protect the community of Bragg Creek from a fire, and

the county and the regional fire department agree with the design there. They were consulted.

Mr. Taylor: Mr. Speaker, since section 26 of the Forests Act gives the minister the unfettered right to “alter or vary any provision, condition or area” of a timber quota or even outright cancel the quota, licence, or permit in the public interest, will the minister commit to denying approval of this logging proposal in instructing Spray Lake Sawmills to log elsewhere in their forest agreement planning area this summer?

Mr. Oberle: I most certainly will not, Mr. Speaker. This is a well-planned harvest activity. It’s been vetted through our department. It’s been vetted in public consultation. It’s a good thing for the community, it’s a good thing for fire protection, and I will not cancel it.

Mr. Taylor: Well, Mr. Speaker, he must be talking to different people than I am – that seems to usually be the case with this government – because I’m hearing that the residents of Bragg Creek are feeling monumentally unconsulted, that it has been monumentally unsatisfactory consultation. The logging is proposed to happen this summer. Although SRD and the minister have not yet given final approval, I have to wonder on the strength of his answers: is the fix in?

Mr. Oberle: Well, Mr. Speaker, it comes as no surprise to me that that member is talking to different people than I am, but I’ve got to tell you that there has been public consultation on management plans. There is public consultation on general development plans and public consultation on annual operating plans. The company itself has been out there. It’s actually a requirement of their harvesting that they hold public meetings. We’ve been monitoring it, and in fact they have been holding public meetings, and they’ll continue to hold more. They work with stakeholders.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Bow, followed by the hon. Member for Calgary-Buffalo.

School Fees

Ms DeLong: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My question is to the Minister of Education. Critics are claiming that the education system is underfunded and that schools have to rely on fees to provide basic busing and instructional material for students. Why are parents in Alberta paying even more than their tax dollars to ensure that their son or daughter can successfully complete public school?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Lukaszuk: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. We have just a few days ago defended the estimates, the budget, for Alberta Education. As you know, this government has made a commitment for the first time in the history of the province to present a three-year budget, that will be increasing from \$6.8 billion to \$7.1 billion. We’re spending roughly \$36 million per school day on education. However, I will be undertaking a review of all school fees charged by jurisdictions to see if any of them can be rationalized and if there are any charges that are perhaps outside of the scope of what should be charged.

The Speaker: The hon. member, please.

Ms DeLong: Thank you very much. My next question is to the same minister. When will you require all public schools to operate

within the allotted budget and ban public school fees once and for all?

Mr. Lukaszuk: Mr. Speaker, school boards do operate within the public funding scope. However, often school boards make decisions to deliver to students additional programs or additional services that are outside of the scope of public education, or often parents make choices to perhaps have a child attend a specialized program that is not in their community school. That may be a reason for some of the fees. But we will have the fees reviewed. Parents should not be charged for anything that is funded under the auspices of public education.

The Speaker: The hon. member, please.

Ms DeLong: Thank you very much. The final question to the same minister: with school boards and schools able to decide for themselves what fees for service they may charge, how is a parent to know what is a legitimate, required expense and what may be questionable or, for that matter, who to turn to when in doubt?

Mr. Lukaszuk: Well, a school board’s autonomy is very important because the role of locally elected trustees is to make decisions reflective of community needs. Having said that, I will be publishing and I have already started publishing detailed budget information not only from the government of Alberta for the Ministry of Education but for all the school boards so that parents will be able to make decisions based on factual information, to see how much money is spent in each school board and how school boards allocate dollars within their system.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Buffalo, followed by the hon. Member for Strathcona.

2:10

Funding for Private Schools

Mr. Hehr: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. This year private schools will receive \$190 million in public funding. The Minister of Education has created a website where Alberta taxpayers can hold our public school boards accountable for their expenditures to ensure openness and transparency. Having checked the website, I was distressed that no information about private school spending was on the website. To the Minister of Education: why is this information not available regarding private schools and how they are using public dollars?

Mr. Lukaszuk: Mr. Speaker, information about all schools will be publicized soon. However, I have to tell you this. Parents of children who go to private schools also pay property taxes, which in part pay for public education. Those schools receive only 70 per cent of public funding. They don’t receive any additional envelope funding for transportation. Private schools build their own buildings, which are often in excess of 20-some million dollars. At the end of the day Albertans have choice. The most important aspect of Alberta education is parental control and parental choice, and they will continue to have choice.

Mr. Hehr: Nevertheless, Mr. Speaker, private schools do receive public funds. They deserve some public scrutiny. Why do we have our public school boards put their information online and not these private schools?

Mr. Lukaszuk: Well, Mr. Speaker, Rome was not built in one day. I have already released the information on all school boards. We are accumulating information on private schools, and the

public funding component of private schools will be equally published on our website as it is for school boards.

Mr. Hehr: That answer is not good enough, Mr. Speaker. He knows full well that private schools get money, roll it into a pot, and spend it on whatever they like. So with the deepest of respect, would you have private schools outline their entire spending money and what they're actually doing in those schools?

Mr. Lukaszuk: I don't know, Mr. Speaker, who's rolling pot, but I can tell you one thing. I know for a fact that candidates for the Liberal Party are very supportive of private schools much like most Albertans are. The very fundamental issue and fundamental block of Alberta education is choice. Parents are voting with their feet. They're sending their children where they choose to, and we support that choice by providing 70 per cent of public funding but not any additional contingents of funding.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Strathcona, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Protection of Job Seekers

Mr. Quest: Well thank you, Mr. Speaker. There've been a lot of stories in the news recently about the looming shortage of workers in our province. During the last boom many foreign workers that came to our province in search of jobs were in turn taken advantage of by unscrupulous employment agencies. To the Minister of Service Alberta: as our economy starts to heat up again, what are you doing to ensure that job seekers are protected this time from predatory practices?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Bhullar: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. This government works to ensure all job seekers in Alberta are treated fairly. That's why earlier today I announced strict new rules to strengthen protection for job seekers and to make employment agencies more accountable. Many people come to Alberta because of our economic opportunities. However, there are individuals that tend to take advantage of these folks, and that's why the changes in employment agency regulations show that this government is taking action to protect the most vulnerable.

Mr. Quest: Mr. Speaker, to the same minister. Given that the minister is making these regulatory changes only now, does this mean that our protections were weak up to this point in time? Why has it taken so long to act?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Bhullar: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Not at all, hon. member. The issue was that just a few years ago we had 158 agencies working; now we have 528. Now, the majority of them are good people, working well in our industry. There are always a few who try to find a way around the law. What we've done is found those loopholes, found areas where they've been hiding behind the law, and found more protection for Albertans.

Mr. Quest: Well, Mr. Speaker, it's good that the government is making this law stronger; however, it's not going to work if it doesn't have any teeth. To the same minister: how will the minister make sure these rules are followed and enforced?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Bhullar: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The actions we've taken

will do exactly that. We have strict rules. People can face penalties of up to two years in jail and \$100,000 in fines. The actions we've taken will ensure that we will have more evidence and more compliance with our rules. If people are not following our rules, we will have more evidence to prosecute them and bring them to justice.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar, followed by the hon. Member for Lethbridge-East.

Cost of Premier's Swearing-in Ceremony

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you. The hon. Member for Fort Saskatchewan-Vegreville spent at his swearing-in ceremony as Premier in December 2006 \$10,900 tax dollars. Five years later the hon. Member for Calgary-Elbow spent at her swearing-in ceremony as Premier over \$22,000. My first question is to the Deputy Premier. Why did this ceremony double in cost at a time when the Progressive Conservative Party racked up over \$7 billion in deficits? [interjections] This is not a laughing matter.

Mr. Horner: Well, Mr. Speaker, there are a number of different places where the hon. member could be asking this question, none of which would be in question period. It's not a matter of policy; it's a matter of the budgets. I would encourage the hon. member to find the appropriate place.

Mr. MacDonald: It's in the *Alberta Gazette*, Mr. Speaker, and this cabinet is responsible for what is published in the *Alberta Gazette*.

I'll ask the Minister of Finance this next question. Given that this PC cabinet can spend tax dollars extravagantly on a swearing-in ceremony just like the current Premier, why did the swearing-in ceremony costs for the new cabinet double when you compare them to what the former Premier did in 2006?

Mr. Liepert: Mr. Speaker, I'd be happy to look into this outrageous expenditure, as the member seems to indicate. I think he said that it was 20,000 bucks, but I'll have a look at it and see what it was.

Mr. MacDonald: You look after the pennies, and the dollars will gather themselves.

Now, again to the Deputy Premier: why did these costs for these separate swearing-in ceremonies for both the Premier and the cabinet double – double – at the same time this government had racked up \$7 billion in deficits? Do you not have any respect whatsoever for taxpayers?

Mr. Horner: As the hon. Minister of Finance has stated, he will look into those costs and will verify where the change or the variance was. Perhaps, Mr. Speaker, that would come to Public Accounts. That would be my guess as to where that would go. The hon. member should know that, given his years of experience on Public Accounts, but there are many things the hon. member doesn't know.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Lethbridge-East, followed by the hon. Member for Fort McMurray-Wood Buffalo.

Support for Front-line Social Workers

Ms Pastoor: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. National Social Work Week is an opportunity to highlight the important work being done by social workers in this province. Within this ministry social workers continue to be challenged with caseloads involving

children and families in extremely difficult situations. To the Minister of Human Services: what is your ministry doing to provide front-line workers with the support they need to do their jobs in a timely and exceptionally efficient manner?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I had the privilege of introducing a number of social workers today as representatives of that profession, and indeed the lives of thousands of Albertans are touched and changed for the better each day because of the commitment and dedication of social workers and caseworkers. Their work is not easy. I'm pleased to tell you that we're providing additional support for front-line workers by adding 30 new supervisor positions. Supervisors and front-line staff work as teams to review information, make decisions about services, and attend case conferences to discuss strategies for addressing complex cases.

The Speaker: The hon. member, please.

Ms Pastoor: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. That partly answered my second question to the same minister. However, how will 30 new supervisory positions help reduce caseloads for front-line workers?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Hancock: Well, thank you. Mr. Speaker, by working together, managers, supervisors, and front-line workers can address situations in a way that contributes to the best possible outcomes for families receiving intervention services. Supervisors are directly involved in day-to-day management of cases and work with their managers and front-line staff to manage the workloads. This comes from the report that we had about a year or so ago, which said that we needed to provide more support for the front-line workers, and that's exactly what we're doing.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Ms Pastoor: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Again to the same minister: assuming that many of these new supervisory positions will be filled by people currently doing front-line work, will you be hiring more front-line workers to fill any of those vacancies?

Mr. Hancock: Mr. Speaker, absolutely. If there are any people from the front line who take these new positions, the positions that they vacate will be filled. We want to have a full complement of these very exceptional, hard-working, and dedicated staff working for the children and families of this province on a day-to-day basis. We want to make sure that they get the support they need and that they achieve the outcomes for those children and families.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Fort McMurray-Wood Buffalo, followed by the hon. Member for Calgary-Varsity.

2:20

Medevac Services

Mr. Boutilier: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Medevac services are very important to all of us, especially in my constituency of Fort McMurray-Wood Buffalo. Lost minutes and lost seconds can mean the difference between life and death for people in northern communities like mine. Less than a year ago the Health Quality Council reported that patient care for medevac patients in Alberta has been compromised, and longer transport times were an increased threat to the well-being of Alberta patients. My

questions are to the Premier. What progress has been made to date on fixing air medevacs and medevac services for northern communities?

Mr. Horner: Mr. Speaker, the hon. member is absolutely correct that this is a very important issue for residents of northern Alberta; in fact, for residents even north of Alberta because our medevac actually handles flights coming in from outside the province to the north. The Health Quality Council did have a recommendation that there had to be an alternate landing facility within proximity of the Edmonton International if the City Centre Airport was to close. We are aggressively pursuing two options at this point in time. That would be the Namao air base and the Villeneuve airstrip.

The Speaker: The hon. member, please.

Mr. Boutilier: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Again to the Deputy Premier: given that Dr. John Cowell publicly testified at that Public Accounts Committee that there is no way to force government to actually implement Health Quality Council recommendations, how can Albertans have confidence that your government is actually acting on what the Health Quality Council recommended for air medevacs?

Mr. Horner: Mr. Speaker, we don't need to be forced to act. We're going to do it. We're going to create the alternate landing strip that needs to be done. My goal is to get the ultimate value not only for the medevac services but for taxpayers as a whole and to create a system that is safe and secure for residents of the north.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Boutilier: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Given that this government has failed to act on the Health Quality Council's previous recommendations, how can Albertans and my constituents trust this government? When you haven't acted in the past, how can we trust you to act in the future on Health Quality Council recommendations?

Mr. Horner: Mr. Speaker, we have accepted all 21 of the recent recommendations from the Health Quality Council. We are actively engaged, as I've said. I know that the hon. member reads the papers and also is attuned to what's going on in the media. He would have seen that we are in discussions with the Department of National Defence and the Garrison at Namao although – I will put this on the table – the decision of Namao will be left with the general and the military because we don't want to do anything that would affect their readiness or their operational capability. As soon as they let us know what that decision will be, we will act.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Varsity, followed by the hon. Member for Strathmore-Brooks.

First Nations Economic Development

Mr. Chase: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Despite Alberta's low unemployment rate First Nations' unemployment is significantly higher than for the nonaboriginal population. The Alberta Coalition for Action on Labour Shortages predicts that there will be soon 114,000 more jobs than people to fill them. To the Minister of Intergovernmental, International and Aboriginal Relations: how is it that with a looming labour shortage and the federal government's refusal to expand the provincial nominee program, your department is not putting more efforts into employing and promoting the employment of First Nations?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Dallas: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and thanks to the hon. member for the question. Indeed, it's an opportunity to talk about the many positive initiatives and discussions that we have with First Nations in terms of economic development opportunities throughout this province. Using opportunities like the First Nations development fund, First Nations communities are engaged in developing enterprises, labour training, educational initiatives, creating a readying workforce that can help aboriginal people.

The Speaker: Thank you. The hon. member, please.

Mr. Chase: Thank you. Will the minister commit to tabling in this House detailed funding and enrolment for all Alberta provincial government-led programs that employ and/or promote the employment of First Nations?

Mr. Hancock: Mr. Speaker, the programming in this area would fall within our ministry. I won't commit to doing that without first taking a look to see what that might involve. That would be imprudent for me to do so.

I can assure the hon. member that there is much happening. We had a report which was done last year called Connecting the Dots, I believe, which talked about an aboriginal workforce strategy. A number of members of this House participated in that. We're moving forward with First Nations on that report. There are programs like Trade Winds, with the trade unions who are looking for aboriginal apprentices. There are a number of programs in this area.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Chase: Thank you. Hopefully, either the hon. Minister for Human Services or the hon. Minister for IAR will commit to providing that information in detail to this House.

To either minister, I suppose. It appears that this government is searching in the far-flung corners of the world for an employment solution that resides here at home. Why has funding for international offices gone up by 60 per cent, but funding for aboriginal programs has remained constant?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Dallas: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I remind the hon. member that while I've defended those budget estimates, we have not yet completed the budget process. It is true that we contemplate investments to increase our presence and to explore opportunities for all Albertans to increase their participation in this great economy that we have. Whether those are aboriginal groups or whether they're private enterprises or whether they're families, making connections around the globe is important to ensuring the success of all Albertans.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Strathmore-Brooks, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

Agricultural Research and Development

Mr. Doerksen: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Much of agriculture is enjoying a time of unprecedented market returns. Many of my constituents understand the importance of strategic investment in research and innovation to ensure the industry's global competitiveness, and that understanding is the genesis of my question to the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development.

What is your department doing to work with producers to ensure that the agriculture industry remains competitive?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Berger: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. As ag minister I'm very proud to be representing the best producers in the world, and we continue to invest in those producers in Alberta. Just last week we invested \$30 million into crop research in the province of Alberta to ensure that our producers remain competitive in the world.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Doerksen: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My second question to the same minister. I'd ask for some more specifics. Those are big numbers. What are some of the specific investments that will contribute to competitiveness and forward-looking results for the industry?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Berger: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Although some would like to dis the farmers, I guess, last year Alberta farmers exported \$7 billion worth of agricultural products throughout the world. It's imperative that we continue to invest in this, so we have invested into management research, pest surveillance, crop management, food and grain quality and technology, and food safety. All of these things are part of the social licence for agriculture to continue to thrive in this province and advance, and that's something we're proud of on this side.

The Speaker: The hon. member, please.

Mr. Doerksen: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Last week we opened a new greenhouse facility at Crop Diversification Centre South. I'm interested to know from the minister what that facility is expected to contribute to agriculture's competitiveness in the future, and will it be available to my constituents who are involved in crop production research?

Mr. Berger: Thank you once again, hon. member. This new facility represents a \$17 million investment on behalf of the government of Alberta into greenhouse technology in Alberta. For those on the other side who aren't listening, I'd like them to know there are 310 acres under greenhouse roof in Alberta. Some of this technology will actually work in Wood Buffalo if somebody is listening.

This, Mr. Speaker, is very important. We have the technology there in a modern greenhouse with unmatched capabilities for research, demonstration, development, commercialization, education, and extension.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre, followed by the hon. Member for Rocky Mountain House.

Alberta Multimedia Development Fund

Ms Blakeman: Thanks very much, Mr. Speaker. All of my questions are to the Minister of Culture and Community Services. First, I'd like to give my thanks to the culture ministry for listening to me and the film and television community and making some much-needed changes to the multimedia fund, but snuck in there with these changes was a requirement that applications will be assessed by a panel for suitability. Now, this is new. To the minister of culture: can the minister explain to us how this expert panel is not a censorship panel to deny applications for films that might embarrass the government?

2:30

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mrs. Klimchuk: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I appreciate the comments about the Alberta multimedia development fund and the streamlining that we have done in that area. I think it's important to note that there are a lot of great projects that are being funded across Alberta, and these projects will continue to be funded based on the merits and based on the projects that are brought forward.

Ms Blakeman: Okay. Well, can the minister tell me exactly what this section means, then? It talks about, number one, assessment and notification: "Department staff will convene an expert panel to assess applications and make grant recommendations to the Minister." That's an entirely new section, and it has to do with censorship. Could the minister please explain it?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mrs. Klimchuk: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I believe that the depth and the wealth of productions that are being done here all contribute to what we have here in Alberta. The process that's in place is nothing about censorship because of the projects that come forward, the Global Visions Film Festival and some of the great film festivals that we have here in Alberta and around the world. This is not about censorship. This is about dollars being used prudently and making sure that the projects brought forward are thought out.

Ms Blakeman: So if there is a film with well-known and reputable production people involved with it that is presented to this expert panel but they are contemplating a film that may not be complimentary to this current government, are you telling me that they're going to be able to go ahead with full funding?

Mrs. Klimchuk: Mr. Speaker, I think it's very clear with the number of films that have been funded through this program for a number of years that there are some excellent productions. Again, this is nothing about censorship. It is about the process, it is about the dollars that are put aside in this fund, and it's about the creative energy we have in this province and the talent that we have and about the choices they need to make when they produce films in Alberta.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Rocky Mountain House, followed by the hon. Member for Calgary-McCall.

Gasoline and Diesel Prices

Mr. Lund: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. As we all know, the price of oil is on the rise again, and I'm getting a lot of calls from constituents about the price of gasoline at the pumps. My question to the Minister of Energy: since we have so much oil right under our feet, why is it that we have to pay such a high price, at well over a dollar a litre, for our gasoline?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Dr. Morton: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The hon. member is right. The bad news is that gasoline and diesel prices are going up again. The good news is, though, that in Alberta we still have among the lowest prices in all of Canada. Both gas and diesel prices are set mainly by supply and demand both internationally and locally. Internationally tensions in the Middle East and supply disruptions there are cutting back on supply. Locally, though, we benefit by

the proximity of refineries to oil and, therefore, lower transportation costs. That contributes to our relatively low cost compared to other provinces.

The Speaker: The hon. member, please.

Mr. Lund: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I would be very interested to know: just where does Alberta rank in price, and what are the taxes that are associated with gas and diesel?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Dr. Morton: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. In fact, I'd be very happy to supply that information. We still, as I said, have among the lowest gasoline and diesel prices in Canada. This is due mainly to the fact that we have the lowest fuel tax, only 9 cents. To get right down to the details, gas in Edmonton and Calgary right now is averaging around \$1.08 a litre. That's 30 cents cheaper than St. John's, 27 cents cheaper than Vancouver, and 24 cents cheaper than Montreal. For diesel, in fact, we are the lowest in Canada, around \$1.16 a litre right now. That's 29 cents cheaper than Vancouver, 25 cents cheaper than Montreal.

The Speaker: The hon. member, please.

Mr. Lund: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Thanks for that information, but I'm curious: why is the price of diesel now higher than the price of gasoline when this is not the traditional ratio?

Dr. Morton: Again, the hon. member is absolutely right. Historically, diesel tends to be less expensive than gasoline, but again I'd repeat that last year we had the lowest average retail diesel price in all of Canada. The reason for the change is economic development. The pace of economic development in Alberta is so strong right now that the demand for diesel keeps going up. But I'm happy to report that, thanks to the work we're doing in working with North West upgrader, we're bringing on not just a new upgrading plant but that they'll also be producing diesel that will contribute to the increase in supply and reduce prices.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-McCall, followed by the hon. Member for Calgary-Hays.

Alberta Schools Alternative Procurement Program

Mr. Kang: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I have been hearing from school boards that there are major challenges with the new cookie-cutter P3 schools built under the ASAP program, that school designs are not flexible. For example, the Edmonton school board wants schools with cafeterias in them, where students can eat and meet, but there is no room in the new schools for this. To the Minister of Infrastructure: if every student is different, every school board is unique in its needs, why is every school built the same?

Mr. Johnson: Mr. Speaker, every school is not built the same. Different school projects across the province are evaluated based on whether a P3 makes sense or not, whether a design-bid build makes sense, or whether it should just be a modernization. There are approximately 40 P3s that we're going to have in the province going forward. If there are specific issues with any of those P3 schools, I'd like to hear about it because up until now we haven't heard a lot of concerns.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Kang: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It came up in the Public Accounts Committee meeting that there were issues with the designs.

Given that his department loves to crow about how much money they claim to have saved on these schools, can he tell this House how much of those savings comes on the backs of the students, who cannot have the cafeterias or extra classrooms which they need?

Mr. Johnson: Mr. Speaker, the savings that are coming from the P3s are coming in a number of ways. One of the things that it enables us to do is to build more schools for more students in more communities. At the end of the day everyone is trying to work to put the students at the centre of this, including the Minister of Education with his new Education Act, the school board trustees, and everyone on this side of the House.

Mr. Kang: Mr. Speaker, to the minister again: can the minister tell us why the decisions about where and how schools are built are made by the government in Edmonton instead of at local school boards elected by and accountable to Albertans?

Mr. Johnson: Mr. Speaker, the last time I checked, we are elected by and accountable to Albertans as well.

The entire priority list, how we decide on which schools are built, is done in consultation with the ministries and all stakeholders, Treasury Board. There are a number of people involved in that. No one can question the investments Alberta is making in capital in this province. It's significant and outpaces all the other provinces in the country. And we're doing that because we're putting the students first.

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

Skilled Labour Shortage

Mr. Johnston: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Alberta's prosperity depends on having enough skilled labour to keep our economic growth on track. I'm hearing lots of talk about bringing immigration from outside of Canada to Alberta. All of my questions are for the Minister of Intergovernmental, International and Aboriginal Relations. What progress has your department made to address Alberta's labour shortage, and what are you doing to support Albertans?

Mr. Dallas: Well, Mr. Speaker, employing Albertans is always our first priority, but our approach in addressing labour needs is multifaceted. We work in collaboration with Human Services and a variety of other ministries in making sure that underrepresented groups in our population such as aboriginal people and mature workers have opportunities in the workforce. We also work directly with businesses, engaging them in finding ways to help mature workers participate.

When workers aren't available locally or from other parts of Canada . . .

The Speaker: I think we'll move on. The hon. member.

Mr. Johnston: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Next question, same minister: if immigration is part of the solution, how are you ensuring that Alberta's needs are reflected in immigration policy that is set in Ottawa?

Mr. Dallas: Well, Mr. Speaker, I recently had the opportunity to discuss Alberta's concerns with the federal immigration minister, Jason Kenney, actually in Calgary about a week ago. We talked

about a number of ways that skilled workers might come to Alberta, including American labour possibilities. We also discussed how businesses could play a more active role in identifying the skilled labour that they need. The federal minister is considering a number of changes that I believe would give employers more opportunities in selecting prospective immigrants. This is a . . .

The Speaker: The hon. member, please.

Mr. Johnston: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's encouraging to see that the province and federal government are working together on this matter. My next question, same minister. Working together only gets us half of the way there. How are we going to ensure that Alberta's priorities are being addressed in Ottawa?

2:40

Mr. Dallas: Well, Mr. Speaker, in fact, this issue is a priority. Of course, that's why my department is supporting our Deputy Premier, who will be travelling to Ottawa next week. He'll be meeting with the Alberta caucus down there and federal ministers, and immigration is going to be on the agenda for every discussion that the Deputy Premier will have.

Mr. Speaker, it's important that we continue to build these collaborative relationships with our federal partners. This has been incited by our Premier. Right from her initial instalment she made it a priority that we want to improve the tenor of our relationship, that we want to have open and constructive dialogue, that we want to continue to make progress.

The Speaker: Hon. members, that will conclude the question-and-answer period for today. Eighteen members were recognized, 108 questions and responses.

In a very few short seconds from now we will continue the Routine with Members' Statements.

Members' Statements

(continued)

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

Heart Function Clinics

Mr. Rodney: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It is an honour to rise today to inform Albertans about the great work that's occurring at two of our state-of-the-art heart function clinics. They've dramatically increased access and advancements in heart care for all Albertans. Over the past two years the C.K. Hui Heart Centre and the Mazankowski Alberta Heart Institute have made remarkable progress and impact in the areas of research, professional knowledge growth, and preventive awareness among Albertans.

They've also significantly increased our province's heart patient intake capacity, improved collaboration between health care providers, and radically shortened referral times. Referral times for heart failure patients have dropped by 75 per cent, from eight weeks to two weeks, over the past two years. Individuals who are referred by a doctor to a heart function clinic are now able to see a specialist and begin a treatment plan much sooner than before, and of course this is invaluable since the quicker the start of a treatment plan, the better the long-term outcome for the patient. All of this good work adds up to 1,900 Albertans with heart failure receiving superior attention at these two heart function clinics at any given time. That's thousands of Alberta heart patients receiving the best possible opportunity to live longer and enjoy a higher quality of life.

I trust that all members of the House will join me in congratulating the doctors, nurses, nurse practitioners, and other health professionals within Alberta Health Services who've ensured that Albertans who have experienced heart failure will have a stronger and brighter future.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

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

Kathleen Sendall

Mr. Webber: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. I would like to recognize the achievements of Kathleen Sendall of Calgary, recently named a member of the Order of Canada for her contributions to the advancement of women in engineering and in the corporate sector. Ms Sendall is currently serving as vice-chair of the board of directors of Alberta Innovates: Energy and Environment Solutions. Before joining us at Alberta Innovates, she was senior vice-president of Petro-Canada's North American natural gas business unit.

She has also served as president of the Calgary chapter of the International Women's Forum and co-chaired their World Leadership Conference on Water, Wealth and Power in Montreal in October of 2010. She is past president of the Canadian Academy of Engineering and a former governor of the Canadian Association of Petroleum Producers. In 2007 she was inducted into Canada's most powerful women top 100 hall of fame. Mr. Speaker, Kathleen remains an active member of the Association of Professional Engineers, Geologists and Geophysicists of Alberta and the Society of Petroleum Engineers as well as the Michaëlle Jean Foundation and the Calgary Opera. No wonder she has been named to the Order of Canada.

Please join me in congratulating this extraordinary Alberta woman for her many accomplishments and this well-deserved recognition.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

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

Judicial Inquiry into Health Services

Dr. Swann: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's time to blow the lid off this decade-long government cover-up of abuse and financial mismanagement in the health care system. Health professionals and the public deserve to know the truth. The inconvenient truth is that current and past ministers of health, the former board chair and CEO of Capital health, the chair of the Health Quality Council of Alberta, and the college registrar have knowledge and perhaps have not felt free to speak on these issues.

In a personal e-mail from Dr. Joffe, then president of the Capital Region Medical Staff Association, in November 2010 to the MLA for Edmonton-Meadowlark he said:

I've offered you support before and want to do [it] again.

I was called this morning by Dr. Tim Winton... heard you on 630 CHED. Tim phoned me as he was concerned about you.

As you may or may not know, Tim went through a Capital Health "process" similar to the one you went through some years ago. His went on for several years and ultimately destroyed his career. He knows what it is like to be isolated, marginalized and challenged, even though you are RIGHT. He also knows what it's like to have the College involved and have challenges to your mental health.

He is concerned for you, as am I. His direct advice to you is that it is time to go underground. You have made your position clear – further discussion... allows others to challenge

and destroy... credibility. First they will destroy your credibility in the Legislature and then as a physician. The more you speak now, the more opportunity they will have to challenge and destroy you.

As mentioned, Tim has been through it. He understands the strategy of isolation, marginalization and then challenges to your mental health status. He's been through it all.

... He has come out on top, though with irreparable damage to his career. He is now an expert in these things and is more than willing to help you, as he has some others in similar situations.

Take care of yourself. We are here and willing to help.

Mark

This Premier must now do what she said she would do last year, include health worker intimidation and financial misconduct in the public inquiry. It's clear this PC government is more...

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Cold Lake. [interjection] Go ahead.

World Kidney Day

Mrs. Leskiw: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's a pleasure to rise today to speak about World Kidney Day. This year the Kidney Foundation of Canada's goal is to bring awareness to the importance of organ donation and the positive outcomes of transplants.

Kidney donation is the most frequent and successful type of living organ donation, yet since 2006 donor rates have become stagnant. With the number of Canadians being treated for kidney failure tripling over the past 20 years, organ donation is more vital than ever. About 2.6 million Canadians have kidney disease or are at risk of developing it.

In 2010, 1,248 people received a kidney transplant, but over 3,300 people were still waiting. Each day about 16 people are told that their kidneys have failed. Albertans with kidney failure spend a number of hours each day or week on dialysis and can wait anywhere from a few months to several years for a transplant.

The need for organs is far greater than the available supply, which is why the government of Alberta established the living donor expense reimbursement program to minimize the potential financial burden associated with the living organ donation process.

Today on World Kidney Day I encourage all Albertans to talk about organ donation with their friends and families and to make their wishes known. Thank you.

Tabling Returns and Reports

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar, then the hon. Member for Calgary-Varsity, then the hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

Mr. MacDonald: Yes. Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I have four tablings today. The first one is on behalf of my colleague the hon. Member for Calgary-Mountain View. These are 10 separate letters outlining concerns by various individuals, and these concerns are related to mental health care and the resources provided. This is to the government of Alberta.

The second tabling I have is an e-mail dated November 26, 2010, from an A. Mark Joffe to the hon. Member for Edmonton-Meadowlark. That was in reference to the hon. Member for Calgary-Mountain View's recent private member's statement.

The third tabling I have is information that I have from the *Alberta Gazette* indicating that the swearing-in ceremony for Alberta's 13th Premier cost \$10,900 and the cabinet swearing-in ceremony at the same time in 2006 was \$2,684.

The next tabling I have is also related to the questions that I asked in the Assembly this afternoon, which was the swearing-in ceremony for Alberta's 14th Premier on October 7, 2011. The cost of this was \$22,147, a doubling in five years. Also noted here is the cabinet's swearing-in ceremony from October 12, 2011. It cost \$5,500, again double from what it was in 2007. That's proof of what I had talked . . .

2:50

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

Mr. MacDonald: I have another tabling, sir.

The Speaker: Oh, sorry. You're not finished?

Mr. MacDonald: No, I'm not.

This is correspondence that I have written and received in my capacity as chair of the Standing Committee on Public Accounts, and this is correspondence I have received from the current Minister of Finance and also the current candidate for Calgary-West, Mr. Hughes.

Thank you.

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

Mr. Chase: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I have two sets of tablings. My first is a further 20 e-mails out of the hundreds I receive from the following individuals who are seeking the preservation of the Castle wilderness and who believe clear-cutting will damage the ecology, watershed, wildlife, and natural species and must be prohibited at all costs. These e-mails come from Sue Arlidge, Nancy Dalgleish, Brian Danniels, Eva Torn Thomas, Sandra Clements, Chris Whelan, Jason Taylor, Teresa Looy, Daniel and Maxine Rudy, Kristine Kowalchuk, Stephanie Michaels, Susan Como, Gerard Drotar, Alexis Harper, Eileen Patterson, Lara Grinevitch, Nick Stanley, Darlene Robb, and Cherie Lowe.

My second tabling is an information sheet from the chair of the Greater Bragg Creek FireSmart Committee, Clint Docken, stating that the committee has been developing a greater Bragg Creek wildfire mitigation strategy since 2008 and recommending that proposed logging by Spray Lake Sawmills be planned with the collaboration of all parties in the west Bragg Creek land users group.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

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

Ms Blakeman: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I'd like to table the appropriate number of copies of an e-mail received from Janet Quon, who is a University of Alberta pharmacy class of 2012 and identifies herself as one of my constituents. Ms Quon is particularly concerned about the inadequate reimbursement model for generic drugs and is very concerned that this is going to affect her ability to provide patient care along with other pharmacists' ability to do that at the same time and asked me to bring this forward.

Thank you very much.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Municipal Affairs.

Mr. Griffiths: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased and, quite frankly, proud to table the required number of copies of a media release and letter of support for the Northern Gateway project that the Capital Region Board issued earlier today. The board consists of 24 member municipalities in the Edmonton region. They believe – and, in fact, they are correct – that there are significant

and tangible benefits to the Northern Gateway project that extend far beyond Alberta's borders, and they are encouraging the joint review panel to approve it.

Thank you.

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

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I have several tablings today. First of all, I would like to table the appropriate number of copies of documents regarding the drilling stimulus program. They relate to my questions earlier today and indicate that there is a massive oversubscription to the program as well as showing that the number of rigs go up and down relating to oil prices, not to the program.

Secondly, Mr. Speaker, I'd like to table the appropriate number of copies of some additional postcards that we've received from 50 Edmontonians calling on the government to provide full funding to open the family medicine and urgent care sections of the East Edmonton health centre.

Mr. Speaker, I have also today the appropriate number of copies of an e-mail and a power bill sent to us by Ann Baran of Iron Springs. Her power bill is for February 2012. Her electric energy charges were \$498.19, and she asks: "How can anyone budget for such fluctuations in the price per kWh? Why are there such dramatic changes reflected in each bill?"

We have an e-mail from Sandra Kraus of Mossleigh, who sent us her power bill from February, 2012 in the amount of \$245.44. She says: "Too many people are living high on the hog at the expense of the average hard working Albertan. Enough is enough!"

Mr. Speaker, I have an e-mail here that was sent by Tom and Michelle Benth of Edmonton to the hon. Member for Edmonton-Glenora. They wrote:

The fact is deregulation benefits only the utility companies – not the consumers . . . Those of us who are on pensions, on disability allowances, single parent families, & the working poor – among others – are adversely affected by what can only be called unbridled greed!

Mr. Speaker, I'm also tabling a bill and comments from Suzanne Schmidt of Stony Plain. Her electricity charges for January 2012 were \$611.39.

Mr. Speaker, there's also one from Dennis and Corinne Cowan of Sandy Lane. They have sent us their bill for January 2012, which, including distribution charges, came to \$294.86.

Mr. Speaker, I'm also tabling a bill from Ryan Reich from Edmonton from February of 2012. His electric energy charges came to \$211.97.

Mr. Speaker, we have a bill from Lee Fremont of Gibbons, who sent us his January 2012 bill in the amount of \$483.96.

Also, John Biollo of Leduc sent us his February 2012 bill for \$244.46.

Mr. Speaker, I also have a bill from Joyce Aitken of Calgary from January 2012, which shows her electricity charges for that month to be \$421.47.

Mr. Speaker, Mickel Auger of Beaver county sent us his bill from January 2012, which came to \$438.94.

Mr. Speaker, also Brad and Sonja Avramenko of Leduc county sent us what they consider an outrageous bill for January 2012 for \$568.51.

Mr. Speaker, Edward Bieber's electricity bill for January 2012 came to \$213.23. He sent us his bill.

Just a couple more. Debbie Paulon of Edmonton sent us her January 2012 bill in the amount of \$501.02.

Two more. Bob Horne from Entwistle sent us his bill of \$352.73, and Edmontonian Brenda Rogal's bill for February 2012 was \$337.46.

Mr. Speaker, I'm tabling the appropriate number of copies of all of these electricity bills so that all members of the House can know what Albertans are facing on a monthly basis.

The Speaker: Are there others? The hon. Member for Airdrie-Chestermere.

Mr. Anderson: Mr. Speaker, I'd like to table five copies of the materials that were referred to in the hon. Member for Calgary-Glenmore's question earlier today.

The Speaker: Well, hon. members, that took 17 minutes. Some of the tablings had to do with questions, which is quite okay. A lot of tablings had to do with other things.

Hon. members, remember that in the past the chair has oftentimes stated that in other jurisdictions the only tablings that are permitted are those which are legislatively required by the laws of the jurisdiction they're in. This is one of those great subject matters that could easily be referred to the Standing Committee on Privileges and Elections, Standing Orders and Printing for review.

Projected Government Business

The Speaker: The Official Opposition House Leader.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. At this point I would like to ask the Government House Leader to share with us projected government business for the evening commencing the 12th of March, and this is under Standing Order 7(6).

The Speaker: The hon. Government House Leader.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Of course, on the evening of March 12 the Legislature will not be sitting, but the policy field committees will continue with estimates as referred to them. But on the 13th of March in the afternoon in the Committee of Supply what every member of the House has been waiting for with bated breath, the estimates of Human Services, will be the order of the day, and then as per the Order Paper if there's any time remaining.

In the evening we will anticipate, in accordance with the schedule that has been filed and in accordance with the motion passed by the House, that the votes on the main estimates would then be taken. Members of the Chamber are reminded that if there are any exceptions to the votes, I think there's a procedure in the standing orders for those to be identified a day earlier.

3:00

Following the vote on the main estimates, as per the motion passed earlier in this House, the House would rise out of Committee of Supply and would sit, and we would expect that we would continue with second reading on Bill 2, the Education Act; Bill 4, St. Albert and Sturgeon Valley School Districts Establishment Act; Bill 5, Seniors' Property Tax Deferral Act; Bill 6, Property Rights Advocate Act.

On Wednesday, March 14, in the afternoon for second reading we would anticipate Bill 4, St. Albert and Sturgeon Valley School Districts Establishment Act; Bill 5, Seniors' Property Tax Deferral Act; Bill 6, Property Rights Advocate Act; and perhaps in Committee of the Whole Bill 2, Education Act; and as per the Order Paper. In the evening we would anticipate the same type of

rotation, with second reading of bills 5 and 6, Committee of the Whole on perhaps bills 2 and 4, and as per the Order Paper.

I believe that on Wednesday we would also have, the vote having been taken on Tuesday night, first reading of the Appropriation Act, which would mean that on Thursday, March 15, in the afternoon second reading of the Appropriation Act, and we would anticipate continuing with second reading of bills 5 and 6 and as per the Order Paper.

I would apologize to the members. I did distribute, as is our practice, a copy of this to other members earlier, but I note that it did not have on it the reference to the Appropriation Act. I apologize. That should be added.

Orders of the Day Government Motions

The Speaker: The hon. Government House Leader.

Address to House by Mr. Rick Hansen

11. Mr. Hancock moved:

Be it resolved that

- (1) Mr. Rick Hansen be invited to the floor of this Chamber to address the Legislative Assembly on Monday, March 12, 2012;
- (2) This address be the first item of business after the singing of *O Canada*; and
- (3) The ordinary business of the Assembly resume upon the conclusion of Mr. Hansen's address; and be it further resolved that Mr. Hansen's address become part of the permanent records of the Assembly.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. As I gave oral notice of yesterday, I had the privilege of receiving from yourself a memo dated Monday, March 5, indicating that Rick Hansen would be in Edmonton on his 25th anniversary tour, commemorating his tour around the world with respect to raising the profile of persons with disabilities and spinal injury. You noted in that memo that on a previous occasion he had been invited to speak on the floor of the House, so I would move Government Motion 11.

I think it appropriate, Mr. Speaker, to acquiesce in your request that he be invited on this 25th anniversary given that the House did have him before the House on the 10th anniversary of his circumnavigating the globe.

The Speaker: The hon. Official Opposition House Leader.

Ms Blakeman: Thanks very much, Mr. Speaker. I will say at the outset that my caucus is supportive of this motion, but I just wanted to note the number of other groups that don't have the opportunity to come onto the floor of the Alberta Legislature and make their comments to us. Certainly, Mr. Hansen has done extraordinary work raising funds and augmenting research into spinal cord injury in Canada, and indeed other countries are able to benefit from his work, but I want to do a shout-out to the many other groups that work for a better quality of life.

We were very honoured today to have a wonderful presentation from the Member for Lesser Slave Lake talking about the REDress project, that is being done across Canada in memory of aboriginal women who have died or gone missing. There are also groups that are seeking equality across the country, seeking better benefits and support so that they can integrate appropriately, and there are a number of other groups that we could get into that are just advocating for attention and money.

We are fortunate to have Mr. Hansen here in Canada and, indeed, here on the floor, but I think it's important to recognize that there are a number of other groups who are not here and could equally be here and, I would hope, get as warm a welcome as I'm sure we will give Mr. Hansen.

Thank you.

[Government Motion 11 carried]

The Speaker: I appreciate that response from the Legislative Assembly. Mr. Hansen is unique. He's a Canadian icon. He's been in this Assembly, one of only four or five people to ever have been invited into this Assembly. He is not here to petition anything from anyone. He will be here to say thank you to the people of Alberta for supporting his quest of 25 years. No one is coming and I will never recommend that anybody ever be brought onto the floor to petition the members of the Assembly. There would simply be 47,000 requests. This is a unique thank you. That's the only purpose.

Government Bills and Orders Second Reading

Bill 5 Seniors' Property Tax Deferral Act

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Red Deer-North.

Mrs. Jablonski: Thank you. Mr. Speaker, it gives me great pleasure to rise today and begin second reading on Bill 5, the Seniors' Property Tax Deferral Act.

As I said in December, when I brought the private member's bill forward in second reading, a seniors' property tax deferral program will help senior homeowners in our province. Seniors will be able to use their home's equity to defer all or part of their property taxes, reallocating that money to other areas of their lives and to other priorities. Freed-up funds could be used by the senior homeowner for things like home repairs and modifications and will help seniors remain in their homes longer.

We all know that the costs of living are on the rise while the incomes of many seniors remain fixed. While I'm proud of all the work our government does on a daily basis to provide support to over 425,000 seniors, this new program is an innovative way for us to do more. I say innovative because as the former minister responsible for seniors I know the demographic challenges we are facing in light of an aging population. The seniors population will soon outnumber the population of our children and youth. For the first time ever there will be more grandparents than grandchildren.

That's why a program like this, which offers so much opportunity and flexibility to senior homeowners, is a positive addition to our senior-related programs and services. Homeowners will be given the opportunity to take a loan to defer all or part of their property taxes until they sell their home or otherwise choose to repay the loan. The government will pay municipalities the property tax owed on behalf of that senior. There will be minimal interest charged to the senior for this loan, which makes it widely accessible.

While this program offers a fresh approach, I feel it's imperative to note that it is also in line with policy directions and research of this government. It is in line with the findings of the Demographic Planning Commission, which in 2008 heard from over 100 stakeholder organizations and 10,000 Albertans that seniors want to live in their own homes for as long as possible. The findings from the Demographic Planning Commission helped to form the aging population policy framework, that I released in

2010, and that framework is helping this government plan for current and future seniors by providing guidelines on the roles, principles, and key directions we are taking to meet the demands of an aging population.

This bill is also in line with the continuing care strategy, which is intended to provide more options to help seniors age in the right place, in their homes and in their communities surrounded by friends and family. I am proud that our government supports seniors' independence and that we are supporting a province where our seniors remain in our communities, where they continue to have many positive impacts on our younger generations and will have for years to come.

Mr. Speaker, I move to adjourn debate. Thank you.

[Motion to adjourn debate carried]

3:10

Bill 4 St. Albert and Sturgeon Valley School Districts Establishment Act

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Education.

Mr. Lukaszuk: Thank you kindly, Mr. Speaker. It's a pleasure to rise today and speak to Bill 4, the St. Albert and Sturgeon Valley School Districts Establishment Act. As Minister of Education I often speak of the strength that educational choice delivers to our system. Public schools, separate schools, francophone, charter, private, and home education programming provide a rich diversity of options and opportunity for Albertans.

Like many other Albertans, the situation in the town of Morinville regarding educational programming and choice has been an area of important interest to me. Quite simply, I firmly believe that we must act to rectify this situation. We must act to affirm the quality education programming that already exists in the town, and we also must act to ensure educational choice and voice. With this piece of important legislation, Mr. Speaker, we are doing just that.

The Alberta we live in today didn't spring up all at once. It was composed slowly from diverse communities coming together over time, from counties merging and separating and small towns becoming bustling communities. Throughout this process the makeup of communities changed. When the public school district in St. Albert and most surrounding communities was first established, the denominational majority was the Roman Catholic faith. When the separate school district in St. Albert was established, the denominational minority was the Protestant faith. This differs from most of the province, where separate school districts were established by Roman Catholic minorities.

Since that time the overall demographics in the area have changed. The education system in these areas must also change in order to better meet the needs of these communities and ensure that students in these communities have choice and voice. As Alberta continues to grow and navigate through the 21st century, historical anomalies like Morinville's lack of secular education option start to stick out like a sore thumb.

Many people in Morinville are perfectly happy with the current arrangement and are indeed receiving the world-class education that Alberta is known for. However, it is understandable that parents and students have been advocating for a system that ensures everyone can access a learning environment that makes them feel most comfortable. Bill 4 represents a compromise between three school jurisdictions, and I must congratulate and express my gratitude to the Greater St. Albert Roman Catholic regional division, the St. Albert Protestant separate school district,

and the Sturgeon school division for their commitment to developing a local solution.

Bill 4 reflects many of the elements of their collaboration and compromise. Compromise, Mr. Speaker, as you know, is not easy because it means that everyone has to make some sacrifices. But just because something has always been one way doesn't make it right. Not everyone will be happy with how the situation was resolved, and I acknowledge that, but it is still the right solution. Bill 4 will redefine education in the Sturgeon Valley forever, and that's a good thing.

Morinville's population is booming, and this bill accommodates the rapidly growing and changing face of that town. Just like the growing pains I spoke of earlier, progress is sometimes hard, but again it's a good thing.

Here is what the legislation will do. It provides the framework in which parents in these communities can exercise the right to a secular education for their children while enabling parents of the minority faith to exercise the separate school rights and privileges guaranteed under the Constitution of Canada.

It also recognizes that the educational needs of a community are best served by a democratically elected school board and that the right to vote for their school board gives parents a voice in the education of their children. Parents across the region will have choice between two different school boards, just like parents in communities across our entire province.

First, it will establish a public school district in St. Albert that will replace the St. Albert Protestant separate school district. Second, it will establish a Roman Catholic separate school district that will replace the Greater St. Albert Catholic school division. This change needs to happen because we cannot have two separate school boards covering the same area. Simply, you cannot have two minorities in the same area.

The new Greater St. Albert Roman Catholic separate school district will serve those geographic areas previously served by the Greater St. Albert Catholic regional division in addition to those served by two nonoperating school boards in the area, the Cardiff Roman Catholic separate school district and the Cunningham Roman Catholic separate school district. Roman Catholic parents in these areas will now be able to run for and vote for school board trustees, giving them a voice in the education of their children.

Finally, the Sturgeon school division will be expanded to serve the Morinville and Legal areas. This means that non-Catholic residents of Morinville and Legal will become residents of the Sturgeon school division, allowing them to run for and vote for the Sturgeon school division trustees. This does mean some changes as the St. Albert Protestant separate school district loses the protection of a separate school board. They did advocate hard, Mr. Speaker, I have to tell you, to protect their right, but ultimately they are focusing on ensuring a quality education for local residents, and they will be governed in the same way as other public school boards in the province. The legislation sets up these new arrangements separately.

Work will be needed and will be done on infrastructure, financial, and operational matters, and that work has already started. The Sturgeon school division will assume ownership of a school in Morinville. Parents choosing a secular education will have a space to call their own. The details of which school and what shared space arrangements might be required have not yet been determined.

The St. Albert and Sturgeon Valley School Districts Establishment Act is a targeted solution to a local issue. It's also a great example of the provincial government working with a community to find a legislative answer to a local issue. This is a decision that

puts students first and affirms educational choice and educational voice. This is the most important thing, more important than building jurisdictional boundaries or religious differences. Our education system is ultimately about the child, and I hope that all members will consider that when voting on this bill.

I am proud of Bill 4, Mr. Speaker, proud of the partnerships forged, proud of the leadership of the three school boards and the towns and communities. Most of all, I am proud that we are doing right by our kids. That's what the Alberta education system is all about.

Mr. Speaker, I am grateful for the support already expressed by members on both sides of this House regarding this legislation, and I encourage its passage as soon as possible in order that choice and voice can become a reality in Morinville.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker. At this time I would like to move that we adjourn debate on Bill 4.

[Motion to adjourn debate carried]

Bill 6

Property Rights Advocate Act

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Lacombe-Ponoka on behalf of the minister.

Mr. Prins: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. On behalf of the minister I'm pleased to move second reading of Bill 6, the Property Rights Advocate Act.

This act supports the government's position that landowners must have recourse to an independent tribunal or the courts or both for the purpose of determining full and fair compensation for access to their land. At the heart of this proposed legislation is a property rights advocate office, that would provide Alberta landowners with impartial, independent information about property rights and help them navigate through the process. The establishment of this office is a direct response to concerns heard by the Property Rights Task Force these past months and directly reflects this government's commitment to listen to Albertans.

Mr. Speaker, let me walk you through the proposed legislation and explain the rationale behind it. During the course of the leadership race the Premier heard repeatedly from passionate Albertans who were concerned that their property rights hadn't been respected in the past. Recently the Premier felt a need to move towards a more common-sense approach when it comes to property rights, so the Premier created a task force to listen to the concerns of these people.

That's exactly what we did. Members of this government travelled the province in December and January seeking input from Albertans on property rights. Our goal was to listen to their concerns and to find grassroots solutions to the property rights concerns that were raised. It was my privilege to participate in the task force with the chair, the hon. Minister of Environment and Water; the vice-chair, the hon. Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development; and all of the other ministers and MLAs on this task force. As well, several other members of government joined us on our tour of 10 communities across the province, from Grimshaw to Lethbridge.

3:20

We heard first-hand the concerns of landowners about their property rights at these open houses, and we heard from Albertans who completed an online survey. They mailed, they e-mailed, or they called in their feedback to our government. I'm pleased to say that more than 1,400 Albertans participated, and I believe that such a strong turnout indicates the importance of property rights to

all Albertans. Recently we have released the document on both what we heard and our response to the concerns raised by Albertans.

The viewpoints provided by Albertans were fairly consistent and can be broken into four overarching themes. First, Albertans told us that they must be actively consulted about decisions that affect them. Landowners said that they sometimes are confused by legislative changes and also sometimes feel that decisions are made behind closed doors. They told us that their opinions must be taken more seriously through consultation and engagement in all property rights issues.

Second, landowners said that they need to be assured that they have access to courts. They said that they felt the current access to the courts is restricted and that fair and easy access is a fundamental principle of democracy.

Third, when use of land is required, landowners expect appropriate compensation. In cases of expropriation and compensatory actions, landowners felt that their rights are seen to be less important than the rights of industry regardless of landowner concerns.

Lastly, and most vocally and passionately, they asked for an advocate to help them navigate through the process and that this advocate would be the key to ensuring what we call the three Cs: consultation, compensation, and access to the courts. This strong desire for an advocate is the reason I am here today to discuss Bill 6, the Property Rights Advocate Act. It is very clear that Albertans expect us to ensure their core values are represented when making decisions in the public interest. We believe that landowners should be consulted about proposed legislation that affects property rights, that public information about property rights and concerns should be readily available, and that appropriate consultation should be conducted in advance of projects undertaken for the public good.

We also believe that landowners should be appropriately compensated where their lands are affected by expropriation, and they should have recourse to tribunals such as the Land Compensation Board and the courts. Therefore, under the Property Rights Advocate Act a property rights advocate office will be established. The advocate will report to the Minister of Justice and Attorney General and will provide independent and impartial information about property rights. The office will help people determine the appropriate resolution mechanism, including the courts, through which they can have their property rights concerns addressed.

Additionally, the advocate will listen to complaints relating to expropriation of land and will review those complaints and prepare a report setting out findings and any recommendations that result. The advocate will be required to table an annual report on the advocate office's business each year in the Legislature. This will promote landowner confidence that the government is transparent and accountable for its record on respecting property rights.

The legislation that creates the advocate also makes it clear that Alberta's Expropriation Act takes precedence over any other land legislation and that all applicable rights to compensation in the courts remain in force. The work of the task force in the introduction of Bill 6 reinforces our desire to continually engage in useful dialogue that shapes how we approach property rights and other important issues, and it strengthens landowner interests as development throughout the province occurs.

Your continued support of the work of this task force is appreciated. I'm very proud that under the Premier's direction we are using the comments and solutions provided to us by Albertans to make improvements that will benefit all landowners now and

into the future. This is a promise that the Premier has made and kept.

With that, Mr. Speaker, I'd like to adjourn debate on Bill 6, the Property Rights Advocate Act. Thank you.

[Motion to adjourn debate carried]

Bill 2 Education Act

[Debate adjourned February 22: Mrs. Forsyth speaking]

The Speaker: I've had three members advise me of their intent to speak: the hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands-Norwood, and then I would recognize the hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre, and then the hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona.

The hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands-Norwood.

Mr. Mason: Thanks very much, Mr. Speaker. It's a pleasure to rise and speak to Bill 2, the Education Act. Just some comments with regard to the bill. While the government claims the bill will strengthen public education, it doesn't do anything to stop public funds from going to private schools and will actually strengthen charter schools by allowing their charters to be issued on a continuing basis instead of just on a temporary basis.

Charter schools are further bolstered by the recent government announcement that charters will now be able to be renewed for a maximum of 15-year terms instead of just five. The bill also reduces transparency with regard to charter schools by moving the requirements for what must be included in a charter into regulation.

Mr. Speaker, I know that the Alberta Teachers' Association has raised other concerns about strengthening charter schools in this bill. It removes the right of first refusal, that school boards currently have, to request to offer an alternative program. The ATA has said that "if parents want an alternative educational program, school boards have the opportunity to offer the program first before parents can establish a charter school." This provision does not exist in Bill 2, which would permit charter schools to be set up with the sole purpose of pulling students from an equivalent public program. This change could also allow charter schools to shift from focusing on innovation and, instead, to simply compete with the public education system, much like private schools now do but with full public funding.

Secondly, Mr. Speaker, the current act requires that a charter school should have "significant support from the community in which it is to be located," but Bill 2 does not contain this requirement. It means that charter schools would no longer be required to actively serve their community's needs.

Third, the current act contains the following provision, that "the operator of a charter school established by the Minister must restrict its purposes to the operation of that charter school," and that provision is now gone in Bill 2. This change could allow operators to run charter schools in ways that enhance their personal profits. An example is that under Bill 2 a charter school could, for example, be run by a corporation that sells computers, thus ensuring that students use a specific brand of technology and in the process preparing them as future consumers of that product.

Mr. Speaker, the bill doesn't do anything to combat the significant school fees that currently exist, and the details of what these school fees can entail are being hidden in regulations instead of being included in the bill. The upcoming regulatory review on school fees that the minister has promised will not be subject to public or legislative scrutiny even though it's a very important issue. Although boards cannot charge tuition fees to resident

students under section 13 currently, school fees on their own can inhibit access to education. According to a recent Edmonton public school board information report the average amount of instructional fees paid by the EPSB student family is \$69, and that does not include other kinds of costs such as transportation fees.

The government is now making quite a big deal about how this bill will strengthen deterrents to bullying, but they haven't actually taken the most significant actions that are needed. We still, for example, don't have enough teachers. More teachers means more supervision, means fewer opportunities for students to bully each other. But we have 480 fewer teachers working in Alberta schools than we did at this time last year, and the Minister of Education is not encouraging goodwill around the bargaining table by saying that whatever amount of money is in the budget for teachers is basically the province's final offer.

[Mr. Zwozdesky in the chair]

Furthermore, the government is good at talking about bullying, but what of the implementation of these measures? What is the timeline for boards to comply? What are the consequences for boards that don't comply? What new resources and supports have been offered to help with bullying outside of schools since that's now covered in the act as well?

Much bullying focuses on sexual orientation and gender identity, yet neither of these things is contained in the Alberta Education program of study.

Also, Mr. Speaker, this act has not repealed the Bill 44 changes to the Human Rights Act that make it harder for teachers to deal with human rights related issues in the classroom, including important bullying-related issues such as homophobia. This bill simply updates the Human Rights Act so that this damaging provision can continue to operate.

3:30

Mr. Speaker, this bill contains no action on full-day kindergarten or removing grade 3 provincial exams. After copious amounts of consultation that preceded this bill, the government announced in January that they will be reviewing provincial achievement tests and examining the operational requirements of full-day kindergarten. Since then the minister and the government say that the government is moving forward on full-day kindergarten but won't have it in place for the beginning of the 2012-13 year as the Premier had promised during her leadership campaign.

It doesn't really seem that the province has its act together on full-day kindergarten, and it continues to drag its feet on making the needed changes to provincial exams. As Public Interest Alberta has pointed out, there's been plenty of time to examine and review. It's time for action on these important issues.

Neither this bill nor the government's recent budget show any leadership in tackling a huge problem in our education system, which is deferred maintenance. For example, in 2011 the Edmonton public school district's buildings were worth a total of \$2.3 billion, and the amount of deferred maintenance on these buildings was as high as \$242 million.

Since there are no major changes between this version of the bill and last year's, it looks like the current minister's recent consultation, *Our Children, Our Future: Getting It Right*, has been nothing more than a PR exercise.

I think there are serious deficiencies and blind spots with respect to this bill. I believe that the government is opening up the public school system to competition with similar programs from charter schools, with full public funding, that will divide the education system. It is not ensuring that charter schools have the

required limitations to make sure that they truly make an additional contribution that cannot be provided in the public system.

They are, in fact, setting up the situation in which we're going to see much competition and division in the public school system, all funded by the taxpayer. That's not the kind of education system that we in the NDP see in the future. We are strong supporters of public education. The whole idea of corporate values like competition in the system are not the kinds of values that I think most Albertans would like to see in the system. In that sense, I think this bill will actually undermine our public education system, and I think that that is a very, very unfortunate development, Mr. Speaker.

That concludes my comments at second reading, and we will have more to say at the committee stage as well. Thank you and the Assembly for your attention.

The Acting Speaker: Thank you, hon. member.

Section 29(2)(a) is available should anyone wish to comment on or put questions to the previous speech.

Seeing no one under 29(2)(a), the chair is pleased to recognize Edmonton-Centre.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I've been looking forward to and dreading the introduction of this act, looking forward to it because education is so important to me. It's important to my family; both of my parents were teachers. My mother's whole career was working for the Edmonton public school board in what they called the primary system then. My father came into the school system when they started the vocational trades high schools here in Alberta and then taught until his retirement. I have an expectation and a responsibility to education. I think it is our key to the future. I have seen it raise people out of terrible circumstances and set them on a path to self-discovery, creativity, and great success.

I'm dreading it because I've just learned over the years that when this government brings forward a bill, they will do some good things and then they will do some things that will offend me to my core, and I just am not sure which is which yet. This is a monster bill. Going by weight it's getting up there.

To be honest with you, just given the budget debates and everything else that's going on – I've got four other portfolios that I'm looking after right now – I haven't had time to read the whole bill, which is what I would usually do.

A couple of things. I'm sure all of us have started to get people e-mailing us. I'm always interested in why people from totally other parts of Alberta would e-mail me and want me to do things, but okay. One of the things that started to occur to me was the number of times people were talking about rights: "It's my right to do this. It's my right to do that." As someone who has studied the Constitution, when I hear that, "It's my right to," I always go back to the document that actually confers rights, and that would be the Constitution of Canada and the Charter of Rights and Freedoms.

When you go through the Constitution, it confers freedoms, first of all, but the freedoms are subject. Right before we even get into it, it says, "guarantees the rights and freedoms . . . subject only to such reasonable limits prescribed by law as can be demonstrably justified in a free and democratic society." So right there, right off the bat, the first thing, right at the top it says that there are limits to this. You don't get to swing your fist around no matter what's in your way. We put limits on these things right from the get-go, and they should be reasonable limits, obviously. Freedoms, rights – and there definitely are rights here. They're laid out; they're very clear.

But protections are also offered; for example, things like the equality section that we find in section 15. That's generally referred to as an equality rights section, but it does lay it out – and I'm just going to quote from it here – that people have “the right to the equal protection and equal benefit of the law without discrimination and, in particular, without discrimination based on,” and then it begins a long list. That's an example of protections that are offered as part of what we get out of this package. So freedoms, rights, protections, and privileges.

Privileges are what we extend as a sort of subsection out of a freedom or a right. A privilege is something that is granted and can be taken away. It's not something that you automatically get. It's not something that you can take to court and demand that somebody give to you. The presiding authority may grant it. The most common one here is drivers' licences. Nobody has a right to drive a car or to drive any kind of a vehicle here in Alberta. There is a process. There's a licensing process. There's a testing process that is set out by the province, who says, “Okay. Here is who we say can legally drive on our streets, and here is the way we're going to test them, and you have to pay a fee, and you've got to have insurance,” and there are all kinds of other things that are set out around that privilege. But it's a privilege; it's not a right.

There are also accommodations. Again, those accommodations are granted by an authority, whichever is the appropriate authority, that says things like, you know: “Here are the rules and the way we want things, but we recognize that that doesn't work for everybody, and we will offer an accommodation.” We will say: “That's okay. You can come and do this, and here's how we'll make it possible for you.” It's an accommodation. They want to bring a group in for some reason, so they will bend the rules or allow another rule that would accommodate a particular group.

Where you often see that is in building codes, for example. There are certain requirements of it, and then in accommodation of people who have mobility barriers there would be ramps and the doors that, you know, you hit the button and the doors open and that sort of thing. We're accommodating certain groups so that we can include them and have them with us in the building.

Now, all of those things go under one heading and are balanced by something on the other side, which is responsibility. So, yes, there are freedoms, there are rights, there are protections, privileges, and accommodations, and it's balanced by responsibility. That's an important part of what we do because it does say: “This is the give-and-take. This is the yin and the yang. We will do these things for you. We will pay for your public education, but you have a responsibility to show up and try and learn. It doesn't mean you have to be brilliant, but you've got to show up and try and learn.”

3:40

New in this education bill is the responsibility of students to do that and a code of conduct. I think, actually, that's a good addition to what we're doing here because it means it's quantifiable. It means that it's very clear what is expected of students. It's a way of measuring what they do. The students are clear, and the other people that deal with them are clear.

This is where it gets complicated. The other things that we have in, if I may say, the mix of offering education – and part of this harkens back to education under section 93 of the Constitution. “In and for each Province the Legislature may exclusively make Laws in relation to Education, subject and according to the following Provisions,” and they set out there a list and a minority list. It uses language like “at the Union,” in other words at the union of the provinces at the time, and the BNA Act is what it's referring back to. What we have mentioned specifically are

Protestant schools, Catholic schools, and then we talk about minority schools.

If the Protestant school is the majority school, the Catholic system is the minority school. It protects minority rights there, and it spells it out very clearly in the Constitution and in the Charter and in your bill. We also specifically mention in the Constitution and in the Charter English and French languages, and again the minority of that. So if there is primarily English spoken, we have guarantees of protection for the minority language speakers, the French, again subject to limitations. The limitation that is spelled out in the Constitution, which I'm not going to find at my fingertips here, is essentially the number of students, and it spells that out fairly clearly. It does use language like: subject to the number of students. There's one other phrase that it uses there.

Okay. Those are the ones that are constitutionally protected. The language, the religions – and the religions, interestingly enough, are spelled out, and in that they're a little archaic in this day and age because there are far more religions that are in our society than Protestant and Catholic. Even inside of the catchphrase “Protestant” there are a lot of other particular sects that identify themselves very distinctly.

But this doesn't include Hindus, Baha'i, Muslims. I'm sorry; I'm going to get myself in trouble here because I don't have the whole long list in front of me. This is getting us in an interesting position in this day and age because at one point someone was a proponent of getting rid of the Catholic school board and it should just all be Protestant, but that doesn't include all of these other religions that are not Protestant. That seems to have not gotten its way into this bill, and for that I thank you. We know which ones are specifically mentioned in the Constitution and the Charter and protected there: Protestant, Catholic, English and French languages.

If you're equating with me and following along on my list, now we get into the accommodations and the privileges, and those are private schools, home-schooling, distance schooling, and, new in this bill, First Nations accommodation, Métis settlement accommodation in schools, and one more – I grew up really close to it – that has always been a part of this, and at one time the school was the personal responsibility of the Minister of Education of the day, the School for the Deaf.

So those are accommodations. Nowhere is there a constitutional right to home-schooling. Nowhere is there a constitutional or Charter right to a Métis settlement school. Nowhere in the Constitution or the Charter is there a right to distance learning or to home-schooling or to private schools. Those are accommodations that the province has seen in its authority to be able to say: “We will allow this. We will offer it.” We have to keep that in mind as we go through the rest of this act, and I'm assuming it's going to take us awhile to debate our way through here.

Anybody who wants to write to me now, I hope you read what I just said because I'm kind of sticky about this stuff. Don't come at me talking about your right to something unless you're going to be able to have read that Constitution before. Thank you so much.

There's a long list of things that are in here and not in here, and I look forward to continued debate on that. Some of the new things that are in here I'm happy to see were some of the things that the trustees were asking for like the personal power, power of the person, the legal thing that allows them to make decisions about stuff.

There are a couple of things in here. I've got a couple of minutes left. This is not a shell bill. Again, I refer to the weight of the thing. Yeah. It's about the same as my smallest cat. So, you know, there's some heft to this one. It's coming in at 200 pages,

close to 200 pages. It's not a shell bill. It's not just, you know: this is the act and everything else comes under the minister. But it's close. There's a lot, a lot of stuff that is now deferred to the minister.

Why do I have problems with that? I have problems with it because he does not come back in front of the people. It does not come back in front of the Legislature for debate. The people may never know until it's a done deal. They may not have the opportunity for consultation. They may not have the opportunity to find out that there is something under consideration by the minister. It's just going to be done and announced because the minister may make regulations, and there is no requirement that regulations come before this House. I always have trouble with that, and I am right to have trouble with that because there are too many examples of where government has made those regulations – and that awful cliché – behind closed doors and out of the view of the people. But that's what happens, and I'm always going to rail against that.

The second part of what's going on here is the language. The specificity of language is very important to me. Some words that I have learned from this government to be very cautious about: choice, option, flexibility, partnership, responsibility. Those words have taken on an entirely new meaning in many cases under this government. Choice with seniors' programs back 10, 12 years ago became no choice. An option, no, was no option. Responsibility meant: you're on your own, toots. Partnership often meant delegated to you; it's all your problem now. The one partner is responsible for everything. Responsibility. Now, I started by talking about responsibility, and I think it's important. I know I'm going to run out of time here.

In second reading I am willing to support what I hope is a good intent in this bill, but I really look forward to Committee of the Whole to dig down on it. Thank you very much.

The Acting Speaker: Thank you very much, hon. member.

Section 29(2)(a) is available should you wish to question the previous speaker or comment on her speech. The hon. Member for Edmonton Gold-Bar.

Mr. MacDonald: Yes. Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre, I certainly was listening with interest to your remarks regarding Bill 2, and I have a couple of questions for you in the time allowed. My first question is regarding section 177 on page 122, authorization to levy and collect taxes. Some time ago the Progressive Conservatives removed the right of democratically elected school boards to tax. How do you feel about that? Do you feel that perhaps now is the ideal time under this bill to perhaps correct that Conservative wrong and allow school boards to again collect taxes as they see fit and as the voters see fit as well?

The Acting Speaker: The hon. member.

3:50

Ms Blakeman: Okay. Thanks very much, Member for Edmonton-Gold-Bar. I have spoken about this publicly before, and I believe it. I think that it is appropriate that school boards are able to requisition money to pay for what they're doing, and I think it should be locally based. A number of years ago – must be close to 20 now – under the leadership of then Premier Klein the decision was that it wasn't fair. They just weren't getting the resources that they needed, so the government was going to collect all the money, put it into general revenue, and then redistribute, and I've got little air quotes around redistribute.

So we watched to see if it did kind of even out across the

province, and I would say that that has not been a successful experiment. As a matter of fact, the schools that were doing okay, usually in urban areas, are now doing not so okay as their money is taken and used to subsidize schools in other parts of the province. I don't believe in that.

All this time I get my beloved Conservatives on the other side – I just want to ruffle your hair a little bit, darling things that you are. For all the talk that I hear about so often, you know, "Pull yourself up by your own bootstraps" and "Do your own thing" and "You're responsible, blah, blah, blah" – okay. But when it comes to schooling, no, you guys are going to take the money, and they are going to have to live with what's left. I just don't agree with it. I think that schools should be able to requisition the funds that they need to do what they need to do, and they will be immediately responsive to the people they are serving, which is their local school board.

Mr. MacDonald: Yes. Thank you very much. I appreciate that.

Now, section 62 of the bill, closure of schools. You didn't have an opportunity to discuss this very important issue. You come from a central neighbourhood of Edmonton. All central neighbourhoods, older established neighbourhoods have had issues in the past with school closures. Would you like to see more warning written directly into this act for communities who are under threat of a school closure from a school board? Would you like to see more rules to give citizens an opportunity to perhaps improve enrolment in their local school before it is closed? Do you think this allows the school boards to act too quickly to close schools is what I'm trying to say.

Thank you.

Ms Blakeman: I think there needs to be enough time for the local community to get organized. Too much time and people go: "Oh, that's not happening right now. I don't have to worry about it. That's next year." So there is a sort of happy medium there.

As someone who has had a school close, I can tell you that it is devastation. I have a community that has never recovered from having its K to 6 school closed. It is literally a black hole in the community. The lights are off. The school ground is dark. The playground that I helped raise money to build when I was first elected – it was built the very first summer I was elected – is a hangout for drug dealers and people up to no good, as my grandmother would say. It devastated us. Even people in the community that don't have kids were involved in those kids' lives. They saw them walk by every day. They went to the Christmas concerts. They saw the kids in their Halloween outfits. They were connected to those children. They knew who they were, and they looked after them. When the kid was going by with a bloody nose and crying, they came out and said: "Hey, I've seen you before, kid. What can I do to help you? Can I phone your mom?"

The Acting Speaker: Thank you.

I have the hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona on my list next, please.

Ms Notley: Thank you. It's a pleasure to be able to rise and speak on Bill 2 at this late point on a Thursday afternoon. This is a bill that has been, you know, long coming. I believe that the previous minister commenced the excessive consultation and discussion and inspirational group settings process about three and a half or four years ago. We had Inspiring Education; Setting the Direction for Special Education; Speak Out, the student engagement initiative; and Inspiring Action on Education, which all took place before the previous version of this bill was introduced last year.

We understood that because of the timing with respect to the

leadership selection process of the Conservative Party there probably wouldn't be enough time in the Legislature to get this bill passed. So we weren't, of course, at all surprised to hear that it would be retabled subsequently. What was interesting, though, was that we decided not to retable it last fall. At that time the minister suggested that, you know, we hadn't done enough consultation, which I thought was quite confusing. Really, I don't know that there's a piece of legislation that hadn't engaged or involved discussion, not necessarily consensus or support, but certainly there had been tremendous amounts of discussion with the public around this piece of legislation or around sort of the precursor to it.

I think that the process from having the very large, big-picture conversations that took place at the various and sundry consultation efforts and then the translation of that to an actual act was maybe less transparent because I think, unfortunately, that a lot of the people that were involved in sort of the big-picture, visionary statements that were agreed to and through the Inspiring Education process, for instance, didn't really understand what that would look like in the course of an act. We didn't really have as much consultation with citizens around that process of translating and how you take big-picture vision A and then link it up to where you see it reflected in the act.

Nonetheless, the current minister then decided that we needed to have more consultation. Really, quite frankly, you know, we've had lots of conversation about how this government has been using Public Affairs Bureau money to essentially engage in pre-election campaigning. From sort of late last fall up until now that's really how I've interpreted much of the outreach and bonding with school councils and more advertising and more consultation that's gone on under this minister, essentially a form of pre-election advertising in an attempt to characterize this government, which has so significantly dropped the ball on education over the last two years, as in fact being a government that is sympathetic to and cares about education.

Now, I don't know that most people really bought it, but certainly there's no question that the current minister engaged in a plethora of media events with a number of children at his side in an effort to maximize the photo opportunities in the pre-election period. As a result, we are now having this conversation at this later date.

Having said that, let's talk a little bit about the bill itself. There are a few things in the bill which I think are reasonable steps forward which a lot of people had been looking for. School boards, I know, had spent a lot of time looking for natural person powers. I think the idea of defining the roles and responsibilities of students, parents, school boards, and trustees is certainly never bad. I think the idea of establishing student advisory councils is a good thing.

I think the fact that the school boards can appoint a superintendent without the prior approval of the Minister of Education is an excellent step forward, quite frankly, because I think there was some discomfort in certain settings of the relationship between superintendents and ministry staff in the past.

Ms Blakeman: But they can appoint trustees.

Ms Notley: Indeed, the Member for Edmonton-Centre points out that this bill allows them to appoint trustees, but I think they would argue that they already sort of had the authority under the old act to fire elected boards.

They continue to maintain a great deal of control in this act. But I guess I would say that on a day-to-day basis the slightly greater independence of the superintendents is not a bad thing.

Having said that, I think there are a number of things included in this bill which I am concerned about, and I'll try and list them off within the 10 minutes that I'm allowed. I'm allowed 15 minutes? Okay. Well, that's good.

The first thing is that the new act has removed the previously existing requirements related to the transportation of students and, in fact, the whole issue around the 2.4 kilometre walk distance. I know that's a very complex issue, and it does relate to financing and funding, but I'm a little worried about what the long-term implications for that issue are in terms of the issue that the previous members were discussing around school closures in community schools as well as the issue of funded transportation for our students.

Another issue that the previous members were talking about that I think is really important to talk about that's not included in this bill is the issue of how we deal with the relationship between the Ministry of Education, the community, the school boards which represent the community, the municipalities, and other arms of the government that engage in municipal planning and land-use planning.

4:00

In fact, what has happened is that this ministry has retreated to a silo form of conversation, which they use to deflect responsibility and accountability for the hollowing out that is going on within our urban communities as a result of school closures. To say, "Well, it's not my file; it's their file," and "It's not my responsibility; it's their responsibility," is profoundly short sighted. It crosses a number of different ministries as well as different levels of government.

I would have liked to have seen an Education Act that was forward looking and reflected an understanding of the critical importance that schools play in our communities as well as in our general urban development, something that needs to be shifted away from the hapless, anything goes, whatever the developer wants, urban sprawl, whatever happens happens kind of process that we have in place right now. Schools are a fundamental part of that.

The previous member talked about what happens when a school closes in a community, and certainly I've been involved in a number of campaigns in that regard. I really do believe that so many things are linked to the existence of the community school, and the failure of this act to even turn its mind to that issue in any fashion I think shows a continued form of inward, defensive, "it's somebody else's problem" type of thinking.

I'm concerned as well about the way this act treats charter schools. I believe that this is the first step towards sort of a continued Americanization of our education system. I understand that charter schools are publicly funded, but at the end of the day what we need to ensure is that our public school boards have the capacity to make decisions which are best for the communities. What's happened in this bill which raises a number of concerns for me is that we have significantly expanded the opportunities for charter schools, and in so doing, we're undercutting the role and the ability of school boards to make decisions around allocation of resources. What we will do is undercut the community school, something which I just talked about as being very, very important.

Currently in the absence of this bill school boards retain the right of first refusal when an application is made for a charter school. So if people go to the minister and say, "I want a charter school because this particular educational need is not being met in my community or is not being met anywhere," the school board has the opportunity to consider whether they are going to provide that type of education within their structure. If they don't provide

it, then in theory the minister has the discretion to go forward and consider the introduction of a charter school. What's happening now, though, is that the school board no longer has that right of first refusal, so that's a problem.

The other thing that happens is that the charter schools then move away from their original focus as centres of innovation, and they simply turn into sort of competitors with the school board.

Another thing. The current act requires that charter schools have significant support from the community in which it is to be located. This new act will no longer suggest that there needs to be community support.

Just to be clear, charter schools do not have the obligation to accept everyone that comes to them. They get to pick and choose who they accept. They become havens of elitism because they get to pick and choose who they select. Maybe in some cases that's appropriate. It depends on the nature of what's being taught and the circumstances around why that was necessary. But those parameters are no longer included in the act.

The additional problem is that the current act contains a provision which suggests that the charter school established by the minister must restrict its purpose to the operations of that charter school. Well, that's being removed, so now what can happen is that Microsoft can create an IT charter school, and the minister can go behind closed doors to approve it because, of course, we're moving all the criteria into regulation. Then what happens is that their primary purpose is no longer to operate the school. It's the school, but they're also Microsoft. Then suddenly we have a marketing opportunity for a computer company, for instance. Currently the act would not allow that, but with the changes under this act, that could happen. So those are my concerns around the charter schools.

Fees. The act does nothing to deal with prohibiting school fees, which are a growing challenge and problem for many of our families throughout Alberta. The sort of vague promise of the minister to deal with it in the future is basically: talk to me after the election; we'll see what happens. You know what? As I've said, I outlined four and a half years of consultation and discussion that preceded this act, and you're saying that we couldn't have somehow got school fees included and addressed in this act, that now we have to do another set of studies and another round of consultation? Come on. It should be in there, and it's not.

Bullying. Of course, this minister has spent a lot of time talking about: well, we're putting in prohibitions on bullying. He's really patting himself on the back and making all these motherhood and apple pie statements about bullying. That's great. We all like motherhood and apple pie statements about bullying. But it really comes down to where the rubber hits the road.

Any educational professional will tell you that the way you limit bullying in the school system is that you have enough teachers and support staff there to provide structured programming – structured recess programming, structured noon-hour programming, whether it be intramurals or some kind of computer geek class or performing arts or whatever – stuff for kids to do at those key times when bullying is a problem. For instance, this year we've got roughly 500 fewer teachers than we had last year. If you maintain that situation so that the teachers are running around like chickens with their heads cut off and can barely see what's going on in the hallways, on the school grounds, or between classes, well, that's when bullying happens.

If you really care about bullying, you will properly resource your schools so that the staff there can do that work that's necessary to create the environment that prevents it. But that's not what this government is doing. They're doing what they always do. They're patting themselves on the back. They're making grand

statements and gestures, but they're doing absolutely nothing to follow up with it. That's an unfortunate failure.

Full-day kindergarten. The Premier promised it when she ran. It's not talked about in this act. We have no commitment for it going forward. It's not in the budget. It's not there. Again, it should have been in the act. We've been talking about this for four years. Why isn't it there?

Ms Blakeman: Oh, longer than that.

Ms Notley: Well, we've been talking about kindergarten for a decade, but the consultation process that preceded this act would have been about four years.

Those are a few things. I have, I think, about a minute left.

The final thing that I haven't had a chance to really talk too much about but which really matters a great deal to me is that we have a fundamental problem in our school system with respect to how we are dealing with special-needs students. The setting the direction plan and now inclusive education is a recipe for profound failure on the part of our school system, and it's going to create many, many problems. I've raised this issue in a number of different sectors. Teachers know it; support staff know it. The fact of the matter is that this act does nothing to prevent this government from moving forward with a strategy which is going to be the equivalent of what we did to people with mental health issues in the early '70s. We're going to be cutting them loose in the classrooms, no accountability, no training for providing the appropriate kind of specialized support for these kids. They're going to get lost in the classrooms, and the overall quality of education is going to suffer.

This act allows that to happen, and it's a real problem.

The Acting Speaker: Thank you very much.

Hon. members, 29(2)(a) is available for questioning or comments. The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

Ms Blakeman: Thanks. Two things. I'd like to ask the member if she would just flesh that out a little bit. I'm wondering specifically what she's trying to get at, whether it's regulations or funding, around special-needs students. That also includes gifted students, by the way.

Secondly, I wonder if she was aware that Mike Strembitsky, when he was the superintendent of the Edmonton public school board, said that charter schools are fine, but they have to be in the public system, in the schools under the public system. That is the system that I grew up with, and it seems to me it worked a lot better. I had no idea that outside of Edmonton charter schools were on their own and were essentially private schools.

I'm wondering if the member could cover those two topics.

4:10

Ms Notley: I'll try and deal quickly with the charter schools. I think that charter schools can work and do work in controlled situations, in situations where they're working collaboratively within the context of what the school board is doing in that situation and are providing that type of expert curriculum or focused curriculum that can be sort of linked up appropriately within the overall public school board. I'm afraid that with the criteria going behind closed doors and being opened up, we're not going to get that and that there's nothing now to stop them from being these sort of competition-type scenarios. I won't get into a huge amount of discussion because I want to answer the other question.

The concern around special needs is not – we talk about inclusion. Inclusion is fundamental, and it's really important. In

order to ensure inclusion, you need to start from the perspective that each special-needs child is going to require a separately developed and assessed curriculum, that may well take them to the very same place that every other typical child is going to. But the skill set for doing that is very different from what 95 per cent of teachers have learned when they got their education, and most teachers will admit that to you quite handily. Moreover, they're not trained on assessing the type of special needs, and they're not trained in curriculum development for special needs.

What we've got right now, where we're going, Mr. Speaker, is that we're just going to download that responsibility onto teachers, and we think that if we give them one online course and a weekend seminar, suddenly they're going to know how to do this. The best teachers know that, in fact, they probably need a good eight months to a year of additional training if they're going to take on that role, which is now being downloaded onto them.

What we're seeing in the classroom now because we're taking away the issue of coding and we're no longer attaching funding on the basis of disability, is that you have a teacher in a classroom who doesn't know how to assess situations. They'll have six or seven special-needs children. They don't know how to assess the severity of each one. They don't know how to manage the curriculum for each one. They don't even know how to manage the behaviour for each one, which, by the way, is not the primary task of the teacher. That's a secondary task. It's still about teaching and curriculum. It's not about behaviour management.

What happens then is that the class just starts to fall apart. People who have been teaching in that context over the last year, year and a half, two years – of course, it's been growing because this government has frozen special-needs funding over four years, and even the funding that went in this year barely catches us up to where we were in 2008. Since most of that is going to creating this

whole new process that the government has developed, it's not going to the kids in the classroom.

With that being said, we've seen it evolve over the last four years that the quality of special-needs education is deteriorating dramatically, as is the experience of the other kids in the classroom. You know, the ATA put out a poll about a month ago saying that the number of teachers who believe that special-needs education has dramatically deteriorated has gone from 25 per cent to 50 per cent over the last four years. There is a reason for that, Mr. Speaker.

I grant that not all of that can be addressed in the act, but what the act doesn't do is stop what this government is doing. It doesn't provide enough clarity for the rights of special-needs children, for special-needs children to know that they have a right to get the support they need, to get the education they need, and that includes having people in their classroom who are trained to provide them with the support they need in that classroom.

The Acting Speaker: Thank you. That concludes 29(2)(a).

Are there any other speakers to Bill 2, the Education Act, at this time? None?

I will then invite the hon. Minister of Education to close debate.

Mr. Lukaszuk: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I would like to thank all the members for this illuminating debate, and I would now ask for the question.

[Motion carried; Bill 2 read a second time]

Mr. Olson: Mr. Speaker, given the time I would propose that we adjourn until 1:30 p.m. on Monday, March 12, please.

[Motion carried; the Assembly adjourned at 4:15 p.m. to Monday at 1:30 p.m.]

Bill Status Report for the 27th Legislature - 5th Session (2012)

Activity to March 08, 2012

The Bill sponsor's name is in brackets following the Bill title. If it is a money Bill, (\$) will appear between the title and the sponsor's name. Numbers following each Reading refer to Hansard pages where the text of debates is found; dates for each Reading are in brackets following the page numbers. Bills numbered 200 or higher are Private Members' Public Bills. Bills with lower numbers are Government Bills. Bills numbered Pr1, etc., are Private Bills.

*An asterisk beside a Bill number indicates an amendment was passed to that Bill; the Committee line shows the precise date of the amendment.

The date a Bill comes into force is indicated in square brackets after the date of Royal Assent. If it comes into force "on proclamation," "with exceptions," or "on various dates," please contact Legislative Counsel for details at (780) 427-2217. The chapter number assigned to the Bill is entered immediately following the date the Bill comes into force. SA indicates Statutes of Alberta; this is followed by the year in which it is included in the statutes, and its chapter number. Please note, Private Bills are not assigned a chapter number until the conclusion of the fall sittings.

1 Results-based Budgeting Act (Redford)

First Reading -- 4 (Feb. 7 aft., passed)

Second Reading -- 31-38 (Feb. 8 aft.), 125-34 (Feb. 13 eve., passed)

Committee of the Whole -- 124-34 (Feb. 14 aft.), 160-61 (Feb. 15 aft., passed)

Third Reading -- 164-65 (Feb. 15 aft., passed)

Royal Assent -- (Mar. 5 outside of House sitting) [Comes into force March 5, 2012; SA 2012 cR-17.5]

2 Education Act (Lukaszuk)

First Reading -- 115 (Feb. 14 aft., passed)

Second Reading -- 152-59 (Feb. 15 aft.), 187-88 (Feb. 16 aft.), 182-85 (Feb. 16 aft.), 256-57 (Feb. 22 aft.), 405-11 (Mar. 8 aft., passed)

3 Appropriation (Supplementary Supply) Act, 2012 (\$) (Horner)

First Reading -- 115 (Feb. 14 aft., passed)

Second Reading -- 150-52 (Feb. 15 aft.), 161 (Feb. 15 aft., passed)

Committee of the Whole -- 185-86 (Feb. 16 aft., passed)

Third Reading -- 251-56 (Feb. 22 aft., passed)

Royal Assent -- (Mar. 5 outside of House sitting) [Comes into force March 5, 2012; SA 2012 c1]

4 St. Albert and Sturgeon Valley School Districts Establishment Act (Lukaszuk)

First Reading -- 236 (Feb. 22 aft., passed)

Second Reading -- 403-04 (Mar. 8 aft., adjourned)

5 Seniors' Property Tax Deferral Act (Jablonski)

First Reading -- 298 (Mar. 5 aft., passed)

Second Reading -- 403 (Mar. 8 aft., adjourned)

6 Property Rights Advocate Act (McQueen)

First Reading -- 236 (Feb. 22 aft., passed)

Second Reading -- 404-05 (Mar. 8 aft., adjourned)

201 Alberta Bill of Rights (Property Rights Protection) Amendment Act, 2012 (Hinman)

First Reading -- 69 (Feb. 13 aft., passed)

Second Reading -- 299-311 (Mar. 5 aft., defeated on division)

203 Tobacco Reduction (Protection of Children in Vehicles) Amendment Act, 2012 (Sherman)

First Reading -- 69 (Feb. 13 aft., passed)

204 Land Statutes (Abolition of Adverse Possession) Amendment Act, 2012 (Allred)

First Reading -- 357 (Mar. 7 aft., passed)

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Province of Alberta

The 27th Legislature
Fifth Session

Alberta Hansard

Monday, March 12, 2012

Issue 15

The Honourable Kenneth R. Kowalski, Speaker

Legislative Assembly of Alberta
The 27th Legislature

Fifth Session

Kowalski, Hon. Ken, Barrhead-Morinville-Westlock, Speaker
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Legislative Assembly of Alberta

1:30 p.m.

Monday, March 12, 2012

[The Speaker in the chair]

Prayers

The Speaker: Good afternoon. Welcome back.

Let us pray. As our members gather to begin a new week in our Assembly, we are reminded of the blessings which have been bestowed upon Alberta, and we give thanks for this bounty. May we conduct ourselves in our deliberations in ways that honour our province and all of its people. Amen.

Hon. members and ladies and gentlemen, we will now be led in the singing of our national anthem by Mr. Paul Lorieau, and I would invite all to participate in the language of their choice.

Hon. Members:

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

The Speaker: Please be seated.

All hon. members will have on their desks a Commonwealth Day message from Her Majesty the Queen, Head of the Commonwealth.

Man in Motion 25th Anniversary Relay Mr. Rick Hansen's Address to the Assembly

The Speaker: At this point I would ask the Sergeant-at-Arms to open the main entrance doors of the Assembly pursuant to Motion 11, which was approved by this Assembly last week.

[Mr. Rick Hansen entered the Chamber and took his place at the bar] [Standing ovation]

The Speaker: Hon. members, this day is of particular significance as it is the second time in our history that Mr. Rick Hansen has spoken from the Chamber floor. On May 8, 1997, Mr. Hansen addressed the members from the floor of the Legislative Assembly. He is the only individual in the 107-year history of this Assembly to have been invited twice to speak to the members.

Mr. Hansen is an exceptional individual who is committed to motivating people to recognize their dreams and to turn them into reality. Twenty-five years ago Rick Hansen established his Man in Motion tour across the globe. For 26 months he and his team wheeled over 40,000 kilometres through 34 countries, raising awareness for spinal cord research.

The Rick Hansen 25th Anniversary Relay is retracing the Canadian segment of the original Man in Motion World Tour. The relay, which started August 24, 2011, in Cape Spear, Newfoundland and Labrador, is travelling westward to British Columbia. The nine-month relay will cover 12,000 kilometres and visit over 600 communities in every province and territory of our great country. Today we invite Mr. Hansen to make a stop on the tour, to join us, and to say hello.

Mr. Hansen, welcome again to the Alberta Legislative Assembly. Would you please come forward. [applause]

[Mr. Hansen proceeded to the head of the table]

Mr. Hansen: Thank you, sir.

The Speaker: Sir, the floor is yours. Don't worry about me.

Mr. Hansen: I hate to turn my back to such a distinguished Speaker.

[The Speaker left the chair and took a place on the floor of the Assembly]

Mr. Hansen: Mr. Speaker, I want to thank you so much for this incredible honour.

Members of the Legislative Assembly, it is an incredible honour to be here to present to you an ongoing journey, a vision, values of this country. I feel so privileged to have been a young kid growing up in rural Canada who had a devastating accident that seemed to have shattered hopes and dreams. It was the values and the spirit of this country, family, friends, community, the medical profession, and role models all working together to help me rebuild my life, to have hopes and dreams, to be able to then look back and think about what I could do to make a difference, to pay it forward to the lives of others. It spawned the Man in Motion tour, to be able to find a cure for spinal cord injury, to make the world more accessible and inclusive for the hundreds of millions of people with disabilities just waiting for the opportunity to express themselves, to be welcome in families, in homes, and in communities.

All those years wheeling across the country and around the world were a tremendous experience. You know, I felt so buoyed because I was looked up to as a Canadian no matter where I went in the world. I felt proud of our values and what we stand for. I also was incredibly inspired when I came across this country in the middle of winter, facing insurmountable odds and obstacles, to see the wellspring of support from local citizens everywhere, people lining the streets, joining with me in a conversation about what this country aspires to be: a healthy and inclusive place for all, a country that also takes its rightful role in the world in leadership, in friendship, and in common spirit.

I'll never forget the incredible response that I received when the Premier met me at the border here in Alberta and welcomed me to this great province, the incredible support here at the Legislature, in universities, in high schools, in hospitals and rehab centres, and on the streets every single day, making me feel like that road wasn't long and lonely but that it was surrounded by family and friends, one country united with one common purpose.

When I completed the Man in Motion tour in May of 1987, I crossed a finish line that said, "Welcome Home, Rick," and above it there was a sign that said, "The End Is Just the Beginning." Well, you can imagine what I must have thought at that point, after having gone through all those miles and all those incredible challenges. In reality, the tour was over, but the dream had just begun.

It was a new conversation with our country, and millions of people picked up that cause and translated it into their own purpose and translated it into real change year in and year out, making fundamental progress towards a cure for spinal cord injury and accessible and inclusive communities. You know, it's hard to measure those profound moments of change in one year, but after 25 years, looking back, there is so much to be proud of, so much to celebrate. This is why we decided to conduct the 25th anniversary relay, going back to places all around the world and, of course, right across this great country, to be able to recognize local champions, to move from one man in motion to many, to make

this a nation's journey, to continue to move forward for the next 25 years until we get to the goal.

I feel so privileged to be doing this cross-Canada relay and joining 7,000 difference-makers who have been with me and so many others for all these years, to recognize the spirit of Albertans, to see close to a thousand Albertans actually out there on the relay, each one of them having their own amazing story.

Of course, here in the gallery we have two amazing difference-makers that I'd like to recognize, Amanda Magyar and Benjamin Tumack. If you could stand up and be recognized. Amanda, you are an incredible difference-maker. You are someone who has set goals and chased dreams. You exercise leadership and self-esteem amongst young people. But you also believe in a healthy planet, and you're continuing to exercise stewardship of this great Earth here locally and inspiring others around the world.

1:40

Of course, Benjamin, I'd like you to stand up because you've also overcome many obstacles yourself from a physical disability, but we don't see disability in your attitude and spirit; we see only ability. You not only translate and overcome your obstacles with muscular dystrophy in so many amazing ways to make a difference, but you have aspirations of representing your country as an elite wheelchair basketball player in the juniors and also dreams of the Paralympic Games to make all Albertans proud.

You are the representation of 850 Albertans who have been part of this relay. I'd like to ask Members of the Legislative Assembly to join me in recognizing you and saying thank you and congratulations. We are proud of you.

In conclusion, ladies and gentlemen, we have come a long way, and there is much to celebrate. I'd like to say a special thank you to the members here in this Legislature. Each and every one of you is making a difference. You have stepped up to serve your constituencies, your province well. You're making change. You have been partners with us for all these years to make sure that Alberta has a world-class research organization with universities and hospitals, finding a cure and connecting with the world. You've made sure that your communities are accessible and inclusive for all, and you see it reflected here in this Legislature, with people who happen to have disabilities but are expressing ability in an inclusive way. These examples of success are worthy.

We appreciate your partnership. We look forward to the next 25 years together. It's going to be a fantastic, accelerating contribution that we all make. I'd like to say thank you so much for being part of my dreams, helping me to feel like our best work is in front of us. I look forward to one year at a time, one stroke at a time, one contribution at a time until we get to that end. Thank you so much, and never give up on your dreams. I really appreciate it.

Thank you. [Standing ovation]

[Mr. Hansen left the Chamber]

The Speaker: Please be seated.

Introduction of Visitors

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Advanced Education and Technology.

Mr. Weadick: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's indeed a pleasure to rise today after that wonderful speech and take a moment just to introduce some very, very special guests we have with us today. Our guests are accompanying Mr. Rick Hansen, who has come to Edmonton as part of his 25th anniversary relay. In your gallery today we have Amanda Magyar, who is

participating in the Rick Hansen relay, and her sister Kassandra Magyar. We have Benjamin Tumack, who is also participating in the Rick Hansen relay, along with his mom and dad, Terri and Ken Tumack, as well as the following staff members from the Rick Hansen Foundation: Jamie Levchuk, Pamela Berg, Nadine Jarry, Colin Ewart, John Gibson, Doramy Ehling, and Christine Myatt. As they join us in the Alberta Legislature today, their presence reminds us that Rick's journey and his message of hope are as relevant today as they were 25 years ago. I would ask them to rise and receive the warm greetings of this Assembly.

Introduction of Guests

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Human Services.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's a pleasure for me to rise today and introduce to you and through you to members of the Assembly a bright and enthusiastic group of 35 grade 6 students from Brookside elementary school, located in my constituency of Edmonton-Whitemud. They're here this week for School at the Legislature. I saw them very briefly earlier today. It looks like they're enjoying the opportunity immensely. Accompanying the students are their teachers Shirley Szeto and Tara Price and parents Kym Schreiner and Sharon Gritter.

Mr. Speaker, it should be noted that in recognition of Commonwealth Day these students were representing various foreign diplomats of the Commonwealth. In speaking with the students, I know they're going to have some wonderful questions for me when we get together later on in the week. They're seated in the members' gallery, and I'd ask them to rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of this Assembly.

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

Dr. Taft: Yes. Thanks, Mr. Speaker. It's a real treat for me today to introduce to you and to all members of the Assembly students from Lynnwood school. There are 44 of them here today. Lynnwood school is a terrific school. I always enjoy going there to read during Read In Week, and I hope to be back not long from now to speak to the grade 6 class, at least, about the Legislature. The students are accompanied by a couple of teachers, Ms Adamson Cavanaugh and Mrs. Afreen, and they have two parent helpers with them, Mr. Pascoe and Mrs. Boucher. I would ask them to rise and please receive the warm welcome of this Assembly.

The Speaker: Hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods, your guests will arrive later?

Mr. Benito: No.

The Speaker: They're here? Go ahead.

Mr. Benito: I have two introductions today, Mr. Speaker. Both of them are in the public gallery. On the date of March 4 four migrant workers from the Philippines are dead after a head-on collision in southern Alberta that police believe was the result of drunk driving. Two men, both 35, and two women, aged 52 and 39, were killed. The loss of Anthony Castillon, Joey Mangonon, Eden Biazon, and Josefina Velarde has left the Filipino community of Alberta heartbroken and in a period of mourning. Mandy Servito, our guest for today, president of CEFA, or the Council of Edmonton Filipino Associations, is leading the way in providing comfort and support to those who have been greatly affected by this devastating incident. As well, Mandy, through

CEFA and in co-ordination with the workers' employers and all Albertans, is standing behind Josephine Tamondong, the lone survivor, through this difficult time. I would ask Mandy to stand and receive the traditional recognition of this Assembly.

My second introduction, Mr. Speaker, is Ms Julie Kallal, media relations of the Council of Edmonton Filipino Associations, or CEFA. Through the leadership role of CEFA and the good media works of Ms Kallal the awareness and help from the community for the victims of the tragic accident of March 4 that killed four migrant workers from the Philippines is in full swing. More help is needed. The umbrella group of 24 Filipino associations is very appreciative and commending the full support of the media for this tragic accident. I would now ask Ms Kallal to stand up and receive the traditional welcome of this Assembly.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development.

Mr. Berger: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure to rise today to introduce to you and through you to all members of the Assembly two important people in my life. Seated in your gallery are my father, Mr. Alvin Berger, from Nanton, Alberta, who at 89 years young still goes out to his shop and works on machinery every day, and my brother-in-law, Mr. Reid McPherson, who farms near Ardrossan. I would like the Assembly to please show them the warm welcome of this House.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Transportation.

Mr. Danyluk: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I would like to introduce to you and through you to members of this Assembly a family who travelled from Beauvallon in my constituency today for a tour of the Legislature Building and to watch question period. Marianne and her husband, Ross Amy, are here with their four children: Heather, Stephen, Sara, and David. They are seated in the public gallery, and I'd ask them to rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of this Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for St. Albert.

Mr. Allred: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased to rise today to introduce to you and through you to the Assembly two constituents and close friends of mine, Arlene and Murray Barker. I believe they're seated in the public gallery near the entrance. Murray is a retired detective from the Edmonton police force, but he has been on disability for 15 years now as a result of his contracting multiple sclerosis. Murray is very interested in the CCSVI treatment, but because of his size and his disability it is virtually impossible for him to travel to the United States for treatment. Nevertheless, Murray is a very positive force in St. Albert, scooting about town in his motorized wheelchair no matter what the weather conditions are. Murray will be a participant in the Rick Hansen relay on Wednesday, enthusiastically carrying the Rick Hansen medal with pride in St. Albert. He is another difference-maker. I would ask Arlene to rise and ask members of the Assembly to give Murray and Arlene the traditional warm welcome of the Assembly.

Thank you.

1:50

Oral Question Period

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

Alberta's Representative in Asia

Dr. Sherman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'd like to welcome the Premier back to Canada. Lately as the PCs lurch from one scandal to another, the Premier has found a new hobby, throwing people under the campaign bus: the Member for Dunvegan-Central Peace, Shiraz Shariff, and now Gary Mar. I wonder who the next member of the under the campaign bus club will be. To the Premier: were there any other government officials or government MLAs involved in organizing this fundraiser or in donating prizes for the silent auction, and if so, will you please explain?

The Speaker: The hon. the Premier.

Ms Redford: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I was certainly pleased to be welcomed back to the province by the hon. member. Our trip to Washington and New York last week was terribly successful – invited by FirstEnergy to speak at the East Coast Energy Conference to talk about the future of Alberta – well received, very optimistic, and pretty excited about what a good long-term fiscal plan looks like for this province.

With respect to a specific answer to the question of the hon. member if there is anyone who exhibits inappropriate behaviour that does not meet a code of values and ethics that matter to this government, then we will ask them to take responsibility for their actions, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Dr. Sherman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Given that the Premier promised change, real change, and first she ripped into Gar Mar during the PC leadership race for his connection to Kelley Charlebois, famous for receiving a two-year \$400,000 PC government contract to do nothing – Premier, you promised change – will the Premier please explain why she exercised such poor judgment in giving Mr. Mar a plum patronage post mere days after the leadership race was over and putting Kelley Charlebois in charge of the PC Party?

Ms Redford: Mr. Speaker, the future of this province will be opening markets, and we have had people in this province who've been public servants, who've done a very good job of doing that, and it's important for us to ensure that we can gather all of the talent possible. Now, there's no doubt – and I said it on Friday – that I have particular concerns about the information that was presented to me on Friday. We acted on it immediately. That matter is with the Ethics Commissioner, and that's where it should be.

Dr. Sherman: Mr. Speaker, the Premier is absolutely correct. Trade is so important.

A patronage position, a suspension of our representative, and our reputation yet again tarnished. To the Premier: given that accounts that that trip to Hong Kong was one of the fundraiser auction prizes and that it may have included a promise that Mr. Mar would show the winner around the city and make introductions to leaders, can the Premier say with certainty today whether or not this is true? Did a government representative attempt to profit from his office and his manner to pay his campaign debt?

Ms Redford: Mr. Speaker, the comments that the hon. member has made are at this point speculative. Now, I'm not going to say whether they are true or not true. That's why, I think by 2:30 on Friday afternoon, within an hour of hearing what had happened, I

asked the Ethics Commissioner to look at that. If this did happen, there is no doubt that it is inappropriate. I've expressed my concern, and we need to ensure that there is due process with respect to this matter.

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

Dr. Sherman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. What was inappropriate was making that appointment in the first place.

Long-term Care for Seniors

Dr. Sherman: Mr. Speaker, before the last election, in 2008, a near crisis caused by the warehousing of seniors was making the news. How little things have changed. Back then the PCs promised to solve the problem by adding hundreds of new long-term care beds to free up beds and eliminate ER waits in the process, and the previous Premier put his name to this. Now, the headlines are the same today as they were in 2008, and today we actually have fewer long-term care beds than we had back then. To the Premier. You're not even building long-term care beds, except 30 of them and a whole bunch of for-profit beds . . .

The Speaker: The hon. the Premier. [interjection] The hon. the Premier.

Ms Redford: Mr. Speaker, the reality is that there are more long-term care beds, there are more seniors in housing, there is strong, affordable public health care for seniors, and we have put in place plans to continue that program. We have had tremendous success. The only reason that the headlines might look similar today as they did four years ago is because, as we know, we are very close to an election, and there are a number of political parties that think that they can scare seniors into not supporting government, and that's shameful.

The Speaker: The hon. leader.

Dr. Sherman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The only one scaring the seniors and making them involuntarily separate and lifting the cap is you, Premier.

Given that the Premier spoke glowingly of privatizing the delivery of seniors' care, saying, "Allowing private industry to meet seniors' needs will create more jobs in many different sectors and steady growth for our economy," when will this Premier stop selling out our seniors and follow the Alberta Liberal lead by building publicly delivered, nonprofit, long-term care? Premier, our seniors are not commodities to be sold to your buddies.

Mr. Horne: Mr. Speaker, this government hasn't built only hundreds of continuing care spaces for seniors; we have built thousands in the last few years. We are on track to meet our goal of 5,300 spaces over five years. Unlike the opposition, that would prefer to warehouse seniors, apparently, in nursing homes of the 1970s, we intend to continue our plan to expand affordable services for seniors and bring health care to them in place.

The Speaker: The hon. leader.

Dr. Sherman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The pot calling the kettle black, the guy who wrecked this whole health system to begin with.

To the Premier. Given that the case of Audry Chudyk made it very clear that this current government does not adequately staff

or resource seniors' facilities already in place, resulting in such cases of severe senior neglect, could you please tell this House how you plan to upgrade the level of care and service in both existing and new long-term care facilities so that no senior ever suffers the shameful neglect Audry Chudyk did? How are you going to do it by reducing the level of care?

Ms Redford: A perfect example of what I've just been talking about, the hon. member standing up and using an unfortunate circumstance to scare seniors across this province. It is not appropriate. I am surely shocked that this is how we would have this conversation. I will go back, Mr. Speaker, to the fact that we are committed to publicly funded health care for seniors in appropriate accommodation that allows people to have choices and stay together. There is no doubt that the minister of health is correct. We have built thousands of new spaces, and we'll continue to do so.

The Speaker: Third Official Opposition main question. The hon. Member for Calgary-Buffalo.

Bitumen Upgrading

Mr. Hehr: The Alberta First Nations Energy Centre project, an upgrader to refine our bitumen here at home that would have led to the first refinery to be built in North America in decades, has been shelved by this government. Crazy, given that this project would have also connected us to Asian markets by using already established pipeline routes. Furthermore, government bureaucrats, cabinet ministers, the former Premier, and the Prime Minister's office were all enthusiastic about this project. To the Premier: how come your government has shelved this project that would have brought \$110 billion into our economy?

Ms Redford: There are a number of projects that come forward to the provincial government and through the private sector to private investors that might make sense. Our job as the government has to be to ensure that we are spending taxpayers' money wisely. Although I know there was a lot of enthusiasm about this project, Mr. Speaker, our job is to take a look at the business case and determine whether or not it makes sense for Alberta taxpayers. Now, of course, we would have had a role and been asked to make a contribution, and we made the decision that in some cases while there might be those opportunities to have partnerships that provide for value-added, this wasn't one of them.

Mr. Hehr: Well, Mr. Speaker, this government has sat on its hands for years, allowing our bitumen to be shipped south of the border to be upgraded and refined abroad, taking away jobs and revenue for our province. If not now for a project like this, Madam Premier, when?

Mr. Dallas: Mr. Speaker, actually, the hon. member suggested that there's no bitumen upgrading happening here. You know, between 60 and 70 per cent of all of the bitumen produced is being upgraded right here. Certainly, the North West upgrader project is another example of a progressive attempt to increase that amount. The simple facts are that we have to gauge the merits of each project on a risk basis for the government, and obviously that translates into risk for taxpayers, so we make some tough decisions.

Mr. Hehr: Well, the simple fact of the matter is that if we don't start building upgraders or refineries, it's not going to be at that 60

to 70 per cent level. What are you going to do with all the bitumen that's being produced here if you don't get a refinery or project built right now?

Ms Redford: Mr. Speaker, we make investments in value-added and upgrading that make sense for Alberta taxpayers. We are going to make sure that we do not sell our bitumen at a discount, and we will not enter into any agreement on a commercial basis that doesn't make sense for all taxpayers.

2:00

MLA Remuneration

Mr. Anderson: Mr. Speaker, this Premier should look up the definition of hypocrisy in a dictionary because she just gave a textbook example of it. She has ordered her MLAs to not receive any committee pay for a whole, gasp, two weeks before an election. Meanwhile this Premier voted herself a huge increase in her salary in 2008 behind closed doors right after the election, pocketing hundreds of thousands of tax dollars. Premier, how about you show some real-life leadership and roll back the 34 per cent wage increase that you and your cabinet voted yourselves and your friends back in 2008?

Ms Redford: Mr. Speaker, it's been very interesting the past three or four days to see exactly the point that I made in my leadership campaign last year. That was that we have a confusing system that doesn't allow Albertans to understand what a transparent and open process looks like with respect to MLA compensation. The fact that we've had random suggestions here and there as to how to fix it in the last three or four days speaks to exactly that point. That is why on November 30 of last year I kept a commitment. We called an independent commission that will examine MLA salaries and benefits, and we will take that recommendation seriously, accept those recommendations.

Mr. Anderson: A 30 per cent salary increase. Thirty per cent. Shameful.

Given that the Member for Calgary-Fish Creek and the Member for Fort McMurray-Wood Buffalo, who make probably half of what you do, Premier, have informed the Speaker that they will be returning all funds paid to them as members of this committee, will you roll back the ridiculous 34 per cent increase you gave yourself four years ago, right after the election, and return that money before the election to show that you are willing to sacrifice some of your own wrongful gains and not just those of your caucus members?

Ms Redford: Mr. Speaker, we will do exactly what I've committed to doing, which is to have an independent commission make a recommendation to not only how government members are paid but all members in this Legislature. When we take a look at the circumstances around compensation, I think there are a number of people in this House that are reflecting today on whether or not the system that we had in place was a system that allowed everyone to be accountable to the people that elected them. I'm looking forward to the results of that report.

Mr. Anderson: You've been here since 2008. You could have changed it. You certainly could have changed it in the last six months. You haven't.

Given you are the highest-paid Premier in Canada and given you are the highest-paid Premier of Canada because you voted for a 34 per cent increase in your own salary just a few days after the 2008 election was over and given you seem so happy to throw your caucus colleagues and their paycheques under the bus, surely you

are willing to show some real-life leadership and commit to rolling back your salary 34 per cent and to paying back the money you took from Albertans behind closed doors. Quit being such a shameless hypocrite.

Ms Redford: Mr. Speaker, what I will submit is that this report is going to be very important in terms of setting a direction for transparency.

The other thing I'll say: I find it terribly interesting that a number of people in this House who today have come up with a convenient stunt to try to polarize an issue are people who were fully aware of exactly what they were receiving for payment and did nothing about it until today, Mr. Speaker.

Alberta's Representative in Asia

(continued)

Mr. Mason: Mr. Speaker, when the Premier won the Tory leadership, one of her first acts was to appoint Gary Mar as the province's trade commissioner in Hong Kong. She did this without an open competition and despite Mr. Mar's previous ethical violations. Now she has suspended Mr. Mar without pay, but she bears the ultimate responsibility for this situation. Why won't the Premier step up and take responsibility and admit that she appointed Mr. Mar because it was politically expedient?

Ms Redford: Mr. Speaker, there are a number of people that we appoint to trade offices all over the world that have a strong set of skills. You'll know that we also appointed the former Mayor of Calgary, Dave Bronconnier, to be in Washington, and he's doing a tremendous job. I think it's very important for government to be able to make decisions to identify a set of skills that matter to Alberta to advance Alberta's economic interests.

Mr. Speaker, when I appoint someone, I certainly expect them to follow all rules that are set out and codes of ethics. As I said, as soon as I was made aware of the situation on Friday, we took immediate action to get to the bottom of it. That's the first thing we need to do.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Mason: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Given that Mr. Mar was cited by the Ethics Commissioner for paying Kelley Charlebois \$400,000 for work that was never done and given that Mr. Charlebois was recently appointed the executive director of the PC Party, will the Premier admit that she knew of Mr. Charlebois' actions when she approved his appointment as executive director of the PC Party?

Ms Redford: Mr. Speaker, this is the continuing discussion with respect to allegations that are unfounded. Now, I'm not going to deny the fact that there have been discussions with respect to how people have earned income, and that's fine, but what I will say is that I believe that anyone that I ask to do a job is going to follow codes of conduct that are in place, and if that has not been the case, then there will be consequences.

Mr. Mason: Mr. Speaker, I think the Ethics Commissioner would differ that these allegations are unfounded. They come right out of his report.

Will the Premier admit that she knew about Mr. Mar's previous ethical violations when she appointed him as Alberta's trade commissioner to Hong Kong without a competition, and if so, why did she do that?

Ms Redford: Mr. Speaker, this is exactly the point. The suggestion that's been made over this weekend is that as Premier I should be jumping to a conclusion and making a decision without having all the facts before me. The preamble to this question did exactly the same thing. I'm not going to do that. We've asked the Ethics Commissioner to look at this. That is appropriate due process, and we should respect the process.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar, followed by the hon. Member for Strathcona.

MLA Remuneration (continued)

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you. Jay O'Neill, a spokesman with the Premier's office, stated yesterday in the *Edmonton Sun*: "Cabinet ministers are not supposed to be collecting cash for sitting on committees." My first question is to the Premier. Is this statement correct?

Ms Redford: Mr. Speaker, I received no payment for sitting on that committee.

Mr. MacDonald: No. Again to the Premier: why did this spokesman from the Premier's office say that cabinet ministers are not supposed to be collecting cash for sitting on committees when we all know they collect on average \$35,000 a year from sitting on government committees?

Ms Redford: Mr. Speaker, there's a compensation package in place with respect to all MLAs and ministers. I've said very clearly that I don't believe that that's the appropriate system. That's why we called for Mr. Justice Major to take on this report, and I'll stand by the fact that we're going to accept the recommendations in that report.

Mr. MacDonald: Again to the Premier: will the Premier's office issue a retraction of the spokesman's statement made yesterday, which was, in all truth, very disrespectful and misleading to taxpayers across the province?

Ms Redford: There was nothing in that statement yesterday from my office that was in any way incorrect. The only reason that anyone watching this might think that there was anything suspicious or incorrect about it is because of the insinuation and innuendo placed on it by this hon. member, and that is not appropriate. Every single year there is a public document in which every one of us in this House discloses how we get paid and what we get paid. I certainly disclose that every year, as does everyone else. There is nothing suspicious or secretive about that. It is public.

Now, Mr. Speaker, as I've said, it is not a system that I think we should continue with. We've asked for the independent commission, and I'm looking forward to the recommendations.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Strathcona, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Meadowlark.

Spinal Cord Injury Research

Mr. Quest: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Each year in Alberta hundreds of people suffer strokes or spinal cord injuries that leave them with varying degrees of disability. My first question is to the Minister of Advanced Education and Technology. As the minister responsible for Alberta Innovates' research system, with all the world-class research that's being done in Alberta, can he tell us

what's being done to find a cure for spinal cord injury and to improve the quality of life for these injured Albertans?

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Weadick: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I sure appreciate this question, especially on a day when we've had Mr. Rick Hansen in our Chamber. This province is doing a large amount of spinal cord research; in fact, almost \$40 million worth of research over the past three decades. On top of that, Alberta Innovates: Bio Solutions has made a direct investment of \$12 million into the Rick Hansen Foundation, working on unique research towards a cure for spinal cord injury. We've also funded the Rick Hansen network to help work towards cures for this very necessary thing.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Quest: Thanks, Mr. Speaker. My first supplemental to the same minister, then. The \$40 million is quite a contribution. Can he give us some specific examples of how the government of Alberta's contribution to this important field of research is making a difference for these injured Albertans?

2:10

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Weadick: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. I had the privilege of attending a Rick Hansen event about two weeks ago, where they highlighted some of the research that's been done in Alberta especially around spinal cord injury and stroke patients. There were two items I remember seeing. One was a joystick called ReJoyce, that allowed people that had an injury to play games with a joystick on the computer. It allowed them to gain the reuse of their hands, and as the game got tougher, they were able to coordinate and do a better and better job of it. Another product, developed right here in Edmonton, was a product called Smart-e-Pants, which allows people that can't move to stay away from having things like bedsores from inactivity.

The Speaker: The hon. member, please.

Mr. Quest: Thanks, Mr. Speaker. My final question again to the same hon. minister: apart from the obvious benefits that he was describing to these people with these life-altering injuries, what are the other advantages, specifically to Albertans?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Weadick: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. We would like all of our citizens to be able to fully participate in our province and in our communities and in our environment. The annual cost of spinal cord injury to the province of Alberta is around \$400 million. The research we do now, today, can have a direct impact on people's lives and on future budgets.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Meadowlark, followed by the hon. Member for Lethbridge-East.

Tobacco Reduction Strategy

Dr. Sherman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Everyone knows that the real solution to health care is not getting sick in the first place, prevention and wellness. Smoking is one of the leading causes of death and is responsible for a wide variety of lung diseases – asthma, emphysema, chronic bronchitis, lung cancer – as well as heart attacks, stroke, cardiovascular disease. Kids are especially vulnerable to second-hand smoke, and in Alberta despite all the

work that we've done – and we've done some good work – the childhood smoking rates have gone from 10 to 14 per cent. To the Minister of Health and Wellness: what is your plan to attack the childhood smoking rate issue?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Horne: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The government is currently reviewing our Alberta tobacco reduction strategy. The strategy did see significant improvement in smoking rates and exposure to second-hand smoke in the last few years.

In addition, our tobacco legislation here in Alberta is among the most aggressive in the country, going beyond simple exposure to second-hand smoke and then taking into account, for example, issues such as the sale of tobacco in pharmacies or in stores that include pharmacies.

The Speaker: The hon. member, please.

Dr. Sherman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. To the Minister of Health and Wellness: given that there is first-hand smoke, where you're directly smoking and it's important to role-model for our young children, and given that second-hand smoke is an issue and there's evidence to say that it's bad for health and that now there's also evidence that third-hand smoke, just smoke on someone's clothes, is bad for our children, do you agree that protecting the health of our children in Alberta should be a top priority with respect to smoking?

Mr. Horne: Well, Mr. Speaker, on this point the hon. member and I certainly do agree. As I was about to say, we are in the process of updating our tobacco reduction strategy. We're looking at a number of initiatives, including exposure to second-hand smoke as it relates to exposure of children in vehicles. We're looking at the sale of flavoured tobacco products and a number of other issues that we believe will have a particular impact on reducing smoking among youth.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Dr. Sherman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I appreciate the minister taking steps and looking at these issues. I have a private member's bill, Bill 203, the Tobacco Reduction (Protection of Children in Vehicles) Amendment Act, 2012, a special case of children being in small, enclosed spaces. To the minister: would you make it an offence to smoke in a vehicle with anyone under the age of 18 present?

Mr. Horne: Mr. Speaker, I believe debate on the particular bill the hon. member refers to is on the Order Paper and may come up later this afternoon. I'll leave the debate on the aspects of the bill to that time.

What I will say, Mr. Speaker, is that the government takes this issue seriously. Rather than one-off initiatives, we are looking at a comprehensive update to our tobacco reduction strategy, and we'll continue to pursue that.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Lethbridge-East, followed by the hon. Member for Calgary-McCall.

Enhanced Support for Home Care

Ms Pastoor: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My questions are for the Minister of Health and Wellness. Last week the minister announced new initiatives regarding home care and rehabilitation services. Mr. Minister, what is the mandate for this new program called destination home?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Horne: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The initiative the hon. member refers to is part of a \$25 million fund proposed in Budget 2012. Destination home is modelled after very successful programs in Ontario and other provinces that target a specific portion of home-care resources to seniors who may be able to return home if they have the proper support. In addition, it helps prevent seniors from having to, as a result of fall or injury, seek treatment in emergency departments.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Ms Pastoor: Thank you. To the same minister. We're hearing concerns about long-term care and the long-term care beds that are required. Why are we putting money into this type of a program when it perhaps could be spent better elsewhere?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Horne: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. This funding is in addition to the over \$450 million that Alberta Health Services allocates to home care at this time. These funds are important because they are geared specifically to the people that we spend a lot of time in this Legislative Assembly talking about, those people who through no fault of their own and as a result of lack of support in the home environment find themselves seeking treatment in the emergency department and hospital. In addition, we certainly hope that these funds will help divert from the emergency department people who are currently living at home and who just need that little bit of extra support.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Ms Pastoor: Thank you. Again to the same minister: how is this new initiative going to impact the employment of health professionals? Is it going to shift from registered nurses to personal support workers?

Mr. Horne: Well, Mr. Speaker, we actually see a role for all staff disciplines in the destination home program. It will continue as an interdisciplinary team approach, that has been so successful in other aspects of the health care system. It is an initiative that will work in concert with other initiatives, programs, and services in the health system such as the 24/7 home-care RN on-call service that was announced along with the destination home program. There will always be a variety of needs in our communities. Therefore, we will continue to work with the most qualified health professionals who know the communities to meet these particular needs.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-McCall, followed by the hon. Member for Cypress-Medicine Hat.

School Infrastructure Funding

Mr. Kang: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. When it comes to government policy, after health care the most important issue for Albertans is education. I'm hearing a lot of complaints about government building new P3 schools under the ASAP program. New schools like Esther Starkman and Johnny Bright in Edmonton are already full, and there's no room to grow. To the Minister of Infrastructure: given that there's absolutely no money in the government's three-

year plan to build new schools or renovate old ones, where will we send our growing population of children to school?

Mr. Lukaszuk: Mr. Speaker, I have communicated on a number of occasions that it is this government's plan to meet the needs of education. We do know that not only in this province but in this country we tend to have schools where we don't have kids and kids where we don't have schools. That's why we're working with Treasury Board right now in making sure that we provide our children with the adequate spaces that they need to receive the education that they are receiving right now in the province of Alberta.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Kang: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The minister may be planning on busing kids to those old schools. Whatever his plan is, he should be clear.

To the minister again: given that the Premier promised full-day kindergarten but given that many schools just don't have the space for it, when will the space be added to accommodate full-time kindergarten in Alberta?

Mr. Johnson: Mr. Speaker, my department is working with the Ministry of Education to understand what the implications of full-day kindergarten are and what kind of an inventory of infrastructure additions we're going to need to be able to fulfill those commitments. As the Minister of Education has made clear in the recent month and through estimates, we're working through that in a phased approach to deliver on the Premier's promise.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Kang: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. To the minister again: given that I'm hearing from school boards that cookie-cutter designs of schools are not flexible enough to allow for boards to easily add extra modular classrooms, what is the minister doing to make sure that school board needs are met?

Mr. Johnson: Mr. Speaker, that is a challenge. Not every school board is the same, and not every community is the same. We want to be able to use the infrastructure that we have and leverage that to be efficient for the taxpayer. But to be efficient for the taxpayer, we also need to be able to deliver as many schools and projects as possible. So whenever we can, we're looking at P3s, we're looking at creative ways to deliver infrastructure to make sure that we get the best value for the taxpayer and then that we can deliver more schools and more spaces for the students that need it.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Cypress-Medicine Hat, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona.

2:20 Disaster Recovery Program

Mr. Mitzel: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. In June 2010 – June 18, 2010, to be exact – hundreds of residents in Cypress county, Medicine Hat, and other communities in Alberta were hit hard by flooding. In the almost two years since this disaster some disaster recovery program applicants have contacted me with concerns about the assistance they're getting or not getting through the program. To the Minister of Municipal Affairs. It seems like improvements could and should be made to disaster assistance, particularly for flooding. Will you order a review of the program?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Griffiths: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. There is no doubt that we have a tremendous amount of compensation for anyone that's been affected by some sort of natural disaster or flood. We know that there have been some concerns expressed around the way some of our projects have run. We're doing a third-party independent review of how we deliver disaster programs. We've picked out specifically the southern Alberta disaster recovery plan and the central and Vermilion disaster recovery plans just to examine what has worked well. There are a lot of things that have worked very well but also things that might not have worked as well as they could have. We can learn from that and improve the programs.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Mitzel: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Well, we're now in 2012. To the same minister: thank you, but why did it take so long to order a review of the disaster recovery program?

Mr. Griffiths: Well, Mr. Speaker, the three disaster recovery programs that are being reviewed right now just ended. They are not receiving any more applicants. It takes a while to assess damage, especially flood-type damage. It can take a couple of years to assess it all and come up with valuations and finish out the program. We want to make sure that when we are going to do a review, we have all of the pertinent data and information and all of the applications in so that we work from all of the information and not make half-guesses or changes based on half-information. We want to do it right, not just fast.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Mitzel: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My last question is also to the Minister of Municipal Affairs. Given that I've also heard concerns about LandLink, the company that administers the program, will you ensure that they're going to be a part of the review?

Mr. Griffiths: Mr. Speaker, that's a very fair question. We are reviewing every aspect of the program, from communication about how the program operated to service delivery and customer service to whether or not the protocols of the program operated in place and if the appropriate information was out there. LandLink delivers quite a few of those services on behalf of the province. We've heard a lot of positive stories, but we want to make sure that they're doing the best they possibly can, too, so they'll be part of the review.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona, followed by the hon. Member for Calgary-Mountain View.

Private Operation of Continuing Care Centres

Ms Notley: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Last week this government stepped into a labour dispute to block the rights of workers. In so doing, they protected a private long-term care operator diverting public funds meant for employee salaries into their profit margin. Now this government claims they are protecting seniors, but they are only protecting the company using taxpayers' dollars to pad their bottom line. To the minister of labour: why is he helping a private long-term care company to shortchange its employees by 20 per cent while pocketing the difference?

Mr. Hancock: Mr. Speaker, my role as Minister of Human Services is to ensure that vulnerable Albertans are protected and to make sure that labour standards are effectively carried out. In this particular circumstance, it is very clear that the vulnerable individuals involved, those who are residents of the home, would not be well served by having to move if there are not sufficient staff to take care of them in their place. It's not clear that there would be sufficient staff to care for them in their place. Therefore, the most important thing to do is to ensure that the labour dispute that's happening is dealt with appropriately and, more importantly, that the individuals involved have a safe environment in which to live.

Ms Notley: To the minister of health then. Given that this government already funds the company on the basis of what AHS pays its employees and given that money clawed back from front-line caregivers will neither save the taxpayer any money nor improve services to these residents, will the minister admit that this is a perfect example that having the private sector deliver publicly funded services hurts the quality of service received by vulnerable Albertans?

Mr. Horne: Mr. Speaker, the success of Alberta in the area of continuing care is a result of a partnership that involves government, not-for-profit organizations, and the private sector. To take this particular instance, which is an unfortunate instance and is under the disputes inquiry board that the hon. colleague referred to, and to generalize that as a failure of the system as a whole is a non sequitur that I'm not going to participate in.

Ms Notley: Well, Mr. Speaker, the system has not been a success. Now, given that private companies will repeatedly attempt to divert public money for services toward padding their bottom line – that's what their shareholders want them to do – why won't the government really stand up for seniors and finally start funding more long-term care centres, or any, that are publicly administered so that seniors don't have to pay the cost of inflating a private company's profit margin through higher fees and compromised services? To the minister of health.

Mr. Horne: Mr. Speaker, with all respect to the hon. member, I do not think what Albertans want is a philosophical or an ideological debate about public versus private versus nonprofit. What they do want is a continuing care system and a range of options that work for them, that bring health care to them, in place in their own communities. That's what we're endeavouring to do.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Mountain View, followed by the hon. Member for Calgary-East.

Labour Protection for Paid Farm Workers

Dr. Swann: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. My questions are for the ministers of Transportation and Human Services. On February 16 the Minister of Transportation asserted that he did not believe it to be "legal for individuals, whether they be farm workers . . . to ride in the back of a pickup truck on our highways" when asked by the Member for Calgary-McCall. However, section 85 of the Alberta rules of the road regulation exempts those who work in agriculture. To the minister: will the minister admit he was wrong and tell this House why this group of Albertans are allowed to travel in an unsafe way on the highways?

Mr. Danyluk: First of all, Mr. Speaker, it is not legal for individuals to travel in open vehicles in the back unless in the exempt areas, and I think farming is one of them.

Dr. Swann: Thank you for admitting that. You didn't admit that last week.

Given the minister's very public position that safety on our highways is a high priority, why does the minister allow paid farm workers in Alberta to be treated differently from all other Albertans?

Mr. Danyluk: Mr. Speaker, I very much believe that we have to have a common-sense approach, and that common-sense approach is very much about: there are a lot of businesses, whether it be a construction crew or whether it be farmers, that need to have individuals that are in the back of vehicles. There is no doubt that if you look at the recreation aspect of it or at individuals riding in the back of a truck, it's not allowed.

Dr. Swann: We just heard a nonsense approach, Mr. Speaker, not a common-sense approach.

Let's try the Minister of Human Services. Why is your ministry and this government perpetuating this discriminatory and dangerous double standard?

Mr. Hancock: Mr. Speaker, it's important always to look at the context of things that are happening. I think it's very clear from the Minister of Transportation's response that in most circumstances it would not be appropriate for people to ride in the back of a pickup truck on a highway, and it's illegal in most circumstances. There may be short circumstances where you're moving from one field to another. There's no good reason for anybody to be in the back of a pickup truck, farmer or otherwise, if they're going to town. But if you're moving from one field to another or some contextual situation, it may well be appropriate as long as it's done carefully.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-East, followed by the hon. Member for Calgary-Glenmore.

Charter Schools

Mr. Amery: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Recently I was pleased to be at Foundations for the Future Charter Academy, where they received the good news that their charter was being renewed for a 15-year term, the first school to receive this extended term. Also announced that day was that the enrolment caps for charter schools were being reviewed and would increase for some schools. Can the Minister of Education explain what that means to schools like Foundations for the Future, which has thousands of children waiting for spots in this program?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Lukaszuk: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The hon. member is correct. The charters have been extended up to 15 years for those charters that meet the requirements of Alberta Education relative to the quality of education that they deliver, and most do. That was to diminish their bureaucratic nightmare of having to continuously apply for a charter renewal. We also have allowed the existing charter schools to rightsize themselves, meaning that if they were in buildings that simply had the capacity to absorb more students and their cap was below that capacity, we lifted their capacity to the maximum that the school can absorb.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Amery: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. If, as the minister says, the growth will happen only in a few schools, then why get people's

hopes up that they may get an opportunity to have their child enrol in one of the charter programs that is already operating at capacity?

Mr. Lukaszuk: Well, Mr. Speaker, that speaks very well to the quality of education and to the choice that charter schools offer. Obviously, parents are in some cases choosing charter schools over other modalities of delivering education. We will continuously be reviewing the uptake of students in charter schools, but we also encourage other education providers to look at some of the programs that are being offered by charter schools and replicate them so that more children in Alberta can have access to similar programs offered by a variety of school providers.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Amery: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. To the same minister: will the minister commit to providing funding to these schools so that they can buy or lease new spaces to expand their programs?

Mr. Lukaszuk: Mr. Speaker, right now charter schools are in a variety of lease or ownership arrangements throughout the province. At this point in time the budget has been tabled in the Alberta Legislature, and we have debated it. Subject to it passing, there are no specific provisions to increase funding for infrastructure for charter schools.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Glenmore, followed by the hon. Member for Dunvegan-Central Peace.

2:30 **Alberta's Representative in Asia** (continued)

Mr. Hinman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. We know from the promotional advertising that Mr. Mar used his position to auction off a trip to Hong Kong to help pay off his leadership campaign fund. Was Gary Mar's plane trip back to Alberta from Hong Kong to attend this unethical fundraiser paid for by the Alberta taxpayers? To the minister of international relations.

Mr. Dallas: Mr. Speaker, as we discussed earlier today, this matter was placed before the Ethics Commissioner, and I'm not prepared to comment until the Ethics Commissioner has concluded his work.

Mr. Hinman: They know that they paid for it. Again, cover-up and corruption.

Given that the appointment of Gary Mar was a pure political appointment and given that Premiers have fired other political appointments for far less, when will the Premier do the right thing and ask Gary Mar to give the money back and fire him?

Mr. Dallas: Mr. Speaker, I don't know how much clearer I could be about this. The matter has been placed with the Ethics Commissioner. We'll allow him to go about doing his work. He will report back, and we'll go from there.

Mr. Hinman: It didn't take so long with a letter to a school board, yet they need to review with the Ethics Commissioner. Unbelievable.

Given the amount of the scandal in the health care, MLA committees, and the Gary Mar affair that is now coming to light under what is clearly a PC culture of corruption, why is the Premier refusing to do anything about these scandals until after the votes of the next election?

Mr. Dallas: Mr. Speaker, as I mentioned, the matter is before the Ethics Commissioner. He'll do his work and report back.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Dunvegan-Central Peace, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

Farm Safety

Mr. Goudreau: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Other members have alluded to and talked about farm safety, and farm safety week is upon us as we speak. My question is to the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development. Does the minister have anything planned to heighten the awareness of farm safety?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Berger: Thank you. Plan•Farm•Safety is the theme of a three-year Canadian Agricultural Safety Association campaign, which started back in 2010. Mr. Speaker, 2010 promoted plan, with an emphasis on planning for safety. In 2011 the focus was on farm, with highlights on implementation, documentation, and training. This year's focus is on safety, recognizing that everyone has a role in farm safety.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Goudreau: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. To the same minister: what other steps is the minister taking to improve farm safety?

Mr. Berger: Mr. Speaker, adults and children all deserve a safe place to work and play. That's why our government believes that education and awareness are best suited to the practical realities of Alberta farming. This government provides annual funding to farm safety programming, including workshops, awareness campaigns, in-school presentations, and grants to farm community agencies. I recently announced a \$2 million regional agricultural society grant to increase farm safety, to help the next generation of farm producers with farm safety programs and ongoing initiatives to that end.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Goudreau: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. As a past agrologist I know that activities on farms are rapidly ramping up. We're going through calving season, and there is very, very little snow left out there, so crops and the cropping season will come upon us very soon. To the same minister: what more is the government prepared to do to improve farm safety during this important time?

Mr. Berger: Mr. Speaker, I am in receipt of the farm safety council's recommendations, but our government will deal with that in due time. In the meantime, education and awareness, of course, are the best ways to deal with the practical realities of the farm. As I stand here this afternoon, my son will be at home doing chores, and what I count on is his awareness and his education on safety to protect him and keep him safe, just the same way I went through it because of the fellow that I introduced earlier pounding farm safety into me. That's how we'll do this.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre, followed by the hon. Member for Calgary-Mackay.

Midwifery Services

Ms Blakeman: Thanks very much, Mr. Speaker. There are few seats for the one midwifery education program in Alberta, so many Albertans obtain their training elsewhere. Now, because Alberta has not signed on to the international midwifery preregistration program, our internationally trained midwives face

a \$32,000 bill to go through this process. My questions are to the minister of health. Given the shortage of midwives in the province is the minister aware of the number of internationally trained midwives seeking registration in Alberta?

Mr. Horne: Mr. Speaker, yes. I met with the college of midwives and their association representatives a little more than a week ago. It is true that there is a shortage of midwives in Alberta. We are concerned about that. We are also concerned about ensuring that we provide an environment that allows midwives to practise to their full scope of training and expertise. The health professions legislation in Alberta and the midwives' regulation are based on the parameters of the scope of practice in the Canadian midwifery framework. We intend to support our midwives in achieving the ability to practise to the full extent of their expertise.

Ms Blakeman: Thanks very much, Minister, for that answer. Again to the same minister: given that it appears that recently about nine applicants for preregistration were advised to apply to bridging programs, which would require that same \$32,000, is the minister considering creating a made-in-Alberta preregistration program?

Dr. Sherman: Good question.

Mr. Horne: Mr. Speaker, it is a good question. I have not had any specific discussions with the midwives or their association about a bridging program. What we have discussed is making sure that the midwives who are licensed to practice in Alberta have the opportunity to go beyond the traditional maternity services, maternity support role in our hospitals and be able to practise in the community, supporting home births and other alternatives that Alberta women want and expect.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you. Back to the same minister: well, wouldn't the minister agree that this a perfect opportunity to consider this? We have the existing midwifery multidisciplinary project under review. We have a brand new college of midwives. Wouldn't this be the perfect opportunity to create a fair and unbiased preregistration program?

Mr. Horne: Mr. Speaker, I'll be happy to take the hon. member's comments about a bridging program under advisement and use that idea along with other issues that we're trying to address in my discussions with midwives. As I said, our intention as a government is to do everything we can to support midwives in practising to the full extent of their training and expertise.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Mackay, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview.

Skilled Workforce Training Programs

Ms Woo-Paw: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Recently the Canadian Chamber of Commerce, one of Canada's leading business associations, declared that our nation's relatively strong economic standing will be in crisis if we don't take steps to tackle the impending skilled labour shortage as the growth performance and competitiveness of our businesses and industries are critical to Alberta's economic future. My questions are to the Minister of Advanced Education and Technology. What is your department doing to ensure that Alberta businesses stay competitive and have enough skilled tradespeople?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Weadick: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. As you know, it is critically important that as we come out of this slowdown, we have appropriately trained people in place. Over the past year my ministry has provided bridging funding of \$17 million to our postsecondaries to keep positions available for skills training even though those seats were not full. We've also changed the ratio of apprentices to journeymen so that we could get more apprentices into the workplace, and we've started to put trades training online. We have four trades online now, with more to come.

Ms Woo-Paw: When employers are desperate to find more skilled workers, why aren't you adding more apprenticeship seats?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Weadick: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. As I was saying earlier, we've managed to maintain seats for apprenticeships even though they weren't being utilized this year because we believe that as the economy comes back, we're going to need them. There's a critical importance of jobs and employment for apprentices to be able to train, so we do need our employers to step up to the table with us to make sure that we can have appropriately trained apprentices in place for the workforce.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Ms Woo-Paw: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My third and final question is to the same minister. What about those that don't have a job yet like our youth and newcomers? Can they get started?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Weadick: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It is an important thing, working with newcomers to the province of Alberta. As part of that we've streamlined our processes for assessing the skills of people coming into the province and looking for ways to bridge their skills into our workforce.

Some of the other things that have been done along with our Premier's visit to the United States are looking for ways to prequalify people in certain trades from other jurisdictions like the United States so that when they come in here, we know what their skills are and can take them right into our workforce very quickly and take advantage of their skills within the needed trades.

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

2:40

Provincial Tax Policy

Dr. Taft: Thanks, Mr. Speaker. My questions will be to the Minister of Finance. This government is running deficits, raising tuition, deferring maintenance on public infrastructure, draining its savings, and spending a hundred per cent of its nonrenewable resource revenues. At the same time, taxes in Alberta could rise \$11 billion and still be tied for the lowest in Canada. This is completely unsustainable. Given that this government has ruled out tax increases, how will this problem be fixed?

Mr. Liepert: Well, Mr. Speaker, I think it's important, because this member started off with a preamble, that maybe I have a preamble to the answer. The preamble to the answer is this. This is the only province in Canada that has no net debt. This is the province in Canada that has the lowest unemployment rate. This is the only province in Canada that has a sustainability fund and a

heritage fund. This is the only province in Canada that will be looking for workers, not having people unemployed.

The whole issue around taxation we've discussed thoroughly in this Assembly, and we'll continue to discuss it as we move forward.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Dr. Taft: Thanks, Mr. Speaker. Well, the minister mentioned the heritage trust fund. Given that the per capita inflation-adjusted value of the heritage fund has declined 60 per cent since its peak in 1982, does this government plan to rebuild the value of the fund, and if so, how?

Mr. Liepert: Mr. Speaker, I think that we've been very clear that as we move forward, we need to have a discussion with Albertans relative to not only taxes, not only the resource revenues and where they go and what they pay for but also the savings strategy of the province going forward.

We have to remember that in the past six or seven years this government has invested some \$30 billion to \$40 billion in critical infrastructure in this province. If this particular member is suggesting that we should not have done that, that that money should have gone into the heritage savings trust fund, well, then I'd suggest he stand up and say so so that constituents in Edmonton understand they would not have a ring road, they would not have an Edmonton clinic, they would not have a dozen new schools, and they would not have an LRT that goes to the south side of the city.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Dr. Taft: Well, thank you. [interjections] This is great fun.

I would not say that. What I would say is that taxes on the rich and on corporations should be raised. [interjections] I told you it would be fun, Mr. Speaker. [interjections] This is a serious question if I could have the floor.

Given the growing reports that the same technology that caused a glut of the natural gas market and gutted the government's natural gas royalties could do the same for oil in the next year or two, which would also hammer this government's treasury, what is this government's contingency plan for this significant risk?

Mr. Liepert: Mr. Speaker, it's good to hear that more than just the leader in the Official Opposition are on the record that we need to tax people more. That's good to hear, and we want to hear that continually from that particular group as we move through the next 30 or 40 days. I think Albertans will make the choice. We will soon be asking Albertans to make a choice. They will have the opportunity of whether to vote for a group of individuals who don't want to spend any money on infrastructure or whether they want to vote for a group of individuals who want to tax more and put some money away in the savings account. They'll make the choice.

The Speaker: Okay. Hon. members, that concludes the question-and-response period today. Nineteen members were recognized, 114 questions and responses.

Statement by the Speaker

Member Anniversaries

The Speaker: We are going to move very quickly, but first of all, before we go back to the Routine, there is a recognition here for a number of members in this Assembly who were elected for their

first time on March 12 of 2001, so their 11th anniversary: the hon. Member for Innisfail-Sylvan Lake; the hon. Member for Lac La Biche-St. Paul, the Minister of Transportation; the hon. Member for Vermilion-Lloydminster; the hon. Member for Dunvegan-Central-Peace; the hon. Member for Grande Prairie-Smoky; the hon. Member for Calgary-Shaw; the hon. Member for Edmonton-Castle Downs; the hon. Member for Spruce Grove-Sturgeon-St. Albert; the hon. Member for Calgary-Bow; the hon. Member for Whitecourt-St. Anne; the hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview; the hon. Member for Edmonton-Beverly-Clareview; and the hon. Member for Cardston-Taber-Warner. Congratulations.

It's happy birthday time for the hon. Member for Stony Plain.

Members' Statements

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

Rick Hansen 25th Anniversary Relay

Mr. Rodney: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I rise today to salute a truly inspirational Canadian, today's very special guest, Mr. Rick Hansen. Few people in the history of the world have demonstrated the vision, endurance, and effectiveness at the levels that Rick has. Twenty-five years ago Rick did something that was thought to be impossible. He wheeled himself 40,000 kilometres through 34 countries in 26 months on his epic Man in Motion World Tour, and as Rick just told us, that was just the beginning.

Ever since then Rick has cultivated innumerable powerful partnerships, including with our Alberta government. Over the past 30 years we've been proud to provide \$34 million in support for spinal cord research, and we are seeing great results, including with Dr. Arthur Prochazka and his revolutionary ReJoyce rehabilitation system; Dr. Vivian Mushahwar, whose Smart-e-Pants prevent painful pressure ulcers; and Dr. Richard Stein with his WalkAide, which helps people with stroke or spinal cord injury to walk.

These are innovations developed right here in Alberta, with the spark supplied by Rick Hansen. Rick is now sharing his vision and his action with an entirely new generation via his 25th anniversary relay, which is shining the light on over 7,000 difference makers of all kinds clear across the country. Having experienced a back broken in six places myself in the past, it was a great honour recently to support the cause by carrying the medal in the relay with my family and to a mountaintop with a great friend.

With Rick's friends and fans around the world I thank him and his family and his team for kick-starting the race for a cure for paralysis, jolting people into changing their minds and actions, and, quite simply, making this world a better place for us all. Through continued collaboration we will live in a more inclusive world, a world in which the newly injured will walk away from spinal cord injury.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

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

Second-hand Smoke

Dr. Sherman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Every adult citizen has a duty to help protect children. Human beings have an instinctive awareness of this duty because we see that children are vulnerable, that they are our future, and that they have not yet developed the full capacity to care for themselves. One of the very best ways to protect children is to insulate them from the harmful effects of

second-hand smoke. That's the goal of my private member's bill, which would make it an offence for adults to smoke in vehicles while anyone under the age of 18 is present.

Second-hand smoke leads to a wide range of health problems, including asthma, emphysema, lung cancer, stroke, heart attacks, and respiratory illnesses. As an ER doc I've seen kids suffering from asthma attacks, and I can't tell you how frustrating it is when the parents have smoked on the way to the hospital.

When adults smoke in cars with children present, it creates two problems. The first, of course, is that they're exposing kids to second-hand smoke in a confined space with no escape. In the winter you can't even roll the window down for some fresh air.

The second problem is that smoking in the car with kids sends the message that smoking is okay. It's about leadership and role modeling, Mr. Speaker. If my parents do it, why shouldn't I? That's the message. If adults stopped smoking in cars with kids present, that's one less place where kids can get the idea that smoking is cool, especially from their parents. That's important because we need to remember that teen smoking rates have been rising lately, and we must reverse that trend.

Prevention, my friends, is the key. It's the key to preventing tobacco-related illnesses, to lowering the cost of public health care, to raising the quality of life for every single Albertan in this province. I hope that all members of this House will see the wisdom in preventing second-hand smoke from hurting Alberta's children. We have not just an opportunity but a duty to protect our kids from second-hand smoke.

Thank you.

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

2:50 **Ethnocultural Inclusivity and Integration**

Ms Woo-Paw: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It gives me great pleasure to rise today to recognize some dynamic community builders. The Ethno-Cultural Council of Calgary acts as a collective voice for Calgary's ethnocultural communities towards full civic participation and integration through collaborative action. Its key initiatives include dialogue between community and government; supporting research and policy analysis on issues affecting their communities such as voter participation, racial profiling, and racial discrimination; as well as community-based primary prevention, that focuses on the root causes of domestic violence, as an example.

The Edmonton Multicultural Coalition aims to advocate for healthy and inclusive public policies and to build the participatory capacity for institutional/sector partners. Their Injera initiative with the Edmonton Police Service, Reach Edmonton, and the city of Edmonton enhances the capacity of the police to work with the community through a crime prevention project where stakeholders learn the culture of police and the cultural communities they serve.

Since 1995 the Edmonton Multicultural Health Brokers Co-operative has tirelessly supported immigrants and refugees to attain optimum health through education, community development, and programs such as perinatal outreach and multicultural family support for children with disabilities. These organizations possess incredible capacity and commitment to bridging between sectors, operate within a dynamic cross-cultural and multicultural framework, and also position themselves for continual innovation.

The leveling the playing field initiative between the Edmonton health brokers co-op, the Creating Hope Society, and Human Services through deepening the understanding of aboriginal and immigrant/refugee families aims to identify practice and policy

changes most supportive of culturally respectful and responsive services for these families.

Mr. Speaker, these organizations came together recently to form DiverseCT Alberta, a network of Alberta cities and towns for diversity, focusing on advancing community-based and public policy solutions to issues affecting the province's diverse citizens.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Grande Prairie-Wapiti.

Arctic Winter Games 2012

Mr. Drysdale: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It is with great pride that I rise today to recognize 230 members of Team Alberta North, including athletes from my own constituency, who travelled to Whitehorse for the 2012 Arctic Winter Games. The Arctic games are also known as the Friendly Games. Having hosted them in Grande Prairie in 2010, I know that this reputation is well deserved. These games are as much about sharing and culture as they are about athletic competition.

For six memorable days teams from northern Alberta, the Northwest Territories, Yukon, Nunavut, Quebec, Alaska, Greenland, Russia, and Scandinavia participated in events that celebrate northern traditions and promote active lifestyles. Alberta's athletes competed in sports like badminton, ski biathlon, cross-country skiing, curling, snowshoeing, and hockey and in Arctic sports and Dene games like arm pull, one-foot high kick, kneel jump, knuckle hop, head pull, and snow snake.

Placing fourth overall, Team Alberta North brought home a total of 104 ulus, including 40 gold, 37 silver, and 27 bronze. The ulu, a symbol of athletic achievement at the Arctic Winter Games, is styled after the traditional Inuit knife used as an all-purpose tool in the Arctic for centuries.

I want to congratulate all the members of Team Alberta for their many achievements at this year's games. These dedicated young people from north of the 55th parallel are the pride of our entire province. I'd like everyone here to give them a round of applause to show our appreciation and pride in all the members of Team Alberta North.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Strathmore-Brooks.

Greenhouse Research and Production Complex

Mr. Doerksen: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. On March 1 I had the pleasure of participating in the official opening of the greenhouse research and crop production complex, GRPC, at the Crop Diversification Centre South in Brooks. This new facility is an investment of more than \$17 million by the Alberta government into our province's greenhouse and crop research and production industry and is a valuable asset to our province.

The complex supports Alberta greenhouse growers by conducting scientific crop research and by growing test crops in a simulated large-scale commercial greenhouse setting. In touring this impressive facility, I saw production greenhouses where tomatoes and peppers were grown and research greenhouses where research into areas such as crop disease, molecular farming, greenhouse robotics, and aquaponics take place.

This facility will help to ensure that our province stays on the leading edge of applied and adaptive crop research, technology transfer, and technology commercialization. It is one of the most advanced facilities of its kind in North America, truly a world-class facility. Every aspect of its design and operation is equipped to create and test greenhouse innovation for scientists, growers,

agribusiness, and educators. It is a place to go for solutions, support, and training.

Greenhouses provide other benefits to Albertans beyond supplying fresh and local food to markets. There are currently 328 greenhouses operating in the province, creating 4,800 full-time and part-time jobs and an annual gross revenue of around \$160 million.

Mr. Speaker, this new research facility contributes economically to Alberta. It will also generate a significant amount of experimental data, invaluable technical information, and business models for the greenhouse industry in Alberta and western Canada. This government is working hard to ensure that our crop industry is among the most competitive and progressive in the world, and by investing in this world-class greenhouse research and production facility, we will accomplish that.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

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

Assured Income for the Severely Handicapped

Mr. Amery: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. When Albertans are in need, they can count on this government to stand up and do what is right. Recently our government took a big step in doing the right thing to improve the lives of severely handicapped Albertans. In Budget 2012 we announced an increase of \$400 to the monthly financial benefit for the assured income for the severely handicapped. At the same time we also doubled the income exemption thresholds, allowing AISH clients to earn twice as much money without it affecting their benefits. This was a commitment that the Premier made to Albertans, and it is yet another example to show that when this Premier makes a commitment, this Premier keeps a commitment.

Mr. Speaker, AISH is important to many Albertans as it provides both financial and health-related assistance necessary to meet clients' basic needs. With this \$400 increase AISH clients are now eligible for a total monthly living allowance of \$1,588. Furthermore, in terms of health benefits AISH clients will continue to receive prescription drugs, dental assistance, optical coverage, diabetic supplies, and ambulance services. For those AISH clients living in long-term care, they will continue to have their room-and-board costs covered at the private-room rate of up to \$1,700 per month plus a personal allowance of \$315 per month for a maximum of \$2,015 per month in benefits.

Mr. Speaker, increased funding to the AISH program represents our government's commitment to assisting our most vulnerable citizens and maintaining their living standards, which together will enhance their quality of life. As a government we have a responsibility to ensure that Albertans are able to meet their basic needs. I'm proud to say that under this Premier we are fulfilling this responsibility.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Cardston-Taber-Warner.

Alston Scout Park

Mr. Jacobs: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's a pleasure today to acknowledge the Alston Scout park, located in the constituency of Cardston-Taber-Warner, which I have been proud to represent. This park is named in honour of Louisa Grant Alston, who moved to Magrath from Utah in 1900 along with her eight children to join her husband, who had come to Alberta to live.

Louisa and her family were pioneers in the area, and Louisa was part of the first primary presidency in Magrath, an organization

which taught Christian values to children. More than 100 years later, in 2003, the Alston Park Foundation was established, and it raised \$25,000 in short order through golf tournaments, family and private donations. Over the next nine years additional funds were raised between numerous community fundraising efforts and grants through Alberta's community initiatives program which led to the building of the park and the official dedication of the park on July 22, 2011.

Mr. Speaker, the construction of the Alston Scout park in Magrath is a perfect example of how the spirit and support of community and government initiatives work together in benefiting Alberta communities. The Alston Scout park is located on main street in Magrath. The park features many scouting exhibits and serves as a great place for families to go to relax, spend time together, and reflect.

I would like to acknowledge the history of the Alston Scout park and commend the Alston family and community for all their hard work in realizing such a worthwhile project.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

3:00

The Speaker: Hon. members, I should point out that in a few seconds from now we will arrive at a situation where Standing Order 7(7) kicks in. "At 3 p.m. the items in the ordinary daily routine will be deemed to be concluded and the Speaker shall notify the Assembly." Having done that, shall I now recognize the hon. Deputy Government House Leader?

Mr. Denis: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I can't even cite the rule number. You've taken it out of my mouth.

The Speaker: It's my job.

Mr. Denis: I would like to move for unanimous consent to waive rule 7(7) for today only.

The Speaker: Hon. members, the request is to waive the standing order so that we can conclude the Routine. It has to be unanimous so I'll just ask one question: is anybody opposed? If so, say no.

[Unanimous consent granted]

Tabling Returns and Reports

Mr. Blackett: Mr. Speaker, as chair of the Standing Committee on Legislative Offices and in accordance with section 20(2) of the Auditor General Act I would like to table five copies of a report by the Auditor General entitled Report of the Auditor General of Alberta, March 2012.

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

Mr. Rodney: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I am pleased to rise today to table an op-ed from the March 11, 2012, *Calgary Herald* entitled A New Perspective: The Health-care Glass Is Not Half Empty, written by Dr. Tom Feasby, dean of medicine at the University of Calgary. The op-ed states: "Criticism of health care is fine, in fact necessary, if it is constructive and balanced. This has not been in the case in Alberta for some time." I would encourage all hon. members to read this op-ed.

I thank you, Mr. Speaker.

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

Ms Notley: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'd like to table the appropriate number of copies of a petition signed by 776 Albertans. The

petition reads: “We, the undersigned residents of Alberta, petition the Legislative Assembly of Alberta to take immediate action to regulate electricity prices, recognizing that electricity is an essential service.” These are in addition to the 1,200 signatures for this petition that were previously tabled.

Thank you.

The Speaker: Are there others? The hon. Leader of the Official Opposition.

Dr. Sherman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I have six tablings. I’d like to table a letter to Cheryl Scarlett, director of human resources, information technology and broadcast services, tabling the return of \$43,656.17 back to the Ministry of Finance, Legislative Assembly Office.

I’d like to table five copies of my cheque, that was delivered today.

With respect to youth smoking rates I’d like to table five copies of the youth smoking rates among Albertans aged 12 to 19. The source is the Canadian community health survey.

I also have five copies of an e-mail from the Canadian Cancer Society, Alberta/NWT division, dated March 9, 2012, supporting Bill 203, the Tobacco Reduction (Protection of Children in Vehicles) Amendment Act, 2012.

Five copies from the Lung Association, Alberta & NWT, dated March 9, 2012, again supporting a free vote on Bill 203.

Five copies from the Alberta Policy Coalition for Chronic Disease Prevention dated March 9, 2012, again supporting Bill 203.

Finally, I’d like to table five copies of Smoke-Free Vehicles: Protecting Youth from Exposure to Tobacco Smoke in Vehicles, from Campaign for a Smoke-free Alberta.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Tablings to the Clerk

The Clerk: I wish to advise the House that the following document was deposited with the office of the Clerk. On behalf of the hon. Mr. Hancock, Minister of Human Services, responses to questions raised by Ms Notley, hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona, and Mr. MacDonald, hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar, on February 13, 2012, Department of Human Services, supplementary supply estimates.

The Speaker: The daily Routine is now concluded.

Orders of the Day

Public Bills and Orders Other than Government Bills and Orders Second Reading

Bill 203

Tobacco Reduction (Protection of Children in Vehicles) Amendment Act, 2012

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

Dr. Sherman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Health care accounts for 40 to 50 per cent of every provincial budget across the nation. In Alberta we can’t balance our budget because we’ve got a lot of sick people here. What we need to do is focus our health care system and the way we think as a society not on a sickness system but on a prevention and wellness system.

Mr. Speaker, did you know that the leading cause of death in Canada is no longer heart disease? It’s actually cancer. Lung

cancer is one of those cancers. Some of the other causes of costs to health care are asthma, emphysema, chronic bronchitis, addictions. Smoking is a major cause of these problems, major costs not only in terms of health care dollars but actually in terms of human suffering. If you have a business, the health of your labour work force determines the economic productivity of your labour workforce. Lost productivity actually affects the bottom line of business. A healthy population is a wealthy population.

So, Mr. Speaker, it’s my pleasure to rise for a second time to discuss Bill 203, the Tobacco Reduction (Protection of Children in Vehicles) Amendment Act, 2012. I move second reading of Bill 203.

When this act comes into force on January 1, 2013, the province will have taken one very large, positive step towards the protection of our children from a dangerous killer, second-hand smoke. Although the wording of the bill is quite simple, to amend the Tobacco Reduction Act in order to prohibit smoking “in a vehicle in which a minor is present,” the outcome would be nothing short of monumental.

Mr. Speaker, I’d like to talk about some facts and figures, and I believe that facts actually speak for themselves. It’s incumbent upon us as policy-makers to make decisions based on merit, evidence, and fact. We in Alberta, I will acknowledge, have taken steps in the recent past to address smoking in public places. I believe that was a very good thing.

Smoking rates amongst children is where we are failing. We’ve failed to meet the youth tobacco reduction target for the last few years. We were trending properly. We went from 12 per cent to 11 per cent from 2007 to 2008, but in 2010 childhood smoking rates went up to 14 per cent, approximately a 30 per cent increase.

Alberta kids continue to be exposed to second-hand smoke in a number of settings, including motor vehicles. The levels of second-hand smoke in cars are worse than levels previously experienced in bars and taverns, especially in small, teeny, little child-sized lungs.

Tobacco use is a known contributor to many of the leading causes of disease and premature death in Alberta: cancer, heart disease, et cetera. Tobacco use cost the Alberta health care system an estimated \$470 million in 2002 alone, and it’s much more than that in 2012. We now have one of the highest youth smoking rates in the nation, and I just recently tabled this chart. Alberta and Quebec are the only remaining provinces without legislation to protect children from second-hand smoke in vehicles.

Real-life examples, Mr. Speaker. I will tell you that nothing bothers the bejesus out of me more than when I’ve got a four-month- or six-month-old baby suffocating – suffocating – and struggling to breathe 60 times a minutes, sucking in between the ribs, and the parents have been smoking on the way to the hospital. It’s absolutely tragic. What’s even more tragic is to actually know that this child is going to go home, and they’re going to be smoking again. These children end up back in hospital.

You know, after 20 years of practising medicine, if there’s one thing we’re going to accomplish in the Legislature, we must stop this practice. We must send a message to our society. Please don’t smoke in front of your kids, and especially in enclosed spaces. It’s dangerous to the health of your children, literally. The health risk of second-hand smoke for young children: there’s extensive evidence that it damages their lung lining and hurts their immunity.

3:10

Arguments against intrusion or private residence. Mr. Speaker, many people are going to say: “You know what? Get out of my

bedroom. The government is playing too big a role in my behaviour.” You know what? We shouldn’t actually have to legislate common sense. We don’t want to get inside people’s homes. We don’t want to get inside people’s bedrooms, but unfortunately I believe that we as policy-makers must take steps to protect these young babies who have no voice. For those Albertans or hon. members who may have concerns with this act on the grounds that they view it as too intrusive or that their vehicle is an extension of their private residence, I would remind them of the need to balance the public interests and the private interest and our duty as a moral, civilized society to protect those who cannot protect themselves.

The maximum fine of \$1,000 associated with the first offence will be consistent with all current violations of the Tobacco Reduction Act: smoking in a public place, smoking in a workplace, smoking within a prescribed distance from a doorway, window, or air intake of a public place or workplace. It is also consistent with the specific goals of this government’s tobacco reduction strategy that, I believe, all members of all political parties would support: preventing tobacco use by youth, cessation of tobacco use by current tobacco users, and protection of all Albertans from second-hand smoke.

Finally, there is no restriction on people smoking in their own vehicles. You can smoke all you want in your car. Please don’t do it in front of a baby or a young person. However, the confined space of a vehicle is not like the interior of a home or a big building. If someone is smoking at home, they can go out to the patio, and those who don’t want to be affected won’t be affected. They can move to another room.

There are no options for a minor in a vehicle but just to sit there and breathe toxic air: toxic, poisonous air. It’s a well-known fact that there are a number of carcinogens and very toxic chemicals inside cigarettes. The principle of protecting our children’s welfare should always be paramount. In fact, as an emergency doctor if we become aware of child abuse or suspected child abuse, it’s our duty to report it. I’m not suggesting this is child abuse, but I am suggesting that we must protect our children.

Mr. Speaker, role modelling. I’d like to speak for a moment about the power of role modelling. Anyone who raises children is familiar with the reality of monkey see, monkey do. I’m going to be honest. You know what? I smoked when I was nine years old. Why? Because I saw my father smoke. You know, I’ll make light of this. He gave me a beating. He did. He gave me a beating because I smoked, and I probably deserved it.

I wish my father had quit smoking. The one-year anniversary of his death is coming up on March 20. I will tell you that after three strokes, 15 heart attacks, two pacemakers, five brand-new blood vessels that they put in his heart, two brand-new blood vessels in his legs combined with diabetes and hypertension: I wish my father had stopped smoking when I stopped smoking. I stopped smoking at the age of nine after that beating. After his retirement – he’d worked extraordinarily hard – he really didn’t enjoy his life. It was so tough to see him suffer.

Not only should we not smoke in front of our children; people should take that sense of personal responsibility and, beyond that, role-model for our children. Mr. Speaker, when parents smoke in front of their children, especially in cars, our children learn how to smoke and are essentially smoking from the day they’re born. In fact, if the mother smokes, there is great evidence out there that it produces lower birth weight babies. That child has been smoking before it was even born. We’ve got to put a stop to that. We must put a stop to that.

We need a cultural change with regard to minors and smoking. It cannot be okay to smoke while pregnant, for youth to smoke,

for parents to smoke in a confined area like vehicles when children are present. It’s an important preventative health step, the wisdom of which certain municipalities in this province, for example Okotoks, and many provinces in this country have already implemented. Mr. Speaker, sometimes Alberta shows leadership by leading; sometimes we show leadership by following. There are only two provinces that haven’t passed this law, Alberta and Quebec. We’ve got to get with the game here. This is a no-brainer.

Mr. Speaker, I know that sometimes we all get stuck with partisanship and accept good ideas because of where they came from or reject good ideas because of where they came from. When I was the parliamentary assistant to the minister of health, on that side, I tabled Bill 215, the same bill, in the Legislature. It was tabled. The Ministry of Health and Wellness supported it. The minister at the time, the hon. Member for Calgary-West, supported it. The bureaucracy supported it. It came to the floor of the House. Unfortunately, we ran out of time in 2008. It didn’t get to second or third reading.

I brought this bill up when I was on that side of the House and now on this side of the House. I would ask all members to please consider: this isn’t a Liberal idea; it’s not a Conservative idea; it’s the right idea. I would ask all hon. members to think about their children and our future and to support Bill 203, the Tobacco Reduction (Protection of Children in Vehicles) Amendment Act, 2012. I ask them: please do not let the opportunity in this instance to do the right thing, to protect our children from a very real killer, second-hand smoke, pass you by for partisan reasons.

We will argue and fight and debate on many other things. We will. We will disagree on many things and agree on many others. But this, I believe, we can all agree on. At least, I hope we can. I would plead with you, please, to not use the old excuse in not supporting this legislation that the government sometime in the future will introduce broader legislation with many other things lumped in, which would also be important. The hon. Member for Edmonton-Rutherford mentioned some of those today, and I would ask that he support this as well. I would ask the hon. members not to use that excuse, the overall tobacco reduction strategy, because I believe that would be a cop-out. The bill is here. We’re here doing the work. We’re going into the election. Let’s not wait and delay this any longer, because it would be leadership delayed. A decision delayed with respect to our children in this instance would be leadership delayed.

3:20

I’m going to give you an example. There was legislation tabled by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar about EpiPens. That’s a public safety issue. We have defibrillators in public places. Many people have anaphylaxis and life-threatening, severe anaphylactic reactions. This idea I supported, but it was rejected because of the source. It came from a Liberal MLA.

Mr. Speaker, I ask forgiveness from the hon. Member for Lac La Biche-St. Paul, but the day after I was removed from caucus, that hon. member had a near fatal anaphylactic reaction from a peanut, and we didn’t have an EpiPen on-site.

I was PA for Health and Wellness. This bill had the support of Alberta Health and Wellness and the government caucus but died on the Order Paper. You have a very straightforward bill before you, and if you agree with it, I would ask you to support it now. We can start saving our children’s lives today if we have the courage to act now. It’s the right thing to do, so why wait?

Mr. Speaker, I thank you for this opportunity to speak on a very important issue that affects our children. Thank you.

The Speaker: Hon. members, might we revert briefly to Introduction of Guests before we move on?

I have two speakers that have indicated their desire to speak. One is the Minister of Municipal Affairs, and then the hon. Member for Cypress-Medicine Hat. If others are interested, kindly send a note.

[Unanimous consent granted]

Introduction of Guests (*reversion*)

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

Ms Woo-Paw: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I'm going to combine my two introductions into one. It is my great pleasure to introduce to you and through you to all members of this House participants and friends from the Ethno-Cultural Council of Calgary's leadership, engagement, action, and development project, the LEAD initiative. This initiative seeks to increase the level of community leadership, civic engagement, and volunteerism as well as cross-cultural collaboration in Calgary's ethnocultural communities to advance issues and point to them.

Our guests are seated in the members' gallery, and as I say the name of their society, would they please stand. I apologize that I cannot include all of the names because of the length of the list: the Ethno-Cultural Council of Calgary, the Council of Filipina-Canadian Women, connecting elders of ethnocultural communities project, the Calgary-Chinese Elderly Citizens' Association, the Bangladesh Canada Association of Calgary, the Calgary Japanese Community Association, the Calgary Korean Scholarship Foundation, the Calgary Korean Seniors Association, the cultural engagement project, the Peruvian Cultural Association in Calgary, Possibilities in Motion, the Vietnamese Christian faithful fellowship, the Excel Family and Youth Society, the Fountain of Orphans and Vulnerable Women, the India Canada Association, the AIDS Calgary African communities project, the Arsii-Oromo, the Assam community of Alberta, the Aweil Union Society, the Calgary Vietnamese Women for Friendship and Progress Association, the *Canadian Latino Newspaper*, the Coalition for Equal Access to Education, as well as representatives from the Edmonton Multicultural Health Brokers Co-operative, members of the Edmonton Multicultural Coalition, and representatives from the Creating Hope Society.

Mr. Speaker, as the founding member of the Ethno-Cultural Council of Calgary I'm very proud to have worked with many of these remarkable individuals and community leaders in past decades, and I'm very pleased to have had the opportunity earlier today to make a member's statement about the great work that these groups of people are doing to benefit Albertans from all corners of our province.

I would like to ask the members in this House to extend to them the warmest traditional warm welcome of the Assembly.

Public Bills and Orders Other than Government Bills and Orders Second Reading

Bill 203

Tobacco Reduction (Protection of Children in Vehicles) Amendment Act, 2012 (*continued*)

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Municipal Affairs, followed by the hon. Member for Cypress-Medicine Hat.

Mr. Griffiths: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's an honour today to rise to speak to private member's Bill 203. I've thought a lot about this piece of legislation, and quite frankly it's had me thinking a lot about my last 10 years as a Member of this Legislative Assembly. I actually find it somewhat humorous, I guess is the only way I could describe it, that of all of the pieces of legislation I've seen us debate in this House for the last 10 years, the sins are some of the most hotly contested and debated pieces of legislation.

To give consideration, we've just discussed upping the penalty, from a 24-hour suspension to a three-day suspension and a three-day vehicle seizure, for those people who have a blood-alcohol content of between .05 and .08. They are impaired when they're driving. Maybe they're not criminally impaired, but they're impaired. In fact, 300 people in this province have been killed by people with an impairment between that level. It's so hotly contested and debated. I can tell from other pieces of legislation on smoking that we've passed in the past that this is going to be a hotly contested and debated piece of legislation, maybe not in this House, but it will be on Alberta's streets. I find it very interesting.

[The Deputy Speaker in the chair]

You know, I remember when we introduced in the legislation on smoking a setback from doorways, and there was so much controversy about it. Comments were made to me that we were taking away people's fundamental rights, that pretty soon they weren't going to be able to smoke anywhere but in their vehicle. Now they won't be able to smoke in their vehicle as long as there are minors present. I can tell that I'm going to receive many cards and letters for my position on this.

Mr. Speaker, this is a fundamental debate about responsibility versus rights. You have the right to smoke, but do you have the right to smoke when young people are present in a confined area where they have to breathe it in? You have a right to smoke, but perhaps you have a responsibility to not smoke in an area where young people are going to be forced to breathe in the second-hand carcinogens.

You have the right to drink, but does that mean you necessarily have the right to drive on Alberta's highways at a blood-alcohol level of .05, putting other people's lives at risk? Perhaps you have the right to drink but the responsibility not to drive on our streets when you've done so, when you're at a level of impairment that can damage other people's lives or put them at risk.

It's a fundamental debate, Mr. Speaker, where people will stand up and say: I have the right to do this. But there is also – and I've debated this among all of my Conservative friends – a responsibility to not harm others while you exercise your rights. That's what makes this such a challenge. I know that some people will argue for their rights. I hope they argue just as vehemently about the responsibilities they have in exercising those rights.

Mr. Speaker, we know that smoking is not a harmless vice. It causes all levels of health care concerns to individuals who do the smoking. We know just as much about second-hand smoke and how dangerous it is as well. There are countless studies that dictate and demonstrate exactly how harmful second-hand smoke is. I've seen videos of the testimonies of spouses who are 70 years old, whose wife or husband passed away 20 years earlier from lung cancer and had never picked up a cigarette or died of heart disease and had never picked up a cigarette, but the spouse that remained alive did smoke and testified: if only they'd known exactly how harmful second-hand smoke was. I heard one spouse say that they wouldn't have been responsible for killing the one they loved the most. That is a very powerful, emotional argument

and demonstrates just what we would do if we knew what kind of harm we caused.

Now, smoking in a vehicle with a young person, Mr. Speaker, is a very confined space. There is no doubt that a young child will inhale second-hand smoke, which we know is dangerous. An adult can stand up and say: "Wait a second. I'm not smoking in the vehicle with you. You pull over and smoke outside." They can debate and protect themselves, but young people can't always do that.

Now, I know that parents or adults would not intentionally want to harm a young person. The majority of people really do want to protect their children or other young people that they have custody or care over, Mr. Speaker, but oftentimes we make decisions without appropriate information. Look; a grown adult who is having a drink at the kitchen table would never – if you told them to pour one-quarter of your drink down the mouth of the child that's sitting beside you for every drink that you have, not a single solitary adult with a bit of common sense would think that was a good idea. But most people fail to realize just how negative, how harmful the health effects are to young people who have to inhale second-hand smoke.

I think the ultimate discussion, the ultimate decision, Mr. Speaker, comes down to whose responsibility it is to protect those young people that would be in a vehicle and forced to inhale second-hand smoke.

The responsibility should be for the adults in the vehicle to not do it. But, Mr. Speaker, if they fail to do that and only when they fail to do that, that's ultimately when it becomes the government's responsibility to protect those who cannot protect themselves. That's ultimately the core responsibility for the government.

3:30

Again, I don't believe that anybody would deliberately try to hurt someone who's young, a minor, Mr. Speaker, which is why, although I'm going to support this piece of legislation, I encourage our minister of health, our government cabinet and caucus, and every member of this Legislature to continue to push for better education about what the harmful effects are.

It would be wonderful, Mr. Speaker, if we got to a point where everyone had enough information about the harmful effects of second-hand smoke and we as a government didn't need to pass legislation because people did the right thing, because they took the responsibility to protect young people who couldn't protect themselves.

I will be supporting this private member's piece of legislation and continuing to advocate and encourage that we educate all Albertans on just how harmful smoking and second-hand smoke are.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Deputy Speaker: Any other hon. member wish to speak on the bill? The hon. Member for Cypress-Medicine Hat.

Mr. Mitzel: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's a privilege for me to rise today in the Assembly to speak on Bill 203, the Tobacco Reduction (Protection of Children in Vehicles) Amendment Act, 2012, being brought forward by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Meadowlark. I'd like to thank the hon. member for his initiative in bringing Bill 203 forward as it highlights many important health and social issues.

Mr. Speaker, I'm sure everyone in this House would agree that protecting our children is always a priority. Whether it involves their physical or emotional well-being, the safety of our most

vulnerable population undoubtedly deserves our attention, and it's no different when it comes to the effects of second-hand smoke.

The objective of Bill 203 is to make it illegal to smoke in cars whenever anyone under 18 is present. A violation of this bill would result in a maximum fine of \$1,000.

Mr. Speaker, the change in social norms regarding smoking that has taken place over the past decade is quite astounding. Our society went from a place where smoking was quite prevalent to one where the practice is now illegal in many areas such as public places, workplaces, and the entrances of many buildings. Not that many years ago you actually could smoke in a hospital. Moreover, minimal supervision is required to enforce those rules as the rate of compliance is high. People now limit the locations to where they smoke and are conscious of whom they smoke around because they see it as common sense and as a matter of respect.

More recently there's been an increase in the number of studies and reports looking at smoking in vehicles. One of the first studies to examine smoking in cars was done in 2008 by researchers at the University of Waterloo and entitled *An Experimental Investigation of Tobacco Smoke Pollution in Cars*. In this study levels of tobacco smoke pollution, more commonly known as second-hand smoke, were measured in 18 different vehicles.

Drivers smoked a single cigarette in their cars in each of the five controlled air sampling conditions. Each condition varied based on the car's movement, level of air conditioning, and whether the windows were open. With the worst ventilation conditions, windows up and the vehicle parked, the level of the smoke was higher than at most bars that allowed smoking. Under the better ventilated conditions, the side window halfway down and the cigarette held close to the window, the level of smoke was reduced but still posed a significant health risk. The researchers concluded that smoking in a car under any condition may potentially lead to high levels of second-hand smoke.

More recently another study was published in the *Canadian Medical Association Journal*, 2011, entitled *Myths, Facts and Conditional Truths: What is the Evidence on the Risks Associated with Smoking in Cars Carrying Children?* While trying to determine the risks involved, the authors first looked at the mixture of chemicals that make up second-hand smoke and its concentration in cars under different conditions such as volume, speed, and ventilation. They also looked at how long a person would be in the car and how long a person would be exposed to second-hand smoke. The difference between how second-hand smoke affects children compared to adults was also considered.

The authors found that the evidence does not show an absolute risk threshold because a range of environmental, biological, and social factors contribute to the risk equation. However, the authors did note that because of the small size of the interior space of a car, during the worst ventilation conditions smoking in a vehicle may constitute a health risk.

Mr. Speaker, the potential health risk posed by second-hand smoke is well documented, and it is clear that smoking within a vehicle poses a risk. Not many people today would refute those findings. However, the fundamental question we may want to ask ourselves while debating Bill 203 is not about the potential danger of second-hand smoke but whether this sort of legislation is the best course of action to mitigate the risk.

This is not to say that governments should be complacent or take no action at all; quite the opposite. As a matter of fact, this province already has a number of health initiatives in place to address this issue. Most of these programs fall under the Alberta tobacco reduction strategy. This strategy is a 10-year plan that was developed and implemented in 2002. It set goals and targets for

reducing tobacco use among Albertans as well as methods for achieving those targets.

The goals of this comprehensive strategy relate to three major focus areas: prevention of tobacco use by youth; cessation of tobacco use by adults and youth; and protection of all Albertans, including children, from second-hand smoke. In order to achieve these goals, this strategy focused its efforts on education, collaboration, raising public awareness, and sustainability. By working with various community-based programs such as the National Non-Smoking Week events, these have spread positive information and have taught youth about the dangers of smoking.

The Barb Tarbox campaign, which was very effective in terms of its recall among adolescents, is another example of the multipronged approach of the strategy. By raising public awareness through a mass-media campaign, this innovative approach, which featured a former smoker, was able to garner significant attention and educate many people about tobacco.

As a result of such achievements this strategy and its stakeholders have had much success with respect to its goals. Four out of 5 Albertans do not use tobacco, and there are now more ex-smokers than current smokers. The percentage of youth in Alberta under 18 exposed to second-hand smoke in their homes also decreased by more than 50 per cent from 2001 to 2006. The number of nonsmoking Canadians who report being exposed to cigarette smoke in a private vehicle has also fallen about 25 per cent between 2003 and 2009.

These trends were not simply the result of legislation as the Tobacco Reduction Act was not implemented until 2008. Instead, they are the result of public education and collaboration, that have been successful in changing social norms regarding tobacco use.

Since 2012 is the 10-year anniversary of the plan, Health and Wellness is currently working with tobacco stakeholders across the province to develop a renewed Alberta tobacco reduction strategy. This renewed strategy will be conscious of the need to protect all Albertans from second-hand smoke but will focus on youth, young adults, pregnant women, and at-risk populations.

Mr. Speaker, I'd like to reiterate that I agree with the intentions of the hon. member in wanting to protect children from second-hand smoke in cars. However, as I've discussed, there are also other approaches that are currently being used with great success.

I'd like to thank the hon. member again for bringing forth this important issue for discussion, and I look forward to the rest of the debate. Thank you.

The Deputy Speaker: I shall recognize the hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona. You wish to join the debate?

3:40

Ms Notley: Yes, I do. Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's a pleasure to be able to get up and speak to this bill, again because I do believe, as the mover of the bill first noted, this has already been discussed at some length in the Legislature.

I want to say at the outset that this is a bill that I think includes a strategy which outweighs the concerns which are legitimately articulated about it. In short, it is a bill that we would support. I say that understanding that there are some legitimate concerns that people might raise with respect to the degree of sort of government oversight into their life and whether the car is an extension of the home and those kind of arguments, but notwithstanding those arguments I think that we need to be very clear about what's at risk here.

I want to begin by thanking the Member for Cypress-Medicine Hat because he did a very good job of quoting a number of important studies which outlined the clear health effects

associated with being exposed to second-hand smoke and, in particular, being exposed to second-hand smoke in a vehicle.

The fact of the matter is that we typically, less so in this province but in most responsible jurisdictions, regulate the exposure of the public in not only public settings but in private settings to hazardous chemicals. Many workplaces are private domains, but we still say that at a certain point you cannot force people to be exposed to chemicals and air quality that jeopardizes their health. It's quite understood that we have a practice in our society where when the health effects reach a certain point, it is considered reasonable and thoughtful to limit the exposure of people to those health effects and thereby limit the right of another person to expose people to those health effects. So it's not new that day in and day out we sometimes limit the rights of one person in order to achieve a better outcome for others.

Now, the fact of the matter is that there's also a lot of literature out there that shows that as we succeed in getting people to move away from smoking, ironically there's a greater income disparity amongst those who smoke and those who do not smoke. More likely than not you're going to have lower income people who are still smoking. More likely than not you're going to have people with lower rates of education who are still smoking. So I'm not unaware of the concern about bringing in this sort of fine/penalty approach against these people because it may actually in some cases make the situation worse.

One of the things I would say about this legislation is that in concert with going forward with this legislation, we need to develop a far more effective and aggressive prevention and cessation program with respect to smoking. Yes, we're all great at putting out advertising. This government advertises up the yingyang. Their favourite thing to do is advertise and educate. But in most cases regulation is that key linchpin of a strategy that makes for real changes.

The other thing that you need to do is that you need to understand that tobacco addiction is an addiction, and we need to be able to provide programs that assist people in breaking that addiction in a way that is nondiscriminatory on the basis of income.

I myself grew up with one parent who smoked, and I tell people the story. We lived about 15 miles out of town, and we would get into the front seat of our three-on-the-tree pickup truck. There would be me, my mom, and my two brothers. We'd be sitting along the bench of the old truck. It would be minus 25 out, so there was no friggig window open, that's for sure. We'd be driving into town, sometimes in second gear because my mom was not necessarily so good at moving us into third gear. She would find a way to smoke three or four cigarettes between the time that we left our place at Dunvegan and got into Fairview.

You know, I'm fully aware that this happened. You know, I love my mother dearly, and she was a very good mother, but at the time the cultural norms of what was acceptable were what they were, and nobody was telling her that that was actually something she could be fined for doing, so she did it.

It was interesting. I was one of those kids, when I was 13 or 14, who was very antismoking, and I was constantly lecturing her about the need for her to quit smoking. Finally, when I was 16, my dad bribed her into quitting smoking and said, "Tell you what; if you quit smoking, we can collectively agree to put this amount of money every month towards the church charity," that she wanted to give the money to, so she agreed to quit smoking. Interestingly, Mr. Speaker, within a month and a half of her quitting smoking, I started. I believe it was because I'd probably been addicted for some period of time because of the amount of exposure to second-hand smoke in our house.

So 15 years later, when I started attempting to quit smoking, I remember being at my workplace, and I was very pleased because they actually paid for these rather expensive smoking cessation programs. That was not something that everybody would have access to. The other thing that helped me quit smoking was the fact that there was a law against me smoking anywhere that was remotely convenient like – oh, should I mention it? – my car. At this point I was in B.C. Now, at that time there was no law against me smoking in my car, but there was a law against me smoking anywhere close to where I was. So that helped me quit smoking. Frankly, I think if there was a law against smoking in your car around children, that would also help people quit smoking.

The final thing that I want to say on this is that at the end of the day kids don't get to choose whether they pick up that cigarette or not. This is not about kids starting smoking when they're 16. This is about a three-month-old baby being exposed to smoke. This is about a four-year-old child being exposed to smoke. They don't get to make that choice. So we need to make sure, just as we would with other situations that put kids at risk, that we as a community step in and say: "You know what? We respect your rights and your role as a family, but at this point we're getting beyond that, which is in the best interest of your child."

Quite frankly, I think being in a truck and smoking four cigarettes with the windows rolled up is probably not a great thing for a child. I'm not suggesting anyone would have said that I shouldn't have still been living with my family, but it would have been helpful if my parents knew that there was actually a price to pay for engaging in that behaviour.

Knowing what we know about the research around the dangers of tobacco smoking, around the addictiveness of tobacco, around the long-term health consequences and the extreme cost to our health care system over the short and the long term, it seems to me quite strange that we wouldn't give very serious consideration to this piece of legislation.

For the sake of prevention, for the sake of our children's health, for the sake of our collective health, Mr. Speaker, I think this is a reasonable bill to consider, and we would support it. We would, though, also suggest that we would accompany support for a bill like this, were our party the one that was running this government, with a much greater investment in prevention programs not only just around preventing smoking but preventing all of those socioeconomic indicators that result in poor health and working on those issues up front to keep people healthy so that we're not paying for it at the greatest expense after the horse has left the barn as it were.

I appreciate the opportunity to speak to this, Mr. Speaker, and look forward to hearing more debate. Thank you.

Mr. Oberle: Mr. Speaker, I rise, actually, with a little trepidation to speak to this bill because I know at least one member in this House probably is not going to find my comments all that helpful. So maybe I should start by saying that I actually support the bill.

I wasn't going to at one point. Many, many years ago, back when I first started in this House and this bill was debated, before that hon. member sat in this House, I thought at that time: gosh, you know, can't parents figure this out for themselves? The very next morning I was in the parking lot of the grocery store in Peace River. A car pulled in beside me that had three little kids in it, windows rolled up, and the driver was smoking a big cigar. That just was beyond me, and I myself smoked for many, many years, Mr. Speaker. I guess my kids have things to say about me, I'm sure.

I do recognize the health impacts of smoking, obviously. You know, I think I can support this bill. There were some reasonable

comments made by the members for Battle River-Wainwright and Cypress-Medicine Hat. I think this is a healthy debate.

The reason I wanted to rise today, Mr. Speaker, is because I'm just slightly insulted – well, okay, quite a bit insulted – that that hon. member, who is one of the most partisan members in this House, should rise and implore me to be nonpartisan in supporting his bill. That troubles me very deeply because that member literally rode his horse into the arena on the back of partisanship and has been viciously partisan in this House. For him to stand up and implore me about, you know, how to vote correctly in this House is, quite frankly, an insult.

3:50

To go on as he did, for example, as a doctor discussing the health situation of the hon. Member for Lac La Biche-St. Paul, especially seeing how the health situation he referred to has absolutely nothing to do with the subject matter of this bill, I find that a little bit insulting. Perhaps we should ask that hon. member to table his permission slip from the hon. Member for Lac La Biche-St. Paul that allows him to discuss the health information of that hon. member on the floor of this House. I suspect that'll wind up being tabled when all of that other health information and evidence about the health inquiry that the Health Quality Council went on a goose chase over and that we're still waiting for is tabled.

Mr. Speaker, I apologize for my anger, but I find it insulting that a member like that would implore me to be nonpartisan. I have no problem being nonpartisan. I have no problem voting for what's right and doing what's right. That's why I'm here. I came here to make a difference, and I don't need any lessons from over there.

As I said, Mr. Speaker, I will support this bill. I honestly thank the hon. member for bringing it forward. I'll take my seat now, and hopefully the atmosphere will calm down.

The Deputy Speaker: Hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar, do you wish to speak on the bill?

Mr. MacDonald: Yes. Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Certainly, I would rise to support Bill 203. I think it is a very good idea. I was surprised to learn that only Alberta and Quebec had failed to provide this type of legislation, and I would like to thank the hon. Member for Edmonton-Meadowlark for bringing this forward. Certainly, there are many, many examples that hon. members in the past have given, valid examples, as to why this legislation is needed.

You know, there was a time not too long ago in this country, hon. members, when perhaps a large family was in a small car like a Volkswagen. The windows were wound up because we know Volkswagens didn't have very good heaters in those days, and both parents would be smoking, coming home from a family outing. The inside of the car would be virtually blue. That certainly wouldn't be good for the passengers then, and it certainly wouldn't be good for passengers now. The hon. Member for Peace River talked about the gentleman smoking a cigar in a vehicle when he witnessed three children riding along as passengers or arriving at the parking lot of a supermarket. So there are examples.

It certainly is the right thing to do. The cost of this shouldn't be an issue. I think we would see over a long period of time significant savings to our health care budget.

Bill 203 as it stands I think should be passed in this Assembly. Hopefully it won't be like – and I'm going to have to get partisan here – other private members' bills and lie on the legislative shelf like some other bills that we know about, including some that

were to provide tax credits to individuals, but for some reason or other, Mr. Speaker, were not proclaimed and put into force.

I would urge all hon. members of this Assembly to please not only vote for this fine bill, Bill 203, but let's make sure that it becomes the law of this province quickly so that children, when they're driving with their parents in a car, are protected from second-hand smoke and the effects of second-hand smoke. Hon. members, this is a very good bill. It's a good initiative. Let's vote for this and move it forward.

Thank you.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Strathcona.

Mr. Quest: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I concur; this is a good bill. It is a pleasure to rise today to join my hon. colleagues on Bill 203, brought forward by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Meadowlark. I'd like to thank him for bringing this bill forward.

Mr. Speaker, the protection of children is a major priority for this government. Quite simply, children constitute approximately one-quarter of our province's population but all of our future. While I commend any initiatives that make our children safer and while I strongly agree with the premise of the bill, I do have concerns about how this bill would be enforced.

I believe that in framing this issue, it's important to highlight tobacco use trends in our province. In particular, the smoking rate among youth aged 15 to 19 has decreased substantially in recent years, in large part due to our Alberta tobacco reduction strategy. The tobacco reduction strategy is a 10-year plan to increase the wellness of Albertans and to decrease health costs related to tobacco use. This age group, from 15 to 19, is key when you consider that this is typically the demographic with the highest rate of tobacco use.

Mr. Speaker, as I understand it, Bill 203 targets two main issues. First, it focuses on raising awareness of the negative effects of second-hand smoke, and secondly, it specifically targets adults who smoke in vehicles while minors are present. With this in mind I believe it's important to highlight the fact that levels of smoking are continuing to decline among Alberta's young people, and I believe we're seeing this result because of our tobacco reduction strategy and because it's working.

For the sake of debate, I also think it's important to look at what other jurisdictions are doing with respect to this matter. As many of you are likely aware, there are a number of Canadian jurisdictions that currently have legislation in place that prohibits people from smoking in motor vehicles when minors are present. I imagine that – and the hon. Member for Edmonton-Meadowlark can correct me if I'm wrong – Bill 203 seeks to replicate the initiatives made in some of the Canadian provinces and a handful of American states.

In addition to these jurisdictions, some municipalities in our province have taken a similar approach to Bill 203 and have mandated a ban on smoking in vehicles when children are present. Mr. Speaker, Leduc, Athabasca, and Okotoks have all passed these types of bylaws in recent years. According to the city of Leduc, by December of this past year about a dozen warnings have been issued to drivers in the city since its implementation this past summer, but no fines, stated to be \$100, have been handed out.

In addition to Athabasca, Okotoks, and Leduc, the city of Medicine Hat currently is the largest municipality in Alberta that has banned smoking in cars carrying people under the age of 16. Mr. Speaker, I should point out that as of January 4 this year only one ticket for smoking in a vehicle when there were children present has been issued since Medicine Hat's bylaw came into

effect on September 1. I'm not sure if this means that virtually no one in the city of Medicine Hat smokes with children in their vehicles or that the bylaw is too difficult to enforce. But these types of numbers lead me to believe it must be one or the other.

Mr. Speaker, laws such as Bill 203 can be part of provincial legislation. In April 2008 Nova Scotia became the first Canadian province to implement a ban on smoking in vehicles when children are present. It's now illegal in Nova Scotia to smoke while anyone under the age of 19 is in a vehicle.

Other Atlantic provinces in Canada – New Brunswick, Prince Edward Island, and Newfoundland and Labrador – have also passed similar laws in the last three years. Provincial regulations in both Ontario and British Columbia pertaining to smoking in vehicles carrying children under the age of 16 came into effect in 2009. Those caught committing this type of act in B.C. are subject to a \$109 fine; in Ontario it's up to \$250. Likewise, Saskatchewan and Manitoba introduced this kind of smoking ban in 2010, with Manitoba's fine nearing \$200.

Mr. Speaker, I'd also like to address various U.S. laws concerning this debate on Bill 203. The southern U.S. state of Arkansas was the first jurisdiction in the world to ban smoking in vehicles carrying children under the age of 16. The fine for committing this offence in Arkansas is \$25. Likewise, Louisiana law bans smoking in motor vehicles when children under the age of 13 are present. Other states like Maine, Oregon, and Hawaii also have similar bans.

My concern, Mr. Speaker, is the effectiveness of enforcement of a law like this. We've heard that many jurisdictions have barely issued any charges. I think it's fair to have concern that law enforcement will be spending time pulling over people who have a cigarette in their hand at the expense of other public safety issues that may be more pressing to address.

I acknowledge that the protection of children's health is and should continue to be a priority of this government, and I commend any initiative that makes our children safer.

4:00

I agree with the premise of the bill. I'm still unsure on how to vote on the bill at this time. For these reasons I'm looking forward to my colleagues' opinions on Bill 203 so that we can make a qualified and educated decision on what's in the best interests of Albertans and the children in our province.

Thank you again to the hon. Member for Edmonton-Meadowlark for bringing this forward, and I look forward to the rest of the debate.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Deputy Speaker: Hon. Member for St. Albert, do you wish to join the debate?

Mr. Allred: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. Yes, I do wish to speak to this bill. I'm very honoured today to rise and speak to Bill 203, the Tobacco Reduction (Protection of Children in Vehicles) Amendment Act, 2012. Before I share some of my thoughts on this proposed legislation, I'd like to thank the hon. Member for Edmonton-Meadowlark for bringing this important bill before the House for debate. In his opening remarks he made the comment that we should not have to legislate common sense. I agree a hundred per cent with that statement. Unfortunately, however, sometimes we do have to legislate common sense.

Sometimes it's difficult to enforce common sense, though. I guess, Mr. Speaker, that's where I'm coming from in this debate. It's really difficult to enforce common sense. Bill 203 would make it illegal to smoke in vehicles while minors are present. This

would be accomplished by amending the Tobacco Reduction Act. I have no doubt that every hon. member in this House would agree that smoking in a vehicle with a minor is inadvisable. That being said, there are still a number of factors and variables to consider as we debate this legislation. We must thoroughly examine all of the issues that are relevant if this law were to be implemented here in Alberta.

Mr. Speaker, I think there's been enough research done on this topic to support the claim that subjecting a young individual in an enclosed space to second-hand smoke can cause them health problems – that's not a question – and I appreciate all of the studies that have been referred to in the previous debate. Those studies have shown that smoking in a vehicle produces harmful levels of second-hand smoke even when the windows are down. Not smoking in the presence of children is a nonstarter. As the hon. member says, it's common sense not to smoke in the presence of children, especially in a confined space.

However, one of my concerns regarding Bill 203 is the challenges it would present to law enforcement officials, and that is the topic I will be focusing my comments on today. The issue of enforcement seems to always be raised during debates regarding smoking bans. This is largely due to the fact that in any jurisdiction there are populations of smokers that will be opposed to any type of law restricting their smoking. Because of this, there could potentially be challenges with enforcement.

Mr. Speaker, if this legislation is passed, even with a province-wide educational public awareness program, which I fully support, there will no doubt be individuals who choose not to abide by the new law. With any kind of legislation sometimes even just putting it in legislation becomes the educational tool to emphasize the importance of it, and perhaps enforcement then becomes a minor issue. The enforcement is just the fact that the legislation is there, and people will pay heed to it.

Mr. Speaker, because of this, we need to consider the challenges police might have when dealing with the enforcement of this law. For example, there is a question of allocation of resources for the enforcement of this law. Funding would be needed to inform and train officials so they understand the law and their role in enforcing it on a day-to-day basis. There's also the question of priority. How many police officers would be spending their time pulling vehicles over to issue fines for smoking in a vehicle with a minor?

The latter issue is one of my biggest concerns due to the fact that there are a number of other, more serious situations where a police officer would be needed; for instance, a severe car accident, an impaired driver on the road, or even individuals travelling at an extremely high speed. Someone might argue that the health of our children is even more important, and I won't debate that.

Mr. Speaker, I really do wonder how Bill 203 would affect the way law enforcement officials allocate their time, and that is an issue all hon. members of this House need to consider as well. Bill 203 would indeed require police officers to monitor and enforce such behaviour, which may divert their attention from other public safety issues. This is not to diminish the importance of the safety and health of our youth, but it is one factor we should consider. But the health of our children is primarily the responsibility of the parent, and we expect parents to be responsible. Unfortunately, some aren't.

Another issue that needs to be at the forefront of this debate is how situations would be assessed by police. How are law enforcement officials to know whether or not the individual in a vehicle is a minor? If a younger child were to be in a situation

where one of their parents was smoking in the vehicle with them, the police would not have any difficulties coming to the conclusion that the child in the vehicle is, in fact, a minor.

Alternatively, Mr. Speaker, an individual might be in a vehicle with a driver who is smoking and may appear to be under 18 years of age. If a police officer were to pull them over because he suspects the passenger to be a minor and after checking the identification, if it was available, realizes that the passenger is actually an adult, then that police officer has done his due diligence. However, that police officer could possibly have used that time differently.

Similarly, there is also the scenario where an individual who is under the age of 18 may look older than they actually are. This creates another problem for law enforcement officials. How can police officers identify someone as a minor if they appear as though they are closer to 25 years of age?

In addition, many passengers, minors or not, may be unable to produce the appropriate identification. How would police proceed when they encounter that situation? These are all factors that take valuable police time. Further to that, how would police be able to tell if a passenger is smoking in the back seat of a vehicle if the windows are tinted, which is legal as long as the front windows are not so tinted? Tinted windows would prevent police from seeing into the back seat of a vehicle and would make it difficult for them to assess whether or not someone is smoking or if there is a minor in the back seat. Some smokers may even choose to keep the windows rolled up when smoking with a minor present just to reduce the risk of getting caught.

Because of this, I think this legislation might prove to be challenging to enforce in some situations. There is also the question of a minor smoking in a vehicle with his or her parents. If police were to pull that vehicle over to issue a fine, who would receive it, the parent or the minor?

Mr. Speaker, as you can see, there are a number of factors in this proposed legislation that may prove to be potential difficulties for law enforcement officials. But when the distracted driving legislation was proposed, we were faced with a number of very similar concerns with regard to enforcement. We passed it, and it is being enforced.

Although Bill 203 keeps the health and safety of our youth in mind – and I support that very much – the challenges it presents to police are still very real and need to be thoroughly considered, especially since Alberta's existing tobacco reduction strategy has been and continues to be successful in reducing tobacco use amongst all Albertans. I was somewhat surprised at the hon. Member for Edmonton-Meadowlark indicating that we have one of the highest rates of smoking in vehicles in the country. That surprised me.

I would like to thank the hon. Member for Edmonton-Meadowlark for all the hard work and effort he has put into this piece of legislation. It speaks of his commitment to public health and safety and also aims to reduce tobacco use in our province, which is always beneficial.

I am certainly in favour of its intent although I do have some concerns about overregulation. Common sense tells you not to smoke in confined spaces in close proximity to children, especially when it's your own children, but you can't legislate against stupidity.

Dr. Brown: Yes, you can.

Mr. Allred: Can you? Sometimes it doesn't work, though.

I always think more consideration needs to be given to the challenges this legislation would present to our law enforcement officials.

From the foregoing, Mr. Speaker, it will be obvious that I am of two minds on this issue, parental rights or parental responsibility.

That being said, I will conclude my comments and urge members to support this bill. Thank you.

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

4:10

Mr. Hinman: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's an honour to get up and debate Bill 203. I must say that I wanted to sit back and listen because I never know which way the government is going to go on legislation. It's good to see the direction the discussion has gone, but I have a few other comments I'd like to make on the partisanship that was discussed a little bit earlier by the Minister of Sustainable Resource Development.

To get into it, I think we'll all agree that we would all prefer to educate rather than legislate. We'd all prefer to inspire rather than require. For myself as an elected representative I felt there were two duties on being elected. One is to protect the life, liberty, and the property of the citizens of the country, and the second one is to pass legislation to protect those who can't protect themselves. This bill falls directly into that category. We need to look at and view: is this something where a citizen of this country is jeopardizing their health or their future because of the actions of someone else? I believe this falls into that category.

Again, many members have gotten up and spoken with a little bit of trepidation because there's going to be some anger out there that we would even consider passing such a piece of legislation, that doesn't leave it in the parents' rights to make that decision for their children.

I just want to comment on a few of the pieces of legislation that we have passed. We're not allowed to drive to town with our children without having them in a seat belt or, if they're small, in a car seat. We're not allowed to go biking with our children without having a helmet on their head. We have many areas that we've looked at, again just the legislation that even adults aren't allowed to drive on their own without having a seat belt on. With all of these we come in and say – and they're not even endangering someone else's life – “Oh, no; this is a hazard, and therefore we're going to legislate it.”

When we look at the many bills that we have passed in order to supposedly legislate common sense, I think that this one is way up on the scale, where we have vulnerable children that aren't able to protect themselves. It's interesting that here in the province people have commented on: how are we going to enforce it, and is it a good use of the officer's time to enforce it? We have a bullying helpline, you know, 1.888.456.2323. That's to help protect our children that are in a situation where they need help. We have a child abuse hotline, 1.800.387.KIDS, or 5437. These are all things that we've put in place wanting to help protect our children and to give them a better future.

To comment a little bit on the dilemma of “Are we overreaching a parent's rights to expose their children to these things?” I don't believe we are. I think that it's interesting that we've come to that point here where everybody so far has gotten up and spoken on this and said that this is common sense, but it wasn't very common a few years ago, when we had this discussion, and it wasn't common back when we passed the legislation to ban smoking in public places. At that time it was also discussed,

saying that we should be protecting our children, yet the government at that time said, “Absolutely not” and spoke out against it.

It's interesting how we've evolved to today, to where this is common sense. Everyone so far, I think, has basically stood up and said that they support this bill. One member said, “Well, I'll kind of wait and see where the discussion goes,” I guess, to decide on how to vote. But it's important that we realize what we are trying to accomplish here, and that is to protect vulnerable children from being exposed to a toxic substance that is going to have an effect on their quality of life going forward though many have been exposed and seem to be fine now. The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona seems to be healthy and doing well and gets out for fresh air, walking every day. Good for her for doing that.

I want to revert to a few comments made by the Minister of SRD, where he said that he was insulted for being told not to be partisan on this. One of the things that I've found quite intriguing being in opposition is listening and talking to government members outside of the Legislature when they discuss or speak out against different bills that have been passed, and it is a problem, hon. minister. If you don't think it is – you yourself have gotten up and spoken on things that I know you have questions about. It's interesting that all of a sudden there's free thought and free expression that's able to go on in this province when we have a new leadership debate going on inside government. Two if not many more – well, many of them did – spoke out against Bill 50 and said that they knew that the process was wrong. They knew that it needed to go back to the Alberta Utilities Commission to have them make the decision and do a proper needs assessment. They need to have a competitive bid, yet now the new Premier has said: this is the way we're doing it. That common sense, that common knowledge that we had four months ago seems to have dissipated and is absent in this House.

Many of the members in here on bills 19, 24, and 36 – oh, great pontification in here supporting it, yet we've had Bill 10 come to amend it. We're looking at some more amendments that have gone on where there's been lots of problems on having what I would call the party whip say how people should be voting. To say that it's not a problem that one is insulted on this I think is an insult to Albertans because there are a lot of members in here that, in my opinion, do not represent those who elected them, because the party has said: “Oh, this is the way we have to vote. End of discussion.” That's until, of course, the next leadership election, and then we'll have a short period there.

So to go back to the bill – and I had to respond because government members have brought this up, Mr. Speaker. I see you're kind of edgy on your chair over that, and I understand that, but they're the ones who brought it up and discussed it, therefore needing to have some more discussion on it.

What we're looking at here is the importance of protecting those who can't protect themselves. We want the best for our children, and I think that this has come to the point where society is realizing that this isn't right. We're trying to educate young mothers, you know. One thing is to take folic acid when they're pregnant. We tell them not to drink while they're pregnant. We tell them not to smoke while they're pregnant. This has a major impact on the children. Our schools are being overwhelmed with children with learning disabilities that many experts are linking back to alcohol, tobacco, preemies that have come out prematurely because of various toxins that they may have been exposed to. So anything that we can do to ensure that our kids have their best

opportunity to be all they can be I think is a reasonable thing to look at.

I'd also like to comment a little bit on the fact that this is a good use of a policeman's time. When you look at much of the other common-sense legislation that we have – pulling someone over because they're holding the cellphone, pulling someone over because they don't have a seat belt on, pulling someone over because their child is not in a car seat – I think this jumps ahead of all of those because the children are being exposed, and there is damage being done to them.

The human body is amazing, though. The ability to rebound after being exposed to these things is truly what has probably caused a long delay in saying: is this really that detrimental? George Burns, you know, smoked all of his life, lived to a hundred years of age. Before my time it was a cool thing to do. It was a healthy thing to do. It was a swanky thing to do. Hollywood used to advertise that and show what a wonderful life it was to have that cigarette or that cigar. It's interesting, as we evolve, to realize what is common sense and what isn't.

Then my other concern is that it's always incremental, one step at a time. Do we need to legislate that people have to walk a mile every day because they're healthier? Do we need to legislate that they're only allowed so many grams of sugar or fat? Those are the concerns that those libertarians have out there: where do we stop, and where do we start?

Again, though, I want to go back where this falls into, the category where we need to protect those who can't protect themselves. A little three-month-old baby doesn't have the choice to say: I don't want to be in this car. A three-year-old, a four-year-old doesn't have that choice. So I think that this is fair legislation, one that hopefully we continue to educate Albertans on so fewer and fewer parents seem to feel compelled to say: oh, it's good for them; it's not going to hurt them. We know that it does. We're jeopardizing their future. So it will be interesting to see if we get support on this.

I must make the comment, though, that if it does pass, we've got other protection for children, bills that have passed in this House but have not been proclaimed. The Mandatory Reporting of Child Pornography Act was passed two years ago, Mr. Speaker. It has not yet been proclaimed. That's very disappointing. The Protection of Children Abusing Drugs Act was passed in 2009 and also not proclaimed.

The Deputy Speaker: Before the chair continues on with the business, the chair asks for consent to revert briefly to Introduction of Guests.

[Unanimous consent granted]

4:20 Introduction of Guests (reversion)

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Minister of Seniors.

Mr. VanderBurg: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's a great honour to introduce a very bright young lady, Karen McDonald. She is a director of community services for SAGE, and as you all know, that means Seniors Association of Greater Edmonton. This organization supports seniors in Edmonton by providing housing and guardianship services. They provide important information, resources that seniors need. They assist with government forms. They help manage seniors' Safe House. They offer a broad range of programs and activities and courses. They provide volunteer

opportunities performing social work services and engaging in advocacy on behalf of seniors. I'd ask Karen to stand and please be recognized by the Assembly. Thank you for all you do.

Mr. Speaker, Karen and her colleagues at SAGE do outstanding work for the seniors of this province. Thank you.

Public Bills and Orders Other than Government Bills and Orders Second Reading

Bill 203

Tobacco Reduction (Protection of Children in Vehicles) Amendment Act, 2012 (continued)

The Deputy Speaker: Is any other member wishing to speak on Bill 203?

Seeing none, the chair shall now recognize the hon. Leader of the Official Opposition to close the debate.

Dr. Sherman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I thank all the hon. members who have stood up and spoken to the bill. Thank you for your honest opinion. I close debate.

The Deputy Speaker: The chair shall now put the question.

[The voice vote indicated that the motion for second reading carried]

[Several members rose calling for a division. The division bell was rung at 4:22 p.m.]

[Ten minutes having elapsed, the Assembly divided]

[The Deputy Speaker in the chair]

For the motion:

Ady	Griffiths	Mitzel
Allred	Groeneveld	Notley
Berger	Hancock	Oberle
Boutilier	Hinman	Prins
Brown	Horne	Quest
Campbell	Jacobs	Sandhu
DeLong	Johnson	Sherman
Denis	Johnston	Swann
Doerksen	Liepert	VanderBurg
Elniski	Lund	Weadick
Forsyth	MacDonald	Xiao
Goudreau		

Totals: For – 34 Against – 0

[Motion carried; Bill 203 read a second time]

Bill 204

Land Statutes (Abolition of Adverse Possession) Amendment Act, 2012

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for St. Albert.

Mr. Allred: Well, thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It's indeed an honour for me to rise today to introduce Bill 204, the Land Statutes (Abolition of Adverse Possession) Amendment Act, 2012, in second reading debate.

Bill 204 seeks to remove all reference to the legal doctrine of adverse possession from Alberta's legislation in order to ensure that it is no longer grounds for land claims. Adverse possession, sometimes referred to as squatters' rights, enables a trespasser

who has been in possession of land without legal title for a specified period of time to be recognized as the legal owner. I brought this idea forward in the fall sitting as Motion 507, which the Assembly agreed to, and I'm very happy to now have the opportunity to introduce it as a bill.

Mr. Speaker, I'm bringing this bill forward because I truly believe that adverse possession has no place in Alberta legislation. If passed, Bill 204 would ensure that adverse possession would no longer constitute a legal basis for possessors to take title to land that does not belong to them. Currently in Alberta if a person possesses land that does not belong to them for 10 or more years, they may legally claim title to the property. The doctrine of adverse possession in Alberta has led to approximately 100 reported court cases in the course of our 106-year history, very few of which have been successful. The low rate of success in these cases relates to the fact that Alberta has a very efficient land titles system, with accurately marked boundaries, quite different from that used in England, where the doctrine of adverse possession originated.

As you may remember from my comments during the last session, the law of adverse possession was adopted in the late 19th century, when Alberta, then part of the Northwest Territories and originally part of Rupert's Land, was purchased by the Dominion of Canada. At that time we adopted the laws of England. The criteria used to decide which laws we would appropriate included the question of whether or not the law was applicable within the local context. Mr. Speaker, after a significant amount of research, it is my opinion that adverse possession was never applicable within the Alberta context and should not have been adopted by the courts in the first instance. I say this because although Alberta did adopt a number of laws and procedures from England at that time, we did not adopt the same land tenure system as was used in England.

Historically land tenure in England was based on boundaries indicated by general markers such as hedges, fences, and ditches. This is known as a general boundary system. As such, it was difficult to determine in any precise manner the true boundaries of a plot of land, and property disputes were common. Given that context, Mr. Speaker, it is easy to understand why England established the doctrine of adverse possession. In the absence of well-documented surveys, the court could resort to adverse possession, arguing that the possessor had lived on that land for several years without being asked to leave and, therefore, could retain the land as their own. The doctrine effectively limited the period of time during which a landowner could reclaim their land, thereby incenting them to be aware of the extent of their property.

But, Mr. Speaker, Alberta did not adopt England's land tenure system. Instead, we adopted the Torrens system of land registration, which originated in Australia in the 1850s. Under the Torrens system the title to land in Alberta is registered and guaranteed by the province based on accurately surveyed parcels monumented on the ground prior to the grant of title by the Crown. To this day the extent of a person's title is determined by those survey monuments, a measure which protects landowners from much unjustified loss of property.

In contrast to England's general boundary system, western Canada has a fixed boundary system where the boundaries were established prior to grants being issued to homesteaders for their lands. These grants were based on quarter sections defined by survey monuments on the ground. By reliance on this system, Alberta has avoided countless property disputes between neighbours, and in cases where disputes do arise, landowners can easily resolve the problem by verifying the original survey.

As you can see, Mr. Speaker, the issue that adverse possession was meant to resolve in England never actually existed in Alberta.

In Alberta we had a system of survey before settlement as opposed to the English system of settlement before survey. Yet the Alberta courts adopted the doctrine of adverse possession, relying on a case from British Honduras, that was upheld by the Privy Council in England. The British Honduras case decided that limitations law, which is what adverse possession is, could coexist in a guaranteed land registration system such as the Torrens system.

4:40

Unfortunately, however, Mr. Speaker, the early court actions did not argue the applicability of the adoption of English land tenure and only argued the question of the application of adverse possession in a Torrens system of guaranteed title. I am certain, even though I can only speculate, that if the case had been argued on the application of the North-West Territories Act amendment of 1886, the early cases in Alberta would have been decided differently, and that would have saved Alberta landowners 100 years of grief.

The doctrine does not offer any real benefit to Albertans; in fact, it has caused a number of difficult legal challenges in the past. For example, Mr. Speaker, in 1965 the city of Calgary lost numerous plots of land to an adverse possession claim, and in 1993 irrigation districts also lost land in two adverse claims. After witnessing the problematic conclusion of these cases, the Legislative Assembly amended Alberta legislation to ban future adverse possession claims against municipalities and irrigation district lands. These amendments made abundant sense under the circumstances. By passing Bill 204 and abolishing adverse possession completely, we will afford the same protection to private landowners that municipalities and irrigation districts already enjoy.

Similarly, Mr. Speaker, an action for adverse possession in 1948 that deprived a landowner of some significant improvements resulted in an amendment to the Land Titles Act, which is now entrenched in the Law of Property Act, that is very beneficial to Albertans and, in fact, has been copied in other provinces as well. Section 69 of the Law of Property Act enables a landowner who mistakenly builds lasting improvements on a neighbour's land to lay a claim to that land so that they do not lose their investment. The legislation, however, requires the landowner to pay compensation to the true landowner for the land lost.

This, Mr. Speaker, in my opinion is fair and just and in keeping with Alberta's spirit of justice. This is excellent legislation because unlike adverse possession, it protects both the legal owner of the land as well as the neighbour who built on it by mistake. Section 69 of the Law of Property Act adequately solves the common problem of building encroachments. Knowing that the law of lasting improvements is in place, we can rest assured that the abolition of adverse possession will certainly not leave a gap in our legislation. Instead, it will make room for more modern and relevant laws to protect Alberta landowners and bring us in conformity with all other Canadian Torrens jurisdictions that currently ban adverse possession.

Mr. Speaker, in closing, I would like to say that Alberta has one of the best land tenure systems in the world, based on accurate land surveys and titles that are guaranteed by the government. Because of this there is no need to limit a landowner's ability to reclaim land claimed by a trespasser. Should a dispute arise, ownership claims can easily be proven through government-registered surveys. I believe that by eliminating the common law doctrine of adverse possession, we will further improve our excellent land tenure system. While this bill may not impact all Albertans, it will make an important difference to every landowner, who can now be assured that their boundaries are protected and can be determined by lawful means.

As such, I would strongly encourage all of my hon. colleagues to vote in support of Bill 204, and I look forward to hearing the rest of the debate. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Deputy Speaker: Any other hon. member wish to join the debate? The hon. Minister of Seniors.

Mr. VanderBurg: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's an honour for me to rise to speak to Bill 204. Bill 204 seeks to remove all reference to the legal doctrine of adverse possession from Alberta legislation in order to ensure that it's no longer grounds for land claims. As I understand it, adverse possession, sometimes referred to as squatters' rights, is a law that Alberta adopted from England in the 19th century. Adverse possession enables a neighbour to acquire legal ownership of a piece of land should they occupy it continually for at least 10 years without being asked by the true owner to vacate the area.

It's understandable that the hon. member would want to eliminate this legal doctrine. As we've heard just previously from the member but also in the debate on Motion 507 last session, the doctrine has been used as grounds for land claims in about a hundred recorded cases in our 106-year history. Overall there is a very compelling case to be made that adverse possession is no longer a valid doctrine in our legal system.

Our provincial legislation has a long-standing history, and it's important that we continually review and revise it to ensure that it meets the needs of our residents and of today's times. That's precisely what the Member for St. Albert is doing here today, evaluating the modern-day value of this law that stems back a hundred years. I want to thank the member for raising this, and I will be supporting it.

Thank you.

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

Dr. Swann: Well, thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. A pleasure to rise in support of this bill, one that the hon. member educated me on just a couple of weeks ago. It was entirely a surprise to me to learn that this ancient tradition, known as adverse possession, continued in Alberta. Since then I've learned something about it. I don't claim to be an expert, but it seems eminently sensible that owners of property should not have anything usurped simply on the basis of occupation or squatting or personal advantage taken of this ancient tradition.

I've never run across the issue, and I guess many of the members here have not run across this specific example in their own personal lives or that of family or friends, but obviously given the information we've had around this bill and the fact that it's been used in many different parts of the province over these years speaks to the need for change. Certainly, I will be supporting it. It's eminently sensible and forward looking and updates us in terms of our property rights and ownership rights in the province.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Deputy Speaker: Any other hon. member?

Seeing none, the chair shall now call on the hon. Member for St. Albert to close the debate.

Mr. Allred: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. I wasn't expecting to do my closing.

Just a few closing remarks. The hon. Member for Calgary-Mountain View indicated that he had not encountered adverse possession. In speaking to some of my other colleagues, some of them have. I admit it's a very rare instance. As was indicated by

the hon. Member for Whitecourt-St. Anne, there have only been about a hundred reported cases in Alberta in the 106 years of our history, but there are a number of cases that go unreported, and if they're not challenged in court, they don't go to court. I know there are a couple of cases currently in southern Alberta, but I don't know that they will go to court. Sometimes they're settled out of court, and they don't get reported.

It is a very difficult law, and as I indicated, we are the only Torrens jurisdiction in Canada that has adverse possession. Even in England, where the law came from in 1870, they have now passed legislation – I believe it was in 2002 – which will abolish adverse possession after a 12-year period, I believe. So it is becoming obsolete even in the country that originally invented it.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

[Motion carried; Bill 204 read a second time]

Mr. Denis: Mr. Speaker, I was going to make a motion that we proceed with Motion 503. I don't want to say why I cannot do that because that would contravene another rule of the House, so I would presume that under the standing orders we will adjourn for 10 minutes.

[Motion carried; the Assembly adjourned from 4:50 p.m. to 5 p.m.]

5:00 Motions Other than Government Motions

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods.

Tax Incentives for Cultural Endeavours

503. Mr. Benito moved:

Be it resolved that the Legislative Assembly urge the government to examine the feasibility of creating tax incentives to support cultural endeavours.

Mr. Benito: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I am pleased to rise today and open debate on Motion 503. I am proposing this motion because I believe we should further explore the possibility of creating tax incentives in support of cultural endeavours. It is no secret that we are a very tax-friendly jurisdiction and that culture plays a significant part in the fabric of our province.

As you know, Alberta is a very multicultural province and is rich in cultural diversity. Culture is increasingly acknowledged as a necessary element of a healthy and balanced society. Many studies indicate that participating in cultural activities helps reduce stress, promotes increased health, and improves academic learning. What I propose with Motion 503 is to start a discussion that could lead to increased support of multiculturalism in Alberta and also to various cultural endeavours in the province. Mr. Speaker, a vibrant culture also gives our province an important advantage as we compete to attract and retain skilled workers and their families to our communities. I think we can all agree that our communities are also strengthened through cultural activity.

Now, Mr. Speaker, I would like to briefly comment on our cultural policy, the Spirit of Alberta, and speak to how I believe it has set the groundwork for Motion 503. The Spirit of Alberta was developed in early 2008 and is the result of research and consultation with Albertans, cultural organizations and foundations, other jurisdictions, and various ministries in the provincial government. In these consultations Albertans have expressed a desire for culture to be a priority and for the government to play a lead role in creating and sustaining the conditions in which culture can flourish. Albertans have also said that government should

work in partnership with other levels of government, the private sector, nonprofit organizations, other stakeholders, and individuals.

Mr. Speaker, I believe that the input of Albertans into these consultations shows how involved and important Albertans view culture in our province. A recent survey indicated that 97 per cent of Albertans believe it is important for every child in Alberta to learn about the culture of the province. The cultural sector itself represents approximately 3 per cent of both the province's GDP and the province's employment. In 2010 more than 90 per cent of Albertans said that they had attended, participated, or performed in an arts and culture event or activity in the past year. Obviously, that means that millions of Albertans are either involved in or attend a cultural event each year. A large majority of Albertans, roughly 91 per cent, say that arts and culture activities are very or at least somewhat important in contributing to the overall quality of life in their community.

I believe that these types of cultural activities and events are very important and that they should be supported by Albertans in a financial capacity by way of tax incentives. While I acknowledge that there currently are tax incentives available for those who donate to cultural organizations that are registered as charitable organizations, I feel that as a province we can offer more.

In closing, Mr. Speaker, I would like to offer just a few more points as to what I view as the strength of Motion 503. I feel that this motion could raise awareness of cultural organizations and activities in Alberta, which could garner more support from Albertans. I also feel that Motion 503 could further enhance charitable giving among Albertans. I do not wish to propose anything too dramatic or unrealistic. I believe Motion 503 to be a very moderate and realistic step towards raising awareness of the great cultural organizations and events in our wonderful province. They should be able to rely on our continuing support.

With that, I would like to invite my colleagues to join in the discussion on Motion 503. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-North Hill.

Mr. Fawcett: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I would like to commend the hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods for bringing forward a motion that I believe is very much well intentioned. You know, the cultural communities of our province certainly play a very, very important role in the societal fabric of our great province, whether they be those cultural endeavours that have long been the traditions of this province or those of new people coming to our province from other areas of the country or other countries in the world. Certainly, as our province becomes more and more diverse, we as Albertans are going to become more and more exposed to some of the cultural differences that are out there, and for that our lives are definitely more enriched.

However, Mr. Speaker, I don't know if I necessarily support this motion. I don't think I will be, mainly for one reason. The Minister of Finance has talked significantly about, you know, the need for a long-term fiscal framework in this province where we evaluate what we're spending money on, how much money we're saving, what we do with nonrenewable resource revenue, and, of course, as the minister has indicated, our overall tax structure. I think that this should be more a conversation that happens as part of that. The reason why I believe that is that there's sort of, I guess, a hierarchy of decisions that you have to do when you talk about implementing tax policy, and that's essentially what this is.

First, the main thing that taxes are in place for is the obvious: we collect tax revenue in order to pay for the public services that the government needs to deliver to its citizens. That should always

be the main purpose of our taxes, to collect those and make sure that what we're required to provide to the public is paid for through the collection of taxes. That can be done in a myriad of different ways. Of course, we know that there are sales taxes, income taxes, property taxes, payroll taxes, all sorts of types of taxes.

The second thing that must be considered when implementing tax policy, Mr. Speaker, is to minimize the economic burden that collecting that revenue might have on future economic development and growth of the economy and future prosperity. That's a very, very important consideration. We do know that in some circumstances, some taxes could be better for incenting certain economic activity or development.

The third thing, and what this member is getting at, is that tax policy certainly can be used to incent certain behaviour or certain policy choices within certain areas. We've seen through this House tax credits for physical activity. We've seen tax credits for incenting certain types of things, in this case investment into our cultural communities.

Mr. Speaker, the reason why I will not support this motion at this time is that I believe that the Minister of Finance, in some of his conversations around building a long-term fiscal framework, will include what this member is talking about. My real concern is that if you talk to any economist, they will say that the best type of tax structure is a low, broad-based tax structure, one where you don't have all of these different incentives and credits being provided to every sort of niche or group or whatever but keep the basic rate of taxes low so that we can incent economic activity that way. That's something that I believe this government has done particularly well over the last 40 years, and that's something that I would like to see this government do. That's why I think this conversation about the incenting of a certain segment of the sector needs to actually be held in the broader conversation that the Minister of Finance has indicated is going to happen when we discuss our long-term fiscal framework.

With that, Mr. Speaker, I'm going to sit down and let other members join the debate.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Dunvegan-Central Peace.

Mr. Goudreau: Well, thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It's also my pleasure to rise today to speak to Motion 503, sponsored by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods. This motion urges the government to consider the feasibility of creating tax incentives to support cultural endeavours in Alberta.

5:10

Mr. Speaker, as a past minister responsible for culture and community spirit and the MLA for Dunvegan-Central Peace I can attest that Albertans take great pride in the culture that has been fostered in this province. They have also expressed a desire for culture to be a top priority in Alberta as we move forward. That means that this government must play a lead role in creating and sustaining the conditions where diversity can thrive.

Mr. Speaker, Alberta boasts a number of cultural events and gatherings every year in hundreds of our communities. There are also numerous individuals and groups and organizations that are committed to supporting and expanding a vibrant cultural environment in Alberta. This government recognizes that supporting our cultural mosaic is a top priority, and that's why there are provisions in place to offer financial assistance to those who positively contribute to Alberta's culture.

Today I want to focus my comments on incentives and other grants that the provincial government currently makes available to support culture in Alberta. Mr. Speaker, in our great province Albertans have the pleasure already of tax advantages unlike any other jurisdiction in Canada. Because of this, everyone living in Alberta already enjoys the benefit of paying lower taxes. While many other jurisdictions in Canada primarily use tax credits to support cultural and creative industries such as film, television, book and magazine publishing, and sound recording, our province utilizes a different approach. Again, I remember as a past minister that instead of providing greater tax incentives to individuals, organizations, and groups to support cultural activities, our province offers already a number of grants through a variety of provincial programs.

For example, the Alberta Foundation for the Arts provides grant funding to artists, art organizations, and festivals to promote arts and culture right across the province. All eligible artists and organizations are encouraged to apply for those grants, and funding can be provided for both very project-specific activities and annual operating grants. In addition, Alberta's Historical Resources Foundation also has existing grant programs. It assists in the preservation and interpretation of Alberta's heritage by providing financial and technical assistance to heritage preservation initiatives. Another example is the Alberta multimedia development fund, which offers grant programs for screen-based media production, book and magazine publishing, and sound recording. These grants are designed to assist in the development of a strong and competitive cultural industry sector in our province.

In addition to those I have mentioned, there are several other provincial foundations and programs that offer financial support for our cultural organizations.

As I mentioned earlier, there are numerous ways individuals, groups, and organizations can secure funding to preserve and advance culture in our province, but there are also some tax credit offsets that are available in Alberta to help support culture. In Alberta many cultural organizations are also registered as charitable organizations with the Canada Revenue Agency, and as such those organizations are already eligible for the combined federal and provincial charitable donations tax credit that offsets 50 per cent of donations over \$200 in one tax year. On the first \$200 donated the organization receives a 10 per cent provincial tax credit in addition to a 15 per cent federal tax credit. As of January 2007 charitable donations exceeding \$200 are eligible for a 21 per cent provincial tax credit in addition to the 29 per cent federal tax.

As you can see, Mr. Speaker, Alberta's approach to supporting the province's creative and cultural industries has been successful, and a variety of funding and grant options are available.

To conclude my comments, I'd like to thank the hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods for his commitment to the preservation and advancement of culture in Alberta and also for bringing this motion before the House for debate. I do agree with the hon. member that culture has great significance in our province. Right now I'm not sure if a greater tax incentive is the best way to continue to support cultural activities in Alberta considering that the current system is working quite well, but I'm receptive to the ideas put forth with Motion 503.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Little Bow.

Mr. McFarland: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I, too, am pleased to stand and give comments that I hope will reflect the majority of

the wishes of the constituents in our area of Little Bow. As many of you are aware, there's a rich history and many different cultures and groups coming to this province, and my comments are more from an historical perspective. I think that this could be a good discussion to have. There isn't any question about whether or not we should have tax incentives. I also believe that we already have had great strides made by people that have come to this province to be Albertans and to be Canadians.

If I could speak personally about it, Mr. Speaker, there were a number of groups that came to our area years ago to homestead. They came from many different countries. My best friend's parents came from Czechoslovakia. There were no programs available. There were no cultural activities. And what you saw was what you could relish and see in their homes, whether it was the few trinkets that they'd been able to save from their previous homeland, and they were very proud of it, but nobody had the ability at that time nor today to preserve that kind of thing except that they did it on their own.

I know that many of the people that came here from other countries – the Dutch Canadians are a very prideful bunch. To this day in Little Bow there'll be groups of hundreds that celebrate annually their freedom and comment on the things that happened after the Second World War when their villages were liberated, and they do it on their own, without any tax dollars, because they're proud and happy to have been liberated by the Canadian armed forces. They do their celebrations on their own, on a voluntary basis.

Mr. Speaker, I believe that cultural activities and events are very important, but I believe there are other ways that they can be supported by Albertans without taxpayer incentives. The Historical Resources Foundation is one truly good one that has been around for a long time that helps identify and preserve these kinds of valuable additions that have been made by many cultures, by many groups, and by many individuals.

In other words, Mr. Speaker, although I understand the intent of this motion by my hon. colleague from Edmonton-Mill Woods, I don't believe that tax incentives are necessarily the way to go. I believe that through continual celebration, events that happen today will continue to happen just for the fact that they have a profile of their own. If I might point out, this Saturday morning at 11 o'clock in Carmangay, Alberta, there will be the shortest Irish St. Patrick's Day parade in the world. There's never been a dollar put into it, but everyone comes down. We're getting people coming from a 60-mile radius, and they have GlobalTV and a free Irish coffee afterwards. This wouldn't have happened if it was a tax incentive-driven program because everyone would be using the program to get the dollars rather than just to celebrate something that would come naturally and be something to be proud of.

With those few comments, I'll sit down and thank again my colleague from Edmonton-Mill Woods for bringing this forward for discussion. But I don't think many constituents in my riding are happy to spend tax dollars on this in a direct way. They'd rather do it in a voluntary way.

Thank you very much.

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

Ms DeLong: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. You know, it seems that culture is so important to the very fabric of our lives. Just in the last little while there's been a couple of events that I've gone to. I'm lucky enough to have the Calgary Irish cultural club in my constituency, so I was lucky enough to be there on Saturday night and join in the early festivities. The camaraderie and the

close friendships that are developed there are so valuable to our community.

Another event that I was at recently was the launching of the second historical book for Bowness. This has been an enormous success, and they have been selling literally thousands of these great big beautiful books. Everyone just loves them. They spend hours and hours reading them. This is the Bowness Historical Society, and it is really the history of the culture that we have had in this little town since the turn of the last century. It's a very valuable part of our community, and it gives the deep roots to our community that add so much more meaning to our lives. Culture is so important to us, yet the way that it comes up, you know, is through the people, where people are getting together, they're supporting each other and coming together. Yes, sometimes they do come to the government for a little bit of money. These books that have been produced have a little bit of government money in them, but it's mostly the work of the people and the little bit of money that they collect.

5:20

I think that it is working so well now. You know, the richness of our communities is coming up through the grassroots, through the actual people. Even though it is so extremely important that we have this culture, I do believe that the way it's working now, where you have just ordinary Joe Blow stepping forward and getting together with like-minded people, is so effective, and I do believe that we should be continuing as we are.

Thank you.

The Deputy Speaker: Any other hon. member wishing to join the debate?

Seeing none, the chair shall now recognize the hon. Member for Edmonton- Mill Woods to close the debate.

Mr. Benito: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I am pleased to rise today and offer closing remarks on Motion 503. If Motion 503 is agreed

to, it could demonstrate that the government of Alberta is supportive of multiculturalism and cultural endeavours in the province. This motion could also provide a platform to highlight the Alberta tax advantage.

The goal of Motion 503 is to start a discussion surrounding the creation of tax incentives in support of cultural endeavours in our province. This could lead to increased support for multiculturalism in Alberta and also the various cultural endeavours in our province. As I indicated in my opening speech, our province is rich in cultural diversity. This gives us vibrant culture, an important advantage as we compete to attract and retain skilled workers and their families to our communities.

Mr. Speaker, I believe that cultural activities and events are very important and that they should be supported by Albertans in a financial capacity. We can further encourage Albertans to do so by way of tax incentives. I also feel that by introducing this motion, we raise awareness of cultural organizations and activities in the province, which could garner even more support from Albertans.

I value and respect my colleagues' comments regarding Motion 503. Again, I would like to thank everyone who participated in this motion's debate today.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

[Motion Other than Government Motion 503 lost]

The Deputy Speaker: Before I recognize the Deputy Government House Leader, I just want to remind our Assembly that the policy field committees will reconvene tonight at 6:30 for consideration of the main estimates of Transportation and Agriculture and Rural Development.

The hon. Deputy Government House Leader.

Mr. Denis: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Given that we are finished today's business, I would move that we call it 6 o'clock.

[Motion carried; the Assembly adjourned at 5:24 p.m. to Tuesday at 1:30 p.m.]

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1001 Legislature Annex
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EDMONTON, AB T5K 1E4
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Province of Alberta

The 27th Legislature
Fifth Session

Alberta Hansard

Tuesday afternoon, March 13, 2012

Issue 16

The Honourable Kenneth R. Kowalski, Speaker

Legislative Assembly of Alberta
The 27th Legislature

Fifth Session

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Shannon Dean, Senior Parliamentary Counsel/Director of House Services	Brian G. Hodgson, Sergeant-at-Arms	

Executive Council

Alison Redford	Premier, President of Executive Council, Chair of Agenda and Priorities Committee
Doug Horner	Deputy Premier, President of Treasury Board and Enterprise
Dave Hancock	Minister of Human Services
Ted Morton	Minister of Energy
Verlyn Olson	Minister of Justice and Attorney General
Fred Horne	Minister of Health and Wellness
Ron Liepert	Minister of Finance
Thomas Lukaszuk	Minister of Education, Political Minister for Edmonton
Diana McQueen	Minister of Environment and Water
Jonathan Denis	Solicitor General and Minister of Public Security
Cal Dallas	Minister of Intergovernmental, International and Aboriginal Relations, Political Minister for Central Alberta
Evan Berger	Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, Political Minister for Southern Alberta
Frank Oberle	Minister of Sustainable Resource Development
George VanderBurg	Minister of Seniors
Ray Danyluk	Minister of Transportation
Jeff Johnson	Minister of Infrastructure, Political Minister for Northern Alberta
Doug Griffiths	Minister of Municipal Affairs
Greg Weadick	Minister of Advanced Education and Technology
Jack Hayden	Minister of Tourism, Parks and Recreation
Heather Klimchuk	Minister of Culture and Community Services
Manmeet Singh Bhullar	Minister of Service Alberta, Political Minister for Calgary

Parliamentary Assistants

Naresh Bhardwaj	Health and Wellness
Alana DeLong	Seniors
Arno Doerksen	Human Services
Kyle Fawcett	Treasury Board and Enterprise
Art Johnston	Executive Council
Barry McFarland	Agriculture and Rural Development
Len Mitzel	Transportation
Dave Rodney	Health and Wellness
David Xiao	Energy

STANDING AND SPECIAL COMMITTEES OF THE LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY OF ALBERTA

Standing Committee on the Alberta Heritage Savings Trust Fund

Chair: Ms Tarchuk
Deputy Chair: Mr. Elniski

Anderson
DeLong
Groeneveld
Johnston
MacDonald
Quest
Taft

Standing Committee on Community Development

Chair: Mrs. Jablonski
Deputy Chair: Mr. Chase

Amery
Blakeman
Boutilier
Calahasen
Goudreau
Groeneveld
Lindsay
Snelgrove
Taylor
Vandermeer

Standing Committee on Education

Chair: Ms Pastoor
Deputy Chair: Mr. Hehr

Anderson
Benito
Brown
Cao
Chase
Leskiw
Marz
Notley
Sarich
Tarchuk

Standing Committee on Energy

Chair: Mrs. Ady
Deputy Chair: Ms Blakeman

Hehr
Hinman
Jacobs
Johnston
Lund
Mason
McFarland
Ouellette
Webber
Xiao

Standing Committee on Finance

Chair: Mr. Renner
Deputy Chair: Mr. Kang

Allred
Anderson
Drysdale
Fawcett
Knight
Mitzel
Prins
Sandhu
Taft
Taylor

Standing Committee on Legislative Offices

Chair: Mr. Blackett
Deputy Chair: Mr. Lund

Blakeman
Brown
Evans
Hinman
Lindsay
MacDonald
Marz
Notley
Ouellette
Quest

Special Standing Committee on Members' Services

Chair: Mr. Kowalski
Deputy Chair: Mr. Campbell

Amery
Anderson
Elniski
Evans
Hehr
Knight
Leskiw
MacDonald
Mason
Rogers

Standing Committee on Private Bills

Chair: Dr. Brown
Deputy Chair: Ms Woo-Paw

Allred Kang
Benito Knight
Boutilier Lindsay
Calahasen McFarland
Doerksen Sandhu
Drysdale Sarich
Evans Snelgrove
Groeneveld Swann
Hinman Xiao
Jacobs

Standing Committee on Privileges and Elections, Standing Orders and Printing

Chair: Mr. Prins
Deputy Chair: Mr. Snelgrove

Amery Mitzel
Boutilier Notley
Calahasen Pastoor
DeLong Quest
Doerksen Stelmach
Forsyth Swann
Jacobs Tarchuk
Knight Taylor
Leskiw Zwozdesky
McFarland

Standing Committee on Public Accounts

Chair: Mr. MacDonald
Deputy Chair: Mr. Goudreau

Allred Kang
Benito Mason
Calahasen Rodney
Chase Sandhu
Elniski Vandermeer
Fawcett Woo-Paw
Forsyth Xiao
Groeneveld

Standing Committee on Public Health and Safety

Chair: Mrs. Fritz
Deputy Chair: Dr. Taft

Bhardwaj
Blakett
DeLong
Doerksen
Forsyth
Notley
Rodney
Rogers
Swann
Woo-Paw

Legislative Assembly of Alberta

1:30 p.m.

Tuesday, March 13, 2012

[The Speaker in the chair]

Prayers

The Speaker: Good afternoon.

Let us pray. Give to each member of this Legislature a strong and abiding sense of the great responsibilities laid upon us. Give us a deep and thorough understanding of the needs of the people we serve. Amen.

Please be seated.

Introduction of Visitors

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Municipal Affairs.

Mr. Griffiths: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's a particular honour and pleasure of mine today to introduce to you and through you to members of this Assembly three guests who are seated in your gallery. They're members of the AAMD and C. They had a meeting with our rural caucus, and many urban colleagues came along, and we had a fantastic discussion. They are great partners in helping to build a stronger rural Alberta and better communities. I'd ask them to rise: Tom Burton from the MD of Greenview; Soren Odegard from the county of Two Hills; and the president of AAMD and C, a constituent of mine and a personal friend, Mr. Bob Barss from the MD of Wainwright. I'd ask all members to give them the warm welcome.

Ms Evans: Mr. Speaker, it's a real thrill today to stand up and introduce to this Assembly a friend of Alberta, a woman who spent 16 years in the Ontario Legislature, eight as a member of the opposition and the last eight years, before she retired in October, as Minister of Economic Development and Trade. Sandra Papatello was famous for building partnerships, not only getting clusters of Ontario businesses to come and work in Alberta, but she came to all of our national buyer/seller forums and arranged several partnerships. She continues to do that today as a member of the federal panel to review aerospace and is working for a number of Alberta-based companies.

With her today is her new colleague. She's now director of PWC, PricewaterhouseCoopers, and has one of their leading national managers out here today, Brian McLean. I'd ask my two guests to please stand and be recognized by the Assembly.

Introduction of Guests

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Red Deer-North.

Mrs. Jablonski: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Today I have the great privilege to introduce to you and through you to the members of this Assembly 70 visitors, 61 in the members' gallery and nine in the public gallery. These are students from Gateway Christian school in Red Deer-North, and they're fascinated and curious about their government. I spoke to the students earlier, and one young man told me that he likes guns and wants to be a member of the military, another told me that he would like to design and build his own car like Ford or Lexus, and another one said that he was interested in being the Premier of the province. In the members' gallery are the students of Gateway Christian school with their teachers, Mrs. Klaaske deKoning and Mr. Jim Driedger,

and their parent helpers Karrie-Anne Brewster, Carolyn Lodewyk, Art Vriend, Mrs. Beatrice Vriend, and Mrs. Zara Wattenbarger. Would you please stand and receive the traditional warm welcome of the Assembly.

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

Ms Blakeman: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Now, you know how much I adore and listen carefully to the seniors in the fabulous constituency of Edmonton-Centre. Today in the public gallery we have with us a very wise group of seniors from Edmonton-Centre, and these are the people who attend the Minerva centre for senior studies, which is housed inside of MacEwan University. This includes, in fact, a high school teacher of mine, so I'm just thrilled that they're here today and that Janet was able to be their guide because she was another teacher, at Strathcona high school. I would ask them all to please rise and accept the riotous welcome of my colleagues.

The Speaker: Well, I was really hoping we could avoid riots this afternoon.

The hon. Minister of Finance.

Mr. Liepert: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure today to introduce to you and through you to the members of the Assembly a group of hard-working Albertans from the workforce development and engagement division of corporate human resources and the Deputy Premier's department. He's off fighting on behalf of Alberta businesses in Ottawa today, so it's my pleasure to introduce Catherine Dupuis, Lauren Hobson, Diana Steele, Melanie Lacher, and Joanne Christiansen. They're seated in the members' gallery this afternoon. I'd ask them to rise and be recognized by the Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Health and Wellness.

Mr. Horne: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I'm delighted to introduce to you and through you and on behalf of the hon. the Premier to all members of the Assembly the winners of our most recent Premier's awards for healthy workplaces. This group of Albertans is being recognized today for making the health of their employees a top priority in their workplace. From wellness programs to on-site fitness facilities and educational programs these employers have made health and wellness easily accessible to their employees and are committed to making Alberta healthier.

These guests are seated in the public gallery, and I would ask each of them to rise as I call their names to receive the traditional warm welcome of the Assembly: Nichole Collins and Gabriela Husch from Athabasca University, Lorraine Zoskey and Michelle Parker from the Persons with Developmental Disabilities Central Region Community Board, Susan Adam and Ray Pisani from Alberta Blue Cross, Heather Stickle from Hyatt Calgary, Lorna Milkovich and Krista Rechner from the Red Deer primary care network, and Fran Pedersen and Tom Burton from the municipal district of Greenview. Please join me in extending a very warm welcome on behalf of the Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Environment and Water.

Mrs. McQueen: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise today to introduce to you and through you to all members of this Assembly two Albertans who have made outstanding contributions to this province and its ecological heritage. Present today are Dr. Howard Tennant and Dr. Ron Wallace. Dr. Tennant is a former president

and vice-chancellor of Lethbridge University. He currently sits on the governing boards of many public and private organizations, including the National Research Council. Dr. Tennant also served as co-chair of the Alberta Environmental Monitoring Panel.

Dr. Ron Wallace is an aquatic ecologist whose 35 years of work on issues related to the oil sands have been widely published and recognized with an Emerald award. In addition to lending his experience to World Bank development projects in Russia and Venezuela, he has served as a board member of Wildlife Habitat Canada and as the former executive director of the Northwest Territories Water Board.

I am very happy to have these two members here. They will be joining us shortly – I see that they're not here yet – but I'd still like to ask people to give them the resounding welcome of this Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Infrastructure.

Mr. Johnson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's a pleasure to rise and introduce to you and through you to all members of this Assembly Melissa Yurdiga, one of my constituents from Athabasca-Redwater. She's the daughter of our hard-working reeve, David Yurdiga. She's a NAIT student working towards a bachelor of business administration in accounting. Obviously, she's got her mother's brains and good looks, as you can tell, too. In addition, Melissa is the project manager for Hand over Hunger, Students in Free Enterprise, which she's going to brief me about after session.

She's accompanied by Liam Zahara, who's a NAIT student and is studying business administration. I'd ask Melissa and Liam to please rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of the Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. member for Calgary-Mackay.

Ms Woo-Paw: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It is my honour to rise today and introduce to you and through you to all members of the House Mr. Matt Pechey, my assistant in Calgary-Mackay, and Barbara Letendre, my assistant in the Legislature office. Matt was previously with the federal government, Mount Royal University, and children's services. Barbara is a long-term employee of the government, and she's gorgeous and most capable. She told me to tone down my descriptions. She's been working with me since last fall. I'm most fortunate to have these very knowledgeable, experienced people providing great support to my office and to the constituents of Calgary-Mackay. I'd ask that they both rise and receive the warm welcome of this House.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for St. Albert.

Mr. Allred: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my privilege today to introduce to you and through you to the rest of the Assembly a friend and constituent of mine, Mr. Joe Demko. Mr. Demko is a trustee of the St. Albert Protestant separate school district No. 6. He is also a former superintendent of the Protestant district and taught in St. Albert for many years. I'd ask Joe if he would please stand and ask the members of the Assembly to give him the traditional warm welcome.

1:40

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

Ms Notley: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I have two sets of introductions today. The first set I'd like to introduce is two guests, Gail Cumming and Trina Firth. Trina has worked as a social worker for 30 years, receiving awards and commendations in the process.

Since being injured on the job, she has been subjected to video surveillance by the WCB, which was then used as a foundation for misleading statements to third parties by the WCB. Gail Cumming, who came with her, is a workers' advocate who's been working with a growing number of injured workers in circumstances similar to Trina's. She is here today to bring attention to the increasing incidence of worker intimidation by the WCB through the unjustified and intrusive use of video surveillance. I would now ask Gail and Trina to rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of the Assembly.

The Speaker: Do you have another one?

Ms Notley: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I have a second set. I'd like to introduce to you and through you to this Assembly two members of my team at the constituency office in Old Strathcona. Hannah Goa has been working as a constituency assistant since May 2010. I'm repeatedly approached by constituents throughout the riding of Strathcona who thank me for the incredibly effective and caring advocacy that Hannah has provided to them since she's been in the office. Jaime Phillips is our . . .

The Speaker: Hold on, Member. You're being disturbed by the hon. Member for Calgary-Mountain View.

Would you kindly retreat.

Dr. Swann: My apologies.

The Speaker: Continue, hon. member.

Ms Notley: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Jaime Phillips is our current field placement student from Grant MacEwan. I've been very impressed with the quality of her work, her maturity, and the enthusiasm that she brings to the office every time she is there. I would now ask both Hannah and Jaime to rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of this Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Fish Creek.

Mrs. Forsyth: Well, Mr. Speaker, thank you. It's my pleasure to introduce to you and through you to all members of the Assembly Dr. Peter Rodd and his son Alexander. Dr. Rodd began his medical career in the Canadian Forces as a medical officer and flight surgeon. He then served for almost 15 years as a family doctor. From there he provided care to patients in the forensic services at Alberta Hospital Edmonton and in the community. Dr. Rodd has a proven record of strong and vocal advocacy in an effort to put his patients first. He's the new Wildrose candidate in Edmonton-Manning, and we are thrilled to have him. With that, I would like to ask him and his son to rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of the Assembly.

Members' Statements

Impaired Driving

Ms Pastoor: Mr. Speaker, today I voice my support of the former Bill 26, the Traffic Safety Amendment Act, 2011, that strengthens the government's approach to impaired driving. I am disappointed that the issue has been politicized by those who should know better.

It is not just my voice but other voices as well such as the member who proposed the piece of legislation where drivers who blow more than a .05 blood-alcohol level would have their drivers' licences suspended for 24 hours. She noted that drivers

are impaired well before they hit .08 and that moving to .05 will work in keeping drinking drivers off the road.

Another voice supporting the increase to enforce a .05 blood-alcohol content said in this Assembly that a .05 limit will keep drunk drivers off the road, making our roads safer for all Albertans.

Yet another voice in May 2008 in this Assembly said that in his experience Albertans were not so much concerned about enforcing our drinking and driving laws as they were worried about how to punish repeat offenders. “[Even if] they haven’t hurt somebody or killed somebody . . . it’s just a matter of time,” he said. Mr. Speaker, this member asked whether this government could find ways to “make drinking and driving a very unattractive option. . . . especially for repeat offenders.” The member in question noted correctly that the government of Alberta does control the driver’s licence portion of the law and asked if the government could take action on that front.

Mr. Speaker, I’m pleased to say that we have. Starting at .05, our approach makes drinking and driving a very unattractive option through escalating penalties for repeat offenders.

Lending their voices of support to Alberta’s impaired driving strategy are the members for Calgary-Fish Creek, Fort McMurray-Wood Buffalo, and Airdrie-Chestermere, and we do thank them for their support.

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

Integrity in Government Leadership

Mr. Hinman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. This Premier likes to talk about real-life leadership. It’s her election campaign slogan. It’s plastered on the side of her campaign bus. Apparently she wants people to believe that she’s experienced in the real world.

I have a problem with that, Mr. Speaker, because nothing that I have seen from this Premier bears any semblance to real life or leadership, for that matter. Great leaders lead by example and keep their word. Leadership isn’t giving yourself a 30 per cent pay hike and then freezing public wages for two years. Leadership isn’t refusing to give it back. Real life isn’t making the laws and then living above them as we’ve seen with the illegal donation scandal and the subsequent investigations into the PC party. Leadership isn’t making a promise for a public health inquiry or fixed election dates and then breaking those promises when you’re looking square into the eyes of Albertans and declaring that you stand by your word. That’s not real life. That’s wonderland. That’s certainly not leadership.

If the Premier wants a real lesson in real-life leadership, she can look to folks like Sergio Marchionne, who when his company, Chrysler, began taking on water, stepped up and led by example. He declined his own annual CEO salary and bonuses while the company attempted to get back on track.

I’ve got news for the Premier. Her party, her government, and our province are taking on water. They’ve run five successive budget deficits. Spending and waste are out of control. Our savings accounts are nearly gone. But instead of showing leadership, real-life leadership, that she likes to talk about, this Premier and cabinet continue to accept the outrageous pay raises that they gave themselves. In real life, in real Alberta people can’t just decide to make more money or break their word because they feel like it

Madam Premier, please show some integrity and real leadership. Call a full public inquiry where health officials and ministers will have to testify under oath. That’s real leadership.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Leduc-Beaumont-Devon.

National Buyer/Seller Forum

Mr. Rogers: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It’s my pleasure to rise today to speak about a very important event happening later this year. From October 2 to 4 the National Buyer/Seller Forum will take place in Edmonton. Our government is pleased to be a partner in putting on this worthwhile event. Each year this forum provides an incredible opportunity for business leaders from across Canada to play a part in shaping the future of our energy industry. What a great way to showcase Alberta. This forum is an excellent opportunity to showcase local and national businesses such as Acklands-Grainger and Commercial Solutions, major suppliers located in Nisku in my constituency.

The theme of this year’s forum, Green Opportunities through Innovative Partnerships, is truly indicative of the direction Alberta’s and Canada’s energy sectors have been taking.

Mr. Speaker, just a few years ago seven oil sands producers formed the Oil Sands Tailings Consortium, through which they now share tailings research and technology to help improve reclamation efforts and reduce the environmental impact of the oil sands.

In addition, earlier this year 12 major oil sands companies signed on to Canada’s Oil Sands Innovation Alliance, which will look for ways to collaborate on environmental research, including new methods of carbon capture and land reclamation. These are just a couple of examples of how partnerships between key players can make a major difference in propelling ideas and technology forward.

Mr. Speaker, the National Buyer/Seller Forum adds yet another layer to these important partnerships by helping to connect oil sands producers, the buyers, with equipment suppliers, manufacturers, and drilling transportation companies, the sellers. Bringing all of these players together into one place creates a collaborative environment in which new ideas are formed which will further strengthen Alberta’s energy sector and attract investment to Alberta and Canada.

Mr. Speaker, the National Buyer/Seller Forum is truly a unique and important networking opportunity. I encourage anyone interested in the energy and oil sands sector to attend and, more importantly, spend some money in our capital region.

Thank you.

1:50

Oral Question Period

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

Donations to Leadership Campaigns

Dr. Sherman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The Premier and the PCs talk about independence, transparency, and accountability while they carry on with backroom deals and warlord politics. The journey of former AHS board chair Ken Hughes is well known, and now we learn that in the PC leadership race a former AHS board member, the current acting chair, Cathy Roozen, personally donated \$5,000 to the Premier’s leadership bid and together with her spouse doled out a whopping \$27,000. How can Albertans trust that the AHS board and AHS are independent of this government when these kinds of donations are being made and accepted?

Ms Redford: Mr. Speaker, the wonderful thing about the rules that we set out for our party is that we have complete transparency with respect to people when they decide to make contributions. I think what Albertans are concerned about is that when they don't have the information, they don't know what people's views might be.

We have a very strong chair at Alberta Health Services and very strong members on that board who have their own role with respect to corporate governance and understand what their legal obligations are.

Dr. Sherman: Mr. Speaker, the Premier is right. They're transparent. The more you donate, you'll get a job.

Given that the Southern family and the companies that they control donated at least \$128,000 to the recent PC leadership campaign and given that the ATCO Group of companies are such large players in the electricity market, again to the Premier: how can you claim that accepting 128 grand does not jeopardize the independence of this government's policy on electricity deregulation, which ultimately is forcing Albertans to pay higher bills?

Ms Redford: Mr. Speaker, I'll say again that the important piece here is that we are completely transparent with respect to where everyone stands. We had an independent panel that made recommendations with respect to transmission, which then was supported as a result of decisions that were made by the AESO, AUC. This is important because what we are saying is that we are completely clear and open with everyone with respect to exactly where everyone stands on these issues.

Dr. Sherman: Mr. Speaker, this Premier is completely transparent. The more you pay, the more you get in contracts.

Given the Premier's recent transmission policy flip-flops and the fact that both the Premier and the Minister of Energy also received substantial donations totalling \$20,000 from TransAlta during their leadership campaigns, to the Premier: whose interests are this Premier and the PC government really serving, the corporations making huge profits from higher costs or the people of Alberta who are paying through the nose for those bills? Whose interests, Premier? Those who fund you, or those who elect you?

Ms Redford: Mr. Speaker, there is a wonderful opportunity in this province to continue to grow this economy. The AESO said it, this government has said it, and an independent transmission panel said it. We expect billions of dollars in investment to be made in this province with respect to the extraction of our natural resources, whether it's oil and gas, agriculture, or forestry. We certainly need the transmission, we need the electricity, and we have been very clear that we've supported that approach from the beginning. There is nothing that is unclear. There has been no change of policy, and we're proud of the policy.

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

Long-term Care for Seniors

Dr. Sherman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Growing the economy is exactly what this Premier is doing on the backs of our seniors. From Delivery Matters, a fact sheet put out by the Parkland Institute, national and international research clearly shows that in the delivery of health care, especially long-term care, the for-profit model leads to lower staffing levels, inferior quality of care. For example, bathing was skipped 10 per cent of the time; feeding, 20 per cent.

Residents were six times more likely to be bedridden, and those people were more drowsy, less socially engaged, ate less, and had more bed ulcers. Why, despite overwhelming evidence, does the Premier insist on defending profit instead of caring for our seniors?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Horne: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Well, the report that the hon. member quotes from is a report that covered the period of 2006 to 2009. Without addressing the specific allegations that the hon. member made, I can tell you that today, in 2012, every resident has a registered nurse, an occupational therapist, or a social worker or a case manager. There is increased access to 24/7 home-care registered nurses. Nurse practitioners have been introduced and are managing medical needs. New strategies have been developed to reduce emergency department visits.

Dr. Sherman: Mr. Speaker, let's bring this minister down to Planet Earth and down to the province of Alberta. Given that the Health Quality Council's Long Term Care Family Experience Survey, released January 2012, found that "on average, publicly operated facilities obtained significantly higher overall ratings compared to private and voluntary . . . operated facilities," again to the Premier: why is this PC government treating the health, safety, and well-being of our seniors with such flagrant, heartless disregard?

Mr. VanderBurg: Mr. Speaker, you know, I take offence at the comments being made. It seems like it's a drive-by smear operation. I went to many, many facilities in this province. Take a look at Extencare Eaux Claires. Go and ask the residents. See the smiling faces. Talk to the families. How about going down to AgeCare in Strathmore? People are very well taken care of in private settings. I would say very, very clearly that I'm proud of the facilities we have. The people that deserve great, great service are our seniors.

Dr. Sherman: Mr. Speaker, I take offence. The only smear here is a smear in the diapers of our seniors who are neglected in long-term care.

To the Premier. Yesterday you accused all of the opposition parties in this House of scaring seniors into not supporting your government. Can you please explain to me, given the overwhelming evidence and the human outcry from our seniors, who want to be cared for, fed, and taken out of bed, who is really scaring our seniors and who is smearing them? Come on, Premier. Stand up and answer the question.

Ms Redford: Mr. Speaker, I stand in this House day after day, and I listen to this hon. member go on and on about how there are seniors in this province that are starving, that aren't getting health care, that do not have appropriate housing, and that simply isn't true. That is my evidence of this direct hon. member's comments in this House with respect to the quality of life of seniors. This is a government that is committed to a publicly funded health care system, accommodation, and choice for all seniors and an improved quality of life so that seniors can live their lives with respect.

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

Donations to Leadership Campaigns

(continued)

Mr. MacDonald: The financial statements of the Deputy Premier in the recent PC leadership race were prepared to comply with the requirements of the Election Finances and Contributions Disclosure Act. An individual campaign donation was not to exceed \$30,000. To the Premier: why did the Deputy Premier in the leadership campaign accept a \$35,000 donation from one individual, which is clearly \$5,000 more than what the limit was set at?

The Speaker: I'm not sure how this applies to the question period, hon. member. Proceed with your next question, please.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. This is in regard to the Election Finances and Contributions Disclosure Act, which is, again, a statute that the Premier had under her control when she was Justice minister.

Again, given that donations should not come from any corporation that does not have business in Alberta, who sent the Deputy Premier's campaign two money orders worth \$15,000 in total from RBC Trust Bahamas?

The Speaker: The same reply, hon. member. Proceed.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Given that the Premier has placed Gary Mar in the penalty box on an unpaid leave because of concerns over leadership campaign fundraising, will the Premier now do the same to the Deputy Premier for exceeding the donation limit from an individual by \$5,000 and cashing money orders worth \$15,000 in total from RBC Trust Bahamas?

Ms Redford: Mr. Speaker, I am first of all not going to confirm any of the allegations that this hon. member has made. This is not part of what I would consider to be appropriate business for this House.

But with respect to the last question, Mr. Speaker, the reason that the trade representative in Hong Kong has been put on a leave of absence without pay is directly with respect to his employment contract with the government of Alberta as a result of the code of conduct that we expect all employees to observe.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Fish Creek.

Alleged Intimidation of Physicians

Mrs. Forsyth: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Today Dr. Peter Rodd came forward with his own personal account of being bullied and intimidated by Alberta Health Services. Dr. Rodd, a psychiatrist, worked with forensic patients at Alberta Hospital Edmonton. Many of these patients were dangerous and, in his medical opinion, too risky to be released into the community. But, as usual, his advocacy efforts to keep these dangerous patients at Alberta Hospital were met with threats to his job and intimidation. To the Premier: why can't you see that your broken promise to hold a judicial inquiry into patient advocacy is seriously harming the health and safety of all Albertans?

Ms Redford: Mr. Speaker, we made a commitment to hold an independent judicial inquiry with respect to queue-jumping. We have kept that commitment.

With respect to these allegations I'm not at all surprised that a Wildrose candidate would be making these allegations about doctor intimidation, Mr. Speaker.

2:00

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mrs. Forsyth: A 420-page report about doctor intimidation. Read it.

Thank you. Again to the Premier: given that physicians have told the Health Quality Council that they need whistle-blower protection if they're ever going to speak out, when are you going to table whistle-blower legislation? There is a mysterious Bill 7 that appears to be on the Order Paper. Could that be it?

Ms Redford: There is a Health Quality Council report that did talk about doctor intimidation. This government has accepted that report. It has accepted the recommendations made in that report, and this government will actually find solutions to fix health care as opposed to the discussions that we seem to have in this House from the hon. members on the opposite side.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mrs. Forsyth: Premier, you're a disappointment to Alberta doctors and their patients.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Again to the Premier. Given that Dr. Rodd came forward today and confirmed what the Health Quality Council has already said, that patient advocacy in Alberta has been compromised by political interference in the system, what more proof do you need? By not calling the public inquiry that you promised, is that what you're trying to accomplish, stop physicians from coming forward?

Ms Redford: Mr. Speaker, the proof is in the report that was presented by the Health Quality Council; we are not disputing that.

The way to fix health care in Alberta is not to politicize this issue by having people at one point talk about doctor intimidation and then 20 minutes later announce that they're a candidate for a political party. That does not fix health care in Alberta, but we will.

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

Long-term Care for Seniors

(continued)

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. A study by researchers at three Alberta universities has found that the health of people in supportive living is at greater risk than those in long-term care facilities. Lack of appropriate staffing in supportive living means that people are twice as likely to end up in ERs or be hospitalized. Will the Premier explain why this government is reducing the number of long-term care spaces despite a severe shortage and despite better health outcomes for seniors in long-term care?

Mr. Horne: Mr. Speaker, the study that the hon. member refers to is based on data from 2006 to 2009. As I said in answer to an earlier question this afternoon, a lot has happened since then. This government is committed to an approach to continuing care that offers seniors a range of affordable housing spaces and brings the health care to them, and we're having a lot of success with that.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much. The facts speak otherwise, Mr. Speaker. Given that the for-profit involvement in supportive living is much greater than in long-term care and that people are

having to stay in supportive living for a wide range of health services that would keep them from needing hospitalization, will the Premier commit to end the handover of care for seniors to the friends in the for-profit sector who donate to her leadership and the PC Party and, instead, put the health needs of seniors first?

Mr. Horne: Mr. Speaker, continuing care in this province, whether it's provided by government, by the not-for-profit sector, or by the private sector, is all regulated exactly the same way. This government has very strict continuing care accommodation standards in place and very strict continuing care health standards in place. They are applied equally across the board. They are enforced rigorously by inspectors. On top of that, we have long-term care accommodation rate protection to ensure that nobody pays more than they can afford.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Well, given that this government is cutting long-term care in this province despite promising a significant increase in the last election and is building assisted living facilities instead and given that those in assisted living are more likely to end up in the ER, why won't the Premier admit that its seniors' care strategy isn't intended to actually help seniors but, instead, the private interests that back the PC Party? This is to the Premier.

Ms Redford: This government's policy is designed to support seniors so that they can live in dignity with choice in the last years of their life. One of the things that we have found out, Mr. Speaker, from seniors in Alberta is that they want to have choice with respect to accommodation. We have a system that is regulated that allows for different models of delivery to a standard that's consistent across the province and ensures that there is public health care available for every senior living in any type of accommodation.

Bitumen Upgrading

Mr. Hehr: Mr. Speaker, the government talks a good game when it comes to raising the fortunes of our First Nations communities and upgrading and refining more bitumen here in Alberta. That's why I'm shocked that the Alberta First Nations energy project, a project that could have employed our First Nations citizens and built our provincial coffers, has been shelved. To the Minister of Energy: why is this project being moth-balled?

Ms Redford: Mr. Speaker, we in this government are committed to diversifying the economy and to ensuring that we're investing in value-added for the good of all Albertans. We know that that has tremendous opportunities for Albertans and Alberta taxpayers across the province. Unfortunately, this particular project was a project that, when we assessed the benefit and the risk, just didn't make sense for Alberta taxpayers. We're not opposed to doing more, but we won't do this project.

Mr. Hehr: Well, Mr. Speaker, given that the economics of this Alberta First Nations energy project compare more favourably than the North West energy project, why are we not proceeding with this project given that we went ahead with North West?

Dr. Morton: Mr. Speaker, I'm happy to answer that question. At its similar stage of where we approved North West, they had already secured the land, they had already secured regulatory approval, and they'd already secured a major partner with years of

experience in the oil sands, CNRL. The current project that he's referring to has none of those, and as the Premier said, at this particular point in time the risks clearly outweigh the benefits.

Mr. Hehr: Well, my spidey sense is tingling on this, Mr. Speaker, in that politics rather than business acumen may be at play here given that this project could have been shelved because high-level PC Party operatives worked directly for competitors of this First Nations project. Has it been shelved for politics and not business?

Dr. Morton: Mr. Speaker, I can see that the habit of making unfounded allegations by the Official Opposition leader is spreading to the rest of the caucus.

There's absolutely no competition between these two different projects. North West is already approved, as I said. Teedrum was very early in the process. As far as the two pipelines, they're totally different, and we support both of them. Northern Gateway is going to ship bitumen. Kinder Morgan is going to support refined products. We support both of them very strongly.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-MacKay, followed by the hon. Member for Calgary-McCall.

Impaired Driving

Ms Woo-Paw: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Many Albertans support getting tough on drunk drivers. However, there are some who seemingly want to make it a political issue and ignore the lives that would be saved and injuries prevented through Alberta's new drunk-driving law. Some of the most vocal critics have been a few particular members in this House, which is odd considering they advocated for getting tough on drunk drivers the way we are doing with Bill 26. My first two questions are to the Solicitor General and Minister of Public Security. One of the areas focused on by the new law is tougher penalties for those who have a blood-alcohol content between .05 and .08. How does that line up with what the opposition members want?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Denis: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Far be it for me to quote myself. I'm going to go to *Hansard*: "I hope this bill will start the process to move to a .05 legal limit." I recognize that drunk driving is not a partisan issue, and I want to thank the Member for Calgary-Fish Creek for her past support.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Ms Woo-Paw: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My second question is to the same minister. That is just one quote from one member. Was there any other support shown for the blood-alcohol limit of .05?

Mr. Denis: Mr. Speaker, once again, I'm going to let *Hansard* do the talking. The Member for Fort McMurray-Wood Buffalo stated in reference to a private member's bill cracking down on drunk drivers: "We should be doing everything we can to make it harder for drunk drivers to offend and to get [drunk] drivers whose judgment is impaired by alcohol off the road." That includes the danger zone between .05 and .08. Thank you to that member as well.

Ms Woo-Paw: My second supplemental question is to the Minister of Transportation. Given that the Member for Airdrie-Chestermere was concerned about repeat drinking-and-driving offenders, quote, if they haven't hurt or killed anybody, it's just a

matter of time, end quote, how does the province's new legislation deal with repeat offenders?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Danyluk: Well, thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. In fact, this law very much targets repeat offenders. We are doing all we can to make the roads safer through education, enforcement, tougher penalties, ignition interlock, and other measures. This is good legislation, and we're doing the right thing to get Albertans home safely.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-McCall, followed by the hon. Member for Strathmore-Brooks.

2:10 School Infrastructure Funding

Mr. Kang: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Every day the deplorable state of our school infrastructure in Alberta continues to be of great concern. Across the province boards are forced to move students between schools while parents fight to save their neighbourhood schools. To the Minister of Infrastructure: why isn't this government co-operating with the cities, the school boards, and other government ministries to revive and save inner-city schools?

Mr. Johnson: Mr. Speaker, I think this ministry and this government is co-operating with all of the possible stakeholders to do the best that we can with the infrastructure and the budget that we've got in this province. We've got great examples of working together. For example, in Lac La Biche we're building schools and bolting those onto the community centre so that we can make use of the common areas like the field house and the library. We don't have to double-bill those and bill those to the taxpayer, and we can use that money to build additional spaces in some other community.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Kang: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. To the same minister again: given that school boards across the province have maintenance deficits of over a billion dollars and half of our schools are more than 50 years old, what is this government doing to fix old schools, not just build new ones?

Mr. Johnson: Mr. Speaker, there are numerous modernizations going on across the province. We need to keep working with the Minister of Education and all the school boards and all the stakeholders, and we're committed to doing that. I would love to build more schools. I would love to renovate more schools for the minister. The reality is that there's a certain budget that we work with. We roll about a hundred million dollars a year through to school boards to do maintenance, and they set those priorities locally. We'll continue to work with them and make those dollars go as far as possible.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Kang: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The problem is that the students are going into substandard schools.

To the minister again: why is your government not fighting to keep older schools open by finding creative ways to use them to their full potential such as making them community hubs and leasing space to community groups and Alberta Health, for example?

Mr. Lukaszuk: Mr. Speaker, let's not forget the most important aspect of it all, and that's the children's education. At the end of the day schools are there to serve our children. Decisions are made on whether schools are opened or closed based on the quality of the educational programs that are being offered. Yes, school boards from time to time have to make difficult decisions to close schools, but those decisions are made in the best interests of the children. When population is so low that teachers no longer can deliver valuable educational programs, those tough decisions have to be made, and they are being made.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Strathmore-Brooks, followed by the hon. Member for Calgary-Varsity.

Resource Revenue Projections

Mr. Doerksen: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. A large portion of Alberta's finances is derived from oil and gas revenue. Some of my constituents have expressed some uncertainty with regard to how those numbers are derived. This was recently highlighted in a column by U of C Professor Jack Mintz in an article in the *National Post*. My question is to the Minister of Finance with regard to revenue forecasts he has presented. Has there been third-party validation of the numbers used to project revenue for the province with regard to oil and gas revenues?

Mr. Liepert: First of all, Mr. Speaker, with due respect, I think time will tell, but I don't think Dr. Mintz will be proven correct. Our forecasts are consistent with the growing Alberta economy. We've got growth that is twice the national average.

Now, three major Canadian banks in their assessments have praised Alberta's budget for having the strongest economic outlook in the country. A few weeks ago I tabled a document from RBC which said: "The government has left itself a solid cushion by using relatively conservative assumptions for key economic variables." I would say that that's a good third-party assessment.

The Speaker: The hon. member, please.

Mr. Doerksen: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My constituents are also interested in some of the mechanisms used to derive the revenue numbers. While that may be complicated to some extent, could the Minister of Finance expand on what mechanisms are used to derive the projections for oil and gas revenue?

Mr. Liepert: First of all, it's really in the Department of Energy. What the forecasters in the Department of Energy do is take the average of all the international forecast prices. I've stated this on a number of occasions in this House, Mr. Speaker. We then sit down individually with industry. We look at their production levels over the next three years and do the math. We then take a look in our Finance department at the increased revenues through both corporate and personal income tax.

We also have another situation, Mr. Speaker, which I won't go into details about now but I think might follow in the supplementary.

The Speaker: The hon. member, please.

Mr. Doerksen: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My third question is with regard to the projections out to 2014-15 of nearly a 150 per cent increase with regard to bitumen royalties to close to \$10 billion. Can the Minister of Energy explain some of the rationale that's gone into those projections, please?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Dr. Morton: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Indeed, I can. There are three factors that go into bitumen royalties – price, volume, and the royalty regime – and they're all going up. The price of bitumen is predicted to rise. Again, as the Finance minister indicated, our projections are consistent with private-sector ones. The second one is the quantity. Production out of the oil sands is predicted to grow 14 per cent this year, 8 per cent next year, and almost 9 per cent the year after. Most importantly, the royalty itself, the postpayout, is two and a half to three times more. It's a bigger slice of a bigger pie.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Varsity, followed by the hon. Member for Leduc-Beaumont-Devon.

Long-term Care for Seniors (continued)

Mr. Chase: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Families desperately searching for the appropriate level of care for their aging loved ones no longer able to live independently face a mind-boggling series of loosely legislated government care options from supportive living to long-term care. A report coauthored by epidemiologists from the U of A and U of C points out that the health risk is double for residents in supportive living facilities than in long-term care. To the Minister of Seniors: do you consider this risk acceptable?

Mr. VanderBurg: Mr. Speaker, the one thing that I want you to know and all Albertans to know is that the safety and the care of our seniors is very, very important to me. I've stressed over and over in this House that if someone is unsure, a family member or an MLA advocating on behalf of a senior in a situation where it's unsafe or at risk, I want it reported, and I want it reported now. It's 1.888.357.9339: write that down. Report it, please. You have an obligation.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Chase: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The government's policy: load 'em and lock 'em.

Given that over half the residents in supportive living facilities were medically unstable and nearly 60 per cent have been diagnosed with dementia, how is your ministry guaranteeing that the residents and their caregivers are safe?

Mr. VanderBurg: Mr. Speaker, it's very, very clear that in our ministry we set the accommodation standards. We do the inspections. Seven hundred and twenty-eight facilities were inspected last year. Very high compliance.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Chase: Thank you. Again to the minister: do you consider it either ethical or economical that residents in supportive living pay higher fees, face additional costs for health-related supplies and services, and that family caregivers are forced to close the gap in inadequate service provision?

Mr. VanderBurg: Mr. Speaker, once again I want to say that through our programs in seniors care and housing we have lots of options, and I stand by those options whether they be delivered through foundations, whether they be delivered through private care, or whether they be delivered through government care. All of those options and many more, including home care, are very, very important to our seniors.

Thank you, sir.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Leduc-Beaumont-Devon, followed by the hon. Member for Airdrie-Chestermere.

Skilled Labour Supply

Mr. Rogers: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Many Alberta businesses, some of them very close to home in places like Leduc and Nisku in my constituency, find themselves victims of Alberta's success. They can't find skilled workers. To the Minister of Human Services: what is the government doing to help Alberta companies find workers to keep crucial Alberta projects on schedule?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. There are several fronts on which we operate. Obviously, Alberta's unemployment rate is among the lowest in the country, in fact tied for the lowest at 5 per cent. Our participation rate is among the highest in the country at 73.7 per cent. But we still want to target those Albertans who can be better employed, so we have processes in place to encourage the untapped labour pool in terms of aboriginal people, seniors, older workers, youth, who have higher unemployment rates than the average. The youth unemployment rate is at 8 per cent, for example. So first we look to Albertans, then we look to Canadians, and then we look internationally.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Rogers: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Again to the Minister of Human Services: given that businesses are the ones on the front line of this labour shortage, they know best what they need, so why does it seem that our government strategies are working in isolation? Do we know best?

Mr. Hancock: I would agree with the hon. member that the front line, the people who are hiring people in this province, do know best, but I would disagree with him that we're operating in isolation. We've been meeting with business, with industry, with labour, talking about how we can work on recruiting the types of people we need and how we can work with the federal government to encourage them, for example, to increase the cap on the provincial nominee program and with other changes in the immigration program so that we can get those people we need from the international market.

2:20

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Rogers: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Given that Alberta's prosperity depends on having enough skilled labour to keep our economy moving, my final question is to the same minister. Businesses are calling for more immigration to Alberta to address their labour market needs. What are we doing to convince the federal government that this is a high priority?

Mr. Hancock: Well, Mr. Speaker, first I should say that our immigration unit works very closely with the federal government's immigration unit to make sure that we're working towards the same end. We work very closely together, but we have been working to try and convince the federal government that we should look at the provincial nominee program numbers and we need to look at streamlining some of the other efforts.

I can say that the Minister of Intergovernmental, International and Aboriginal Relations met recently with the federal minister and had a very good meeting with him. In fact, just recently we've heard some announcements from the federal government in that

area. Our Deputy Premier is in Ottawa today meeting with the federal Alberta caucus . . .

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Airdrie-Chestermere.

Alleged Intimidation of Physicians

(continued)

Mr. Anderson: Mr. Speaker, this morning Dr. Peter Rodd, a psychiatrist and former flight surgeon for the Canadian Forces, shared that because he had objected to certain dangerous mentally ill patients being released into the community before they were ready, he was threatened with the loss of his job and blackmailed by AHS officials. Dr. Rodd has been as specific about the details as he can without risking a lawsuit and joins the Alberta Medical Association in demanding the protection and immunity afforded by a full public inquiry. To the minister: why will you not call a public inquiry into the rampant bullying and intimidation in our health care system?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Horne: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Well, as the Premier explained again earlier in question period today, an inquiry has been called into queue-jumping, and to the extent that physician intimidation was a factor in that, it will be considered by the inquiry.

With respect to the physician who spoke to the media earlier today, I have no direct information about the facts of his particular case. What I would say, Mr. Speaker, is that under the Health Quality Council review there was an opportunity under section 9 of the Alberta Evidence Act for that physician and any others to tell their stories.

Mr. Anderson: He was scared to death about coming to the Health Quality Council. That's why he didn't come.

Given that Dr. Rodd has noted that Alberta Health Services, after learning of his intent to run for the Wildrose Party, is delaying sending him his paperwork necessary to continue practising medicine in Alberta and given that he has been informed that the needed paperwork is finished and was ready to be released to him last week but is now delayed and given that the doctor has received several job offers from out of province but would much rather remain here in Alberta to treat patients in Alberta, Minister, will you please undertake to ask Alberta Health Services to release the paperwork he is waiting on so that this doctor can treat Alberta patients?

Mr. Horne: Mr. Speaker, there are processes within Alberta Health Services for any physician to follow who has a concern. With respect to the organization of medical staff, those procedures may be found in the medical staff bylaws. They include dispute resolution processes that I would expect could address this particular situation.

Mr. Anderson: Is it any wonder why doctors feel so intimidated in this province, Mr. Speaker?

Given that the Health Quality Council report, dozens of media reports, and now the story of Dr. Rodd clearly show that a culture of fear and intimidation is literally rampant in our health care system, will the minister do the right thing and call a full public inquiry on it so that we can not only hold accountable those involved in the bullying and intimidation but, even more importantly, provide Albertans with the health care they need instead of allowing them to suffer unnecessarily while you worry more about your political well-being rather than the well-being of Albertans?

Mr. Horne: Well, speaking of politics, Mr. Speaker, I can tell you that this government has absolutely no interest in the candidacy or lack thereof of anyone running for any of the other caucuses. We leave that to them and to their internal processes, whatever they may happen to be.

With respect to the physician in question, as I mentioned earlier, there was an opportunity under the Health Quality Council of Alberta review. In addition to the protection of the Alberta Evidence Act, every physician who took part was offered, in writing, a presigned waiver from Alberta Health Services releasing that physician from any third-party contract that they may have had.

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

Water Allocation

Ms Blakeman: Thanks very much, Mr. Speaker. If one is trying to figure out what water licences are being approved, the water allocation system in Alberta is definitely not transparent. The minister can both approve or stop a transfer of an allocation of Crown water without public review or consultation. The Alberta WaterPortal website does not show licences held in Alberta except in the South Saskatchewan basin, where there are no new licences, and in many cases the director of water management can approve water licences without any public review or consultation. To the minister . . .

The Speaker: The hon. minister. [interjection] The hon. minister, please.

Mrs. McQueen: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I thank the member for the question, but unfortunately the preamble was so long that I didn't get to hear the question.

Ms Blakeman: I'll try again just so that the minister is good and sure she can hear it. Can the minister confirm that over 239 permanent water allocations have been approved over the last month?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mrs. McQueen: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm not sure of the exact numbers that have been approved over the last month, but our government and our Department of Environment and Water ensure that when any allocations are given, it goes through a process, and they are very good at going through that process.

Ms Blakeman: They seem to be very good at it, going through it very fast.

To the same minister: why is the government making it easier to organize transfers of water licences in the South Saskatchewan basin, with all the details available on the WaterPortal, rather than concentrating on the conservation of water in that drought-stricken area?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mrs. McQueen: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Just to finish off with the last question, our department is very efficient, and that's why they get a lot of work done.

With regard to this one here, certainly, we work with the closed basin in the South Saskatchewan basin. We increase conservation and actually encourage conservation. When we look to the irrigation districts, just for an example, who are large users in the south basin, they have looked at conservation and have really had

a large amount of conservation in that area. We always look first for conservation, for sharing of water. We continue to do that throughout the province but particularly in the south.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-North West, followed by the hon. Member for Calgary-Mountain View.

Environmental Monitoring

Mr. Blackett: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The government of Alberta recently announced a joint oil sands monitoring program with the federal government and today announced the creation of an interim working group to report back to government on how to ensure that the system has independent, credible oversight. My question is to the Minister of Environment and Water. Is this interim report just an extension of the Alberta Environmental Monitoring Panel since that panel already called for independent oversight?

The Speaker: The hon. minister, please.

Mrs. McQueen: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm sure proud today. I earlier introduced a couple of guests that are working on this working group with us. Dr. Tennant and Dr. Wallace have joined us here, and certainly we're very proud. With their help we're now moving into the next phase of our work to bolster environmental monitoring in the province and develop independent, science-credible oversight. We must ensure that it is independent oversight, that it is effective and efficient, and that the policy and compliance remain with government.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Blackett: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My first supplemental is to the same minister. How many more panels and committees need to be established before we see real results?

Mrs. McQueen: Thank you, hon. member. We have seen results. The joint monitoring plan was announced in February with the federal Minister of Environment and myself. We moved to do that quickly, as I said before, to make sure that we do not lose the spring monitoring season. We've made sure that we've added additional dollars within my budget of Environment and Water, and industry as well has committed to dollars for this. The stakeholder group that we have appointed will report back to me by June 30.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Blackett: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My second supplemental is to the same minister. Why doesn't the government just set up an independent commission?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mrs. McQueen: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. We are looking at significantly changing the way that we do business. As the chair of the working group said in this morning's news conference, this is a very complex and challenging task, akin to stapling Jell-O to the wall. We want to build the best system, which is why we are taking a careful, deliberate look at all the options. We must ensure that we build effective, transparent, science-credible, independent oversight.

The Premier visited in Washington earlier last week, and certainly they look to us . . .

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Mountain View, followed by the hon. Member for Calgary-Nose Hill.

Family Care Clinics

Dr. Swann: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Primary care networks increase patient access and satisfaction with family physicians. They decrease the strain on the province's over-crowded emergency system. Yet rather than support consistently this area of primary care, this government has decided to reinvent the wheel. To the minister: what is the difference between a family care clinic and a primary care network that's worth \$15 million and will serve 30,000 people as opposed to the almost 3 million people served by . . .

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Health and Wellness.

Mr. Horne: Well, Mr. Speaker, this government is interested in providing a range of primary health care delivery models that meet the unique needs of individual communities across Alberta. To that end, as the hon. member points out, Alberta's primary care networks have done tremendous work over the last eight years. Through agreement with the Alberta Medical Association and Alberta Health Services this government as recently as a couple of weeks ago has indicated its willingness to provide additional financial support. Family care clinics are yet another model that will be of assistance in serving unique needs in communities, and we're happy to . . .

The Speaker: The hon. member.

2:30

Dr. Swann: Well, let me try the question again since he continues to evade it. What is a family care clinic, and how does it differ from a primary care network?

Mr. Horne: Well, Mr. Speaker, a family care clinic is another option for providing primary health care services. It includes, as do primary care networks, the opportunity to deliver care through multidisciplinary teams. It includes the ability to train health professionals through preceptorships offered in the family care clinics. It has the potential to include direct access to a variety of health care professionals, including nonphysician professionals like nurse practitioners, and it has the potential to serve targeted needs, particularly in areas of the province that have a lower socioeconomic status.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Dr. Swann: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Again to the minister: why have physicians and physician representatives been shut out of the discussions around the development of family care clinics?

Mr. Horne: Well, Mr. Speaker, nothing could be further from the truth. Physicians have been consulted and are being consulted in the development of these family care clinic pilot projects. The Alberta Medical Association as an organization is a member of an advisory committee that is assisting with advice on implementing and evaluating these projects across the province. So physicians clearly are involved in this, and we continue to build on their involvement in the future in both improvements for family care clinics and our primary care networks.

Evanston Community Transportation Access

Dr. Brown: Mr. Speaker, residents of the community of Evanston in northwest Calgary are concerned about the fact that there's only one road in or out of the community, and as a result access is a

major concern for them. In the case of an accident or bad weather residents are facing long lines and congestion, and they're having delays getting in and out of the community, which may cause safety concerns. My questions are all for the Minister of Transportation. Why does this fast-growing community in northwest Calgary only have one route of access?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Danyluk: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. The safety of residents is a priority for my ministry. The city of Calgary allows a certain amount of growth, of development before an additional access is necessary. We continue to work with the city of Calgary in regard to the growth of the communities around the Stoney Trail. More importantly, we very much stay in contact with the city at all times.

Dr. Brown: Well, will the minister advise what his department can do specifically to address the transportation access issue in Evanston to make sure that there are no safety concerns there?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Danyluk: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. The province will look at any proposal that involves, of course, the participation of input from the city and input from the developer. As the community grows, there is an interchange on 14th Street. Like all new communities, both the city and the developer are key in planning.

Dr. Brown: Can the minister advise when we can expect the interchange at the corner of Stoney Trail and 14th Street to be completed so that the residents of Evanston can have better access?

Mr. Danyluk: As stated earlier, Mr. Speaker, the city determines when the second interchange is required, but to the hon. member I do want to stress that the interchange is in the plans for both the ring road and the community. You know, that particular interchange is in the plans, and when the development is large enough, then it will be built. We will always continue to ensure that our roads that include access to communities are safe.

Provincial Tax Policy

Mr. Hehr: Mr. Speaker, Alberta is probably the wealthiest place on Earth, but here we have a structural deficit that is covered off by the unsustainable use of our fossil fuel revenues just to pay today's bills. Since 1987 this government has spent all of the over \$225 billion it has brought in from this one-time revenue source. To the Minister of Finance: do you believe it's fair to future generations and to the future prosperity of this province to spend all of this revenue as it comes in?

The Speaker: Personal opinion.

Mr. Liepert: Mr. Speaker, I think the member needs to be corrected. I don't have the numbers in front of me; 1987, I think, was the year that he used. I can say that in the last six years the government of Alberta has invested some \$20 billion to \$30 billion in infrastructure. That's infrastructure that wouldn't be there today. I'd ask this hon. member whether or not he's suggesting we shouldn't have spent that money, whether he wants to go tell his constituents in Calgary-Buffalo that there should be no ring road around Calgary, whether there should be no south

Calgary hospital, whether there should not be schools in new neighbourhoods. I ask him if he wants to take that into the street.

Mr. Hehr: I'm not suggesting that at all, Mr. Speaker, but what I'm going to say is that given that we have a flat tax which sees a millionaire executive pay the same rate of taxation as his secretary and that we are the only jurisdiction in Canada that follows this practice, can the minister not see that this policy has contributed to our inability to save for the future and leads this government to spending all of this resource revenue as it comes in?

Mr. Liepert: Mr. Speaker, as we approach the provincial election soon here, it's becoming very clear where various political parties stand. We have this particular political party, which is advocating increased taxes. We have a group over there that masquerades as a political party that is saying that we should cut 2 and a half billion dollars out of our infrastructure. This political party is standing on its record, one that sees the strongest growth in Canada, the best place to live, work, and raise children.

Mr. Hehr: Given that Albertans want predictable and sustainable funding and a savings plan for the future, would it not be a conservative principle to adopt a tax policy that asks citizens to pay for what they use rather than prejudicing our future generations and future savings plan by selling off one barrel at a time to pay today's bills?

Mr. Liepert: Mr. Speaker, the economic philosophies of this government are pretty clear. We don't tax any more than we have to. We watch our spending and ensure that we get good value for our dollars, and I've just mentioned a whole bunch of areas where we have invested in infrastructure. I think that within a very short period of time we'll ask Albertans to pass judgment on whether they want a government – well, they won't be government – whether they want a few MLAs who want to tax more, whether they want a few MLAs who want to cut all infrastructure spending, or whether they want a government that wants to deliver what Albertans are asking to have delivered.

A. Blair McPherson School

Mr. Zwozdesky: Mr. Speaker, parents with young children who live in Tamarack and the Meadows in my area, including some of the surrounding areas, absolutely love their new school, A. Blair McPherson, and all of their teachers. In fact, this school has become so popular that it is bursting at the seams, and come September, they will be desperate for new space. They will probably have to allocate nonclassroom teaching space in order to accommodate all the students. This is not a good situation, so I have some questions for the Minister of Education. Since I already brought this matter to your attention earlier, what can I tell my constituents today about their desperate need for at least two modular classrooms?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Lukaszuk: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It is a success story that we should be happy with that a school is built, and obviously the parents and children are satisfied with the school that they have. That school, actually, is drawing students from quite a large area. I also appreciate that parents are concerned about overcapacity. What the hon. member can tell the parents is that not only have I discussed this issue with the member at length, but I have also had the pleasure of meeting with the school board, with the

superintendent, with the trustees, and the chair and discussed that very same situation in great detail with them.

Mr. Zwozdesky: Thank you, Mr. Minister. Mr. Speaker, A. Blair McPherson school is so new that they don't even have a playground at this school yet, nor do they have a community league with whom they can partner. What would you suggest they do to acquire a much-needed playground space for their particular school and the 800 young students who need one?

Mr. Lukaszuk: Well, I wanted to go further with my first answer. The hon. member can also tell the parents of the children at McPherson that I looked at the capital plan, and I already communicated to the trustees and the chair that they will be receiving two additional portables to accommodate more students in that particular school and decant some of that frustration that is happening.

Relative to playgrounds, Mr. Speaker, in our 10-point plan, as you know, we are looking at a model of constructing new schools so that children will not only be receiving a K to grade 9 or a K to 6 school but also a playground that comes along with it.

The Speaker: The hon. member?

Mr. Zwozdesky: I'm done. That's it.

The Speaker: Well, hon. members, that concludes the question-and-answer period for today: 18 members, 106 responses and questions.

We'll continue with the Routine in just a few seconds from now.

2:40

Members' Statements

(continued)

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

Donations to Leadership Campaigns

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you. Five of the six PC leadership candidates released their list of contributions last Friday. This list, this long list, is a list of very generous donors. Power companies top the list. The Southern family and companies they control donated at least \$128,000; TransAlta, \$50,000. They certainly can afford to be generous when the price of electricity is as high as it is. Cathy Roozen, who has become interim chair of the Alberta Health Services Board, donated \$5,000 to the Premier's leadership campaign. Another family donated \$100,000: \$40,000 in donations to the Premier, \$30,000 to Mr. Mar, and \$30,000 to the current Minister of Energy. Another donation to these three candidates also totalled \$100,000 when you add it all up.

You have land developers. You have landlords. You have liquor store owners. You have casino operators, energy companies, law firms. They're all part of this list, and fortunately it is part of the public record. I would encourage citizens to please go online and check this list for themselves.

Do we need new laws for leadership campaigns? That is a good question. Is the generous donation cap of \$30,000 too high? Should democracy be sold to the highest bidder?

In conclusion, I think we need to pay heed to the remarks from the hon. Member for Calgary-Mountain View, who is absolutely right in suggesting and indicating that democracy is not for sale at any price.

Thank you.

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

Culture Forum 2012

Ms Woo-Paw: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. On February 24 and 25 almost 400 community leaders from across Alberta gathered in Red Deer for Culture Forum 2012. Represented were all facets of the broad cultural spectrum of this province, including the arts, heritage, recreation, creative industries, and the multicultural and nonprofit sectors. These community leaders came together in the first-ever crossdisciplinary discussion on Alberta culture to share ideas and experiences and to work together to formulate a strategy that will sustain and grow our cultural community.

Among those taking part were youth delegates from across the province, young people bringing their own unique perspective and their own unique vision of a vibrant cultural future. Also heard was the input from the corporate sector, which has sought and continues to seek new opportunities in support of Alberta culture.

Mr. Speaker, in survey after survey the message from Albertans is clear. Culture matters. It matters to those who deliver community-based recreational and social programs and services, and it matters to the children, families, and the most vulnerable Albertans who benefit from those efforts. It matters to the artists, performers, and technicians, and it also matters to those who applaud the efforts and are inspired by their works. It certainly matters to those who work tirelessly to conserve our heritage sites.

Mr. Speaker, culture connects our people, our communities, and our province, and that is why we are seeking ideas and input from all Albertans through the Culture Forum 2012 online survey. Albertans are encouraged to participate in the survey until March 28 by visiting the Culture and Community Services website at www.culture.alberta.ca.

Mr. Speaker, I also encourage all Members of this Legislative Assembly to take part and to encourage their constituents to let their voices be heard on the future of culture in Alberta. Thank you to the Premier and our minister for having the foresight and for their efforts to make this happen.

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

Retrospective on the Past Year

Mr. Taylor: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. This is it, my last member's statement. Guess I'd better make it count. Guess I should try to say something profound, but I've got nothing because nothing profound has happened in this place in over a year.

We sat for 47 days last year. Even on a four-day week, that's still less than 12 weeks out of 52. The old leader announced he was leaving, and then it took the natural governing party nine months to choose a new leader. In between hardly anything of note was accomplished in or anywhere near this place. Since then what's been delivered by this government has consistently fallen well short of what the Premier promised: a fixed election range instead of a fixed election date; an independent, judge-led inquiry into this narrow little question of whether queue-jumping is happening in the health system today instead of the wide-ranging inquiry that the Premier led us to believe she would call.

As example after example of this government's arrogance and intimidation of and indifference to the people it serves have come to light over the past several weeks, all we've seen is crisis management where we should be seeing a commitment to real change and action. That's what the Premier led us to believe she would deliver if she was chosen to lead her party and this government, real change: really going through that tired, old, calcified government, cleaning house and bringing in a new

culture and a new way of behaving and a commitment to be bold and innovative.

Mr. Speaker, nothing has changed, and it can't as long as this government is in power because like the Tin Man in Oz after 40 years the thing has rusted solid, only Dorothy can't get it to move again no matter how much she uses the oil can. Who knows? Maybe she doesn't even want to.

At the end of *The Hunt for Red October*, one of my favourite movies, Captain Ramius turns to our hero, Jack Ryan, and says: a little revolution from time to time is a good thing, don't you think, Ryan? We have an election coming soon and with it the opportunity for a little revolution of our own.

Tabling Returns and Reports

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Lethbridge-East.

Ms Pastoor: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I am tabling five copies of Bill 210, the Traffic Safety Amendment Act, 2000, which I spoke of in my member's statement today.

The Speaker: Hon. Member for St. Albert, you have a tabling?

Mr. Allred: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'd like to table five copies of a document entitled An Argument for the Elimination of Adverse Possession in Alberta Made before the Committee on Private Bills and Motions. This is a document dated November 28, 2011, authored by myself. It lists all the citations that I used in the debates both on Motion 507 in the last session and any citations on Bill 204 in this session.

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

Mr. Chase: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I have two sets of tablings. My first is a further 20 Castle e-mails out of the hundreds I've received from the following out-of-province and out-of-country individuals who say that they are considering not visiting Alberta unless the logging of the Castle wilderness is stopped: Nancy Searing, Jane Culmer, Holly Marchuk, Jeanne Buzek, Christopher Deane, Karen Clark, Denise Day, Bernadette Keenan, Douglas MacLachlan, Mervi Rantala, Fritz Lehmborg, Nancy Goldsberry, Dallas Emard, Marina Sommer, Danielle Hallam, Heidi Stewart, Terry Newcombe, Nicole Boon, George Milligan, and Marilyn Hunter.

My second set of tablings, that the hon. Minister of Education appears so anxious to hear, comes as e-mails and letters from the following 20 individuals who are concerned about the proposed logging in the west Bragg Creek area, and they are requesting a complete, facilitated, and accessible public consultation: Sharon Henderson, Mike Stuart, John Drew, Breanne Moyer, Troy Delfs, Courtney Adams, Laurie Weidenhamer, Doone Watson, Gaynor Hoyne, Mike Wattam, Terry Markey, Samantha and Len Fleckney, Kris Marsh, Carl Johns, Katherine Brushaber, Claire Markey, Delsey Harvey, Steven Knudsen, and Martin Blades.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: Edmonton-Strathcona, do you have a tabling?

Ms Notley: Yes. Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'd like to table the appropriate number of copies of a petition signed by 546 people calling for a renal dialysis satellite unit at the Athabasca health care centre. They say that there are 17 to 20 patients who are forced to travel to Edmonton for dialysis three times a week, that family members must miss work, and patients' health is jeopardized by the travel. The signatures were collected by Dia

Hurren, Patricia Hurren-Hannah, Heath Hurren, Ben VanderBurg, Carla Weich, and Arlene Brost, all of whom visited the Assembly last week to drop off the petition.

2:50

Orders of the Day Committee of Supply

[Mr. Zwodzesky in the chair]

The Deputy Chair: Hon. members, I'd like to now call to order the Committee of Supply.

Main Estimates 2012-13

Human Services

The Deputy Chair: I would now invite the hon. Minister of Human Services to proceed with his opening remarks. We'll explain the procedure thereafter.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. It's a privilege to be here this afternoon to discuss the 2012-13 budget estimates for the Ministry of Human Services.

Joining me today on the floor of the House is Deputy Minister Steve MacDonald. I just want to take a moment to say thank you to Steve because the Ministry of Human Services is a rather large ministry, and he has a rather large job and is doing it supremely well. We're joined here today by assistant deputy ministers Gord Johnston, Karen Ferguson, Susan Taylor, Alex Stewart, and Lana Lougheed. Of course, they are only several of the assistant deputy ministers who assist Steve in his duties.

We are joined by a number of other ministry staff – I won't name them all – who are with us in the members' gallery. I want to thank each and every one of you for the opportunity I've had to work with you over the last five months and for the service that you provide to Albertans and for Albertans. I have to say that this is a very dedicated group of people, and they represent a very significantly dedicated group of people in our department.

I won't spend any time talking about numbers because we have the budget tables in front of us, but I do think it's important to talk a bit about the mission and the story of our new ministry since it's the first time we're appearing before the committee. Human Services, as it's appropriately named, is all about people. The programs that are delivered by our 5,200 staff – that's 23 per cent of the Alberta civil service – touch the lives of your constituents every day. We keep children safe, help people get off the street, assist families so their children get a solid start, help individuals to be safe at work, and provide opportunities for people to gain the skills they need to get better jobs.

Our goals are to ensure that the right supports are available at the right time to Albertans who need them so that they can live in human dignity and have the opportunity to maximize their potential.

Under separate ministries our programs did a good job of assisting people. However, Albertans signalled to our Premier that they wanted change in the way government works. They wanted to have government departments work more cohesively together; they wanted easier access to all the services they need, in one stop where possible; and they wanted us to use our resources, both financial and human, more effectively, with a singular focus of achieving positive outcomes for people.

Bringing Alberta's people supports together under the Ministry of Human Services is helping us accomplish the change that

Albertans want. In fact, Mr. Chairman, that is the motto for our department at the moment: Better Together.

Every day we're working to align our policies to better coordinate and improve programs that provide the safety, the jobs, and the opportunities to help people, families, individuals, and communities succeed. For example, our employment and services delivery staff are working side by side with child and family services caseworkers to support at-risk youth as they transition to adulthood. They're helping youth who may be facing a number of obstacles like unemployment, mental health issues, and disabilities, which require comprehensive supports.

Another example is easier access to financial support, now available to pregnant and parenting teens attending the Louise Dean and Braemar schools in Calgary and Edmonton respectively. In fact, Mr. Chairman, that's one of my favourite stories. We've been trying for a number of years now to get those supports aligned so that those young women at the schools can focus on their schooling and not worry about the financial issues and the child care issues and the other issues. It's taken a long time to put that together. When the Ministry of Human Services came together, we were able to complete that, to settle those contracts, and make sure that the funding is there for those children to continue their schooling. With income support and child care in one ministry, we're able to provide a new funding model that gives those teens the right supports at the right time and helps them achieve success in life.

Alberta is blessed with tremendous opportunity and a very bright future. At the same time we face complex social challenges and pressures that need to be addressed: a rapidly growing population and shifting demographics, family violence, poverty, homelessness, and a projected labour shortage. But Budget 2012 represents a strong investment in people that will help us protect vulnerable children, individuals, and families and support them in times of need; promote fair, safe, healthy, and inclusive workplaces and a skilled labour force; and continue working with partners to create opportunities that help Albertans succeed. Total ministry funding is \$2.6 billion, an increase of \$132 million from 2011.

We are the legal guardians of 8,700 children in provincial care. An additional investment of \$75 million in child intervention will help strengthen families' ability to care for their children in their homes or place children in a safe environment until their home situation improves. Our budget will support more permanent homes for children in care through adoption and private guardianship and provide additional assistance to Alberta's 2,400 foster families. This includes foster parents like our own Legislature's Assistant Sergeant-at-Arms Gordon Munk and his wife, Cecilia, two of Alberta's amazing foster parents. Gordon and his wife have helped over 250 kids in their home over the past 35 years. They currently care for three children, one of whom just won a Great Kids award as one of 16 inspiring young leaders from across our province. That is the job that our foster parents do.

Funding for foster care support is increasing by \$11.4 million, allowing us to enhance supports for children in care who have family-based placements and helping us to continue support for foster parent mentoring and aboriginal caregiver training initiatives. We work closely with the Alberta Foster Parent Association to determine the best way to help foster families such as the Munks meet the needs of the children in care.

We also rely on contracted agencies to provide important services to vulnerable children and families. We are providing funding to support a 5 per cent wage increase and a \$1,500 lump-sum payment for their staff to help agencies recruit and retain

qualified employees in a tightening labour market. This follows the \$1,500 lump sum to agency staff that was provided last September. Budget 2012 also outlines a commitment to additional agency funding to 2014-15, and we will work closely with our partner agencies to maximize this investment in the coming years.

On the homeless front since 2009 more than 4,800 Albertans have been housed through Alberta's plan to end homelessness. This includes Gordon, who ended up on the street because of a drug and alcohol addiction. His wife left him and took their child. His life fell apart. Eventually, he entered a detox facility, and then through help from the Housing First program he was able to get a place to live along with the support that he needed to stabilize his life. Today he is a different person. He reunited with his family and is in the second year of a four-year psychology program at university. His dream is to help others by becoming a drug and alcohol counsellor. He is succeeding. He is giving and will continue to give back to his community. Increased investment of \$69 million in outreach support and services will help 1,800 more homeless Albertans like Gordon secure and maintain permanent housing.

3:00

One of the Premier's commitments during her leadership campaign was to provide the maximum child care subsidy to families making \$50,000 or less. Increased funding in Budget 2012 fulfills this promise with an increase of \$21 million for child care. We expect to provide more than 26,000 subsidies to low- and middle-income families this year, which will help more moms and dads who want to support their families by entering the workforce, which in turn strengthens our economy.

Funding for the family support for children with disabilities program is also increasing. An additional \$12.6 million will help us to assist even more families so that they can raise their child at home and participate in community life. As of September 11 our monthly caseload for the program was about 8,500 children and youth with disabilities.

In an ongoing effort to build and educate tomorrow's workforce, we have budgeted \$451 million for income supports, which will increase benefit rates by an average of 5 per cent. We expect to provide benefits to 34,000 Alberta households this year. This strengthens support for people who are looking for a job, training so they can get a job, or are temporarily unable to work, which is very important with Alberta's projected labour shortage of 114,000 workers by 2021.

In 2010-11 about 32,600 immigrants came to Alberta from around the world. With more than \$54 million in funding this year we will continue to support immigrants as they settle into their communities and join our workforce.

Funding for the workplace standards program is increased by \$4.4 million. This is a tremendously important area as our employment standards contact centre receives 130,000 calls annually. This investment will help us strengthen inspections and investigations so that workers are treated fairly in the workplace and go home safe and healthy at the end of their day.

We have a number of important priorities moving forward, including those in the Premier's mandate letter, working with Albertans to continue to develop a social policy framework, which will guide how social policy and programs are redesigned and aligned to better achieve outcomes for Albertans.

We also continue to build on significant steps to strengthen the child intervention system, including creating the Child and Family Services Council for Quality Assurance, independent experts who

will make recommendations about how services could be improved.

We'll also strengthen our important partnerships with the aboriginal communities to support them in addressing complex challenges, including overrepresentation of aboriginal children and youth in care, higher incidence of family violence, and unemployment. It's the primary focus of our newly created aboriginal policy and initiatives division.

We have extremely passionate, intelligent staff on the front lines, who help Albertans directly along with those who provide support behind the scenes. We recognize that to truly improve our services for Albertans, positive change must continue within our organization as well. A big part of this is a culture of collaboration. We have and will continue to give staff opportunities to share their ideas about what, why, and how we are doing things and ways that we can continue to work better together.

We are committed to achieving better outcomes for Albertans and ensuring our investment of their tax dollars is truly making a positive difference. Together, I am confident that we will be there when Albertans need us to help them persevere through difficult times, give them opportunities to reach their potential, and contribute to Alberta's success.

The Deputy Chair: Thank you, hon. minister.

Members, for the next hour we have the Official Opposition that can go back and forth with the minister. I don't know what your preference is, but if you would indicate so, we will chair it accordingly.

Dr. Swann: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. I would appreciate the opportunity to go back and forth and welcome the staff for Human Services. I look forward to a productive few hours talking about this important ministry. I'll go by section. Perhaps that would be the most constructive way to proceed.

Just by way of preamble I think it's very interesting and very creative that all these human services have been brought together. It's not unprecedented. It's clear that many of the issues that you relate to have a lot of commonality. In fact, there needs to be a very good interrelationship between all the ministries that have now come together. You've eliminated some silos. You've opened some opportunities for communication. I guess the danger is that when anything gets too big, some of the small fry get lost, some of the most vulnerable. Of course, in many of our lives children have to take the number one position there.

In that context, perhaps, I'll begin with some questions around children and children's services. I've had some individuals certainly contact me, individual cases the minister has heard from. I won't be springing any new ones on him, but some raise questions about policy and about whether we have the right balance in terms of protecting children and families and maintaining them as long as possible in their most optimal environment.

Effective April 1 the household income that qualifies families to receive the maximum child care subsidy will increase from \$35,000 to \$50,000. This will allow additional low- and middle-income families to receive new or increased funding to offset the cost of accessing child care, which is a positive development; that is, of course, if they are able to find the child care space.

My understanding is that only about one-fifth of our young parents that are working – that is, about 70 per cent of the mothers that have children of child care age – can get access to child care services. Given that Alberta is experiencing a baby boom and continues to grow at a rapid pace, can the minister explain why the

government opted to increase funding for child care by \$17 million but hasn't funded any new child care spaces for two fiscal years?

Another question relates to the subsidy boost and the question about whether this subsidy boost had anything to do with the coming election. The timing of it, obviously, raises questions.

Does the minister genuinely believe that we have enough child spaces in Alberta at this time? According to an August 27 report from CBC, again I repeat: about 70 per cent of working mothers have children from newborn to five years of age. About 20 per cent of those children have access to daycare space. I'd appreciate hearing some comments about that.

When the creating child care choices plan concluded at the end of fiscal 2010-11, the former minister of children and youth services said in a *Herald* story that Alberta now has upwards of 90,000 child care spaces. Can the minister provide an update on these figures for child care spaces? Several recent media reports have suggested that some had to close, and there may not be the same number at all since a year ago, when this report was concluded.

While I support the decision to increase wages for contracted agency staff, is the minister prepared to acknowledge that daycare centres are also really struggling to find and retain trained staff because of the hard work and the low wage?

A growing problem in Alberta's large urban centres is that new neighbourhoods aren't being built to have a child care centre included in them. What, if anything, is the minister and the department doing to address the urban planning issue here?

Can the minister comment on media reports that some Calgary parents are having to pay for daycare months, more than months, in advance just to hold a spot for their child when the child is ready to need it or is born? Some are actually booking daycare spots while they're in early pregnancy, I understand. Does the minister consider this acceptable? If not, why isn't more being done to address the growing wait-lists that exist at many of the city's child care facilities?

I guess the other area that for me has been pressing as a medical officer is the standards in child care settings and the regularity of inspections, the rigour of inspections. I'd be interested to hear some comment about the standards which we are now expecting and whether they've changed since I was in practice about 10 years ago. That would be a good place to start.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Deputy Chair: Thank you.

The hon. minister.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I think it's so appropriate that we're starting with children as I continue to wear on my lapel, ever since I was sworn in as Minister of Education and now continue through Human Services, a pin which says Children First. I think it speaks to the fact that we can't lose sight of children regardless of the size of the department. We've got to focus on every child having the opportunity to meet and maximize their potential, and that's certainly what we're working towards doing.

The hon. member started on the daycare area, and I think there are a number of very positive things that I can respond to. First of all, he's saying that 1 in 5 parents are waiting for a child care space. The information that I would have is that there's an 80 per cent occupancy rate across the daycare system. Now, the problem may well be not in the question of whether we have sufficient spaces in the system but whether they're in the right places. That's always a challenge, obviously.

I know in my own constituency, for example, when we opened four new schools – if the Minister of Education is here, I'd just remind him that they're now full and that we need modulars – the first calls I got were from parents saying, "We have to leave our neighbourhood to get daycare spaces and out of school care spaces," and "How do we relay it back to the schools?" There's some work that we can do in assisting to co-locate and to make sure that there are daycare spaces in those neighbourhoods. But overall on a system-wide level there has been significant progress.

3:10

In fact, during three years of the creating child care choices plan approximately 29,000 new spaces were created as a result primarily of the investment that was made at the provincial level in encouraging those spaces to be opened. Nine thousand spaces closed, addressing the hon. member's question about closing spaces, so there was a net gain of 20,000 in that period. From April 1 to December 31, 2011, 4,602 spaces were opened, and 2,483 spaces closed, resulting in a net increase of 2,119 spaces. I can't guarantee this, but I would suspect that the closing of spaces is related to the changing demographics in areas, and that it's basically a shifting of spaces from one place to another.

I would suggest that while it's not all nirvana, there's obviously work to be done. In fact, we're seeing that being picked up in the community both by the not-for-profit and by the private sector, and that's evidenced by the fact that last year, as I said, from April 1 to December 31 so many spaces were opened without the benefit of the program that we had in place in previous years. So I think that that is actually happening. The take-up, as I say, of both the not-for-profit and the for-profit is in fact working.

With respect to urban planning issues I understand what the hon. member is saying. We had issues, for example, in Calgary where it was difficult to co-locate a child care facility on property that was zoned for schooling, for example. That's a continuing issue that needs to be addressed. That needs to be addressed both by the local communities, though, in terms of them talking to their local councillors about how they want to move forward, and we do need to address that as we plan for growth and, particularly, plan for new schools. As I said, in my neighbourhood it's very, very clearly an issue. You can put new schools in place, but if parents have to drive past them to drop their younger children off or if they need before and after school care, you haven't necessarily solved the problem.

The issue of Calgary parents and waiting lists and those sorts of things I think really are addressed by that question. Growth will happen to meet those needs, and it is happening in the system. We're in the process of completing an analysis of the implementation of an online wait-list registry for parents and child care service providers, and that will give us better data with respect to where the demand level is, which will assist providers in determining where they would like to locate and operate.

With respect to the question on accreditation I think we can be very proud of the fact that we have a very significant accreditation process in this province. Some people have decried that it's voluntary, but it's a voluntary process. About 96.5 per cent of daycares have reached that accreditation process. So I think there are very significant changes in the accreditation standards and a sincere effort on behalf of daycare providers to reach those accreditation standards. Of course, that sincere effort is complemented by the fact that we have wage top-up funding for those staff that reach accreditation standards. So \$74.4 million is subsidizing daycare wages for those staff who are getting the appropriate levels of accreditation. I think that deals with most of the questions.

There was one question about the rigour of inspection. We have revised our child care inspection list. We have implemented policies and procedures on documenting inspection results and have developed training plans. So I think it's safe to say that we are significantly dealing with the question of standards, are achieving those standards, and are inspecting to make sure that daycares are safe, caring places for our youngest citizens.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. member.

Dr. Swann: Thank you, Mr. Chair. Well, it still puzzles many of us why we would make such an important inspection voluntary. I hope the minister will look at that issue and give Albertans assurances that at some point we're going to see mandatory inspection as a standard. It's always been a puzzle to me that we would leave it up to individual daycares whether they choose or not choose to have inspections and accreditation.

Moving to child intervention, the total budget for child intervention increased 11 per cent over the last fiscal year, adding 30 new child intervention supervisor positions. Your last press release stated that funding for the 30 new positions will come from the \$53 million increase to the child intervention services budget. Given that on June 30, 2011, the office of statistics indicated that the monthly average for children and youth receiving intervention services fell each year between 2008 and 2010, can you explain the rationale for increasing supervisory positions for a declining population? Given the stories that I've heard about the stresses on the front line, why would these not be the priority if indeed there are more complicated families – and I don't doubt that there are many more complicated families – to deal with? I guess I have serious questions about whether supervision is needed as much as front-line, intensive casework.

Is the boost to the child intervention budget an acknowledgement that we've been asking too much from front-line workers for too long and that the province hasn't been adequately supporting our staff in this work in a very difficult and challenging field? I'll have some more questions to do with your surveys over the last few years that reflect some stresses and strains in the system, particularly for children and youth.

Given that many of the 30 new child intervention positions are expected to be filled by promoting front-line child intervention workers, is the minister concerned that Alberta may be temporarily left with a core of front-line staff who are inexperienced and who don't have the necessary qualities to deal effectively on the front line?

[Dr. Brown in the chair]

Finally, a commonly held belief of parents who find themselves involved in the child welfare system is that child intervention workers are paid a bonus for every child apprehension they make. I don't believe that that's the case, but I needed to raise it for the record.

While I'm on the issue of child intervention, I'm sure the minister would be familiar with the name Phil Murphy, who's been at many of our doors asking for a serious commitment to a 16-year-old child who has mental illness, has drug addiction, has been involved in prostitution. He has given me permission to use her name on the floor – he is at the end of his rope – but she hasn't, so I can't use her name. I guess the question is: how well are we working between the ministries of the Solicitor General, Human Services, and Health? I have had both him and one other father approach me about what they felt were inefficient, ineffective actions in a potentially life-threatening situation, something I agreed to raise.

Clearly, there is a mental health component here. The physicians may have failed in some ways in taking action based on their powers under the Mental Health Act. It appears that the daughter is now in an unsafe home situation, and that's the question that, I guess, you folks have to assess. You have to make the call, and you have to take the hits if it isn't the right call. He cited the B.C. investigation of a father who killed three of his children, and he cited the lack of integration and the lack of supports that he was getting. I don't know that case, but he felt it was very relevant to his own.

Another apparent policy within your department is that child services – at least, he has this impression; I don't know – cannot communicate actively with estranged parents except in the case where they have been charged with something. That's a confusing issue to me. I know you have dealt with this in your office. He is not satisfied, so I feel compelled to at least get clear in my own mind what some of your policies are in relation to communicating about a child to the parents when the parents are estranged from the child.

Finally, one of the areas relating to these services is that this child has been in care and out of care, and I think many of us would like to know: what kind of evaluation are you doing on these institutional care settings to establish the degree to which they are assessing appropriately, deciding appropriately when and how to discharge, and what kind of support services will be wrapped around that minor – and I'm talking about minors now – when they are discharged from an institution? I'd be interested to hear any of your comments.

3:20

Mr. Hancock: Well, Mr. Chairman, two things need to be said. First of all, it absolutely boggles the mind that the hon. member – and I know he's a gentleman, and I know he's trying to dispense with a rumour. But bonuses for apprehension? Give your head a shake. That could not possibly be right in any reasonable person's world, and it's not right in our world.

Secondly, I would caution the hon. member. He's referred to a specific individual and a specific family on the floor of the House, but I don't believe he has the permission of the daughter involved to identify her in that way, and it's not appropriate. I know it's sometimes constraining for the discussion of policy, but we do have to keep it at a policy level. I appreciate that sometimes it's useful to have specific examples, but we have to be cautious because people have rights.

In fact, this department and this government cannot just simply go out and apprehend somebody because a parent or some other person believes they ought to be, believes that they're a danger, because there's been a family breakdown, if there has been a family breakdown, in a certain circumstance. That's not sufficient to interfere with the civil liberties of an individual. I know previous members from that side of the House that I've had the opportunity to work with over the years stood very strongly on the concept of civil liberties and the individual rights that people have and that we should not be interfering with individual rights. I cannot just decide that I want to do something, and neither can people on the front lines of the child welfare system.

We can apprehend when we believe that someone is being harmed. We can apprehend when we believe that someone needs protection. Under the Mental Health Act, which comes under Health, an individual, a child or otherwise, can be apprehended under what I think is called a form 10 if that person is likely to be a danger to themselves or to others. The apprehension, of course, requires certification by two appropriate medical professionals as to whether that apprehension can stand, whether a person can against their will be taken into custody for treatment.

Another way in which you can take a child into custody for treatment is under the PCHAD Act, but that, again, requires a court approval and an appropriate process. People's rights, whether they're children or adults, are important, and we can't just interfere in those rights because we have intensive and caring and, yes, loving desires by a parent to do what they believe is right for that individual. There is balance that has to be undertaken.

I can assure the hon. member that the people who work in children's services, the people, certainly, that I have had the privilege of working with over the last five months in this area, take their responsibility very seriously to protect children, to work with families where they can and to repatriate children to their families, to help support families so that they can support children. If that's not possible, they work to find another safe place for a child, where they can live and grow and maximize their potential. You can't always be working in a command way. You have to build relationships. You have to work with children at all ages but particularly when they're essentially coming up to be young adults.

I think it's very important to understand that many of the cases that the hon. member deals with or hears about are not foreign to us. They are cases where there has been intensive intervention, intensive collaboration and co-operation working with them.

Again, I would end where I started, to say that if there are further this afternoon, I would trust that the hon. member would not give out personal information which serves to identify a child who undoubtedly has not given the permission and to label them in the various ways that you did with respect to activities that that child may or may not have undertaken. That's just inappropriate.

Now, the hon. member started with a comment about voluntary inspections. Inspections are not voluntary. Inspections happen when scheduled to happen. Accreditation is a process that's working very well in this province. We have a very high standard, and we're incenting that standard. We're very happy with the level. In fact, I don't think that if you mandated it, you'd get a higher level of accreditation. You know, there's always the argument of whether you legislate things or whether you achieve it in a different way. What's happening right now in Alberta with respect to accreditation and standards is at a pretty high level, and I think that most provinces would be proud to be where we are.

The hon. member referred to 30 new supervisor positions. The hon. member may recall that there was an expert panel that was convened to investigate a very serious situation in Calgary, and that panel reported just about a year ago. One of the recommendations of that panel was that front-line workers need more support, so what we have moved ahead with to do, because of the complexities and the demands of the front-line child intervention work, is to work in teams, with supervisors who act as mentors, as advisors, as supporters with a team of front-line workers. This is very much a team-based approach. Although we're calling these 30 supervisors, those will be our most experienced people, who can then assist the front-line workers by working with them in a team-based approach so that you're not out there by yourself with very complex cases, so you know you are surrounded by a team of good people who can help.

In that vein I would have to say that the AVIRT team, that's been set up in Calgary and now in Edmonton, brings not just the front-line social workers and child care workers together; it brings the police and other support people so that they can truly build a team around each child in need.

The hiring of the 30 supervisors is a very important step forward to help build the strength of our front-line teams. They will be supported. I can assure the hon. member that if any of those people – and I'm sure some of them will be – are directly

from front-line staff, we will be hiring the people necessary to fill in those positions. We're going to make sure that we have supervisors and teams that have the qualities and the ability and the experience necessary to provide that strength to the front line that is necessary as our caseloads continue to grow. And they are continuing to grow. The hon. member referred to a decreasing caseload, but the caseloads are growing, albeit I think only by about 4 per cent last year in our intervention services. They also, of course, are very complex, so it's necessary to have that kind of front-line support.

Dr. Swann: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I was simply referring to the data from the office of statistics that suggested that 2008 had 13,000, that 2009-10 had 12,400, and that 2011 had 12,300 cases for intervention.

With respect to staff survey and staff morale a number of surveys have been held over the last four years. I congratulate the department of children and youth services for assessing them over the years and making those reports public. There are some serious signs of morale problems within at least the children and youth ministry in the past, and I think they have to be seen as connected to the quality of care and the effectiveness of our budgets. If morale among the staff is not what it should be, you're neither going to attract nor retain staff.

I'm referring to perhaps three highlights that I pulled out of the survey from 2010, where only 49 per cent agreed with the statement, "Innovation is valued in your work"; 44 per cent agreed that their organization provides the support they need to adapt to changes in their job and work environment; and 46 per cent agreed that ministries and departments are working together to achieve the goals and priorities of the government of Alberta.

That may be part of what stimulated the changes that we've seen, but I wonder if and when you're going to do another assessment and whether, in fact, a survey was done – it hasn't been reported, that I know of – in 2011. If and when you do the next survey, will you be repeating the same questions so that they can be compared? I think that would be a very valuable contribution.

3:30

Another concern that I've heard expressed is the standards for employees for child care and social workers. It sounds like it's variable and that in some cases you don't have qualified social workers to do some of the work. How do you decide, and what consistent standard do you have to hire people? What is your turnover rate? Can you give any indication of just how much of a turnover you have in the child and youth care sector? What do you see as having changed since becoming Human Services to help the retention of workers, to give them greater job satisfaction, a career ladder, continuing education, all of the things that tend to provide greater job satisfaction and retention?

With respect to the outcome-based services and intervention services – I forgot to ask this one in the last section – government appears to be moving to a new delivery model with outcome-based services. It seems valid and valuable. Many are private agencies that are being contracted to do more and more of the facework with clients, but the expenditure is hard to find in the budget. Can you give any indication of the proportion of those front-line, face-to-face workers that are now contracted out as opposed to managed within?

Many of the agencies lack the capacity to do the work that government employees do, and I guess the question is whether we are not developing the capacity in-house. What's the reason for that? How consistent can these services be if they're contracted out?

I'll leave those questions, then.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I think the question around staff morale is a very interesting one to explore. What we are trying to accomplish by bringing together the Ministry of Human Services is to create a ministry where the work can be done, as we say, better together. There's a much higher degree of opportunity for people to be able to work with someone else very easily to achieve the outcomes that are necessary for the particular Albertan or Albertans that they're working for.

Whether it's in child services or whether it's in family support services or whether it's in income supports or those areas, it's the ability to come together like we've done with respect to the Terra foundation and Braemar school and to say: instead of a young mother having to come over here for income supports and go over there for child care support and go someplace else for transportation dollars and find it too difficult and not bother to continue with their schooling, we bring that together and find a way to do that so that we focus on making sure that each one of those children – I'll call them children – has the opportunity to be successful at school, which is the most important outcome piece for us, so that they can raise their children and have their children be successful. That's what's really happening.

When that happens, when you see those success stories, when you can take home with you on a daily basis that you've done something that's really assisting someone, that is empowering. That is really going to improve morale, I believe. We'll know this fall, I think, when there'll be another survey, and we'll know whether morale has improved. I can tell you from what I've seen already the excitement that we have in this department from people who feel empowered to use their judgment and skills and ability, not just follow rules, to achieve outcomes.

You talk about outcome-based service delivery, to be able to say to someone: "Let's look at what we're trying to achieve. Let's use our judgment and skills to achieve that. If there's a dumb rule in the way, let us know why you didn't follow the rule so that we can monitor that to determine whether or not that helped you achieve the outcome." Then we can either say, "Well, no; this rule or guideline has a reason," or we can say, "Let's change that, because others should know that that's not an effective process."

We know that people are complex beings, and you cannot write a set of checklists and rules and standards that work in every circumstance. So we say to people on the front line: we trust your judgment. We are hiring some of the best people. We have standards; we're not hiring just anybody. There certainly are standards and qualifications that people have to have before they're recruited to the position. As I said, we're supporting them now with additional supervisors who have a higher level of experience and service and capacity and who can be role models and mentors for them. We're freeing people up not just in the children's services area but in the income supports area and all across the department to use their judgment and skill and ability to achieve outcomes.

When we're talking about the question of outcome-based services, please don't equate outcome-based services in the same breath as hiring private services. Certainly, there are private services in some circumstances that are being employed, primarily by child and family services authorities, in the context of what we're talking here about. I think about 58 per cent of the front-line staff are actually ministry employees; 53 per cent are staff in the CFSAs. I'm not sure offhand how many of the people that would be doing that from the CFSAs would be contracted to other agencies, but even those other agencies are not always necessarily private, for-profit agencies. Some of them are contracted services, not-for-profit agencies.

Regardless, that has nothing to do with the outcome-based service delivery piece. That's not about privatization or about outsourcing. That's about focusing on every single challenge we have and saying: what is the outcome we're trying to achieve for Albertans? Fundamentally, that's what the social policy framework discussion is about: coming to a policy framework which outlines what kind of a society we want to have; what it takes for humans to live in dignity; what are the things that as a society we want to support; and what are the roles of individuals, of family, of community, and, yes, of municipal, provincial, and federal governments in achieving those things. Then how do we review our programs to say: are they designed to help achieve those outcomes?

I personally believe that we are doing well now, and I think that we will see that staff morale is going to be very high. I've been out to a number of locations with staff. In fact, I was flipping pancakes last Thursday morning as part of Social Work Week, saying thank you to some of our front-line staff, and I got into some exciting conversations with individuals there about what they're doing and how they feel about what they're doing and how they feel about a minister who says that there are two parameters, the Bible on one side and the Criminal Code on the other. It has to be legal, and it has to be ethical and moral.

Within that, we expect you to use judgment. Rules are for when brains run out. We want to achieve outcomes, and that's an important piece to say to people, that innovation is important. Doing things that make sense in the context of the people that you're working with is important, but it's also important to make sure that we know what's being done so that we can assess the results and determine if people are using their own judgment and are not achieving outcomes. Then we have to work with them in terms of improving skills and abilities. If they are using their own judgment and they are achieving outcomes, we have to look and say: do some of our program guidelines need to be changed?

[Mr. Zwozdesky in the chair]

We should be getting away from a context where somebody is not able to get the help they need because for some reason they don't fit a specific guideline. That, I think, frees up staff to achieve much better results, to feel empowered, and to not just follow dumb rules. Outcome-based service delivery is being modelled across the province in a number of areas, and the first phase in the process of that seems to be working very well. We're certainly looking forward to empowering staff so that they can be innovative, creative, and, most of all, use appropriate judgment in dealing with the circumstances that they're facing.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. member.

Dr. Swann: Thanks very much, Mr. Chair. I would be remiss if I didn't raise issues around WCB at this point. As I'm sure the minister has heard, there are some serious problems in the WCB. It appears that the balance is being lost between the interests of the worker and the interests of this organization we call the WCB. In some cases, I would say, both the worker and the employer are the losers in this.

I've had a number of communications from people who have formerly worked with WCB and felt they could no longer support the efforts of the WCB to act on behalf of individual claimants. Some concerns relate to the Millard Health rehabilitation centre and the adverse incentives to get people into that and the extra charges that are created once individuals are referred to that centre, sometimes inappropriately. Another has to do with the average duration of programs at the Millard Health centre.

3:40

Another concern raised is about the kickback to WCB, the benefits when they use the Millard Health centre. In some cases they're able to argue it on paper very well, but the end result is no different from the point of view of the individual receiving it, with surcharges of up to 260 per cent.

You may have heard some of these concerns expressed by some of the advocates for workers. There's a bonus and incentive program for treatment providers that is inappropriate and in many cases no accountability to that bonus and surcharge system. I guess there are so many issues there that I'm sure you would have some comments about where you can make some improvements in the balance between incentives for the WCB as an organization and those who run the organization, those who benefit from being in the organization.

Another area is the appeal process, a lot of concerns from workers who have been injured, ill, have to leave the country for whatever reason, and have only one year in which to sustain an appeal for injuries. Especially in a complicated case, it may be totally inappropriate to have a one-year restriction on appeals for WCB.

There are a range of issues that have been raised in detail, which I could outline in a letter to you, but it needs reform.

Mr. Hancock: I think it would be quite appropriate for the hon. member to outline any of the concerns that he might have about WCB in a letter or to work with me to arrange an appropriate time. Of course, WCB estimates are not before us, WCB being an independent body which assesses its employers and raises its money that way. It's not in my budget. In fact, the only piece in my budget relative to WCB would be the amount which is transferred from the WCB to us for the operation of the Appeals Commission.

But I would say this about the WCB. I've had discussions with the WCB board chair and its members of the board and with the CEO about the mantra of the WCB, that it's there to support injured workers, to get them back to work as quickly as possible and to support them when they can't go back to work at the same level they were at. That's its mandate. That's its motto. That's what it needs to do. That's what it should be focusing on.

The interesting part about the WCB is that as MLAs we often act as ombudsmen. People come to us for help when they get into trouble. I've often said that 25 per cent of our work as MLAs seems to be as ombudsmen for WCB claimants and 25 per cent for maintenance enforcement. But I have to say that over the past year or two that has not been the case. I have not had that level of complaint about the WCB. In fact, all of the statistics would show that it's actually performing very well and achieving very high levels of satisfaction rates with its clientele, injured workers. In fact, since I've become minister of this department, I have to say that I think we've had – I'll look for a nod up there – less than 10 complaints or issues raised with our office by MLAs or outside with respect to WCB. So the evidence would suggest that it is working well for most workers most of the time, and the satisfaction rate seems to be particularly high.

I will assure this hon. member that I will continue to look for board members for this independent organization who understand the motto, that injured workers should be supported in getting back to work as quickly as possible and provided income supports in the event that they can't go back to the same standard of work.

I would suggest to the hon. member relative to his concerns about WCB that he can communicate them to me, and I'd be happy to either sit down with the WCB and review those concerns

or otherwise meet with him to discuss those concerns. But the estimates are not in our estimates book.

The Deputy Chair: Thank you, hon. member. I was going to raise something as well with respect to the estimates, but I think you've provided sufficient clarity, so we'll just move on.

Dr. Swann: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I would also be remiss in not raising some issues around farm workers at this time. It seems that there has been a systematic discrimination related to paid farm workers ever since the '60s in this province, and it appears in many ways that it's serving one group of interests over another.

Not only does occupational health and safety not apply to paid farm workers even in industrial farming operations; the labour code doesn't apply. WCB isn't necessarily present for injured workers. There's no standard for child labour, as we talked about in question period today. Farm workers can legally be carried in the back of a pickup truck, whether on farms or on highways. It's clear that this is an area where Alberta stands out and not in a very favourable light across the country.

Unfortunately, the beneficiaries are the big operations that can save money on the backs of injured workers, that can in some ways see themselves profiting from child labour, from injured workers, and from individuals who actually die and get no compensation. I could readily reference one woman from Black Diamond who continues to go to the appeal courts of Ottawa to receive some kind of compensation five years after losing her husband on such an operation.

The irony here, of course, is that the industrial operation carries a huge legal liability by not having WCB, which indemnifies them, by not having occupational health and safety standards, and by potentially being taken for millions of dollars with some of these. Yet we have a government here that seems totally resistant to looking at moving into the 21st century in terms of labour code and compensation and, primarily, occupational health and safety. We lose between 18 and 25 individuals a year, and we have hundreds and hundreds of injuries where if we had higher standards, if we had enforcement, if we had some reasonable 20th-century standards on some of these industrial operations in particular, we would see some change.

The Deputy Chair: Hon. member, I hesitate to interrupt, but if we could get back to the estimates; there's nothing in the estimates that I've seen . . .

Dr. Swann: Why is there nothing in the estimates relating to changing the status of farm workers?

The Deputy Chair: Okay. There's a good question. Hon. minister, would you wish to respond?

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. This is not a new issue, as the hon. member has mentioned. You mentioned the irony of the fact that farmers could face huge liability issues and not have coverage. I would remind him that they can get coverage if they want. There is a voluntary subscription process, so farmers facing that issue could certainly opt in. One of the issues – and I understand the minister of agriculture addressed some of these issues in his estimates last night – is the fact that a lot of paid employees in terms of farm situations . . . [interjection] I'll wait until he's prepared to listen.

The Deputy Chair: Please give the floor to the minister.

Mr. Hancock: One of the real issues is designing a system which makes it easier for people to opt into that type of coverage. If you have temporary workers as opposed to full-time long-term employees, full-time long-term employees would be easier to deal with with an organization like the Workers' Compensation Board. One of the barriers to success may well be that if you have people who only work for short periods of time, to bring them in and take them out adds a real set of difficulties.

We can look at those sorts of things and say: "Is there a better way? Is there some other way of providing that kind of insurance? Would that be appropriate?" That may well be something worth looking at.

Certainly, the question of businesses as opposed to farms, the family farms, is something that one could look at and have an interesting discussion around how we could do that.

Dr. Swann: You've been looking at it for 20 years.

Mr. Hancock: Well, I've only been here for 15; I've got my 15-year pin. I don't know; I can't speak to the 20.

But I'd say this: there was a council which the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development put together to deal with this. As he's indicated, they've recently provided him with a report, and we've committed to sit down between the two ministries and work on that report, take a look at it. One thing that's very clear is that farmers have not wanted to be part of that regulatory process, but that doesn't mean we shouldn't look at some of the aspects and say: how can we do a better job? Obviously, injured workers, whether they're on the farm or off the farm, are certainly not something we want in this province, and we certainly don't want people to die with respect to work-related accidents.

3:50

Now, I would say to the hon. member, because he has raised this a number of times particularly relative to children, that one should not aggregate all those statistics. People do die on farms. Sometimes they fall through ice on ponds. Sometimes they die riding horses. Those are, one would say, home-related accidents rather than work-related accidents, but they seem to be lumped into the same statistics that the hon. member was referring to the other day.

There is work to be done, certainly, in terms of education, in terms of focusing on incidents relative to agricultural operations and perhaps in determining what type of operation it is and what type of work it is and how we can do a better job of providing opportunities for farmers to get the kind of support that they might need by way of insurance support. But that's certainly a work in progress.

Some of the statistics I looked at indicate that we are not substantively different – and I stand to be corrected on that; I'm going to have a look at this again – than other jurisdictions in the country which do have mandatory coverage. So I'm not sure it's the mandatory coverage piece that really will help us when it comes to the outcomes we want, which are fewer accidents and fewer deaths in agricultural operations.

Dr. Swann: Well, I guess the question then would be: why do we require that of all other workplaces if it doesn't make a difference? Why are we spending millions of dollars in this province on occupational health and safety standards in virtually every other workplace?

A couple of questions quickly about wages. Budget 2012 will see staff from contracted agencies who work with vulnerable children, youth, and families and with those with developmental disabilities get a 5 per cent wage increase and a \$1,500 lump-sum

payment. What type of hourly wage will this translate into for the average employee of one of these agencies, and will they be earning more than, say, someone who works at Tim Hortons? Given that the staff from these contracted agencies are already woefully underpaid, does the minister really think that boosting wages 5 per cent is going to be sufficient to keep people from leaving for higher paying jobs?

In relation to that I noticed that supports for independence or Alberta Works went up only 5 per cent after three years, since 2008. So the supports for people who are in dire need only went up 5 per cent, which, again, is inconsistent with what we have committed to ourselves, where MLAs get cost-of-living and inflation increases every year. Why wouldn't we give our most vulnerable people at least an indexed increase in their income each year?

But getting back to staff, what was the government's rationale for addressing the wages of contracted agency staff specifically? We know that staff morale has been low. I heard no comment on how that's being addressed. Certainly one of the areas is income.

The joint Human Services-Seniors release in February 2012 mentions that the "Budget 2012 also outlines a commitment to additional agency funding" for 2013 to 2015. What is the commitment that you identified between those three years for additional agency funding? Given that staff from contracted agencies who work with children and families had their wages increased in 2007, the same year that wages were boosted for staff working in licensed daycare centres, why are the latter being excluded from the province's generosity this year?

The Deputy Chair: Hon. minister, just a reminder that we have about nine minutes left in this portion.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you.

Well, I'll end with the last portion with respect to the daycare workers. Daycare workers are being subsidized in a different stream to get accreditation, so as they move up their accreditation, there is income support provided. That would be one of the explanations there.

I appreciate the hon. member's interest in the wage gap but would indicate to him that we are working very closely with contracted agencies and others with respect to how to appropriately deal with this issue over time. Certainly, a 5 per cent increase plus the \$1,500 bonus this year and the \$1,500 bonus last year will go some way toward dealing with the wage disparity issue. But we do not want to create a different problem by increasing wages, and that's one of the things we're finding in discussions with our collaborative agencies. They want to work with us on how to apply their resources.

We have \$25.7 million this year, which will assist with the wage issue, but we also have \$50 million next year and \$83.3 million in the following year to deal with this issue. We are working directly with the agencies involved, discussing with them how to appropriately utilize those resources in whatever way makes sense for them with respect to their staff. That's pretty important because we do not want to just simply put the money into a wage packet.

Particularly, one of the issues is that not all the people that are involved in those sectors are actually contracted by government, so you create, then, a wage disparity within an organization relative to who's paid and who's not or between two organizations, one of which is contracted and one of which is voluntary.

Dr. Swann: I don't understand that.

Mr. Hancock: Well, suffice to say, then, that there are a significant number of issues that have to be addressed there. Those issues are being raised by our partners in the process. We're sitting down and working with them through those issues to make sure that while we move towards achieving the overall policy objective of equity, we're not discombobulating the organizations in that process. I can assure the hon. member that that's a very important commitment of ours, to bring that disparity down and do it in a way that makes sense for the individuals involved.

The Deputy Chair: Thank you.

Hon. member, we have about six minutes remaining in this portion.

Dr. Swann: Thanks very much, Mr. Chairman.

Well, again, I'd like to hear more comment about the staff morale issue. I haven't heard any serious response about how things are going to change as a result of some of the declining morale that was indicated in the surveys. I know you can't say specifically if you haven't done a survey, but what have you put in place to deal with what appears to be a very serious morale problem, at least within the child and family services area?

With respect to the social policy framework the mandate letter to the minister instructed him to lead the development of a social policy framework, and I think it's very timely and important for Albertans to be part of that discussion. The minister references the policy framework in broad, vague terms but has yet to tell Albertans in plain language what it's all supposed to mean. I've heard it referred to as an integrated strategy, a comprehensive review, a public consultation, a transition to outcome-based service delivery, and lots of seemingly disparate issues. Can the minister explain what the social policy framework is, how long its development is expected to take, and what might happen as a result of the framework? What other ministries are involved in the initiative?

We've long advocated on this side of the House for a provincial school lunch program. Is that even on the map? It seems a pretty basic thing, that we ensure that all children at schools be nourished in order to learn. It's going to benefit everyone. I wonder if that's a practical application of some of the social policy review. Was the minister suggesting that a provincial school lunch program might actually be possible if, during the development of the social policy framework, Albertans do tell government they want this?

The Deputy Chair: The hon. minister.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I thought I'd addressed the issue of morale, but let me just say this. We're working very, very hard to ensure that the staff in our ministry, regardless of what sector of the ministry, are engaged and empowered to do their jobs. That in and of itself, we believe, will really work towards improved morale. People will feel valued in what they do, for their skills, their judgment, and their ability and will be able to do their work unencumbered by silly rules. You cannot write rules for every situation. I think that's something that detracts from the staff morale issue: when you feel that you're not able to actually carry out your job the way you want to. Well, we're changing that dynamic and saying: "We want to rely on your skill and your judgment and your ability. We want you to go in and help achieve the outcomes for those children or for those families, and we're going to support you in doing that." That's an incredible dynamic.

4:00

In fact, the deputy minister has made a personal mission of meeting with staff across the province in engagement sessions and learning and listening to the staff in terms of how we could do things better together and engaging them in the design of the ministry on a basis that really takes into account the learned experiences of the staff on the ground relative to what we need to do. I believe that will do a lot towards the staff morale.

We're looking at how we can better provide for learning opportunities to enhance staff training and ability where they want it, where they need it. I think that will go a long way. I can't tell you that staff morale is up or is going up, but I can tell you that from all the feedback that I've gotten – and I've made it a practice in every ministry that I've been in to go and talk to front-line staff and hear from them what's going on – what I'm hearing is that people are really excited about working better together, about being able to collaborate closely with the other people that they need, and about being empowered to use their judgment and skill to achieve the outcomes we want.

I'm quite convinced. I had some trepidation when the Premier called me to take on this portfolio. In fact, I ran immediately to my computer to see what was going to be involved. Thank goodness it isn't all of the things that were on there. I'm very much convinced now, having had the opportunity to work with the people involved, that we are actually going to achieve some very significant improvements in how we support Albertans to achieve their potential. I'm excited about that. I believe morale is going to go up. I believe it's already up.

Social policy framework is probably the most important piece of work we could undertake in government at this point in time. We've got great economic outlooks. We've got a tax and an economic structure, infrastructure support. All those things are in place. We've got an education system that's considered to be the best in the English-speaking world. It's one of the best in the world. We've got, certainly, issues in all areas that you have to deal with, but between health and education and the economic side things are going very well in this province.

The social. We have a lot of good social agency in this province, but what we don't have is a social policy framework which truly addresses what kind of a society we want to have, what it means to live in human dignity, what kind of supports there need to be for individuals and families to be able to achieve that. How do we ensure that every child has the opportunity, that in fact every Albertan has the opportunity to meet and maximize their own personal potential so that they can take care of themselves and their families and contribute back to their communities? A social policy framework brings that together and says: what are the outcomes that we're wanting to achieve as a society, and what are the roles and responsibilities in achieving that? Then we'll go back to check our program delivery piece to say: are our programs actually achieving those outcomes? Are we working together in the appropriate way, whether it's within the department or across departments?

You asked about the ministries involved: Health; Education; Seniors; Culture; Solicitor General; Justice; Intergovernmental, International and Aboriginal Relations; Tourism; Executive Council. They are all a part. We've pulled a pod together. We are working with that group of ministries internally on a fast-track basis at a high-priority level. We have a deputy minister's committee. We put a high priority on this, and I'd be happy to get back on the timeline.

The Deputy Chair: Thank you.

Okay. The next 20 minutes are dedicated to the third party, and I would assume that you might want to go back and forth. The chair is pleased to recognize the hon. Member for Fort McMurray-Wood Buffalo.

Mr. Boutilier: To the chair, I wouldn't assume anything when I speak. On this note, last night I was actually using my 10 minutes. Actually, with the minister last night I wasn't getting real value for the dialogue going back and forth, so I used my 10 minutes. But in light of the fact that this minister and I joined the same government at the time, 15 years ago, I will go by your assumption, and I will try the dialogue. If I find the value of the dialogue is not proceeding, then I'll change that in the next hour or so.

With that, to the minister, congratulations on your new ministry. First and foremost, in looking at the plethora of your responsibilities and seeing the people that you have with you today, I think of the millions of dollars that are being spent. I'd like to know: would you like to be called Minister or Dave? I'd prefer to be called Guy, so feel free not to have to call me hon. member. You can just call me Guy.

Mr. Hancock: I'd love to do that, but I think the rules of the House preclude it.

The Deputy Chair: The rules would not allow it.

Mr. Hancock: I need to call you either hon. member or the Member for Fort McMurray-Wood Buffalo.

The Deputy Chair: Let's proceed with the normal decorum, please, hon. member.

Mr. Boutilier: Well, I'm glad to see he would love to do that.

He did mention in his opening remarks and concluding remarks that there were some things when he looked at the ministry when the Premier called him to in fact take over this responsibility, which really, I believe – correct me if I'm wrong – was three ministries. Prior, it would have been children's services, with the hon. member from Calgary; then also the minister of housing, I believe, who is sitting on the front bench today; and then also the minister of employment. I believe those were the other three ministries that were combined. Is that correct, Minister?

Mr. Hancock: Well, actually, I suppose we certainly have all of children and youth services and all of employment and immigration. We have the program portion of the former housing ministry and certainly the responsibility for the program regarding homelessness, and we have Alberta Supports, which used to be in the Seniors portfolio.

Mr. Boutilier: With that, you said that you had some concerns when you first saw the ministry. From what the Premier talked to you about in that private conversation inviting you into cabinet to do this, you said that you had some concerns. What were the concerns based on the plethora of responsibilities in the new combined four ministries? What were your concerns? You had mentioned that you had some.

Mr. Hancock: Mr. Chairman, I won't go into the details of what went through my mind at the moment, but my biggest concern was whether or not we would have the opportunity to look at it from a holistic basis and say: you know, is this just going to be running programs, or is this going to be an opportunity to reshape

how we think about our society and how we think about the role of government in supporting individuals to be successful? Will I have the opportunity in my mandate letter to talk about a social policy framework in the fullness of that context?

I have to tell you, Mr. Chairman, that I was absolutely delighted to be able to sit down first of all with the Premier and then with the leadership staff in the department to explore what the opportunities were, to be able to focus on how we bring together all of the social agency that's done within government, working collaboratively, because it's not all in our department – of course, Seniors has AISH and PDD, and there are other areas that certainly impact, and the social determinants of health, for example, are important – and to be able to bring together those departments and provide a leadership role and talk about the social policy framework, which sets a common understanding among Albertans of what's important to us in terms of our society and human dignity.

Mr. Boutilier: I guess we'll never be able to get to the inner voice of the discussion you had when the Premier called you. I was trying to get to your inner voice, to what you were thinking was concerning you about this new ministry that's combined. I'm disappointed that you didn't share with us what that inner voice was actually saying to you about what your concern was.

That being the case, the people that are with you today, I'm assuming, are assistant deputy ministers or deputy ministers. Is that correct? I would welcome the opportunity of the experience that they bring in helping Albertans. It's quite a plethora. I'm very proud to say that my colleague, who was the second minister of children's services, Calgary-Fish Creek, as minister of children's services has been certainly a wealth of information.

I'd like to be able to say that at the level that they are at and having been a minister for almost eight years and understanding the levels of bureaucracy, I'd really welcome – and I'm sure you would – you to share with me a story in terms of this budget and how it has helped someone and from each of the members of your team that are here on how they have helped someone directly, be it a family, be it an adopted family, be it someone with autism, be it someone in family and community supports, be it someone who is dealing with the WCB.

I would really like and I think Albertans would welcome the opportunity for every one of your team to talk about something that really makes you want to come back to work the next day. One of my greatest concerns as a minister was that sometimes I used to love – and I'm sure this minister does, and I'll ask this question – being able to meet with people on the front line and even at a director level or an executive director level or as an assistant deputy and then a deputy, and then it comes to you. I'd really welcome the opportunity.

4:10

In terms of the dollars we're spending, do you have people on the front line coming into your office, or is it always screened through the variety of levels of bureaucracy to get to you? For instance, an AR is an action request. Does it have to go through the deputy? Does it have to go to the assistant deputy, then the executive director, then the director, and then to someone in the front line, or in fact can you pick up the phone and talk to someone directly? What I'm really inviting today in a very polite way is a story where each of the senior members of your team has been able to make a difference in someone's life. I would welcome that, based on the dollars we're spending.

Chair's Ruling Relevance

The Deputy Chair: Just before you go ahead, hon. minister, I know that we're here technically debating the estimates, and there has been a tradition of latitude to allow comments on the fiscal plan in general and on the three-year business plan, as you're well aware, but I don't know how these stories that have been requested from you might fit in to all of that. I look forward to seeing how you tie that all in with the estimates, which is what we're supposed to be here debating.

Mr. Hancock: Well, thank you, Mr. Chairman. I would presume that the hon. member opposite would be the one who would be asking about the estimates and that I would be the one who would be telling the stories of success. I will engage in that process because I think it's very important to talk about the success, about the real difference, that the money that's spent – and there's the tie to the estimates – in this budget actually does real things for real people, to help people be successful in this province.

Debate Continued

Mr. Hancock: I said earlier in my remarks that I've made it a practice in every department that I've been in to drop in on location and talk to people who are at the front end. I had the opportunity to go to Calgary a month or two ago and to sit down with some of the social worker team in one of the Calgary offices, the child and family services authority in Calgary, and hear about how they are now working together in an AVIRT team with the police, with professionals in health, with other necessary collaborations in the community to be there immediately for any child at risk.

If a child shows up at the hospital with injuries, there can be an alert, and there can be immediate action, and that's progress. One of the problems we do have and one of the mandates that I have from the Premier is on communication, in sharing information appropriately between the people who need to have it. We've got some real excitement now about the partnerships that are being created. We've had those opportunities to see those partnerships. I was on a cabinet tour – you might remember a cabinet tour – in late January, and I had the opportunity to drop in to offices in Lac La Biche. I wasn't actually in the offices, but I was meeting with people from the office. I was in the Provincial Building talking to some of our front-line workers about how they are now feeling empowered.

I'll use an example. We have a rule that says that they can provide up to \$2,500 for an individual to achieve some education/training goals, and one of those goals is to achieve a class 3 driver's licence. What the individual said to me was, "If you've got a class 1 driver's licence, you can get a job here." I've worked with individuals and have said to them that if you can get your potential employer to sponsor \$1,000, we'll sponsor the \$2,500 because the class 1 driver's licence course process requires \$3,500. He said, "Am I going to get in trouble for breaking the rules? You said that we could do that." I said: "No. That's a perfect example of an outcome-based result."

I talked about the Terra foundation and Braemar school, and Louise Dean school in Calgary is the same way. We went out to the school with the Premier at the beginning of March to see what's happening there, and there are some very exciting things. These are children having children, and their only success is going to be if they can successfully complete their education. Quite frankly, there were barriers to those successes. You had to go for

income support over here. You couldn't actually apply for income support when you were pregnant; you had to wait until you had your child. You didn't know where you were going to go to live. You didn't know about child care. There were barriers to success.

We were able to work with the Terra foundation and say: how about if we provide you with the resources, and you work with these young moms and potential young moms and work those things out with respect to housing and transportation and child care and income support? They're doing it now.

Mr. Boutilier: Thank you.

The Deputy Chair: Hon. member, you have about eight and a half minutes left.

Mr. Boutilier: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I certainly appreciate your enthusiasm. I also thank you for recognizing, of course, my colleague the Member for Calgary-Fish Creek, who I believe was key in working with people in children's services to start Amber Alert, which is something that I know she's still very proud of.

I would ask, in terms of the dollars that are being spent in the ministry in a variety of, you know, sections, does the minister take time as he assesses the dollars being spent as we are in budget debates to reflect on a weekly basis of what the successes are? How have we helped Albertans, be it someone in family and community supports or be it children as you described – and the story, I think, is a very good one – or be it someone in WCB? I'm just trying to understand the inner workings of the ministry relative to how connected the minister is with the front lines.

I'll wait till you finish the conversation because I know it's difficult to . . .

Mr. Hancock: I've got my ear on you.

Mr. Boutilier: Oh, do you? Okay. I wasn't sure. You do things in stereo?

Mr. Hancock: Yes.

Mr. Boutilier: Oh, okay.

I wanted just to be absolutely certain that in accounting for the dollars, there is a real sense of – do you as a minister, from the variety of ministries that both you and I have been in, feel really connected to the front line of what is taking place in Alberta and the dollars that are being spent? In fact, I would welcome you personally to share a story of where you feel good about this ministry and what has happened, be it from what you might have heard from one of the front-line people. I'm really interested, genuinely, in a story like that so that we can see the real value and outcome, saying: hey, this really is good value and is helping. I welcome that story.

The Deputy Chair: Hon. minister, to respond.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Well, I will tell the hon. member a story, and this one is a personal one as an MLA and now as a minister. In my own constituency a young lady, 12 years old, had an aneurysm. The family has been dealing with the issues that that creates for them and the love that they have for their child for the last four years. The young lady is now 16, had her sixteenth birthday just in the last week.

Most people in that circumstance wouldn't have survived, but this young lady has an incredible amount of resilience, and she's working through that. She is now able to be mobile, albeit with some assistance. She's back at school, albeit only for periods of

time. In fact, she started high school this year. She was able to go to one period a day, and now she's up to two periods. Actually, I think as of recently she's up to three periods a day that she can go to school. She's getting some of her speech back and, as I said, she's getting some physical mobility back.

On Saturday night I was at a fundraiser called Build a Bedroom for Bethany. Because she can't access the second floor of her house and she's living on the main floor of the house in essentially the family area, the community has come together to raise money to build a bedroom for Bethany, to add onto the house. We don't have a program for adding onto people's private residences, but I can tell you that through our supports for FSCD, family support for children with disabilities, there have been so many ways in which we've been able to work together, between Education and children's services, to support a family in that sort of a circumstance.

You can imagine what happens to a family when they have that kind of a real tragedy happen, when they've got an alive and vibrant young lady and all of a sudden an aneurysm just fells her like that. So it's important to be able to work with families who face those challenges. They face some incredible challenges in their life, and we can't take that away. We can't replace that. But what we can do is be there to support in various ways with the assistance that they need, whether it's the occupational health and therapies, the various places. We've got some of the best facilities in the country, if you take a look there at the Glenrose, to help with rehabilitation and that sort of thing. That's how a community can come together to support, and government can be there with a lot of support areas.

4:20

I can tell you another story about another young man that I know who's going to graduate from grade 12 this year. This young man was in foster care, and then he moved to kinship care. He is really succeeding. He's succeeding because of teachers and others who worked to support him through the school system. He's succeeding because of the system in our department that has supported him in the various living relationships that he needed. I believe he's on his own now. He's going to graduate high school this year. He's going to go to university, and he's probably going to have an advancing futures bursary for youth in care to go there.

We have 610 youth from provincial care receiving advancing futures bursaries to help them go to postsecondary education. That's how Alberta society through their government can support these children and their families to be successful. That's exciting.

Mr. Boutilier: Thank you, and I appreciate your story. I'm sure all members, Mr. Chair, appreciate that story. I sincerely say that.

As we talk about stories, clearly, in helping such a magnitude of Albertans – really, it is quite a collective of a variety of different Albertans that you deal with – I would encourage you as minister and the dollars that are spent to continue to focus in on those stories. Really, no matter what we deal with in policy, be it fiscal or whatever, at the end of the day it really is about those individual stories. We can talk in here. I recall on that side talking about: I want to assure all Albertans. But when we come down to it, we want to really talk about Martha and Henry and their children and what their stories are. What you just did there I applaud, and in fact, I welcome even more.

The image that Albertans believe of the ministry sometimes perhaps is more perception than it is of what is really taking place. I do know that there is a lot of good that goes on. I will say this. From family and community support services, from friends of ours that we know that have been directly, positively impacted, I

want to let you know that I think Alberta has a very good reputation by comparison to other provinces across Canada. I know that there are other members that also have said that. I say that that's good.

With that, I want to move on to a couple of things that I'd like to ask. Number one is on the financial dollars, if we can get back to the hard, cold facts. Did your ministry pay bonuses last year? I think the rule was that there were no bonuses. Is that correct? I believe there were no bonuses.

Number two, how much do you pay the CEO of the WCB, workers' compensation. He is the CEO. He reports to a board but ultimately falls under your purview as the minister. I'd really like to know what that is.

Also, just one final question that I would like to ask. The WCB president and CEO: have they received bonuses in the last year, and what would they be?

Thank you.

The Deputy Chair: You have about 20 seconds left right now.

Mr. Hancock: Well, Mr. Chairman, as I indicated, while it's my responsibility, the CEO of the WCB is the equivalent of a deputy minister – in essence, I have three deputies in this department: the chair of the labour board and the CEO of workers' compensation and the deputy minister that handles all the rest of the stuff. I just quickly would say that the hon. member can go to the annual report of the WCB. That's where their financials are, not on my statements. He can look and see what the chair and the CEO made.

The Deputy Chair: In case it didn't get noted, there's an annual report, the minister has indicated, for WCB, and there's information there for the member.

All right. We are proceeding to the next section with the fourth party. Twenty minutes are allocated. I would ask the hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona to just indicate: do you wish to go rapid-fire with the minister for 20 minutes?

Ms Notley: Indeed. Yeah.

The Deputy Chair: Indeed. All right. Proceed.

Ms Notley: Okay. We'll see how well it goes. I know this minister cares about his ministry and likes to talk about it and often will become very descriptive in his conversation about it, when sometimes maybe I'm looking for very specific answers. There are many things I want to go through. Of course, as I've mentioned this before, this setting, being in the actual Assembly, probably exaggerates that tendency a little bit from our otherwise more back-and-forth conversation. If periodically I get up and start talking while you're talking, it's absolutely not because I don't think everything you're saying is very interesting; it's because I'm acutely aware that we're debating a \$2.6 billion budget in three hours, and there's a lot of stuff to go over.

I'd like to start, I guess, by just commenting on both the good and the bad around the reorganization of this ministry. I'm concerned that labour and employment standards and health and safety have been wrapped into this ministry. I think it's too much. I think we have some problems, significant problems, in that area in this province both in terms of establishing a balanced labour relations environment and also in terms of providing for real and genuine rights for working people in our province, and I am very concerned that it's been sort of swept into other extremely important areas. I'd rather see that separated out, but I'll get to that section.

What I'm going to ask you about and talk about first is the issue of income support and how that relates in a general sense to the issue of children and families, enhancement and those kinds of issues. I'll start with a more open-ended question, although I'm going to start with a specific description.

I'm glad that income support is now back with children and families. I used to think it was really kind of obnoxious the way we separated out children and families from income support because there was a lot of political support for spending resources on children, maybe not as much as I'd like but, you know, some, but somehow the parent who needed financial support, that was just sort of the dirty little secret, and it slowly got pushed off farther and farther into the closet, and we never had the two together. The fact that they are together now is good because, obviously, fundamental to successful child protection is the alleviation of poverty and dealing with those challenges.

I want to describe a situation that would exist under the current rules and regulations around what I understand your ministry does. If you have a single mom who has two children and she is expected to work, my understanding is that under your guidelines she would be paid \$953 a month, and that's a combination of the core benefit and her private housing accommodation benefit. She would be paid \$953 a month.

Now, if your single mom with the two children experienced what are referred to as barriers to employment, she would then be paid a little bit more. About \$1,050 a month, we'll say. Those barriers include things like chronic illness, mental health issues, long-term disability, those kinds of things where the diagnoses are not quite so clear as to get them through the AISH hoop, but clearly they have significant medical issues.

You've got your moderately disabled single mom with two kids. One's three, and one's four. She receives about \$1,050. Then, thanks to the federal government, they would also receive a further \$461 a month through the national child benefit supplement, I believe. Then you've got your single mom with your two kids who's basically trying to live on \$1,300 a month, and she's expected to look for work.

Let's then look at your child care subsidy policy. Your child care subsidy policy would subsidize her to a maximum of \$546 a month for each preschooler, and the average cost of sending that preschooler to child care is roughly \$756 per month, according to your own press releases. In essence, she's got a child care bill of about \$400 a month. So we're back to the situation where mom is expected to look for work. Her national child benefit supplement has been completely exhausted by her need to get child care. She is trying to raise two children while looking for work on \$953 a month.

I want to ask the minister how reasonable it is that you believe that that mother and those kids are going to be successful, that those kids are going to go to school well fed, that they're going to have the opportunity to learn like every other child living in a family that averages \$75,000 a year in this province, whether that mom is realistically going to succeed in finding employment, whether she's going to be able to pay her heating bills, and where that money comes from? So when your child protection worker gets there and the kids are at risk and they're in clothes that don't keep them warm and there are holes in their boots and it's minus 40 out because we live in Edmonton, what do we do?

4:30

These are three things that have all now come together in your ministry, so I want to hear how you deal with that. Also, I don't want to hear about a strategy that you're going to write two or three years down the road with lots of consultation; I want to hear

how you're going to deal with it right now. Then I'd like for you, if you could please, to tell me how many families there are in Alberta right now in that situation.

The Deputy Chair: Thank you.

The hon. minister to respond.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Just because the hon. member raised at the beginning about how passionate I get and how long-winded I can be – that wasn't her language, but that's what it equated to – how many minutes are left in the first 20-minute exchange?

The Deputy Chair: You have 13 minutes and 20 seconds.

Mr. Hancock: There was a lot of detail in that question, and I understand what the hon. member is getting at. I don't believe the numbers are accurate in terms of what she's talking about. According to the numbers – and they are subject to being corrected because we're looking very quickly here – a single employable adult with two children would have a combined benefit of about \$1,600. That's \$1,030 in income support plus \$333 in national child benefit and \$237 in child tax benefit, so it's at \$1,600.

The reality of what we're talking about is that when you have an individual who is in a circumstance where they are having trouble making ends meet, they need to come to Alberta Works to deal with their income issues. Of course, on the child care side, for the daycare and out of school care rates, the subsidy is going up to \$628 a month for one to 18 months or \$546, which, as I understand it, is just slightly below the rate that we might have, for example, at the YMCA child care in the city here.

What you're really talking about is how we are empowering the staff at Alberta Works to sit down with that young lady and say: "We understand there might be some issues, there might be some challenges getting the bills paid this month. What are we looking at longer term? How can we assist you with what you need to get into the right kind of place and space where you need to be to be able to have that quality of life with your children?"

We're not going to make nirvana by any stretch of the imagination, but we are seriously charged with helping each individual in that type of a circumstance to work through it and to get to a better place if they can. Do they need some assistance to perhaps improve their skills to get a better paying job? Well, we can work with that.

The bottom line is that it's not just about saying: "Okay. This is a single person with two children, and they have these kinds of bills, so we should write them a cheque." It's about sitting down and working with that person to say, "How can we work together to help you achieve a better place and to help you with the challenges that you face with your children?" and those sorts of issues.

While I understand what you're saying about amounts, certainly part of our overall process, which you don't want me to get into, is to determine exactly those things. What is the level that a person needs to earn to be able to live in dignity? What are the types of supports that we need to have? We will go through and review all of those.

Right now I'm satisfied that we can say that that individual can approach an Alberta Works office at any time and say, "Here's my challenge; can you help me?" and they are empowered to sit down and say: "Okay; what can we do to help that individual work through the challenges that they have?" whether it's challenges with paying the rent, whether it's challenges with respect to finding an appropriate daycare, or whether it's challenges with

respect to improving their skills and abilities so that they can get a better paying job.

How many people are there in that position in Alberta? Well, right now we have 36,094 people who are either people expected to work or working or people with barriers to full employment. Of those, 20,000 of them would be what we would call expected to work, so they don't have significant barriers to employment other than perhaps their personal circumstances. So that's how many families. Now, how many of those would be single parents with two children I can't tell you.

The Deputy Chair: Thank you.

The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona.

Ms Notley: Thank you. Well, a couple of comments on that. I think what would be really important – and the benefit of having these ministries merge together is that that's absolutely what you should be able to tell me – is how many of those people that are living at roughly half the low-income cut-off, as identified by most antipoverty organizations, have children in those households.

Mr. Hancock: I'd like to be able to get the hon. member that information, but I think that even with a binder this thick, Mr. Chairman, it would be presumptuous of her to understand that I might have that specific number at my fingertips at this moment.

Ms Notley: Again, I guess my point is that I would hope that that would be a priority number for you to identify because we're not going to deal with this multigenerational growth of children at risk if we don't deal with poverty right up front. My point, as I see that the minister understands, is that any child growing up in a household with that kind of income is going to have to be superhuman to break out of that. It's not going to be just a typical child or, God forbid, a child with special needs. It's going to have to be a superhuman child that breaks out of that situation that the current funding levels have put them in.

In terms of what the minister says about the numbers, the numbers that I quoted were right out of your press release in terms of average costs of child care. I used your updated child care subsidy numbers as a result of the increase that is included in this budget, and I'm reading off your website, that gives the core/accommodation rates. They don't talk there about the discretion of an income support worker, which is interesting. It would certainly be something that we would like to get.

I'll tell you something that was interesting. I don't know if the minister is aware of this, but you said: "Well, that mother" – and we'll say that it's a mother because in 90 per cent of the cases it is – "could just go in and talk to her income support worker and be told how we could figure out this problem." In fact, they can't do that. They have to make an appointment, and they have to get in line to make the appointment. Then after they've gotten in line to make the appointment, if they happen to get in line early enough, they have to come back another day.

The actual gatekeeping processes that are in place right now in your income support offices are extremely challenging for people, and they push people out. I'm certainly not suggesting that this minister was in charge of it, but I would suggest that there was a time when there was a concern about the number of people on income support. Some people suggested that perhaps those barriers to access to income support programs might well have been designed to result in the reduction of people applying.

Having said that, let me just get directly to the budget. In terms of income support there are some planned reductions, particularly with respect to line items 2.3 and 2.4, and those were the two line items that I was talking about. I'm concerned about what – I'm

sorry. For line item 2.4, income support to people with barriers to full employment, there is actually an expected increase, which is slight, and then there is an expected decrease with line item 2.3, which is income support to people expected to work or working. I'm wondering where those numbers come from, if it's a change in benefits. Was there an increase in benefits? Are you anticipating a reduction in the number of people applying for benefits, or what's the case there?

Associated with that, line items 2.9 and 2.10 both anticipate going down at a rate much greater than their associated line items of 2.3 and 2.4. There I'm talking about health benefits to people who are eligible for income support, either for the go to work or the barriers to work programs. I'm wondering why the changes to the budget for those eligible for health benefits are different than the changes to the budget for the income for that same group of people. Does that make sense? Okay.

4:40

The Deputy Chair: The hon. minister.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. On the first part, with respect to the lineups and appointments, I can't say that I've been to every Alberta Works office, but I've certainly been out to Alberta Works offices. I, quite frankly, have been impressed, both with the north Edmonton one and the one in south Edmonton that I visited, with the way they're set up to welcome people in a reception area, if you will, and then a counsellor will sit down with the individual involved and then get them tied into a counsellor.

I didn't observe the lineups or the appointments that the hon. member is talking about. I must have been there at just precisely the right time of day, I suppose. I can understand that if there are a lot of people who appear at the same time, there might be a need to make appointments. I don't think that there's anything inappropriate with that. Most of us have to make appointments for various things that we do in our lives. There are not sufficient resources in any world to have immediate access for everybody who needs everything all at the same time. I mean, there will be times, I'm sure, when there's a need to either take some time to wait or to get into a line or to make appointments.

I can honestly say that the two places that I was at were in active operation. The counsellors were working, the people were coming in, and I was very impressed with the set-up. In fact, I was surprised at how well set up they were and how they were actually working towards what we were hoping that they would be working towards, and that is bringing together the various resources, taking a look at individuals as a whole person, and saying: what is it that we need to do to help you be successful? You know, it's not simply a matter of: can you pay your rent next month? It's a question of: "How are we going to work with you to achieve success in the longer term? And, yes, we can help with the immediate-term issues."

With respect to lines 2.3 and 2.4, line 2.3, the income support to people expected to work or working, is in fact going down by about – what's that? – \$13 million this year. There's an increase of 5 per cent to the rates, but there's an expected reduction of about 2,000 people in terms of those who will need support. That is probably as an amazing result of the fact that our economy is so good in Alberta, as a result of the policies of this government and the preparation that we've made to be ready to come out of the recession which has hit the global marketplace, that there are actually jobs that people can do. There are a lot of people focused on how we can assist people to get the jobs that they're capable of and to get the necessary skills and ability to move to jobs that they aspire to.

That's a very important part of working together with Advanced Education, with Education, with others in the system to make sure that we can get people and support them as they get to where they want to be and how they can use their potential. So we are actually expecting a reduction of about 2,000 people in the expected to work caseload.

There is an increase anticipated in the barriers to full employment caseload, so that balances that off a little bit. We have a \$9 million increase in that particular area.

Now, with respect to the health benefits that's simply an expectation of saving money on generic drug costs. The hon. member will be aware that there are a lot of drugs achieving their – I don't know what you'd call it. They're running out of their protected status, if you will. There are a lot of generic drugs coming on the market, and it's anticipated that our drug costs will go down because of that and because of the work that's being done in health to lower generic drug costs generally.

The Deputy Chair: Hon. member, we have about one minute left, not quite.

Ms Notley: Okay. Well, that's great. I'm obviously going to have to try and, hopefully, get another opportunity to question the minister.

On the issue of child care I'm just going to pepper a few questions at you, and maybe we can talk about it when I get a chance again. Your ministry has given the average cost of child care in Alberta for preschoolers. I'm wondering if you can provide us with information on the average cost per child that's in the zero to 18 month age, the 18 month to 36 month age, and then the 36 month to K age groups because, certainly, I know from personal experience that there tend to be significant differences.

As well, I'm wondering if . . .

The Deputy Chair: Thank you, hon. member. Perhaps there will be an opportunity to come back.

The next 20 minutes, hon. members, is set aside for any members from any other party represented in the Assembly or any independent members should they wish to speak.

If not, then we'll open the floor up to any other member. The hon. Member for Calgary-McCall.

Mr. Kang: Thank you, Mr. Chair. Thank you, Mr. Minister. You have been trying to be very informative so far. My questions are around the homelessness support. A new entity named the interagency council on homelessness appears in the Human Services budget estimates for 2012-13, page 157, line item 7.2, which presumably replaces the Alberta Secretariat for Action on Homelessness. I know that the Premier's November 3, 2011, mandate letter to the minister instructed him to create this new entity, but no specifics were provided beyond that.

Since the Alberta Secretariat for Action on Homelessness is absent from Budget 2012, can the minister please confirm that it has been or is being disbanded or will be replaced by the interagency council on homelessness? If so, what is the mandate of the interagency council on homelessness, and how will that differ from the role of the Alberta Secretariat for Action on Homelessness? Is this more than just a name change?

What is the composition of the council going to be? Will it be comprised of representatives from the province's seven community-based homelessness management bodies and the respective homeless serving agencies? Will it include any former board members from the Alberta Secretariat for Action on Homelessness to facilitate continuity? Is the council already

operational, or are we in the midst of transition from the Alberta Secretariat for Action on Homelessness to the new agency?

If the council is not yet fully operational, when is it expected to be? What impact, if any, will creating a new provincial homelessness agency really have when Alberta's seven community-based homelessness management bodies are all pursuing their own local plans for ending homelessness and are expected to achieve that goal ahead of the province's 2019 target?

The Deputy Chair: The hon. minister.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I'm glad we're going to be talking about the homelessness part of the ministry this afternoon. I think it's a very important story. It's a very important success story. I had the privilege just last week of being at the ROOPH awards. I would be challenged to say what ROOPH actually stands for. It has something to do with putting roofs over people's heads, but it's actually R-O-O-P-H. It's an acronym for something.

Anyway, the ROOPH awards recognize people who make outstanding contributions to homelessness and housing. Actually, one of the awards went to a gentleman who had previously been homeless and who had been through the collaborative processes of our department and social agencies and municipalities, had been able to go through detoxification to get his life together, and is now giving back in that area, Mr. Chairman. So a very good story.

I see the hon. Member for Fort McMurray-Wood Buffalo coming back and wanting stories. That was a very compelling story.

One of the other compelling stories that day was the fact that they gave an award to our former Premier, the Member for Fort Saskatchewan-Vegreville, for his leadership and this government's leadership on the homelessness issue. The 10-year plan to end homelessness and the leadership that the then Premier provided were recognized and awarded from this community agency. It wasn't something from government. It wasn't self-applause. It was community agencies in Edmonton recognizing, and that same member will be recognized nationally with an award for Alberta's emphasis on homelessness. With respect to the national award I can say that the nomination came from people who worked within the department and others who recognized that that leadership was so important on ending homelessness.

I'm really pleased I had the opportunity to get that on the record and to acknowledge the Member for Fort Saskatchewan-Vegreville and the work that he did and the leadership that he provided, which is recognized not just by members of his caucus and government but by all of our collaborative partners across the system of municipalities and social agencies.

With respect to the interagency council on homelessness our Premier promised last year that we would take homelessness from a provincial perspective to the next level. The secretariat has done an excellent job, and I think there are seven community organizations across the province, seven municipalities who work with community agencies to have homelessness action plans in their communities. They've worked collaboratively with the secretariat, the secretariat being in charge of developing and initiating and providing the impetus for the provincial action on homelessness, the 10-year provincial homelessness plan.

4:50

That secretariat has done good work. Its role right now, its current role, is actually one of monitoring implementation and reporting on annual progress. They do good work, but we need to take this to next level. So the Premier indicated that what we wanted to do was transition from a secretariat on homelessness, whose job was

monitoring, to an interagency council on homelessness, whose job would be to work collaboratively together with all of the seven partnering municipalities and the social agencies involved to make sure that we keep the pressure on. We can't let up now. Even with the success of finding homes for 4,800 people and the services to support them in those homes and to work with them to achieve success for them, we still have more work to do. We need to take it to the next level.

We're in the process of transitioning. There's been a lot of work done. We've completed consultations with over 225 stakeholders, Mr. Chairman, including secretariat members, community partners from various sectors in Fort McMurray, Edmonton, Grande Prairie, Lethbridge, Calgary, Medicine Hat, and Red Deer. We're not taking this lightly. We're taking it very seriously, and we're doing it very conscientiously. We're working toward an enhanced collaborative approach to moving from the first phase of providing housing to end homelessness to a phase which includes a focus on preventing homelessness and providing specialized supports to targeted groups. That's very important.

First of all, we want to ensure that we can eliminate to the extent possible through our social policy framework and other processes the conditions which exist which allow the situation of people falling into homelessness so that we don't have the homelessness problem but also to understand that a certain segment of the homeless population will require support for most of their life. They've got significant comorbidities. They've got alcohol and addiction problems, they've got significant mental issues, perhaps, and they're going to need support. While we can try to eliminate homelessness with this 10-year plan, about 20 per cent of the people involved are going to need wraparound services and supports so that they can live in the community in a nonhomeless state, if I can put it that way.

The budget reflects numbers. It reflects that we'll be carrying forward support for the interagency council on homelessness instead of a secretariat on homelessness. The exact nature of how that council is made up has not been concluded yet, but we are working with agencies in terms of how to set up the governance structure on that in a very important way.

We have in the budget, of course, an amount for emergency and transitional shelter support, and the hon. member might have noticed that that went down modestly, and I say that went down modestly because, actually, the take-up of shelter spaces has gone down, which is a clear result of people being housed and less need for the emergency and transitional shelter.

The outreach supports, Mr. Chairman, are going up significantly. They're going up 28 per cent. That's a recognition of moving to this next phase. While we need to continue to work on getting people into housing and off the street and into a situation where they have a home, the housing first model, we also need to increase the supportive piece because you not only need to provide the wraparound services for those people that you're bringing into it, but you need to sustain the services for the 20 per cent that are going to need long-term support services.

So, Mr. Chairman, I think it's a very important area. It's one where I'm very proud of the fact that I was able to be there when our former Premier was recognized for the leadership role that he as Premier and we as a government have played in this homelessness area and the success that's been achieved to date and the model that we're developing, which is going to continue to build on that success and to achieve the results that we need, which is that we'll end homelessness within 10 years.

The Deputy Chair: Thank you very much.

Hon. Member for Calgary-McCall, continue.

Mr. Kang: Thank you, Mr. Chair. After fulfilling its initial mandate to develop the province's 10-year plan to end homelessness, the role of the Alberta Secretariat for Action on Homelessness arguably became somewhat murky. The secretariat's 2009 and 2010 reports to the minister made mention of its monitoring, assessing the implementation of the 10-year plan, regularly reporting to the public on progress, and providing strategic advice and recommendations to the minister, which could include suggesting revision to the plan. However, beyond developing the 10-year plan and producing those two reports, there seems to be little evidence that the secretariat was providing good value for the money. In retrospect can the minister cite even just one example where the secretariat recommended revision to the 10-year plan since it was first unveiled nearly three years ago?

Given that the Calgary Homeless Foundation, which is really at the epicentre of homelessness in Alberta, saw fit to revise and update its 10-year plan at the three-year mark in 2011, does the minister agree that the province would be well advised to do the same? Also, given that the Calgary Homeless Foundation unveiled its June 2011 plan specifically to end youth homelessness in the city and that the demographic is conspicuously absent from Alberta's 10-year plan to end homelessness, will the minister agree that a revision or addition which incorporates this into the province's plan is both appropriate and necessary?

The Deputy Chair: Thank you.
Hon. minister, to respond.

Mr. Hancock: Mr. Chairman, I can say with a great degree of certainty that the secretariat on homelessness has played an integral role in the initial development of the plan and has played an integral role in the ongoing discussion with our seven partnership organizations across the province relative to updating the plans. They report on an annual basis.

You know, we've moved from before the secretariat on homelessness to a question of sort of managing the homeless in terms of temporary shelters and that sort thing to a dedicated effort to transition homeless people into housing and to provide the necessary wraparound supports. That doesn't come just by sitting around a table as a secretariat. That comes with an integrated, collaborative approach between the municipalities and the province. There have certainly been a lot of resources put into providing housing units but also a lot of resources put into the collaborative support services that are necessary and to focus on how you bring them together to end homelessness. That work has been good work.

Indeed, we are moving to the next level, and we're recognizing the fact that we need to do more than just be monitoring and updating the plan. We need to be action oriented and engaged. The interagency council will bring the players together who are actually front line to help on the governance structure with input from the province and from our ministry and, perhaps, from others. We're working on that governance process, what will actually be involved in that, but the focus will be on how we work together to continue to build on the success to date.

If the hon. member thinks that any of the resources have been wasted in this area, I can assure him that there have not been wasted resources. There's been an incredible amount of focusing of resources because you're always short of resources and you need to get the results. They have got the results, and that's been acknowledged not only provincially but nationally. Alberta has played a leadership role in this area. That's not just the province; that's the province working with municipalities and with the social agencies, coming together and focusing deliberately on a problem,

finding solutions, and achieving success. That is absolutely important.

Now, youth homelessness is obviously a key element and one that has certainly come to the forefront as one of the next pieces to focus on. As the next phase of the implementation of Alberta's plan we're absolutely working on developing a strategy targeted to end and to prevent, not just to deal with the homelessness that exists today but to work on the elements which result in homelessness. That's part of the work that we do, but it's also part of working together with the agency and working with the community support groups that are out there that are seeing these homeless youth as we speak and are helping to encourage them to get off the streets, to find the necessary supports that they need, whether it's to deal with alcohol addiction issues, to deal with family breakdown issues, to deal with drug addiction issues, whatever those challenges are.

We've alluded to some of those earlier in the estimates this afternoon, the need for collaborative work on that area, but one of the important pieces of it is the social agency on the street who is able to be there to provide that first stopping place and then to be able to connect right into the system so that we can zero in on the individual, what their particular barriers to success are, and help to remove those barriers to success.

5:00

I would say to the hon. member that the money that's been spent on the secretariat to date has been money well spent. We do need to transition to the next stage, and that's the interagency council. We're transitioning to the next stage. We don't want to spend unnecessary resources on administration. We want to focus the resources on the front end, but you obviously have to have some resources to build the plan and to develop the collaboration and, indeed, to do the planning framework that's necessary so that the resources that we do have in this area are well targeted and well used and achieve the same kind of result, the same kind of success that we have achieved to date in building towards ending homelessness in this province.

Mr. Kang: Thank you, Mr. Minister. I was not saying that money was wasted. My question was just: did we get the value for the money? I was not saying that we were wasting money on that, Mr. Minister.

It seems that one key area where both the secretariat and the government have dropped the ball is in the ongoing co-ordination and integration of Alberta's seven community-based homeless management bodies. It was a big deal when we were talking about what is supposed to be the provincially executed plan for ending homelessness. A prime example of this has been the inability of the province to realize strategy 2 of the 10-year plan, which is to establish a provincial electronic information management system and to provide funding for its development.

The Calgary Homeless Foundation, as I'm the sure the minister knows, has opted to develop its own homeless management information system, which is expected to be up and running within two years according to a February 6, 2012, *Calgary Sun* column quoting the CHF president Tim Richter.

Does the introduction of the interagency council on homelessness represent an acknowledgement that efforts to co-ordinate and integrate Alberta's seven community-based homeless management bodies have not always been successful?

Question 2, can the minister explain how the council is going to secure buy-in from Alberta's seven community-based homelessness management bodies in those areas where the secretariat has fallen short? Is the minister willing to admit the reason why the

seven community-based homeless management bodies have not always been keen to co-operate on an initiative such as the electronic information management system is that beyond receiving provincial funding, those bodies wish to make their own decisions and retain local control?

Mr. Hancock: Well, Mr. Speaker, in the development of any successful organization there are always challenges and opportunities, and indeed in this one there have been challenges and opportunities. Those challenges and opportunities, though, have been met with an incredible amount of success in this area. The hon. member refers to a provincial-based information system, and indeed there is a provincial information system, and there's also a Calgary information system. The officials have been working closely together to integrate the data and the information so that they work together.

That's not an unusual approach. You have local organizations who have independence and want to operate in one manner, but I can say that we've been working very closely together and achieving success in that. I can also say that I had the opportunity – I was going to say a few days ago, but it's probably just before Christmas – to sit down with the seven partner agencies and people coming from each of those agencies and had a very good discussion on what the way forward looked like and on how we were going to work together, and there was no reticence at all from the Calgary organization or from any of the other organizations about working together collaboratively to achieve a common success across the province as well as success in their individual areas.

I don't know where the hon. member is getting the information from – I heard him say the front page of some newspaper – but I can say that certainly there are always challenges. I mean, you don't have passionate people working in an area without having some challenges. But those are good challenges and more often than not resulted in good successes. I think the outcomes-based agreements allow us to target the investments where we need them, and we're working very, very well with the agencies now.

The collaborative process I mentioned in terms of setting up the interagency council is meeting with a great deal of enthusiasm. In fact, I would suggest that the individual that the hon. member mentioned from Calgary with respect to the Calgary agency is very much a part of believing that we need to move to the interagency council as the new form of governance in this not as way of denigrating what went before but as a way of building on what went before and moving to the next level. I think there's a great degree of collaboration happening, very much good will, and very good success.

The Deputy Chair: Thank you very much.

The chair is pleased to recognize the hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona.

Ms Notley: Thank you very much. I'm pleased to be able to have a chance to engage with the minister some more. I'd like to pick up where I left off on the issue of child care. I had asked about sort of the average cost for licensed child care to be broken down by age group. Before the minister has a chance to get up, I was wondering if I could ask just a few more questions on the issue of child care. Then I'll move on to a different subject.

One is: now that you've got employment and immigration as part of your ministry, I would hope or wonder – both, I guess – whether or not you're in a position to do a job of projecting child care needs of Albertans. There was a national agency that was funded out of Ottawa that did a fairly good job of projecting child

care demand on an interjurisdictional basis. Thanks to the not-so-fabulous Stephen Harper government they've lost all their funding, so public access to a lot of the statistical information has now disappeared.

My question is whether your ministry, being in charge of employment and immigration, understanding, of course, that according to some in your government we have a projected human resource shortfall coming forth in the next two years, can assess how many families, either single-parent families or dual-parent families with both parents working, are expected to be here with how many kids. From that, you can basically do an estimate of child care demand, knowing that some people will find a way to get their aunt or their mom to take care of their child. Needless to say, that's an exception, not the rule. So I'm wondering if there's any work being done on that, and if you have any estimates on that basis in terms of going forward.

My next question is about accreditation. I've looked on the website, and maybe I'm looking at the wrong place. I'm looking on the website where it says Accreditation of Early Learning and Care Services, and that organization talks about doing this job on behalf of the Alberta government. They talk about having the validators who go out and inspect the accreditations. I'm wondering if there is some place where we can get online access to the reports of the accreditation visits?

I can see a list of who is accredited, but if I click on that place, all it says is that it's a daycare and it's been accredited. It doesn't say anything about what the report was, whether they were one of the ones that were first not successful and then subsequently were successful, what the concerns were, that kind of thing. Given that previous ministers – and I'm sure this minister would never do this – have suggested that parents have a buyer beware sort of obligation when it comes to child care. I wonder if it's possible to get access to that information.

Finally, the minister mentioned in response to a question from the Member for Calgary-Mountain View that there is an 80 per cent occupancy rate in child care and then started to equate that with the school issue, which I doubt is exactly the same. Nonetheless, I'm just wondering if there are any estimates within your ministry on what the empty spaces cost and whether we're seeing that 20 per cent nonoccupancy as being related to geography or whether it's related to them being higher cost positions or what the situation is. Is there an analysis of what that 20 per cent vacancy is caused by?

Associated with that is a request for information on an average wait-list because you know that there are lots of places out there that do have huge wait-lists, and people are waiting to get their kids in there. So I'm wondering if there is any similar data that's been put together on that?

One more question for you on child care. Last year I asked the previous minister how much money publicly traded child care companies had received from the ministry primarily through the accreditation grant funding but if there was any other start-up funding. My understanding is that at this point almost every publicly traded child care corporation has been bought up by one child care corporation called Edleun, which is the one that the ministry referred me to last year in answer to my question. I don't know if that continues to be the only publicly traded child care corporation. I'm getting a bit of a nod over there. I'm wondering if I could hear how much money they received in the last budget year.

5:10

The Deputy Chair: Thank you.

Hon. minister, please.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. The hon. member was interested in the average monthly fee for age group by type of program. I can indicate that for daycares, for example, for infants under 12 months the average was \$837; 12 months to under 19 months, \$861; toddlers 19 months to under three years, \$768; preschoolers three years to less than 4.5 years, \$728; kindergarten, which is 54 months to less than seven years and not yet attending school and grade 1 to 6, \$700. Family day homes for those various selfsame categories would be \$549, \$587, \$636, \$611, and \$589. Out of school care for the latter two categories, which is kindergarten, 54 months to less than seven years, is \$479; school age, seven years plus attending school, \$368. Those are the numbers with respect to the averages across the province.

With respect to the last question that the hon. member asked, the only publicly traded child care company that I'm aware of that's licensed to offer child care in Alberta is Edleun. It owns 41 licensed child care programs in the province, 25 daycare programs, 16 out of school care programs; in 2010-11, April 1 to March 31, 2011, \$1.8 million accreditation and \$4 million subsidy; in 2011-12, April 1 to December 31, \$1.9 million accreditation and \$4.4 million subsidy.

With respect to the online access to reports I'm given to understand that we don't actually put the reports online. That might be an interesting thing to explore, but you can go through a child care lookup tool, and with the child care lookup tool you can determine whether there were any violations, any problems identified. You can take a look to see what has come out of accreditation reports with respect to our inspections, with respect to whether there have been any violations or concerns raised, and you can use the child care lookup tool to do that. I am interested in the issue of whether accreditation reports could be put on, and if that's something we could do, I'd be interested in looking at that because I do think parents need to know what has happened.

With respect to wait-lists we're doing an analysis of the implementation of an online wait-list registry for parents and child care service providers. We're looking to see how we could implement that. Again, the key is to help parents make appropriate choices for their children, and we're certainly interested to the extent that we can do that. Our first priority for resources, obviously, would be to make sure that people had access.

There was another question in there. Predicting future demand: we don't actually have right now a good demographic analysis model for predicting future demand. It's something that we'll be looking at going forward in terms of how we can replace the information that was there. We do have a number of ways that we can use data that's readily available now. Just as an example, you mentioned people coming to the province. We know that, for example, with 5,000 provincial nominee certificates we get 7,400 people. You can figure out in that, you know, that a certain number of them will be children. So there are ways that we use existing data to help us with that process.

I know in Education we had a very, very good demographic modelling tool, and we can certainly access some of that information. We've had a baby boom in the province, so health has the information for us relative to how many babies have been born over the last five years. We can use some of that to model, but of course there's an extra piece that needs to go in that because not every child that was born is going to need daycare. There's some work that needs to be done on that, but that's an area that's certainly of interest to us to project what we need going forward.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona.

Ms Notley: Thank you. That's very helpful. There was one question that popped into my head that followed up there right before projection. Oh, yes, a waiting list. I think that's great if you can develop an online waiting list. I think that would be very helpful to parents to be able to sort of bounce around and check where they should go. I'm wondering if you can provide me with any information on child care availability, waiting lists, and/or extra space or shortfall, as far as you know, on a regional basis. That 20 per cent of open spaces: are they all in Edmonton? Are they all in Calgary? Are there parts of the province that have a tremendous shortage of child care versus areas of the province that do not? Again, I'm still wondering if you've done any analysis of that 20 per cent that's not filled, what the description is of those spaces that are not filled. What's their average cost, for instance, and where are they located?

The Deputy Chair: The hon. minister to respond, please.

Mr. Hancock: Yeah. I'm not sure I can give the hon. member the precise data that she's looking for. I can tell you that of our 25,803 daycare spaces, there's 82 per cent enrolment; of our 19,664 out-of-school care spaces, we have 73 per cent enrolment; of 8,512 family day homes, there's a 75 per cent enrolment; and for 14,834 preschool spaces, an estimated 80 per cent enrolment; so an overall 78 per cent enrolment for the 68,813 spaces.

With respect to regions I can tell you how the spaces are broken down by region. It wouldn't be a surprise to you that region 6, which, I believe, is Edmonton, has 31.5 per cent of all program spaces and that region 3, which, I presume, is Calgary, has 32.6 per cent of the spaces.

I can't tell you off the top the occupancy rates in each of those areas. Region 1 is 6.1 per cent, region 2 is 3.6 per cent, region 4 is 7.8 per cent, and region 5 is 2.9 per cent. The bulk of the spaces, obviously, are in the Edmonton and Calgary regions. I don't have at hand the occupancy rates per region, but I'm being advised that it's pretty consistent across the province in each of those areas at 80 per cent.

You'll appreciate that demographically within those regions there could be very serious shifts in areas. I mean, I know that, again, in my own area there's been huge growth in population. I have 74,000 constituents right now, a huge growth in the south end of my constituency, and there hasn't been a similar growth in daycare spaces. As I mentioned to the hon. Member for Calgary-Mountain View, as new schools open and people look at how they're going to do their planning for family and for their life in terms of how they get to and from work and school, et cetera, there's been considerable concern around how you get to school when there's no daycare in the neighbourhood.

So there are issues there. No question about that. The market is responding, as I indicated. When I say the market, I'm not just talking about the private sector. I'm talking about not-for-profit as well. Without government capital subsidy there were 2,000 spaces created over the first eight months of this year, 2,119 net spaces over that period of time. So the market is responding.

Ms Notley: Thank you very much for that information. That's helpful. I look forward to going back and crunching some of those numbers and seeing where to go from there.

I'd like to switch gears quickly – I always say quickly, and it ends up being a bit of a fruitless hope of mine – to the area of child protection, which, as you know, I'm quite concerned about. I'm wondering if I could just start, before we get into a discussion of it tonight – I hope we do get a chance to have a discussion because I think there are some sort of policy-based issues that

warrant a good discussion. Nonetheless, I'm just wondering if I could get some information from you.

I was looking at your annual report from last year. Of course, we saw the number of children who in 2010 to 2011 had been receiving services from your ministry and who had experienced either an injury requiring hospitalization, or there was a fatality. I'm wondering if you can provide me with this most recent year's numbers. I realize that we've not quite gotten to March 31, but if you can give me the information there up to your most recent date possible, that would be very helpful.

In doing that, I'm also wondering if you could just clarify for me whether the term "receiving services" means the following: a child who is under a permanent guardianship order, a child who is under a temporary guardianship order, and a child whose family is in receipt of family enhancement services but remains in the custody of the family. That's my understanding of what receiving services means, but I just would like to be sure that we're comparing apples to apples.

5:20

My next question is related to some of your performance measures. In your annual report one of your performance measures is tracking, you know, how many children who have received services do not receive additional services within the 12 months following that. I have two questions arising from that. The first is: when you are looking at the numbers that I just previously asked about, the injuries and the fatalities, do you look at or track how those kids do within the year of not receiving services? For instance, if the fatality occurs of a child who is no longer officially receiving services because the file has been closed but it's still within that 12-month period that is part of your performance measure, are those numbers collected or reported anywhere?

The reason I say that is because it's a very blunt and not the most effective tool of measuring whether the speed with which files are closed is appropriate and effective. One of the reasons I raise that is that it does link up a bit to what some people are worried about as being the outcome of outcome-based services. It may or may not ultimately be the outcome of outcome-based services, but it's one thing to check.

The final thing that I'd like in this area – actually, I'm running out of time, and I suspect that you'll talk to the answer; I'm going to ask you about three more questions – is if you could just provide me with the number of children currently in your ministry that are covered by a permanent guardianship order, the number of children covered by a temporary guardianship order, the number of children who are receiving family enhancement services while still in the home, then how that compares with last year, and as well the number of foster families that you currently have and the number of those which are kinship care families. I'm sorry if the previous member asked that. If they did and you gave that information already, then just tell me. Anyway, the number of foster families and, of that, the subset of those which are kinship care families and whether that represents an increase or decrease from last year.

The final thing, which I hope we can discuss, but I think we're probably going to run out of time, is that I've had people who work in child protection raise to me the concern that essentially the acuity, for lack of a better term and to sound very technical, of the kids who are in care and/or receiving services has increased dramatically. I've had someone say – and this is just a ballpark figure, and by all means tell me if I'm wrong – that 10 years ago we might have had this number of kids that we were serving for this dollar, that what's happened over the last 10 years is that the number of kids we're serving has dropped by almost 50 per cent

but that the number of dollars has almost doubled, that we're putting a lot of money into a very, very challenged group of kids, which is good because we need to – we can't not – but what's happening then is that other kids who might have received less intrusive but meaningful supports from the ministry are no longer getting that support because we're pushed into this situation of being intensely reactive.

I'm wondering if you're able to provide any observation on that, particularly from a statistical point of view, in relation to what I heard, which was that the per capita cost of children receiving services is going up and the number of children is going down. That's a proposition that's been put to me. If I'm wrong, then by all means clarify.

The Deputy Chair: Thank you. We only have about 40 seconds left in this section.

Mr. Hancock: Okay. I'll start at the end and then maybe can just send you some of the data because that's easy to send. The last piece is particularly important. Acuity levels are going up, so fewer children, higher acuity levels, more resource intensive – absolutely – but that does not mean that others are being left behind. In fact, one of the things that I was very pleased with when the Premier asked me to take on the role of Minister of Human Services was that she alluded to the fact that I had previous experience in the health portfolio and the Education portfolio and that one of the things we were doing was building a wraparound services model so that we could help children and families before they got into that level of acuity.

I think there are great indications that that's working very well. Yes, the acuity levels are high and the resource-intensive piece is high, but we're also working on the other side with the wraparound services to help the other children before they get to that level.

The Deputy Chair: Thank you, hon. minister.

The hon. Member for Fort McMurray-Wood Buffalo is next, followed by Calgary-Mountain View.

Mr. Boutilier: Well, thank you very much. In reviewing the financial data, numbers are numbers, and of course this is important. I've seen some increases in some areas, some decreases in other areas. My first question would be: could the minister talk about an area that is concerning him and that has been identified from within his team relative to the numbers that have been presented to him as a minister; specifically, where Albertans could be put, potentially, by you not being able to fulfill your objective and your mandate? Is there any one area that you view within your ministry that you would have loved to have been able to see additional resources placed in to be able to help? That's either dollars or people.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. minister.

Mr. Hancock: Mr. Chairman, yes. That's a tough question. Obviously, in any portfolio there are always more things that you can do. You have to be very prudent with Albertans' resources. I think it's very important for us to have a policy framework so that we understand what the outcomes are and understand the roles and responsibilities, what things should be done by families and by individuals, what things are community issues, how we can as government support families and individuals and communities rather than trying to do things ourselves. But you can always utilize more resources, absolutely.

I'd hesitate to want to segregate out any particular area. Aboriginal children: you know, 67 per cent of our children in care are aboriginal, much higher than in the general population level. Now, that number is skewed a little bit by the fact that the numbers of nonaboriginal children have gone down, so the percentage has gone up, but that just masks the fact that we've got some real issues in helping young aboriginal children to be successful. That's an area that we need to devote some resources to, and quite frankly we need to find a way to get past jurisdictional issues and get right to the nub of helping children and helping children be successful. That's not just a matter of throwing more resources in it. It's obviously a question of how we work better together on that holistic level.

There's no question that, particularly for aboriginal on-reserve children, which are not in our jurisdiction at all – they're Alberta children, and Alberta certainly not only needs to benefit from their success, but we also pay the cost of failure – the social cost of failure is way too high in so many different areas.

I would love to see us be able to have more resources available and a better co-ordination of resources on the mental health side. Certainly, early access to mental health help for children and adults but for children particularly is important. While we've got some very good intervention processes and we're building better collaborative models and wraparound services and working well with Education – and I'm excited about the idea of school nurses, for example. I know we have a few experiences where we have mental health classrooms available, but that's an area where we could actually utilize resources very well.

On the occupational health and safety side I am chagrined by the fact that I get reports on injured workers and people killed in the workplace. Obviously, you cannot put an inspector on every corner – that's not going to do the job – but we do have to find some way to deal with that. I mean, we had, I think, three people who fell off roofs over the last year and had a security rope. They had a security harness, but the rope was too long. That's just unacceptable. It's not a matter, necessarily, of devoting more resources to it although we have hired more occupational health and safety officers last year and this year, and we're going to need to be able to put more emphasis on that side. We have a lot of businesses in this province. We've got a lot of young workers. We've got too high an accident rate, and we have to figure out how to deal with it.

Those are some of the areas where I'd like to have more resources.

5:30

If a page was available, I'd have a page deliver this to the hon. member. I have a whole package of drink coasters on pregnancy and alcohol. Fetal alcohol spectrum disorder in this province is a real issue; it's an issue right across the country. It's very preventable. I want to send these coasters over to the hon. member because members of his party are distributing coasters on .05. I really believe that if they want to engage in responsible alcohol advocacy, it ought to be where they send coasters which encourage people not to drink when they're pregnant out to the bars and the places that they're sending drink coasters to. Now, that would be a very responsible thing to do. That would save a lot of resources for this province because we have about 450 children born every year with fetal alcohol spectrum disorder. It's entirely preventable.

Those children face a lifetime of challenge, and we face a lifetime of challenge from those children because there are so many issues. When I was Minister of Justice, Mr. Chairman, I met with the Chief Judge then, Ernie Walter. He would tell me about

the frustration that courts felt with these children and youth and adults with fetal alcohol spectrum disorder in their courts, with no significant thing that they could do in terms of dealing with those issues. Those people just cycle through and through and through and create more issues with respect to it.

There are ways of dealing with them, but they're very cost intensive to help those individuals lead a significant life and make a contribution and to support them in doing that. It would be better if we were able to find a way to prevent it.

I would urge the hon. member to talk to his caucus colleagues, distribute drink coasters that actually can make a difference, and invest in helping to save people from a lifetime of fetal alcohol spectrum disorder rather than encourage people to drink and then perhaps drive.

The Deputy Chair: Thank you.

The hon. Member for Fort McMurray-Wood Buffalo.

Mr. Boutilier: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I have to ask the chair about him talking about our coasters. Is that relevant to this particular budget discussion? I'd like to know. Since you've allowed that liberty, I'm going to take advantage of that liberty at this time.

Up to this point I actually thought the hon. member was acting quite ministerial, but then, based on his last comments, he actually started sounding quite political. That being the case, allow me to move on.

Obviously, the minister would like to partner with the Wildrose on coasters. It'd be my pleasure to partner with you on those coasters, for sure, on both coasters, because it is about keeping about our highways and Albertans safe. That is so important.

I'd like to move on for a moment to occupational health and safety, which is part of your responsibility, and in doing so, I want to share with you a story. It's a story from when I first was elected mayor of the oil sands capital city, Fort McMurray. It was back in 1992, when a tragic accident had happened in Alberta. I think it was on Christmas Eve. I don't know if you were aware, but it was an accident – and you don't really have to look for any papers on what the question is that I'm going to be asking – where a municipal worker in the greater Edmonton area had to do a sewer line break and went down into the excavation without the cage. Ultimately the Albertan suffocated.

I want to impart some wisdom, and I welcome his response on this. First of all, does the minister – and let us hope there are no workplace accidents, but statistically there appear to be – personally call the CEO of the company if, in fact, there is an accident or a death? Let's hope there is neither, but if there is, does the minister employ that tactic?

The reason I say that is that back in 1992 as the mayor we had municipal workers, and after seeing what had taken place in another municipality in the greater Edmonton area, I went around as mayor to work sites to see what was going on. In actual fact, there were a few situations where there was violation, in my view, of what our workplace policies were. What I did at the time was suspend the worker that was not following the actual workplace policy that was being violated.

But you know what I also did? I suspended the managers above him. You know why? I'm thinking that if this worker can feel comfortable trying to violate a policy and the actual supervisors are maybe allowing this to happen, why isn't there that type of accountability? No matter what worker is hurt, for there to be a culture where someone could get hurt, my question is: do you call the CEO directly and indicate that there has been a death in a company? It's not a phone call that anyone ever wants to make.

Really, what I found interesting was the culture, that I wasn't just holding the worker accountable; I was holding his bosses accountable, too. I impart that wisdom to you because it was a terrible situation. I would welcome the approach that you're taking as a minister in promoting this type of workplace safety so that you never have to make that call.

Mr. Hancock: Mr. Chairman, I think that's a very interesting approach. The short answer is that, no, I don't make those sort of calls. The longer answer would be that there might be a significant difference in workload between circulating through the sites of the municipality of Fort McMurray and visiting all the workplace sites in the province, even those where there are injuries.

But the point the hon. member is making is a very important one. Workplace safety is the responsibility of the worker, who has the right to say no, to not work in unsafe conditions, and who has an obligation to follow the safety standards that are required. But it's also the responsibility of the employer to make sure that safety standards are followed and that the right equipment is available and that safety standards are first and foremost on the work site. So it's a dual responsibility. There's no question. The point that the hon. member makes is extremely important.

Enforcement isn't the whole answer to anything, but what we are doing is moving forward with two pieces of an enforcement piece: a ticketing process so that an inspector or a peace officer can issue a ticket on-site to a worker who is violating safety regulations so that there is an immediate impact on that individual, drawing it to their attention – of course, they can issue a stop work order, as they do now – and we're looking at the ability to ticket the supervisor or the employer as well, the supervisor perhaps on an individual basis, but also, then, administrative penalties, to be able to look at what an employer may have done or not done and put in place administrative penalties.

One of the problems with immediate impact on the failure to follow safety regulations is that the investigative process and the process of issuing a stop work order, which may or may not have any impact or may have just a limited impact, or doing the necessary investigation to get to the seriousness of a prosecution is problematic. So ticketing penalties and administrative penalties – they're used in other areas; this is not an overly burdensome process – we're going to be bringing forward in the very near future, over the course of the next year, to make sure that we focus in on that.

We've had campaigns on commercial construction, on powered mobile equipment, on young workers, and on residential construction. Just to highlight the frustration in this area, I did an announcement last fall about the results of the residential construction inspection process and the violations that we found and the issues that needed to be dealt with, and it wasn't just a block or two from where that announcement was made that a worker fell off a roof and there was a fatality. What happened was that they had a safety harness, but his rope was too long.

We need to deal with those issues. I'm not dealing with them by phoning the CEO, but I am dealing with them by drawing to the attention of the company in a very dramatic way, with an administrative penalty, and to the workers in a very dramatic way, with a direct impact on their pocketbook, that they have responsibility equally for safety on the work site.

Mr. Boutilier: Thank you. Certainly, Mr. Chair, that's free advice. I found it to be significant when as mayor I would call directly the general manager of public works, indicating that we're holding the chain of people involved. I appreciate that.

5:40

I want to move on to another, totally separate topic. As I went back and looked at the four ministries that were combined into this one ministry that you're responsible for, I noticed that the minister's office budget – and I'm not sure how the number came up, with \$903,000 for the minister's budget – has dropped by \$300,000. I find this interesting.

I also find interesting that the deputy minister's budget dropped from \$1.2 million to \$800,000, which is \$400,000. Now, my question is: have you laid people off in doing this, or where was this money actually going? Clearly, I think the minister can agree. Having been in three or four ministries myself, to see a drop from \$900,000 to \$600,000, I have to ask the minister: is this a shell game? Or is the work being done somewhere else, and it's just no longer in your office? Or is the work still being done, and it's no longer in the deputy minister's office? I need, really, to know where hundreds of thousands of dollars have gone.

Mr. Hancock: Mr. Chairman, I'm very chagrined to inform the hon. member that, notwithstanding that we went from two and a half or perhaps three ministers to one, the minister that remains in that portfolio has not had an increase in pay over the last four years.

I mean, there are obviously some salary issues. When you go from several ministers' offices to one minister's office, even though I have incredible support staff, we don't have the same number of support staff that all of the ministers' offices would have had. There are economies of scale. I wouldn't necessarily say that those were layoffs although, you know, certainly some people found employment in other areas as a result of the changes, and those are sort of the normal changes when there are shuffles or changes of ministries. We've reorganized it, obviously, and as I say, we're carrying on the workload with fewer people and with the same salaries.

In the deputy minister's office I'd suggest it's a similar piece. The deputy minister has now, I think, 13 assistant deputy ministers reporting to him. He obviously has some staff to help him with that. He's a man of many talents and abilities, but he still only has 24 hours in the day, so there are lots of staff working with him to achieve these things and to provide the co-ordination that we need. Obviously, there are economies of scale when you take, essentially, three and a half ministries and make it into one.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. member.

Mr. Boutilier: Thank you. I appreciate that, Mr. Chair.

I would offer the comment, with the latitude of the chair, that as you know that the Wildrose plan when they form the government, if successful, is to go to 16 ministries, which would mean even further consolidation. I would be very interested in the consolidation that took place in your area. The fact is that you can still provide the service?

The Deputy Chair: Hon. minister, we have about two minutes and 30 seconds.

Mr. Hancock: Well, yes, Mr. Chairman. I think we can provide the services. I would point out to the hon. member that in any effective organization you can only have so many priorities at a time. So in terms of ministerial advocacy, you know, I don't actually have a much larger job than I had before. I can't say that for the deputy and the ADMs. I can only focus on a number of things. I can only be in so many places. There are a lot of invitations, for example, that come in from organizations that

would like the minister to appear at an AGM or an important meeting for them. Luckily, I have a parliamentary assistant, the Member for Strathmore-Brooks, who's done an incredible amount of work going around the province and meeting with business and industry in terms of the employment side. We have the chair of the secretariat on aboriginal youth.

Ms Notley: How about unions? Have you met with unions?

Mr. Hancock: I've met with the unions. I've met a lot with the unions, as a matter of fact. Mr. Chairman, I toured the plumbers' and pipefitters' new college, which is an incredible place. I've met with the leadership of the building trades union, a number of the leaders in that area, and had some very good conversations with them about things like how we can attract more workers to the province, how we can skill workers in the province. I'd like to say to the hon. member that, for example, we've met with the trade unions with respect to a project called Trade Winds. It's a cost-intensive piece but a very effective way of bringing aboriginal youth into the trades. I've met with them and actually had an opportunity to see the site when I toured that area.

I would caution the hon. member about, you know, looking at a cost-reduction strategy across government by reducing ministries. In theory, if you follow that, you could reduce it to one and just have one grand ministry. Well, of course, you're not going to be able to meet with the people who need to be met with and consult with Albertans in an appropriate way. You have to make sure that there's some cohesion to the way departments are brought together. In the Ministry of Human Services that cohesion is there, but I wouldn't say that that would be appropriate all across government.

Mr. Boutilier: Thank you very much.
How much time do I have?

The Deputy Chair: Twelve seconds.

Mr. Boutilier: Twelve seconds.

Will the minister commit to provide in writing the answers, specifically, for any outstanding questions that haven't been answered today?

Mr. Hancock: Mr. Chair, I believe that I've answered the hon. member's questions rather fully and thoroughly, but if there's anything that I have not answered fully and thoroughly, in my opinion, then I would be more than happy to sit down with him at any time and continue the conversation.

The Deputy Chair: Thank you. Let the record show that the hon. minister did respond.

We now have about – let's see – seven minutes left in the three-hour debate, so we'll recognize the hon. Member for Calgary-Mountain View, bearing in mind that you have about seven minutes.

Dr. Swann: Thanks very much, Mr. Chairman. I just have a few questions relating to labour issues, the labour code review and labour shortage. The government recently had two Edmonton lawyers quietly conduct a review of the Labour Relations Code at the urging of a coalition of antiunion employers in the construction sector. The minister reported in question period on December 1, 2011, that he had just received the first report from those lawyers that same day and would be reviewing the material in short order. What was the report's principal finding, and what did the minister conclude about the effectiveness of the government's

legislation; that is, Bill 26, the Labour Relations Amendment Act, 2008, that was enacted to put limits on MERFing, market enhancement recovery funds? Is the minister prepared to declare this matter dead and stop threatening to curtail the few tools that unions have in Alberta, and will the minister take that report public so that all Albertans can examine the objectivity of the claims?

With respect to the labour shortage a December 2011 Human Services news release reported that the province could face a cumulative labour shortage of up to 114,000 workers across all sectors by 2021. Some occupations with anticipated shortages include a variety of trades, health care workers, financial services, retail sectors, public service careers, restaurant- and tourism-related jobs. Aging demographics, a strong economy, and global competition for skilled labour are said to be some of the biggest reasons for the forecasted labour shortage.

Can the minister outline specifically what he's doing to improve labour market conditions for groups that we generally describe as harder to employ, including aboriginal people . . .

The Deputy Chair: I hesitate to interrupt, hon. member, but could I ask the conversations to be brought down a little bit? It's difficult to hear the speaker.

Go ahead, hon. member.

Dr. Swann: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

. . . youth, immigrants, mature workers, and people with disabilities? What is Alberta doing to press the federal government to raise the cap on the number of immigrant workers allowed to come to the province, and does the minister foresee any willingness on the part of the federal government to change this? We heard recently that it was boosted to 10,000. Where does that fit in the province's needs?

Can the minister explain where the federal government's arbitrary annual cap for immigrant worker admissions to the province comes from? It was reported recently in the media, as I say, that Alberta wants the federal government to raise the cap from 5,000 to 10,000. Does that still hold true in light of the latest labour shortage projections?

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Deputy Chair: Thank you.

The hon. minister.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I'll start with the last one. We, of course, would prefer that the cap was taken off, but we could live with a cap of 10,000 in the short term, moving up to 10,000 even. Any movement would be helpful because we do have a lineup of people who could be very good contributors to our province on a long-term basis, and we would like to be able to utilize that.

We've closed, for example, the family stream. If we had no cap or a larger cap, we could do a family stream or an entrepreneurial stream. We have temporary foreign workers who are ready, willing, and able to become Albertans, and they're leaving and going to Saskatchewan because they can get into the Saskatchewan plan or Manitoba because they don't have quite the intensity that we have, where they have the ability to have more flexible streams. Manitoba, for example, has the 5,000 cap as well, but they don't have the same intensity that we have in the need for workers, so they're looking at increasing their population. With a 5,000 nominee cap we get 7,400 people, and they get close to 11,500 people because they have different aims.

5:50

So, yes, we're still working on it. In fact, the Deputy Premier is down in Ottawa today meeting with the Alberta caucus, meeting tonight with the minister, and encouraging them to continue to work even though we're pleased that there's been progress made. We've had very good discussions with the federal government on this particular issue, and some of the changes that they're making on the federal level will certainly help us with respect to the Canadian experience class, with respect to moving trades into the education class, and in some of the other areas will help us with the worker piece.

With respect to employing Albertans, certainly there are strategies. I mentioned Trade Winds. There are other strategies. We have the Connecting the Dots strategy, which deals specifically with the aboriginal workforce and bringing aboriginal people into the workforce at a greater level. We have the mature workers strategy. We're working on a youth strategy. Those are three areas, in particular, where we need to focus more in terms of how we encourage and support workers coming into the workforce.

I suppose the other area that I think we need to be more effective in is helping persons with barriers to success, or disabilities, to use their ability. It's always great to be able to see that in times when there's a shortage of workers, there are more opportunities open because employers are more willing to embrace people that they might have not otherwise looked at. It's unfortunate that sometimes they wait for that, but we can take advantage of the piece that we have.

The hon. member mentioned reports. I don't remember specifically which one I was referring to in December, but there were two areas where we were asking for legal advice to the minister in areas with respect to the code. With respect to the area of competitiveness I've asked the lawyers involved to go back and do more comprehensive work relative to what is happening in our neighbouring provinces and those sorts of areas. Because that's advice to the minister, I'm not prepared to comment at the moment as to what that advice was. Suffice it to say that we're interested in competitiveness, and we're interested in looking at barriers to competitiveness. If some are brought forward, we will have a full and open discussion with all sectors of the work community, both employers and unions, relative to what, if anything, needs to be done.

With respect to MERFing, I can tell the hon. member that I'm having those discussions. I've met with the trade unions. I've met with contractor associations. We've had discussions on that, where I've asked for information with respect to the size of MERF funds and those sorts of things. [Mr. Hancock's speaking time expired] It's very unfortunate that my time is up.

The Deputy Chair: Thank you very much, hon. members.

Motion 6, agreed to back on February 8, 2012, requires us to now rise and report progress.

[Mr. Zwozdesky in the chair]

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Member for Dunvegan-Central Peace.

Mr. Goudreau: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Committee of Supply has had under consideration resolutions for the Department of Human Services relating to the 2012-13 government estimates for the general revenue fund and lottery fund for the fiscal year ending March 31, 2013, reports progress, and requests leave to sit again.

The Acting Speaker: Thank you.

Does the Assembly concur with the report? Say aye.

Hon. Members: Aye.

The Acting Speaker: Those opposed, please say no. So ordered.

Mr. Hancock: Well, Mr. Speaker, I'm tempted to move on with some legislation, but in view of the hour I would move that we adjourn until 7:30 p.m.

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Government House Leader has moved that the Assembly stand adjourned until 7:30 this evening, at which time we will reconvene in Committee of Supply. Is that your wish?

Mr. Hancock: I understand we would reconvene in Committee of Supply in order to deal with the votes previously scheduled.

The Acting Speaker: Thank you.

[Motion carried; the Assembly adjourned at 5:56 p.m.]

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Province of Alberta

The 27th Legislature
Fifth Session

Alberta Hansard

Tuesday evening, March 13, 2012

Issue 17e

The Honourable Kenneth R. Kowalski, Speaker

Legislative Assembly of Alberta
The 27th Legislature

Fifth Session

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Zwozdesky, Gene, Edmonton-Mill Creek, Deputy Chair of Committees

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DeLong, Alana, Calgary-Bow (PC)	Olson, Hon. Verlyn, QC, Wetaskiwin-Camrose (PC), Deputy Government House Leader
Denis, Hon. Jonathan, QC, Calgary-Egmont (PC), Deputy Government House Leader	Ouellette, Luke, Innisfail-Sylvan Lake (PC)
Doerksen, Arno, Strathmore-Brooks (PC)	Pastoor, Bridget Brennan, Lethbridge-East (PC)
Drysdale, Wayne, Grande Prairie-Wapiti (PC), Deputy Government Whip	Prins, Ray, Lacombe-Ponoka (PC)
Elniski, Doug, Edmonton-Calder (PC)	Quest, Dave, Strathcona (PC)
Evans, Iris, Sherwood Park (PC)	Redford, Hon. Alison M., QC, Calgary-Elbow (PC), Premier
Fawcett, Kyle, Calgary-North Hill (PC)	Renner, Rob, Medicine Hat (PC)
Forsyth, Heather, Calgary-Fish Creek (W), Wildrose Opposition Whip	Rodney, Dave, Calgary-Lougheed (PC)
Fritz, Yvonne, Calgary-Cross (PC)	Rogers, George, Leduc-Beaumont-Devon (PC)
Goudreau, Hector G., Dunvegan-Central Peace (PC)	Sandhu, Peter, Edmonton-Manning (PC)
Griffiths, Hon. Doug, Battle River-Wainwright (PC)	Sarich, Janice, Edmonton-Decore (PC)
Groeneveld, George, Highwood (PC)	Sherman, Dr. Raj, Edmonton-Meadowlark (AL), Leader of the Official Opposition
Hancock, Hon. Dave, QC, Edmonton-Whitemud (PC), Government House Leader	Snelgrove, Lloyd, Vermilion-Lloydminster (Ind)
Hayden, Hon. Jack, Drumheller-Stettler (PC)	Stelmach, Ed, Fort Saskatchewan-Vegreville (PC)
Hehr, Kent, Calgary-Buffalo (AL)	Swann, Dr. David, Calgary-Mountain View (AL)
Hinman, Paul, Calgary-Glenmore (W), Wildrose Opposition Deputy Leader	Taft, Dr. Kevin, Edmonton-Riverview (AL), Official Opposition Deputy Whip
Horne, Hon. Fred, Edmonton-Rutherford (PC), Deputy Government House Leader	Tarchuk, Janis, Banff-Cochrane (PC)
Horner, Hon. Doug, Spruce Grove-Sturgeon-St. Albert (PC)	Taylor, Dave, Calgary-Currie (AB)
Jablonski, Mary Anne, Red Deer-North (PC)	VanderBurg, Hon. George, Whitecourt-Ste. Anne (PC)
Jacobs, Broyce, Cardston-Taber-Warner (PC)	Vandermeer, Tony, Edmonton-Beverly-Clareview (PC)
Johnson, Hon. Jeff, Athabasca-Redwater (PC)	Weadick, Hon. Greg, Lethbridge-West (PC), Deputy Government House Leader
Johnston, Art, Calgary-Hays (PC)	Webber, Len, Calgary-Foothills (PC)
	Woo-Paw, Teresa, Calgary-Mackay (PC)
	Xiao, David H., Edmonton-McClung (PC)

Party standings:

Progressive Conservative: 67 Alberta Liberal: 8 Wildrose: 4 New Democrat: 2 Alberta: 1 Independent: 1

Officers and Officials of the Legislative Assembly

W.J. David McNeil, Clerk	Stephanie LeBlanc, Parliamentary Counsel & Legal Research Officer	Chris Caughell, Assistant Sergeant-at-Arms
Robert H. Reynolds, QC, Law Clerk/ Director of Interparliamentary Relations	Philip Massolin, Committee Research Co-ordinator	Gordon H. Munk, Assistant Sergeant-at-Arms Liz Sim, Managing Editor of <i>Alberta Hansard</i>
Shannon Dean, Senior Parliamentary Counsel/Director of House Services	Brian G. Hodgson, Sergeant-at-Arms	

Executive Council

Alison Redford	Premier, President of Executive Council, Chair of Agenda and Priorities Committee
Doug Horner	Deputy Premier, President of Treasury Board and Enterprise
Dave Hancock	Minister of Human Services
Ted Morton	Minister of Energy
Verlyn Olson	Minister of Justice and Attorney General
Fred Horne	Minister of Health and Wellness
Ron Liepert	Minister of Finance
Thomas Lukaszuk	Minister of Education, Political Minister for Edmonton
Diana McQueen	Minister of Environment and Water
Jonathan Denis	Solicitor General and Minister of Public Security
Cal Dallas	Minister of Intergovernmental, International and Aboriginal Relations, Political Minister for Central Alberta
Evan Berger	Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, Political Minister for Southern Alberta
Frank Oberle	Minister of Sustainable Resource Development
George VanderBurg	Minister of Seniors
Ray Danyluk	Minister of Transportation
Jeff Johnson	Minister of Infrastructure, Political Minister for Northern Alberta
Doug Griffiths	Minister of Municipal Affairs
Greg Weadick	Minister of Advanced Education and Technology
Jack Hayden	Minister of Tourism, Parks and Recreation
Heather Klimchuk	Minister of Culture and Community Services
Manmeet Singh Bhullar	Minister of Service Alberta, Political Minister for Calgary

Parliamentary Assistants

Naresh Bhardwaj	Health and Wellness
Alana DeLong	Seniors
Arno Doerksen	Human Services
Kyle Fawcett	Treasury Board and Enterprise
Art Johnston	Executive Council
Barry McFarland	Agriculture and Rural Development
Len Mitzel	Transportation
Dave Rodney	Health and Wellness
David Xiao	Energy

STANDING AND SPECIAL COMMITTEES OF THE LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY OF ALBERTA

Standing Committee on the Alberta Heritage Savings Trust Fund

Chair: Ms Tarchuk
Deputy Chair: Mr. Elniski

Anderson
DeLong
Groeneveld
Johnston
MacDonald
Quest
Taft

Standing Committee on Community Development

Chair: Mrs. Jablonski
Deputy Chair: Mr. Chase

Amery
Blakeman
Boutilier
Calahasen
Goudreau
Groeneveld
Lindsay
Snelgrove
Taylor
Vandermeer

Standing Committee on Education

Chair: Ms Pastoor
Deputy Chair: Mr. Hehr

Anderson
Benito
Brown
Cao
Chase
Leskiw
Marz
Notley
Sarich
Tarchuk

Standing Committee on Energy

Chair: Mrs. Ady
Deputy Chair: Ms Blakeman

Hehr
Hinman
Jacobs
Johnston
Lund
Mason
McFarland
Ouellette
Webber
Xiao

Standing Committee on Finance

Chair: Mr. Renner
Deputy Chair: Mr. Kang

Allred
Anderson
Drysdale
Fawcett
Knight
Mitzel
Prins
Sandhu
Taft
Taylor

Standing Committee on Legislative Offices

Chair: Mr. Blackett
Deputy Chair: Mr. Lund

Blakeman
Brown
Evans
Hinman
Lindsay
MacDonald
Marz
Notley
Ouellette
Quest

Special Standing Committee on Members' Services

Chair: Mr. Kowalski
Deputy Chair: Mr. Campbell

Amery
Anderson
Elniski
Evans
Hehr
Knight
Leskiw
MacDonald
Mason
Rogers

Standing Committee on Private Bills

Chair: Dr. Brown
Deputy Chair: Ms Woo-Paw

Allred Kang
Benito Knight
Boutilier Lindsay
Calahasen McFarland
Doerksen Sandhu
Drysdale Sarich
Evans Snelgrove
Groeneveld Swann
Hinman Xiao
Jacobs

Standing Committee on Privileges and Elections, Standing Orders and Printing

Chair: Mr. Prins
Deputy Chair: Mr. Snelgrove

Amery Mitzel
Boutilier Notley
Calahasen Pastoor
DeLong Quest
Doerksen Stelmach
Forsyth Swann
Jacobs Tarchuk
Knight Taylor
Leskiw Zwozdesky
McFarland

Standing Committee on Public Accounts

Chair: Mr. MacDonald
Deputy Chair: Mr. Goudreau

Allred Kang
Benito Mason
Calahasen Rodney
Chase Sandhu
Elniski Vandermeer
Fawcett Woo-Paw
Forsyth Xiao
Groeneveld

Standing Committee on Public Health and Safety

Chair: Mrs. Fritz
Deputy Chair: Dr. Taft

Bhardwaj
Blakett
DeLong
Doerksen
Forsyth
Notley
Rodney
Rogers
Swann
Woo-Paw

Legislative Assembly of Alberta

7:32 p.m.

Tuesday, March 13, 2012

Committee of Supply

[Mr. Cao in the chair]

The Chair: Hon. members, please get to your seats. The chair would like to call the Committee of Supply to order. Prior to beginning, the chair will outline the process for this evening. The Committee of Supply will call on the chairs of the policy field committees to report on their meetings with the various departments under their mandate. No vote is required when these reports are presented according to Standing Order 59.01(7). Members are reminded that no amendments were introduced during the policy field committee meetings, so the committee will then proceed to the vote on the estimates of the Legislative Assembly as approved by the Special Standing Committee on Members' Services and the estimates of the officers of the Legislature.

Finally, the chair would like to remind all hon. members of Standing Order 32(3.1), which provides that after the first division is called in Committee of Supply during the vote on the main estimates, the interval between division bells shall be reduced to one minute for any subsequent division.

Committee Reports

The Chair: The chair will now call on the chair of the Standing Committee on Education, the hon. Member for Lethbridge-East, to present her committee's report.

Ms Pastoor: Thank you, Mr. Chair. As chair of the Standing Committee on Education pursuant to Standing Order 59.01(7) and Government Motion 6 I am pleased to report that the committee has reviewed the 2012-13 proposed estimates and business plan for the Department of Advanced Education and Technology.

No amendments to the estimates were introduced during our meeting for the committee's consideration.

The Chair: The chair shall now recognize the hon. deputy chair of the Standing Committee on Energy, the hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

Ms Blakeman: This is just a very sweet moment for me, Mr. Chair. However, in my role as deputy chair of the Standing Committee on Energy and on behalf of the Member for Calgary-Shaw pursuant to Standing Order 59.01(7) and Government Motion 6 I am pleased to report that the committee has reviewed the 2012-2013 proposed estimates and business plans for the following departments – drum roll, please – Agriculture and Rural Development; Energy; Environment and Water; Intergovernmental, International and Aboriginal Relations; and Sustainable Resource Development.

No amendments to the estimates were introduced during our meetings for the committee's consideration. I'm so sorry about that.

Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Thank you.

I would now call on the chair of the Standing Committee on Finance, the hon. Member for Medicine Hat.

Mr. Renner: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. As chair of the Standing Committee on Finance pursuant to Standing Order 59.01(7) and Government Motion 6 I am pleased to report that the committee

has reviewed the 2012-2013 proposed estimates and business plans for the following departments: Infrastructure, Service Alberta, Transportation, and Treasury Board and Enterprise.

No amendments to the estimates were introduced during our meetings for the committee's consideration.

The Chair: Thank you.

I shall now call on the deputy chair of the Standing Committee on Public Health and Safety, the hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview, on behalf of the chair.

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. It has taken 12 years for me to get an opportunity like this, so this is a thrill – a thrill – to actually read a report. As deputy chair of the Standing Committee on Public Health and Safety pursuant to Standing Order 59.01(7) and Government Motion 6 I am pleased to report, although with slightly mixed feelings, that the committee has reviewed the 2012-2013 proposed estimates and business plans for the following departments: Justice and Attorney General, Seniors, and Solicitor General and Public Security.

No amendments to the estimates were introduced during our meetings for the committee's consideration.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

I shall now recognize the hon. Member for Calgary-Varsity, the deputy chair of the Standing Committee on Community Development, on behalf of the chair.

Mr. Chase: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair. As the highly acclaimed and hard-working vice-chair and on behalf of the Member for Red Deer-North, the chair of the Standing Committee on Community Development, pursuant to Standing Order 59.01(7) and Government Motion 6 I am less than pleased to report that the committee has reviewed the 2012-2013 proposed estimates and business plans for the following departments: Culture and Community Services; Municipal Affairs; and Tourism, Parks and Recreation.

No amendments to the estimates were introduced during our rushed meetings for the committee's consideration.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, hon. members.

7:40 Vote on Main Estimates 2012-13

The Chair: We shall now proceed to the vote on the estimates of the Legislative Assembly as approved by the Special Standing Committee on Members' Services. Hon. members, pursuant to Standing Order 59.03(5), which requires that the estimates of the offices of Legislative Assembly be decided without debate or amendment prior to the vote on the main estimates, I must now put the question on all matters relating to the 2012-13 offices of the Legislative Assembly estimates for the fiscal year ending March 31, 2013.

Agreed to:

Offices of the Legislative Assembly

Expense and Capital Investment

\$135,541,000

The Chair: Shall the vote be reported?

Hon. Members: Agreed.

The Chair: Opposed? Carried.

The chair shall now proceed to the vote on the main estimates. Those members in favour of each of the resolutions for the 2012-

13 government estimates for the general revenue fund and lottery fund for the fiscal year ending March 31, 2013, please say aye.

Hon. Members: Aye.

The Chair: Opposed? Carried.
Shall the vote be reported?

Hon. Members: Agreed.

The Chair: Opposed? Carried.

I would now invite the hon. Government House Leader to move that the committee rise and report the 2012-13 offices of the Legislative Assembly estimates and the 2012-13 government estimates for the general revenue fund and lottery fund.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I would move that the Committee of Supply now rise and report the estimates of the Legislative Assembly offices and the government estimates 2012-13.

[Motion carried]

[The Deputy Speaker in the chair]

The Deputy Speaker: Hon. members, I shall now recognize the hon. Member for Medicine Hat to do the report.

Mr. Renner: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The Committee of Supply has had under consideration certain resolutions relating to the 2012-13 offices of the Legislative Assembly estimates and the 2012-13 government estimates for general revenue fund and lottery fund, reports as follows, and requests leave to sit again.

The following resolutions for the fiscal year ending March 31, 2013, have been approved.

Offices of the Legislative Assembly estimates for the fiscal year ending March 31, 2013: support to the Legislative Assembly, expense and capital investment, \$65,414,000; office of the Auditor General, expense and capital investment, \$25,650,000; office of the Ombudsman, expense and capital investment, \$3,011,000; office of the Chief Electoral Officer, expense and capital investment, \$23,200,000; office of the Ethics Commissioner, expense and capital investment, \$940,000; office of the Information and Privacy Commissioner, expense and capital investment, \$6,288,000; office of the Child and Youth Advocate, expense and capital investment, \$11,038,000.

Government main estimates for the fiscal year ending March 31, 2013.

Advanced Education and Technology: expense, \$2,785,851,000; capital investment, \$4,647,000; nonbudgetary disbursements, \$274,000,000.

Agriculture and Rural Development: expense, \$626,384,000; capital investment, \$2,196,000.

Culture and Community Services: expense, \$210,492,000; capital investment, \$2,500,000; nonbudgetary disbursements, \$2,820,000.

Education: expense, \$4,429,269,000; capital investment, \$4,395,000; nonbudgetary disbursements, \$9,834,000.

Energy: expense, \$214,104,000; capital investment, \$6,315,000.

Environment and Water: expense, \$222,187,000; capital investment, \$9,375,000; nonbudgetary disbursements, \$100,000.

Executive Council: expense, \$31,461,000.

Finance: expense, \$119,468,000; capital investment, \$2,512,000; nonbudgetary disbursements, \$25,698,000; lottery fund transfer, \$1,338,405,000.

Health and Wellness: expense, \$15,894,912,000; capital investment, \$77,226,000.

Human Services: expense, \$2,542,180,000; capital investment, \$5,698,000.

Infrastructure: expense, \$1,230,571,000; capital investment, \$388,867,000; nonbudgetary disbursements, \$193,000.

Intergovernmental, International and Aboriginal Relations: expense, \$190,554,000; capital investment, \$50,000.

Justice: expense, \$498,252,000; capital investment, \$6,835,000.

Municipal Affairs: expense, \$1,265,067,000; capital investment, \$5,190,000.

Seniors: expense, \$2,457,348,000; capital investment, \$160,000.

Service Alberta: expense, \$314,573,000; capital investment, \$53,073,000.

Solicitor General and Public Security: expense, \$725,882,000; capital investment, \$106,612,000.

Sustainable Resource Development: expense, \$261,428,000; capital investment, \$22,747,000.

Tourism, Parks and Recreation: expense, \$158,214,000; capital investment, \$13,582,000; nonbudgetary disbursements, \$400,000.

Transportation: expense, \$1,495,560,000; capital investment, \$1,246,818,000; nonbudgetary disbursements, \$20,976,000.

Treasury Board and Enterprise: expense, \$164,371,000; capital investment, \$491,000.

[The voice vote indicated that the committee report was concurred in]

[Several members rose calling for a division. The division bell was rung at 7:48 p.m.]

[Ten minutes having elapsed, the committee divided]

[The Deputy Speaker in the chair]

For:

Ady	Elniski	Morton
Allred	Hancock	Oberle
Benito	Jablonski	Ouellette
Berger	Jacobs	Pastoor
Brown	Johnston	Renner
Campbell	Leskiw	Sarich
Dallas	Lukaszuk	Tarchuk
Danyluk	Lund	Weadick
Denis	Marz	Webber
Drysdale	McQueen	Xiao

8:00

Against:

Blakeman	Hinman	Sherman
Chase	Kang	Swann
Forsyth	MacDonald	Taft
Hehr	Mason	Taylor

Totals: For – 30 Against – 12

[The committee report was concurred in]

Government Bills and Orders Second Reading

Bill 4

St. Albert and Sturgeon Valley School Districts Establishment Act

[Adjourned debate March 8: Mr. Lukaszuk]

The Deputy Speaker: Hon. minister, you still have 12 minutes.

Mr. Lukaszuk: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It is a pleasure to be able to rise again and speak to Bill 4. It is well known that as population was settling into our fine province, school boards and school districts were established. The settlement pattern was pretty well much the same throughout the entire province, with the exception of one very special area. That would be the area surrounding the city of St. Albert, including the town of Morinville, where the Catholic population, because of some great active work of Catholic priests, who were pioneers in that part of the province, had become the majority of that particular area. Being so, they have established a school board that was reflective of the majority. As a result of it, it became the public school board. Hence the non-Catholics, the Protestant community, was the minority numerically speaking, and they became the separate district. None of that was replicated anywhere else in the province as the opposite was actually true in the rest of the province.

This system has functioned quite well. However, Mr. Speaker, as you know, the demographics of the province have shifted significantly. When we look at statistical data from the last census from Statistics Canada and some preliminary numbers from the most recent one, we find, actually, that Catholic communities are in most parts of the province a minority. Even where they are a majority, on a school-board-wide basis they do not constitute a majority anyhow. So the anomaly of having a Catholic board being a public board and a Protestant board being a separate board simply could no longer be supported.

This government, as you know, Mr. Speaker, is a strong advocate of making sure that parents have not only the choice of being able to send their children to a variety of schools that includes the choice between separate or public school boards but also have the voice that they should be able to elect trustees that will represent their views on school boards to which they choose to send their children.

Unfortunately, again for historical reasons, in the town of Morinville the public school board was a Catholic school board, and public education that was nondenominational, that was secular, was not made available. So parents who chose to send their children to a public school had to de facto send their children to a Catholic school. If they were not Catholic, they could not run and/or vote for trustees for the school board to which they were sending their children, so definitely a limited choice and definitely no voice. This matter, as you know, Mr. Speaker, has been a point of contention in the community for a while.

Some choose to look at this in respect to numbers. How many people were inconvenienced by this fact? Well, frankly, Mr. Speaker, numbers really don't matter. Canadians have constitutional rights, particularly rights relevant to suffrage, and whether it's one person that's denied suffrage or a thousand people that are denied suffrage is irrelevant. The fact is that if there is such an anomaly, it has to be corrected. Bill 4 will resolve this issue once and for all.

What needs to be highlighted is the sacrifice that all school boards have participated in, to some degree voluntarily and to some degree perhaps not, in resolving this very important issue. Every single one of the three school boards – the St. Albert Catholic, St. Albert Protestant, and Sturgeon Valley public – have all given in something. They have all sacrificed something to make the system work. Now the system will be, with the passage of Bill 4, in line with the rest of the province.

Mr. Speaker, I'm hoping that members of this Legislature will vote in favour of this bill. It will give parents in Morinville not only choice but voice, and it will correct the historical anomaly. The school boards in the region, including St. Albert, will be reflective of the rest of the province, and children will continue

receiving the excellent education that they have been receiving in their region except under a more standardized administration that is reflective of the rest of the province.

At this point I'm looking forward to arguments from other members of this Assembly.

The Deputy Speaker: Thank you, Minister of Education.

The hon. Member for Calgary-*Buffalo*.

Mr. Hehr: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. It is, as always, a privilege to rise and speak to anything in this House, and this bill is no different. I appreciate the minister going through what was a fairly accurate description of the situation that has existed in Morinville for quite some time now. What established Morinville, which is north of Edmonton, was largely a francophone community and Catholic-based community. The Catholic majority created a situation where the Catholic board became the public school board.

For parents the only alternative to Catholic schools was the separate school board, which was Protestant. Parents wanting to send their children to a secular education in Morinville until recently had no ability to do so. They had to send their children to one of the four Catholic schools or move out of town or find some other accommodations. These parents really didn't have an opportunity to have the ability to have their political voice in the school system and also could not run for trustee. Under the Charter of Rights and Freedoms, as the minister indicated, students are guaranteed access to public and secular education, which is the hallmark of any egalitarian society, the public education system.

I commend the decision of the minister. I believe it was probably the best decision that could be made in these circumstances. It aligns this school board district with what is happening throughout the province, having our Catholic and public systems available to our students. Having the ability of parents to run as trustees is also a step forward, providing that political discourse and that ability to take part in the democratic process that is very important.

If there is one concern that I'd just like to highlight, it's that this situation seemingly took a rather long period of time for what appears to be a rather simple decision. I understand that local politics are often messy and can be challenging. Nevertheless, we always have to look at these with the best interests of the students and what the people's fundamental rights are. I think the best interests of these students and their parents was to have the ability to go to a public school in Morinville.

This did not occur for some period of time, and in fact I will say that the government dragged their heels on this for a number of years, causing a lot of concern, a lot of angst, a lot of rancor, and the denial of parents' ability to send their children to a secular-school option, an option that is unfettered with religious teaching. That was unfortunate. In my view the government of the day should have moved much quicker on this. In fact, to have arrived at a decision so simple and that arrives at essentially making this school district in line with what all other school districts are in Alberta was essentially a no-brainer that should have been done quite some time ago.

8:10

Again, I will be supporting this bill, and I believe it's the right direction for the area of Morinville. I hope that the minister follows through with some commitments to getting an educational learning facility that reflects something in the character and kind that the community expects, a place where their children can go to

school, hopefully with four walls, a working heater, a gymnasium, and the like, to take part and to learn to the best of their abilities to be able to participate as full citizens in Alberta going forward.

Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I thank you for allowing me to speak on this bill.

The Deputy Speaker: Thank you, hon. member.
The hon. Member for St. Albert.

Mr. Allred: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I feel compelled to rise today to speak on Bill 4, the St. Albert and Sturgeon Valley School Districts Establishment Act. I intend to address this issue under three heads. Firstly, the issue of fairness; secondly, I will speak to some of the legal issues as I see them; and lastly, I want to talk about the bigger picture of religious and secular education.

Mr. Speaker, as the MLA for St. Albert I represent three school boards: the Greater St. Albert Catholic school regional division No. 29, which includes all of St. Albert and extends north to include Morinville and Legal and lies within four different constituencies; the Greater North Central Francophone education region No. 2, which has two schools in St. Albert; and the St. Albert Protestant separate school district No. 6.

In my capacity of representing the St. Albert Protestant separate school district No. 6, I feel compelled to rise today to speak on Bill 4, the St. Albert and Sturgeon Valley School Districts Establishment Act, and express some of their concerns even though those concerns may be contrary to the interests of another board in my constituency. But, Mr. Speaker, there is a wrong here, and it is my duty to address it.

Mr. Speaker, this bill is put forward with one purpose and one purpose only, and that is to resolve a problem in Morinville, where the public school board in that community has denied the legitimate constitutional rights of several families to receive a secular education for their children. Yet the fact is that the Greater St. Albert Catholic regional division is a public school jurisdiction, as the previous Minister of Education noted, with the same rights and obligations as every other public school jurisdiction in Alberta. The crux of this issue is that the Greater St. Albert Catholic school board has insisted that it will continue to only offer a religious education and has denied the parents the right to have their children opt out of religious education and classes since religious education permeates virtually every subject taught.

Instead, Mr. Speaker, in an effort to resolve the problem for the affected parents, a neighbouring school jurisdiction, the Sturgeon school division, has offered to provide a secular education for those parents that wish it and has arranged for temporary classrooms within Morinville to provide that education. Unfortunately, this is not an ideal solution for three reasons.

The Sturgeon school board does not have jurisdiction within Morinville, and hence the parents have no right to vote for trustees or otherwise be officially represented on that school board. Secondly, at the present time Sturgeon school division does not have adequate facilities within the town of Morinville to provide the kind of education that Albertans consider standard, and there is no rush to provide those adequate facilities. Thirdly, since Sturgeon school division is in Morinville by sufferance, there is no assurance that they will have adequate facilities in the future. I feel confident that the secular enrolment will grow in Morinville. On the other hand, the enrolment in this new separate jurisdiction may decline, and they may have excess space in the future.

The solution to this dilemma, as proposed by the hon. Minister of Education, is to involve another school board, the St. Albert Protestant separate school district No. 6, that has no involvement

in the current dispute whatsoever, a board which in good faith came to the table to help resolve the dilemma. The St. Albert Protestant district, which has special rights under the Alberta Act as a duly constituted separate school board in Alberta, was prepared to have its designation changed from a separate school district to a public school district subject to the express caveat that it retain its duly acquired constitutional rights.

The solution proposed by Bill 4, however, takes away those duly acquired constitutional rights as a separate school district over the objections of that school board. Basically, Mr. Speaker, the government is saying in Bill 4: we can take away the constitutional rights that you've enjoyed for more than 50 years, but we won't provide a comparable guarantee.

Mr. Speaker, here we have a case where one school board, the public Greater St. Albert Catholic regional division, is denying the constitutional rights of its citizens. To solve the problem, Bill 4 proposes to take away the constitutional rights of the St. Albert Protestant separate school board, which is not even involved in the dispute in question. I ask you: is that fair and just? St. Albert Protestant is being punished, and Greater St. Albert Catholic is being rewarded.

Mr. Speaker, this has been labelled as a consensus agreement between the three school boards. Unfortunately, as I said, that is not the case. St. Albert Protestant came to the table at the request of the minister, but their agreement to any changes was always conditional on being able to retain their rights as a separate school district as guaranteed by the Alberta Act.

As the chair of the St. Albert Protestant school board of trustees clearly stated in her letter, which I tabled earlier in this session:

We want it to be clear that we did not agree to the compromise proposed. We believe that the rights afforded to our district when it was established could be protected and that continues to be our position. Although we are pleased that Bill 4 recognizes that our district's boundaries will remain co-terminus with the City of St. Albert, we are disappointed that no assurances regarding regionalization in the future have been made. This concern was our main focus in the caveat that has not been fully addressed.

Mr. Speaker, let me offer a suggestion. In 1990 this government adopted the Constitution of Alberta Amendment Act, assuring a land base for the Métis people of the province. This act provided that there could not be any subsequent amendment to the legislation unless the Métis Settlements General Council approved.

I suggest that we amend this legislation to specify four things about the new St. Albert public school district: one, St. Albert will never be amalgamated with another school jurisdiction without a positive plebiscite result among the people of St. Albert; two, St. Albert public has the right to elect trustees; three, St. Albert public has the right to levy property taxes locally, subject to the same conditions as applied to every separate school jurisdiction in Alberta; and four, the preceding terms will not be amended by the Legislature of Alberta unless the amendment is approved by the board of trustees of the new St. Albert public school district.

Mr. Speaker, our own government provides the precedent right down to the name of the legislation, the Constitution of Alberta Amendment Act. We can give rights even as we take former rights away.

This amendment, Mr. Speaker, would resolve the Morinville situation and would also satisfy the conditions that St. Albert Protestant brought to the table. In fact, this is the solution that St. Albert Protestant thought they were going to get during the deliberations.

Mr. Speaker, Bill 4 as proposed is a clear breach of trust. The St. Albert Protestant board entered into these discussions in good

faith and were prepared to change their designation subject to one crucial caveat: that they would retain the rights duly conferred on them when they were established. This legislation is a clear violation of duly acquired constitutional rights. For this legislation to be asking to take away these rights by what appears to be an innocuous piece of legislation without due process is wrong, wrong, wrong.

Now let me turn to some of the legalities. This legislation is arguably a violation of section 17 of the Alberta Act of 1905, which states in 17(1):

Nothing in any such law shall prejudicially affect any right or privilege with respect to separate schools which any class of persons have at the date of the passing of this Act, under the terms of chapters 29 and 30 of the Ordinances of the North-west Territories, passed in the year 1901, or with respect to religious instruction in any public or separate school as provided for in said ordinances.

Further, Mr. Speaker, the establishment of separate school districts is clearly set out in sections 212 to 220 of the present School Act. The establishment process clearly speaks of minority faith electors having the right to petition for a separate school designation. The process is quite specific and requires a petition, a public meeting, an accurate census, and a vote of electors, all of which must be carried out in accordance with the School Act. This is the process St. Albert Protestant went through some 50-plus years ago.

8:20

Similarly, there are very specific and detailed provisions for the dissolution of separate school districts which require, again, a plebiscite and a vote of the electors. There are, however, no provisions for the minister to arbitrarily either establish or dissolve a separate school district. For the hon. Minister of Education to come in and arbitrarily propose a new process for the establishment and dissolution of a school district without a public consultation process is without precedent and very heavy handed, to say the least.

The minister has clearly stated that you can't give minority rights to a majority. Mr. Speaker, minority rights were not given to a majority in the case of St. Albert Protestant. They were a minority when they acquired those rights through due process, and there is nothing – absolutely nothing – in the legislation that says they lose those rights if they become a majority.

According to the Alberta School Act separate school districts can only be established when the minority faith is either Catholic or Protestant. How, then, has it been established that the Greater St. Albert Catholic regional division represents a minority of electors in the Catholic faith as compared to the Protestants within their boundaries, which include St. Albert, Morinville, and Legal? Based on the 2001 census it is clear that electors of the Catholic faith are still in the majority within that region. The most recent census shows that Catholics outnumber Protestants by 615 persons in the three municipalities that make up the Greater St. Albert Catholic regional division. Since they are not a minority faith, they cannot – let me repeat that; they cannot – become a separate school district.

Our own government made a commitment last fall to conduct a complete census in the affected area, and we have renege on that commitment. The census was to have been completed in December, and, as I understand it, it was put on hold. As the minister has stated, you can't give minority rights to a majority. How, then, can the minister give minority rights to Greater St. Albert Catholic regional district? How can he take away the rights of one district based on that philosophy but give them to another

district based on the same philosophy? What's good for the goose is good for the gander.

The fundamental issue that brought this dilemma to the public's attention last year in Morinville is, however, really the crux of the discussion that we should be having here today. This brings up a further legal issue with regard to the current situation, which needs to be the focus of the discussion. That question is the basic right to teach religion during the school day in the first place, and it goes back to the constitutional roots of this province. The Greater St. Albert Catholic school division has adamantly stated that they have the right to teach religion throughout the school day, and religion permeates virtually every subject taught in that school division. This practice is presumably being allowed to continue under the proposed Bill 4.

As I said, this is a basic issue that brought this dilemma before the Department of Education a little over a year ago. That is with regard to the authority to teach religious education in schools in Alberta. Sections 137 and 138 of chapter 29 of the 1901 ordinance respecting schools states:

No religious instruction except as hereinafter provided shall be permitted in the school of any district from the opening of such school until one half hour previous to its closing in the afternoon after which time any such instruction permitted or desired by the board may be given.

Subsection (2) goes on to say:

It shall however be permissible for the board of any district to direct that the school be opened by the recitation of the Lord's prayer.

Section 138 says:

Any child shall have the privilege of leaving the school room at [any] time at which religious instruction is commenced as provided for in the next . . . section or on remaining without taking part in any religious instruction that may be given if the parents or guardians do desire.

Section 45 of the same school ordinance refers to the formation of separate school education in Alberta and says this.

After the establishment of a separate school district under the provisions of this Ordinance such separate school district and the board thereof shall possess and exercise all rights, powers, privileges and be subject to the same liabilities and method of government as is herein provided in respect of public school districts.

There is nothing in the ordinance and nothing in the Alberta Act that permits what is often called permeation, and I am not aware of any court decision in Alberta that upholds permeation. As I understand the situation, Mr. Speaker, the 1901 ordinance is still in effect in Alberta, and therefore I would suggest that compliance with this section would resolve the problem in its entirety without the need for Bill 4 or any further action.

Mr. Speaker, I also want to speak about the broader picture with regard to religious and secular education in Alberta. I'm concerned that Bill 4 only presents a Band-Aid solution to the problem of secular education in Alberta. It only addresses one localized problem.

We're becoming an ever more cosmopolitan society in Alberta and, in fact, all of Canada. We need to rethink our centuries-old laws and traditions and determine if they are still applicable in this day and age. We live in a multicultural society, and there's no justification for extending special privileges to one religious minority that we do not extend to all.

The Deputy Speaker: Hon. members, Standing Order 29(2)(a) allows for five minutes of comments or questions. The leader of the NDP.

Mr. Mason: That will do fine, Mr. Speaker. Thank you very much. I listened carefully to the hon. member's speech. I find most interesting both its content and the fact that he is speaking so strongly against a government bill. I wanted to clarify, though, the status of the constitutional protection afforded to the Protestant school board of St. Albert. You mentioned this was in the Alberta Act, and I wonder if you will explain to me how the Alberta Act might be amended and whether or not this bill is amending the Alberta Act in some sort of legal way.

Mr. Allred: Thank you for that question. As I understand it, the Alberta Act and the 1901 ordinances are part of the constitution of Alberta, and therefore a statute of this Legislature cannot amend those constitutional acts.

I'd just like to go on, Mr. Speaker, and continue. I believe that we are obliged to obey the law and the Constitution as they are written, but neither the law nor the Constitution is perfect or written in stone. Even as we obey their current form, we have the right to talk about changing them. We have the right to change them when there is a public consensus that the time has come for change.

The Constitution once denied women the right to vote. At one time you had to be wealthy and own property to be a Senator. At one time Alberta did not have ownership of the mineral wealth beneath our soil.

Mr. Speaker, I challenge all of us to rethink the concept of mixing religion with education. Religious institutions do a good job of teaching their beliefs to people who wish to partake in their activities outside of the educational institutions. Why should we push religious education on those who are either nonbelievers or simply want to separate religion from the education system, as clearly is being demonstrated in Morinville today?

This is a serious issue that requires extensive debate in the public arena. Let us not continue to hang our hats on outdated constitutional decrees that apply to 19th century Canada. Let us debate the issues based on 21st century realities.

Just in conclusion, Mr. Speaker, I urge the Minister of Education to review and rethink this legislation in view of the fact that it takes away the constitutional rights of one responsible school board in an attempt to remedy an injustice against the constitutional rights of the citizens of Morinville, rights that have been denied by the public board of Greater St. Albert Catholic regional division.

There are also several other issues that need to be resolved with regard to whether this proposed legislation is or is not ultra vires the current School Act. It is my understanding that neither the minister nor this Legislature has the authority to override existing legislation without specifically amending or addressing that legislation by virtue of a notwithstanding clause.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Airdrie-Chestermere. 8:30

Mr. Anderson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'd like to thank the previous speaker for speaking so eloquently to his points. I disagree with most of what he said, but I do like the fact that there is some democracy happening here. It's amazing. Unfortunately, this good member has said that he's retiring soon from this House after his four years of good service in here. It's too bad that that can't happen just as a normal course of business because if he, unfortunately, was a member of the government, there would probably be consequences attached to his speech. [interjection] Oh, I think that's pretty much without doubt.

I would like to say unequivocally, though, that I do support Bill 4. I think that it's a good solution to a very complicated and uncomfortable problem. The Wildrose caucus, of course, believes very strongly in school choice and parental choice in education. We're very supportive of our public school system, of our Catholic separate school system, of independent schools, charter schools, private schools, both nonprofit private schools as well as the for-profit private schools although those are very much in the minority, and, of course, of the home-schoolers. We support all school choice. We think that it is actually not just a . . .

The Deputy Speaker: The five minutes for 29(2)(a) are completed.

Hon. Member for Calgary-Varsity, do you want to go on on the bill?

Mr. Chase: Yes, I would like to, but I don't mind if the hon. Member for Airdrie-Chestermere would like to continue in his train of thought or possibly catch up to his train of thought.

Mr. Anderson: I was next on the list as well.

The Deputy Speaker: Hon. member, do you want to continue on the bill, not under 29(2)(a)?

Mr. Anderson: Sure. I'd love to. On the bill.

The Deputy Speaker: Okay. Then go ahead.

Mr. Anderson: I would like to say that we support this bill because we support parental choice in education. Our understanding is that this bill will allow for students to finally have their own permanent secular school in the town of Morinville. It will allow parents that opportunity. Arrangements are apparently being worked on to ensure that a permanent school site will be up and running in September of 2012. Ownership of this school site in Morinville, as far as we understand, will be reassigned to the Sturgeon school division.

This bill indicates it will see the Sturgeon school division expand its borders and become the public system in Morinville and Legal. The Greater St. Albert Catholic regional division will lose its public status and, instead, become a separate school district.

We feel that this is a very good solution to this problem and a good resolution. There is nothing more frustrating for a parent than feeling that they don't have any option with regard to educating their children that is appropriate to them. It would be just as frustrating on the other side if there were folks in there who wanted to home-school their children, send them to a nonprofit, independent faith-based school or to a charter school, for example, and who didn't have that option except perhaps having to move in order to obtain it. It's very good to see that there's been choice in this regard because there are some parents that wanted to send their child to a full secular public school. I think that that's a very appropriate thing to want, I think it's a perfectly good thing to want, and therefore we support that.

I do want to note, though – and I would disagree with the Member for St. Albert on this – that we actually feel that school choice is a fundamental human right. In the UN declaration of human rights it says specifically that parents have the right to decide what education is appropriate for their children. That's in the UN declaration of human rights. [interjection] Yeah, it is. Absolutely. It's in there. I tabled it once. I'll table it again at another time. It is important. You know, we can't pick and choose all the time. Human rights are human rights, and we need to be

respectful of them in that context. So that's something that we support.

I congratulate the minister on coming to a resolution on this. I'm not sure why this wasn't resolved before, but, you know, these things, I guess, do take time. I hope that as we go forward, there will be respect given to the separate school division as well as to any charter schools or home-schoolers in that area that want to continue on in those types of educational settings and that this won't be used in any way – and I don't think that's the intent at all – to subvert or replace other school choices in that school division.

On behalf of the Wildrose caucus – well, at least on behalf of this member – I'd like to say that we support this bill.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Varsity on the bill or under 29(2)(a)?

Mr. Chase: On the bill if possible. Did you want 29(2)(a)?

Mr. Anderson: No, thanks.

The Deputy Speaker: On the bill.

Mr. Chase: Thank you very much. We're being very conducive and collaborative and collegial tonight, wanting everybody to have all opportunities to speak.

I didn't get a chance during the 29(2)(a) – and possibly the hon. Member for St. Albert would want to reciprocate – but I was very interested, in fact intrigued by the hon. Member for St. Albert's explanation and reading of the various legislative acts going back to 1905, the Charter rights of separate and public boards. I thought he did a very good job in terms of delineating the problems associated with this particular school district.

Mr. Speaker, while I am not a Catholic, I strongly support the right of the separate school to exist. I support the historical rights. I understand very well from first-hand experience what it's like to be sort of shuffled into a circumstance from a religious basis that you don't necessarily agree with. When I was a student at Guthrie elementary school on the Namao air base in the 1950s, we didn't have a choice in terms of religious instruction other than that if you were a Catholic, you went off to one room, and if you considered your religion to be under the Protestant banner, you went off to another room. There was no ability to take into account whether one was Jewish or whether one was Muslim or whether one was Hindu. You had to basically divide up into Protestant or Catholic.

Therefore, as a member of a Protestant religion that did not necessarily fall into the similar categories of other religious groups, I found it rather laborious to have a minister of a particular faith speak to our group for approximately an hour on I think it was a Friday afternoon. This has happened to Protestant children for a number of years who have not been able to exempt themselves from the religious instruction portion of the separate, in this case public, school jurisdiction.

Mr. Speaker, I consider myself to be a religious person but a religious person by choice, not by requirement. The hon. Member for St. Albert raised an issue that had not occurred to me with regard to awarding a right to one group involving taking away the rights of another group. I believe in public debate and public input. I don't think public input can simply be in the form of marking an X on a ballot every four years; neither do I believe that everything can be solved by plebiscite.

We've seen examples, particularly in the States, in California – and I believe it was a plebiscite over Bill 21 – that very much diminished the rights of public schools and public school boards

to collect taxes. The public school system was very much battered by plebiscites where with only 35 per cent probably a similar statistic of students or parents connected to a public school system were being constantly out-voted, and the necessary support for textbooks, for learning, and so on in California was tremendously undermined.

8:40

I believe that the hon. Member for St. Albert, in mentioning the problems associated with Bill 4, which was designed to give equal rights to the Protestant members of the St. Albert community, has a point. I don't know whether by his discourse he believes that Bill 4 is so badly conceived that it cannot be corrected by an amendment, but I would look forward to the hon. Member for St. Albert attempting to solve the problem that he has indicated exists with an amendment if it's possible to accomplish that.

The right of an individual to be educated according to their faith is important. That said, there is the discussion about the separation of religion and state and the separation of education and state. If we fragmented our school system to the point of recognizing every single religion and if every single religion that fell under the Protestant circumstance were to have its own independent school, then the collectivity of the public system would be so undermined as to segment or fragment the education. Having been a teacher in the public system for 34 years, I would not want to see that fragmentation occur.

I find myself in a quandary because I support the rights of Catholic individuals to have the religious instruction within their school which is a large part of their education system and has historically been so. I have gone to Catholic school board celebrations. I have seen elementary children interacting with junior high children, interacting with high school children, and bringing the idea of God and Jesus and disciples into every aspect of their celebration. I believe they should have that right to do so.

That said, Mr. Speaker, I also believe that we have become so politically correct that when schools decide that it's offensive to have or to use the word "Christmas" to refer to a concert, then I have troubles with that.

Mr. Speaker, when I was a schoolteacher, I would have what I called the international Christmas choir, and students were encouraged to be a part of it regardless of what their religion was. The songs that we sang were primarily – well, I shouldn't say primarily. There were some *Silent Night* versions in different languages. We also sang *Jingle Bells* in different types, in French and English, and *O Christmas Tree*, *O Tannenbaum*, and so on, but none of the students were required to be in that particular choir.

I was grateful that the schools I attended did not take Christmas out of the option. We've seen circumstances where, out of risk of offending other individuals, any iconography – crucifixes, et cetera – has been sealed and closed so as not to offend. I believe that religion for those who choose to have a religion can be very supportive in individuals' lives. I am grateful, for example, that my grandsons are exposed in a very dramatic way to the Hindu religion. My son-in-law Vivek Warriar is a Hindu. His mother and father are practising Hindus. I appreciate the fact that my two grandsons get a global perspective on different religions.

One of the stories that I'd like to very quickly recount is my eldest grandson, Kiran, expressing sorrow to my wife that she only had one God, and he was quite willing to lend her some of his from the Hindu religion. It's open-mindedness, it's tolerance, it's appreciation, it's understanding of all religions that is absolutely essential to a good education, not putting forward a particular view that you believe is superior to all others but

accommodation. That to me is what a public system and under that public system the separate system, which is part of a public system, does so well. It accommodates.

Now, Bill 4 is an attempt to accommodate the religious rights of Protestant children in a public school board that historically was of a Catholic denomination, and I'm not sure based on the eloquence of the hon. Member for St. Albert and his very detailed research that Bill 4 can be all things to all people. I don't believe in sacrificing either a majority or a minority for the sake of one or the other. So possibly, Mr. Speaker, if the hon. Member for St. Albert believes that Bill 4 can be amended to provide the solution that is absolutely necessary in Morinville, where children have a choice between a nonreligious education and a religious education, then I would be very interested in seeing that amendment, and I would most likely support it.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker, for this opportunity to participate in a debate which originally I thought was of a black-and-white nature but now has several shades of grey.

The Deputy Speaker: Standing Order 29(2)(a)?

Seeing none, the chair shall now recognize the hon. Member for Calgary-Glenmore on the bill.

Mr. Hinman: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It's a pleasure to rise and speak to Bill 4, the St. Albert and Sturgeon Valley School Districts Establishment Act. I think one of the most important things that we do here in the province is educate our children for the future. I think that everybody in here understands how important education is and, even more important, how exciting it can be for children to go to school, to have that desire to learn, to be able to express themselves, and to be able to intermingle with other children their own age. It's just really neat, and it's one of the things that, I must say, I truly enjoy as an MLA. Any opportunity that I have to go into the school and talk to students, I jump on it, and my assistant knows that any time I'm asked, I say: absolutely, yes. It has to be a pretty snowy day and I have to be a long way away before I won't make the effort to go to a school to be able to talk to children, though I myself wouldn't want to have to go back and be subject to the tests on whether or not we remember.

It's exciting in this bill that what the government is recognizing here is the importance of choice. There were parents in Morinville that have been struggling for some time and not happy with the choice that they had and were kind of caught in the system, so I want to speak in favour of this bill. It's excellent to have parents that are excited to be able to send their children to a school of their choice that isn't perhaps – again, we want that choice. The previous speaker just spoke about the importance of the Catholics being able to have classes where they can integrate their faith and their beliefs with their teachings and how they come together. Others may feel that that's not appropriate or not values that they want their children to be exposed to, I guess, or to be open to.

8:50

I think in today's world more and more parents are certainly realizing the importance of diversity and are wanting to be exposed, to understand why other people are doing what they're doing and to really understand them in a much more diversified way because that's how we become great neighbours. That's what has been the strength of Alberta, the diversity of the culture of belief and of opportunity here in the province.

I'd just like to say that I'm in favour of this bill. It's good to see that they're going to have choice and that those children will hopefully go to school there and will be excited and want to learn.

One other thing, and I believe my colleague spoke to this. One of the things that we keep pushing in the Wildrose, that we think is critical, is that this Premier said that she wanted to be open and transparent. I think that her dictionary and mine are very different, though, Mr. Speaker. Open and transparent would be to say: here's our priority list of schools; this is where we're at. Circumstances change, and this is a classic example of where if we had the top 12 schools prioritized, I think Albertans across the province would realize: look, we've just formed a new school district and we need to have a new public school in Morinville for these children to go to. All of a sudden that would pop to the top because with this bill I believe they're supposed to be in their new school by September 2012. The explanation would be quite clear. It would be open, it would be transparent, and it would be understood. Albertans are very good that way, I believe.

It is disappointing that we don't know whether this is just going to be another one of those hollow announcements, where the government says they're going to do something to placate citizens and does not really come forward. But, like I say, if we actually had a list and that went to the top of the list for Albertans to look at and see, then they would kind of be bound by their word and not have this loosey-goosey attitude that: "Oh, yeah. We promised that, but we can skip out of that. After the election it won't matter. We've got four years."

We seem to see this attitude being replicated day after day, month after month, year after year, and it's disappointing to many residents. I must say that the ones from Fort McMurray are still looking for their seniors' care facility that they were promised, are still looking for their twinned highway that has been years and years in progress, and little progress has been made on that.

In closing, I just want to thank the minister for bringing this bill forward and for providing choice for the children in Morinville. I hope that children across the province will be served well with our schools this year and in the coming years and that we'll prioritize our money in the right areas.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Deputy Speaker: Standing Order 29(2)(a)?

Seeing none, any other hon. members wish to speak on the bill? The hon. Minister of Human Services.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Just a few comments. I have to rise and disagree entirely with the hon. Member for St. Albert with respect to the comments that he made on this bill. I had the privilege of serving as Minister of Education. I had the privilege of working with the people in the greater St. Albert area with respect to trying to resolve what is, in essence, an historical anomaly in our province. The St. Albert Protestant school board is the only minority faith board of the Protestant religion in the province. That in itself is interesting because when people tend to think of separate schools, they tend to think of them as being Roman Catholic.

The act, in fact, does not refer to a faith; it refers to the rights of the minority faith to establish a board. Of course, it's talking about the Christian faith because that was what was extant at the time that the Alberta Act was put into place.

However, we are currently in the year 2012, and people are entitled to a public board that is not faith-based. Unfortunately, in the greater St. Albert area the public board was the Greater St. Albert Catholic board. Now, being a public board, as Minister of Education at the time I insisted that they had an obligation to public education, to provide public education choices. That board did not see it that way. They believed that they had a right to offer only permeated Catholic education.

Now, the hon. Member for St. Albert talks about permeation not being what was provided for in the Alberta Act, and he may well be right. But the fact of the matter is that over the years we've developed a minority faith school system around the province that's primarily Catholic except for St. Albert, and it's one where I would think it would be very difficult to remove your faith-based principles from the operation of the school. In fact, that's one of the bases of Catholic education in this province, that it operates on a standard in which the faith principles permeate what they do.

In almost all of Alberta parents and students have choice. They can choose to go to a minority faith-based school that's Catholic. Now, there are some parts of the province which don't have that because numbers don't warrant it, but there is a provision for establishing a minority faith school if the numbers ever did warrant it.

The problem in Morinville particularly is that there is not a secular school option, and people are entitled to that. People are entitled to go to school and to have school in a secular way without faith-based principles involved or, in fact, to ensure that their children are exposed to their own faith in their own way. That's one of the challenges that we always have in education is the balance between the role and rights of parents to teach their children their values and the role of the education system to ensure that children grow up having a fulsome understanding of the world that they're going to live in and the community that they live in and having respect and tolerance for others.

This is an issue that needs to be resolved in the greater St. Albert area. The fact of the matter is that the St. Albert Protestant school board does not exercise any of the rights of a minority faith-based school board. They don't exercise the right to hire solely Protestant teachers. They don't exercise the right to exclude others that are not of the Protestant faith. In fact, they operate very much like a public school board. One of the issues that was important to the St. Albert Protestant school board was the right to tax, but the fact of the matter is that even though minority faith boards have the taxation authority, there is no difference across the province between a public and a separate school board with respect to the funding for students under that board. So the right to taxation is a distinction without a difference.

No school board in the province has the right to determine exclusively their boundaries. So while the board may have had some concerns about whether or not they would ever extend beyond the limits of the city of St. Albert, the reality is that at some point in the future there could be in Alberta a reason to change school districts. I don't believe that that's the intention of the minister now. It certainly wasn't any part of the discussion. But there's no way that you can guarantee forever the boundaries of a board.

Here's a situation where you could do one of two things. You could under the existing School Act redraw the boundaries. But the interesting reality is that most of the parents served by the Greater St. Albert Catholic school board now approve of the educational opportunities that they have and, by choice, include their children in them. So just redrawing the boundaries would disenfranchise the majority of parents and students in that area who actually like the status quo. It's a very small number of people at the moment who want the secular option.

It really would not be in the best interests of the education of the children, which, after all, is what we should be focusing on in this discussion: what's in the best interests of the children? It would not be in the best interests of all the children in that area just to simply redraw the boundaries as some people have suggested we could do. It was suggested to me when I was Minister of Education, and I know it's been suggested to the current Minister of

Education: "The easiest solution is there. You don't need to pass a new act. You can just redraw the boundaries." In fact, under the School Act you could redraw the boundaries, but that would not be in the interests of the majority of the people whose children are going to school there.

The only real solution is the solution that the minister is proposing and that this act is bringing forward, and that is to establish a public school board in St. Albert, currently the St. Albert Protestant board, make that the public board, put Sturgeon as the public board for the area outside of St. Albert, and then recognize a minority faith board to cover the areas that are currently covered by both St. Albert and the Morinville-Legal area and the other minority faith boards that have been established in the area and consolidate them into a greater St. Albert Catholic board. That's what is being proposed here.

It's the only logical solution. It's a current solution for the current times. It's not something that everybody agrees with, but it is in the best interests of the children in that area, which is what this ultimately is all about.

9:00

The Deputy Speaker: Standing Order 29(2)(a). The hon. Member for Calgary-Varsity.

Mr. Chase: Thank you. I would like to address my question to the hon. Minister of Human Services, who has previously been Minister of Education. He and I share a number of values about the strength of the public system, which incorporates the Catholic system. He's very aware, for example, that you don't have to have a baptismal certificate or a letter from a priest to attend a Catholic school. A Catholic separate division does not segregate individuals based on their religious background, race, creed, colour, et cetera. That's why the separate school is part of the public school program.

I honestly want to indicate that this isn't a trap that I'm setting out for the minister, but I would be interested in how he feels about schools using religion as a requirement such that in order for you to attend the school, your parent has to regularly attend a Protestant church or you regularly attend a different type of school, and if you're not of a particular faith persuasion, then that school can draw a line and deny you access to their particular institution and still receive 70 per cent of public funding even though there is very much a case of discrimination.

I know the government talks in terms of: why choice? But when discriminating is used in the negative sense of limiting a person's opportunity to participate, Mr. Minister, can you talk to the House as to the legitimacy of a school that restricts based on religion?

The Deputy Speaker: Hon. Minister, we're talking about the bill of the Sturgeon and St. Albert school districts. If you want to answer, go ahead.

Mr. Hancock: Well, Mr. Speaker, very clearly, there needs to be a public school option that takes all comers, that's available for all students to go to. That has got to be paramount. But we also need to have choice in our system. We support choice in Alberta, and choice in our system in Alberta is what has helped to create the best education system in the English-speaking world. Not my words but the words of the Prime Minister of Great Britain when he spoke to the Parliament of Canada.

Choice has been one of the things that has helped to create that best education system in the English-speaking world. Choice involves religious choice in some circumstances, teaching choices, teaching methodologies, things that attract kids to school, perhaps, like sports schools and otherwise. As long as there's one public

school system that's a top-quality school system that is available for everyone else, then the ability for parents and children to make that choice based on whether it's religion or otherwise is perfectly valid.

I would correct the hon. member. The minority faith boards are entitled to accept only students of the minority faith if they wish. What we find with most boards across the province is that they will accept any student that wants to come as long as they are prepared to accept the religion that's taught or that permeates the school process.

Choice is very important. What we need to do and what we have to do with this act is make sure that there is a public option that's available to all students and needs to be available in Morinville. That's what this does. After that the choices that are available through francophone schools, through minority faith schools, through charter schools, through private schools, whether they're faith-based private schools or otherwise, and through home-schooling are all a wide range of choices which help to make the healthy system that we have.

The Deputy Speaker: Any other hon. member?

On the bill?

Seeing none, hon. Minister of Education, do you wish to close the debate?

Mr. Lukaszuk: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Thank you for this illuminating debate. It was interesting to engage in a variety of points of view. I think that with few exceptions we agree that Bill 4 is the right solution at the right time to provide the parents of Morinville with choice and with voice, and I would ask for the question on this bill.

[Motion carried; Bill 4 read a second time]

Bill 5

Seniors' Property Tax Deferral Act

[Adjourned debate March 8: Mrs. Jablonski]

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview on Bill 5.

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'll keep my comments brief. This is a good bill. It's a good idea. I think it will help our seniors in their desire to live as long as they possibly can in their own homes. It will remove a financial obstacle that many of them face in the form of their property taxes, and it will do it without in the long-term burdening other taxpayers. It doesn't seem to have a lot of downside, and it has a significant upside, if I may put it in those terms.

I would just urge the government to put this initiative in a broader context for seniors staying at home. One of the challenges that seniors face is inadequate home care. The benefits of home care are enormous. I would strongly support an expansion of publicly funded, publicly delivered home care and have it implemented across the province. I'm very aware in recent weeks of the inadequacies of the home care programs in parts of Alberta and, frankly, the inadequacies of the assisted living facilities in parts of Alberta as well.

While the government is moving forward with Bill 5, the Seniors' Property Tax Deferral Act, in a good way, it needs to also bring in other programs to help seniors stay in place, including home renovation and home health care programs and home support programs. I suspect one of the reasons the government isn't doing that more effectively is because of a philosophical

resistance to that somehow. I think that's a mistake. I frankly think that those kinds of programs not only are good for seniors but actually save money for the taxpayer, Mr. Speaker.

With those comments, I will once again say that I will be supporting this bill. Thank you.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Fish Creek.

Mrs. Forsyth: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm grateful to speak to this bill, the Seniors' Property Tax Deferral Act. Being an only child with an elderly mom, this bill resonates with me. I think our population is aging, and our seniors are a growing portion of the population. They have a unique set of circumstances and challenges that I think need to be addressed, and property taxes are, no question, one of them.

When we get to retirement age, we want to relax, and quite frankly we want to take it easy. Our seniors spend decades working hard and deserve to retire, but some have to worry. They're on fixed incomes, and money is tight. A fast-growing economy is a great thing to have. Great job prospects can't be taken for granted, but when the economy grows and so do the prices for all the things that they have to pay for, life gets tough for those on a pension.

9:10

Seniors have critical items that can't be skipped. They have to pay their mortgage. They have to pay the rent, and they have to pay for groceries. They also usually have to pay for medications. Property tax is something that cannot be avoided either, and the taxes go up with the rise in property values. Seniors end up feeling pinched.

There are some cold hearts out there that say: "Well, you know what? Sell your house or take out a home equity loan." Well, Mr. Speaker, that's not fair to our seniors. They deserve better than that. Seniors should be able to stay in their homes for as long as they can. That, quite frankly, is best for everyone. Our seniors are most happy – and I use my mom as an example – living in their home for as long as they can. They're healthy; they're comfortable. They deserve to be in their home. My parents lived there for some 60 years.

It is true that many seniors and my parents bought their home at a very, very low price compared to what my mom sold her house for today. But selling the home and moving doesn't really solve the problem. Selling at today's high prices means buying at today's high prices. It's a wash. You know what? It's a lot of hassle moving, and quite frankly it's not fun to uproot yourself, especially when you're in the comfort of your home and you're in the comfort of your friends.

I've seen these commercials for home equity loans on TV a lot. They seem like a great idea. You can travel the world by using the equity in your home. That may be good for some people, but they shouldn't be forced to do it just to meet their basic expenses. Going into debt to make it through the day is a bad situation, and we shouldn't encourage it.

A home isn't just a place where you live. Quite frankly, it's where your heart is. It's where your memories are. People want to keep property in the family. It doesn't always have to be a cottage or a cabin. It can be just a place, Mr. Speaker, where you and I grew up. Seniors want something to pass down to their kids and their grandkids. They don't want to sell their home or have a mortgage on their property.

You know, Mr. Speaker, I like and I know the Wildrose likes what this bill is aiming to do. It seems clear enough. Eligible seniors will have their property tax deferred until they move or

until they pass away. In the meantime, the government will pay the municipality for the deferred taxes. It will become a loan agreement between the senior and the government. Quite frankly, that seems reasonable to me. In larger cities in Alberta property taxes are over \$2,000 per year. Some cities get close to \$3,000. Combined with utilities, you could get easily to \$5,000 in total. This is a huge figure for someone living on a pension.

But for the Alberta government, which brings in revenue near \$40 billion, this is more affordable. Government has a role to play in helping those in need. The cure here is the deferral. By deferring the property taxes, seniors have more income to spend on their essentials like their grocery bills and their prescriptions. The money will be paid back. The government is not losing here. It's clear in the bill that interest will be paid as well as the cost of running the program.

Mr. Speaker, I do have some questions, not about the intent but about some details. One concern that I do have is the eligibility criteria. Now, I've read through this bill, and I didn't find an age for eligibility, so one must assume that the age is 65. In B.C. it's 55. In New Brunswick it's 65. I think that is something that the government has to clarify. Is it 65? Is it 55? What age makes sense? I think most Albertans feel that 65 may be fair, but that's something that the government has to clearly indicate in Bill 5.

I do want to raise another issue in regard to income. I don't see any income or net worth requirements in this bill either. My hope is that we recognize that seniors on a fixed income can have a valuable home because they bought it 30 years ago.

On some days, Mr. Speaker, I've done a lot of door-knocking. You can walk into a home that's considered a million-dollar home, and I happened to do that a couple of weeks ago. They happened to pick a great neighbourhood at a great time at what we would consider a great price. I was door-knocking, and the seniors invited me into their home. She was 88, and he was 89. You know, it was a cold Saturday afternoon, and I decided I would have a cup of tea with them.

Well, Mr. Speaker, I've got to tell you that I saw some things that I haven't seen in a long time: shag carpeting throughout the house – in fact, it was orange carpeting – the furniture was old, and the house was well kept. So you can't necessarily judge a book by its cover. We had a nice cup of tea, and they were explaining to me how they're struggling day by day and month by month. Even though they had this beautiful home in Lake Bonavista, it's that cover that we can't judge.

I think all seniors, no matter where they live, should be eligible for the property tax deferral. I don't think we want to get into means testing. After all, no matter what the income is, no matter what the property value is, it will all be paid back with interest.

I think what we have is a good piece of legislation, and I think it shows that we're going to recognize that our seniors are struggling with their bills and may need some help. I've explained – and I'm looking forward to the debate – some of our concerns about the age. Quite frankly, I'm surprised, to be very honest with you, after we've done some research about other deferral programs across the country, that there isn't an age in this bill. I don't know if it's because the government forgot it or if they just haven't determined what age should be in this bill, but I think that's an important factor.

We have seniors at 55 that are retired. [interjection] Oh, I hear the minister talking again, so maybe he'd like to answer. Is it 55, like in B.C.? Is it 65, like in New Brunswick or, for example, some of the other provinces? I talked about: are we going to have this means test? Ontario has their deferral program only available to low-income seniors.

After these comments I look forward to hearing what the government has to say. I will put on the record that the Wildrose supports the bill and the intent of this bill. We would like to be able to tell our seniors in our ridings: "You're 56, and you qualify" or "You're 66, and you qualify" or "No, we're not going to have any income testing on this particular piece of legislation."

The bill talks about the eligible property owners. It says quite clearly: "an individual who is a resident of Alberta, has attained the prescribed age." I think that for us it's important to find out what exactly the prescribed age is. I look forward to either the Minister of Seniors or the member responsible, Red Deer-North, clarifying that.

Mr. Speaker, with those words, thank you, and I look forward to the rest of the debate.

The Deputy Speaker: Standing Order 29(2)(a)?

Seeing none, any other member wish to speak on the bill? The hon. Member for Calgary-Varsity.

Mr. Chase: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I wanted to put it on the record that the thoughts, the proposals behind Bill 5, the Seniors' Property Tax Deferral Act, have been Alberta Liberal policy for some years. Obviously, we're therefore supporting the intent of Bill 5.

A bit of a history lesson. Going back to 1993, our Premier at that time, Klein, indicated to seniors, to public servants, to a whole variety of people that if they submitted to cuts in services to pay down the debt, in short order with the first surplus their sacrifices would be recognized. Well, Mr. Speaker, it's almost 20 years later, and the sacrifices that seniors made with regard to increased taxation in their property taxes are just now beginning to be dealt with through Bill 5.

There is no doubt that seniors can be house rich but economically impoverished, and for a senior to stay in their home as long as they physically can, as the hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview pointed out, they need supports. One of those supports – and this is a small but significant support – is the deferral of their property tax.

9:20

Now, the hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview talked about the need for other supports such as a break in terms of turning their house into a more accessible circumstance. My wife and I, thinking ahead, have just made some significant renovations to our house, and one of the renovations involved taking out the bathtub and putting in a shower with a built-in bench so that in the situation where our mobility is decreased, we would be able to continue to live in that house. Granted, it is a split-level, which involves some stairs. Because we could afford it, we were able to accommodate for our aging lifestyle, but many seniors on fixed incomes don't have that possibility.

The federal government used to have a program that allowed, for example, individuals to have their roofs replaced, that being part of a taxable deduction. It also had a program whereby seniors could make their homes more accessible. The federal government passed on those programs to the provinces, and unfortunately in this province that program that improves the accessibility has been eliminated by this government.

Now, it is important that the government have a very direct role in supporting seniors in their homes, and it's in the government's economic interest to do so because a senior can be supported in their home for basically one-twentieth on a daily basis of what it costs to institutionalize them in an acute-care bed. We've had the discussion about how many long-term care beds have disappeared

as the government allows them to be changed to supportive living or assisted living, which does not provide near the medical support absolutely necessary.

There are some wonderful volunteer organizations like Meals on Wheels, that I believe will be celebrating either its 45th or 46th anniversary this year. They do provide seniors with a degree of support in terms of an affordable home-cooked-style meal that is, obviously, healthy and will support them nutritionally. But I do believe the government should be stepping up to a greater degree, beyond Bill 5, the Seniors' Property Tax Deferral Act, to allow those seniors who are able to stay in their homes to remain there.

For example, Calgary-Varsity, which used to be considered an outlying district in the city's northwest, now very much can be considered an inner-city area, and the taxes for even small bungalows or even wartime-style houses in the Calgary-Varsity constituency are extremely high and do not support seniors in staying.

Now, there have been proposals, which I support, in terms of increasing the density, but where it would be of great help to seniors is, instead of having a grandma suite or a grandpa suite, to actually have a student suite in part of the seniors' existing house, a secondary suite. It would be rather supportive of seniors to take in a young person and be able to accommodate them within their own home.

I know that my grandmother in Saskatoon had a basement suite circumstance, and over the years numerous students who went to the University of Saskatchewan stayed in my grandmother's suite and helped her with the chores. Because of that help, she was able to stay in that family home for a considerably longer time period than she would have been able to otherwise.

I support Bill 5, the Seniors' Property Tax Deferral Act. I do have a degree of cynicism in that with the government not being willing to commit to not raising the daily living fee for long-term care homes, even with the money that seniors manage to save by deferring their property taxes, they could very well be systematically gouged for in private, for-profit long-term care if the government goes ahead, as the Premier suggested in her campaign for leadership, and removes the cap on seniors' long-term care residences. This may be giving seniors a little bit more time in their own homes, but when the taxes come due, will they have sufficient left to live in an alternative facility, whether it be an assisted living facility, whether it be a continuing care facility, whether it be a lodge or some form of long-term care? Will the seniors have sufficient money left in the end to be able to finish their lives with a degree of dignity?

That is a concern that seniors brought to my attention yesterday at the public forum debate on seniors' issues that Seniors United Now hosted at the McClure United church in Edmonton-Decore. Mr. Speaker, it's important to note that while I was the only seated MLA in attendance, there was representation from the Wildrose in the form of a young man by the last name of Genuis, and he upheld the Wildrose values very well. David Eggen, formerly the Member for Edmonton-Calder, represented the ND Party very well. The individual representing the Alberta Party was unable to attend due to an emergent circumstance. But as is so often the case, whether it's a public forum on seniors or a forum on health care, there was not a single representation on behalf of the Conservative Party.

I found that surprising because it appears that the government is being more supportive of seniors' needs through Bill 5, but in the whole city of Edmonton they could not find an individual to represent their policies at the seniors' forum. Now, there was no effigy placed in an empty chair – it was, after all, in a church circumstance – but knowing that seniors do vote and that seniors

are passionate about their voting, it seems to me that in order to complete the debate, representation by the Conservative Party at that seniors' forum would have been appreciated.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker, for this opportunity to speak on Bill 5. It is Liberal policy, and it will help seniors, provided they have sufficient money at the end of the selling of their homes, to be able to afford the alternatives without unduly taxing their families.

The Deputy Speaker: Standing Order 29(2)(a)?

Seeing none, the chair shall now recognize the hon. Member for Fort McMurray-Wood Buffalo on the bill.

9:30

Mr. Boutillier: Yes. Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I wish to stand today and say that I welcome many of the comments that have been made. The Member for Calgary-Varsity: I appreciate his comments as, certainly, I do the Member for Calgary-Fish Creek's. Clearly, I really do believe that despite all political party lines that are here, there is a sense of trying to do something that's so important for the very people that have built this province, our seniors.

As saddened as I am that they have failed to honour the commitment of a long-term care facility in Fort McMurray, I am very pleased by this commitment. Hopefully, all parties will support this important initiative. It's not a perfect bill, but it certainly is a bill that, in my view, in the spirit of helping our seniors, is important. I wish only that the principle and the value and the spirit of what is intended in this bill could have been applied to seniors when this government made a commitment to them four years ago to build a long-term care facility and have failed to this point in time to even break ground. And here it is over four years later. I think that's shameful because of the fact that we are a city of over 100,000 people.

With that, Mr. Speaker, I will be brief. I support the initiative of this bill and the spirit of this bill, and I would encourage all members in this Assembly to do the same.

The Deputy Speaker: Standing Order 29(2)(a)?

The hon. leader of the ND opposition on the bill.

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I certainly concur with the intent of the bill, which is to allow seniors to remain in their homes longer. I think that this is a very humane direction. Certainly, in the past there was much more extensive support for seniors to stay in their homes, as has been alluded to, and that was taken away by Ralph Klein's government under the pretext that we all had to do our bit to balance the budget. Those things were promised to be restored once that had been done. During the period of time when there actually were surpluses in balanced budgets, these programs were not restored. Now, on the eve of an election, a partial move is here, and I think it will be welcome.

I just want to caution people because I know that when I was involved on the council of the city of Edmonton, there were instances where residents were able to defer additional levies that were put on their property tax until they sold their home, but in some cases these levies soon amounted to more than the cost of the home. Now, I think that will be less likely in this case because it was a separate matter; it was sewage and roadway improvements that were added to the property tax. The city had moved in an area that was old style, mixed use, where there was some industrial and commercial and residential all in the same neighbourhood. The city moved to turn it into an industrial park, so they put in heavy-duty sewers and other very expensive infrastructure improvements and put the cost on as a local property levy. Those

costs mounted greatly, and the seniors that I tried to help at that time were unable to sell their homes because the debts had accumulated beyond the value of the home.

I would just like to point out, Mr. Speaker, that we are allowing seniors to defer these taxes and at the same time incur a debt against the value of their home. When they sell their home, they may receive very little for it, or they may have trouble selling it. I think that those are things that need to be taken into account.

I think, frankly, that we need to go a bit further than this if we're really sincere about keeping seniors in their own homes. Nevertheless, I think it will be helpful in many cases, and I join with other members here in indicating that I will support the bill.

The Deputy Speaker: Standing Order 29(2)(a)?

The hon. Member for Lethbridge-East on the bill.

Ms Pastoor: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I just will be very brief. I want to make sure that I'm on the record as supporting Bill 5, the Seniors' Property Tax Deferral Act. Clearly, for the last seven years I've been very involved in seniors' issues, and I believe that this is a good bill. It has been pointed out by some of the members across the way that, certainly, caution would be used in thinking of the future when the seniors do sign up for this.

One of the advantages of this bill is that it is a choice. You will have the choice of whether or not you want to defer your taxes, and you also will have the choice of being able to look at it as the years go by. You may not want to do it right away, but you may want to do it five years out, when you think you may have to move. One of the cautions was that sometimes this money may have to be used for nursing home care, which is a very, very strong caution. People would have to be aware of that.

The other thing is that I know that many, many seniors are house rich and cash poor. I would like to think that when they did this, they would have a little bit of extra money not just to pay for their medications and not just to pay for their food but to actually be able to live as opposed to existing. For a couple to go out to a show at night, it's probably \$25 just to get in for the show. A lot of them don't drive, so they would have to take a cab. Even if that little extra money would be able to give them one night out to something that they might enjoy, certainly to go out to watch their grandchildren doing whatever, particularly school plays and that sort of thing, although that isn't that expensive, I'd like to think that many of the seniors that I do see at this point in time who are really existing from bill to bill would actually be able to enjoy life.

That's one of the many reasons that I'm supporting this bill wholeheartedly. I think it's a good step forward. We'll be able to watch and see the effectiveness of it. B.C. actually has done this already ahead of us, so we can watch some of the things that they have done. In fact, there hasn't been a great pickup in B.C., but Alberta is not B.C., so we will see just how effective this is.

I am pleased that there will be a good evaluation system on this to be able to have good statistics and look at what the outcomes are, which is what this government would like to do in many other areas of their responsibilities. Let's look at the outcomes, and let's have good evaluations and audits, so to speak, in terms of how successful our programs are.

With that, Mr. Speaker, I'm very pleased to support this. Thank you.

The Deputy Speaker: Standing Order 29(2)(a)?

Seeing none, the hon. Member for Calgary-Glenmore on the bill.

Mr. Hinman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's an honour to get up and speak on Bill 5, the Seniors' Property Tax Deferral Act. I

must say that in principle I'm in favour of this bill, but as with many of the bills this government seems to pass when it comes to property, I don't know that they think things through very well and, certainly, leave some holes that are of concern.

The interesting thing – and my colleague has already brought it up to start off with – is that it doesn't define what a senior is. In a lot of places 55 is a senior in order to get into places; in other places it's 65. [interjection] Well, minister of education, you say you know the age? [interjection] Wait and see. Isn't that typical of this government? There'll be an election, and then wait and see. Unbelievable, the rhetoric that comes out of some of the ministers from this government.

We don't know what the age is and who qualifies. I mean, a senior member of the family? So if the parents are dead and the senior member of the family is 21, are they eligible? Perhaps there's a little bit of sarcasm in that question. Nevertheless, this government doesn't seem to define or realize or it takes this attitude that, well, we'll let the cabinet. Under Property Tax Deferral Loan, section 4(6) says, "The Minister, in consultation with the Minister of Finance, shall periodically determine the rate of interest applicable."

Another area of concern for me, Mr. Speaker, is: why is this government so compelled to think that the minister or cabinet needs to be able to have such powers to determine such things and not leave it up to the market or a formula so that it's actually, you know, based on prime or something like that?

9:40

That leads to my next question and concern, Mr. Speaker, and it's been brought up by several members now. What is the value of the home? How long are the loans going to be eligible for? I live in a part of Calgary that is very interesting. There are still a number of citizens there that bought their homes in 1958, '59, '60 through to '62, when they first got married, and they're still living in that home. There are several of them that are 90 years plus in their homes. They bought those homes for \$15,000, \$12,500, and now those homes are valued between \$380,000 and, I would say, \$550,000. They're astounded at the so-called asset-rich yet cash-poor position they're in.

What I want to point out to the government and what can happen is that we're getting to a time when people are retiring at 65. They don't have a lot of savings, and the pension plans are not keeping up to the rate of inflation in the government. If, in fact, they were to start doing that at 65, now at 85, 20 years later, at \$2,000 a year and compounding that, you have to ask: what is going to be the total cost on that house? Some members have talked about that, especially the Member for Edmonton-Highlands-Norwood, who's had personal experience, being on city council. What is the cost of that house?

I've been in other areas both here in Edmonton and in Calgary where houses are actually a liability because these are neighbourhoods now that are being refurbished and where new houses are being built, so they actually tear down the old houses, and it's the value of the lot. How many seniors are going to be caught in that situation where today they think they have a house that's of value, but 20 years from now, when they're 85, or 30 years from now, when they're 95 and still living in their home, everything else in the neighbourhood has been rebuilt and looks new and up to date, yet here's this old house that is past its time and needs to be torn down and to be built up? There's nothing in here that talks about a cap that's going to I guess protect the taxpayers of Alberta on what the value is of that home and whether it gets exceeded and becomes a liability.

Again, going back to the Minister of Finance determining what interest rates they're going to charge on this home, I'm old enough, Mr. Speaker, that I remember when interest rates, depending on where you were borrowing from, in the early '80s were anywhere from 18 to 22 per cent. A lot of people might laugh and say: oh, we'll never see that again. Well, I would say: never say never. We're at a debt now where I can see interest rates shooting up, escalating at quite a rate. We can look over to Europe and see that some of those countries can't sell their bonds and how they've gone up to 10 and 15 per cent in short order because the government can't put out the bonds to buy back.

I would recommend on something like this that you would tie that loan to a 30-year bond rate or a 20-year bond rate, where there's at least some security not only for the government but for those people that are making the loan on their homes, not just stuck to the minister's whim or the fact that prime could go up. Now is a great time to secure, you know, offset this loan on the other side of the paper.

The eligible owner of the property "may apply, in accordance with the regulations, for a property tax deferral loan for the purpose of paying the qualifying property taxes on the eligible property owner's eligible residence." Again, how and when will the regulations be established? It's just concerning that that this has been brought forward almost hastily, and we just don't know what is going to be the whim of the minister on where it's set, what it's going to do.

We do not have it defined by age. I think that it's even set up such that a senior could own it, in fact, with their 30-year-old child and allow it to go forward on that basis. There are no parameters that would prevent that.

It's not defined by income. It's interesting in the other jurisdictions that have these. I mean, there's B.C., there's Ontario, and there's P.E.I. – it seems like there's one other jurisdiction here in Canada that has these – and each of them has addressed other areas. I wonder if the minister even looked at those other jurisdictions to realize, you know, that, yes, age is something to consider, that income is something to consider, a cap. The percentage of the value of the home is to be considered. Then again, like I say, that value can peak and then go down the other side once it becomes a liability because the home is past its purpose and being able to be renewed.

I used to rent in a home down in Rosedale that was built in 1912. I don't know that that house is going to be of any value. Someone will end up buying it purely to tear it down for the lot value. I don't know that that would be one where it would be wise to be saying, "Yes, senior, go ahead, and we'll pay your taxes for you on that home," especially one that's just turned 65 and just entering into that retirement age. It could go on for a long time.

I also think it's interesting when we look at the dilemma that we're in. This government now for the fifth budget is running a deficit totalling \$16 billion. Since the tide started receding, instead of the money coming in, it's been pulling out faster than we're collecting the revenue. It's interesting as you look around the world at the economic dilemma that we're in. I kind of compare government and its spending to the dog chasing its tail. It makes you dizzy watching it, and eventually in exhaustion it will lay down and rest or whatever. This is the dilemma that we put seniors in, that because of government spending, inflation has kicked in.

The question is: with all of the monetary easement that's been going on for the last few years, what's going to be the value of the houses in a couple of years? On the positive side, I guess we maybe don't need to worry about capping the value of these homes because they could double and triple or quadruple again

because of the monetary easement. On the other side, I have seniors that paid \$12,000 for their home in 1959, and they are currently paying \$2,200 to \$2,400 in taxes on those homes. They've been retired, though, some of these people, for 20 years, and their retirement pension has not kept up with the cost of inflation because of the government's monetary policies and the inflation value that we've seen in homes.

Mr. Speaker, I certainly understand and appreciate the intent and the principle of this bill. I think it's a good idea, but I do not think that the government has done its due diligence to put the proper parameters around this bill. Of course, as the Minister of Education so eloquently says, just wait and see. I guess that when you've been in government for 41 years, you get that attitude of telling everybody: "Just wait and see, and don't actually worry about thinking things through because you haven't had to in the past. Why should you now?" It comes back to bite too many citizens here in the province. I do not believe they want to just wait and see. They want good legislation. They want to understand it. They want the parameters around it. They certainly don't want it resting with cabinet or with one or two ministers to say: "We'll pick. We'll choose. We'll decide what that interest rate or what that property value is or whether or not you can go to the courts to get your fair compensation."

It's just wrong, Mr. Speaker. Arbitrary law hasn't worked well anywhere in the world. It certainly isn't going to work well here. You need access to the courts in a proper, defined way, and I wish the government would define these bills a little bit better.

With that, I'll sit down and listen to any other comments that might be made.

The Deputy Speaker: Standing Order 29(2)(a). The hon. Minister of Education.

Mr. Lukaszuk: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. This hon. member is waxing eloquent on how the Minister of Education is telling him to wait and see, but I'm wondering if he actually is aware what the answer to this question is and whether he realizes that the definition of a senior is actually well defined in Alberta's legislation. Perhaps he wouldn't have that many questions if he read other accompanying acts. Is he aware of the definition of senior?

9:50

Mr. Hinman: I would love for the Minister of Education to read in here that it's going by Alberta's definition of a senior and actually describing that in the bill. I doubt that the minister has even read the bill. If I've missed it, I'd be grateful. But with the amount of work that we have to do on this side because this government needs to rush things through, I'll be the first to admit that I haven't always gone through it with a fine-tooth comb. I have not seen the definition or where you would find the definition. I'll be happy to listen to the minister enlighten me on this subject.

The Deputy Speaker: Standing Order 29(2)(a)?

The hon. Member for Rocky Mountain House on the bill.

Mr. Lund: On the bill. Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I want to congratulate the sponsor of this bill. I think this is long overdue. When the hon. Member for Calgary-Glenmore was making a number of comments about issues that will be addressed in the regulations, I found interesting the comments about a house devaluing. That is a real possibility. But likely if that is occurring because of the market value on the taxes, then the taxes are probably going to be going down. The one thing that isn't going to

devalue to any great degree will be the lot itself. In many cases that will probably appreciate as opposed to devalue, so I think there are ways that it can all be covered off.

The only thing that I would suggest – probably it would even complement this bill – would be the ability for some people that have disabilities to be able to stay in a home under the same circumstance. Those types of people have a very limited income if they're on AISH. Now, the increase to the \$1,500 would sure help, but to have to pay the taxes – I think that if those could be deferred, those types of people would also benefit greatly from this type of program.

I think these things can all be worked out. Certainly, the Member for Calgary-Glenmore did point out a number of things that have to be taken into consideration when the regulations are developed.

The Deputy Speaker: Standing Order 29(2)(a). The hon. Member for Calgary-Glenmore under 29(2)(a), right?

Mr. Hinman: Yes, under 29(2)(a). I'm just trying to look through here because I thought that there was some mention about a family member with a disability. I'm just going to hopefully look through here and comment on that. As I answered the last question, I was disappointed but not at all surprised that the Minister of Education just wanted to pontificate, and he doesn't have the answers which he is expressing. He likes to pontificate and show his brawn but doesn't show his brains too often, Mr. Speaker. I guess I'll have to say that I can't see it quick enough. I thought I had it underlined, but I think there is something in here about those that have those disabilities.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Airdrie-Chestermere.

Mr. Anderson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. This will be two for two today on a government bill that I'm supporting. I'm very happy about that. [some applause] Thank you. It's good to see I'm having an effect.

I'd like to speak in favour of the Seniors' Property Tax Deferral Act. This, of course, is a policy, and I don't by any means claim that our party is the only party in here that has been pushing this policy for a while. I do know that the Minister of Seniors absolutely has been pushing this initiative for a while, before he was Minister of Seniors, as have several others in that caucus on the PC side. It's certainly something that I actually campaigned on during my nomination back in 2007, when I was with the PC Party. Under my own seniors policy it's something that I would advocate for, and I was glad to see that under the Wildrose our seniors policy also became one of our policies.

This is a very good initiative. It's one that I think has broad support. It's obvious to me that the reason that Alberta is a great province, of course, has a lot to do if not a majority to do with the seniors that have built it. They've put their sweat into providing for their families, in creating a legacy that we can all be very, very proud of. We have a debt of gratitude that we owe to them, and I think this bill under debate makes an effort to repay our seniors in that way but does so in a way that is very fiscally responsible, which is something I like about this initiative.

The problem here is very clear. Retired seniors are quite often in a situation where they long ago paid off their home. They worked hard to own their own home, but because of a growing economy and inflation combined with fixed incomes, they are in a pinch. Essentially, they are asset rich but cash poor.

I don't think it's right that a senior would be put in a position where they would have to use the furniture for firewood, so to

speak, or after paying off this home for so long and in many cases for years living in this home, essentially being forced out of their homes. That is, I guess, a part of life in some ways, and I understand, you know, that we can't always have what we want, but so many of these seniors have worked so hard to pay these homes off. To say, after they spend their whole lives paying off their mortgage, "You've got to move into a smaller apartment and give up your home" – if there's some way we can at least assist them to not have to do that, a fiscally responsible way of doing so, I think that that's a very worthwhile endeavour.

In my view, people are happier and healthier if they're in their homes. They shouldn't have to leave because of growing property taxes, which, of course, is a huge problem here because as their home value goes up and they're on a fixed income, they start having great difficulty paying their property taxes.

Alberta has a world-class economy. We are the envy of many around the world largely because of our oil and gas resources and the freedoms that that permits us and the resources that it gives us. We've had to make the most of what those are, and many of our seniors were part of doing that, of taking those resources and building something special here in Alberta.

I, too, feel that there are some unanswered questions about this bill. With regard to seniors I'm assuming that when we're talking about seniors, we're talking about age 65, I imagine, but if that's different, I would certainly like to know so that I could tell my constituents. It would be clear if it was directly in the bill, as my colleague was saying.

Let's say that it is 65. It would be good to know whether this bill only applies to those 65 and over and also at what income levels a senior would be able to utilize this program. What I wouldn't like to see, Mr. Speaker, is this program essentially abused by people. You know, if it's not lined out, I think that the system here could be abused and used as, essentially, an investment tool for folks that don't really need to defer their property taxes, whose income is such that they're fine paying them. They're still making a lot of income. If you're talking about seniors over 65, it's a small percentage of people, but it's just, I think, necessary to have some ground rules to make sure that no one is abusing the system, so to speak.

I would like to see those in committee. At least, I would like to see that more readily defined. You know, if a senior's income is under \$80,000 a year, \$65,000 a year, something like that, those folks could take advantage of it, but if it was over that amount, perhaps they wouldn't have access to that program. Whatever the line is – and I'm certainly not the person to make it – it would be nice, using empirical data, to see what would be the best way to go about doing that and looking at other jurisdictions but also just using common sense here.

10:00

At the same time, I don't want to see the threshold set so low that it essentially disqualifies seniors making \$30,000 or \$40,000 or \$50,000 a year. That may sound like a lot of money to someone who doesn't have to pay a mortgage because it's paid off or whatever, but indeed with inflation, where it's at sometimes, and the rising cost of living and so forth \$50,000 just does not stretch, even when the mortgage is paid off, as far as a couple might want it to.

So whatever that number is, it would be good to have that number going forward so that we could actually make sure that it was based on some empirical evidence and that we were all comfortable with it in here. I'm assuming what will happen now is that it will just be left to regulators in the bureaucracy to deal with. I think that that question should be something for this House to decide and not some arbitrary decision of the ministry.

That's kind of the main thrust of my support for the bill. I would like to note really quickly, though, that other jurisdictions do use this method. In B.C., for example, they have a program. The program is opened at the age of 55, but you can't collect your pension from the CPP until you are 65. So in a day and age when people are living and working longer, it makes sense to me that this program would kick in at age 65, which I'm assuming it does, but I would like some clarification on that if possible.

There were just a couple of other points, but by and large I just want to say congratulations to the minister for bringing forward this bill. It's a good bill. If we could get some clarification around those two little things, I think it would sail through committee very quickly as well and would be helpful to all those involved.

Let's pass this bill. For those in my constituency that might read *Hansard* after this or watch the video or whatever on this bill, what this bill allows seniors to do is to take the property tax that they owe to the municipality and essentially put a lien for that property tax against their home. When that home is eventually sold off after those seniors have passed on, then the property tax, that lien, is paid off, and therefore the government is paid back that amount. In other words, it allows seniors to use equity in their own home in order to pay property taxes and increasing property taxes.

Anyway, it's a very good idea. If this works well once it's set up, potentially there might be some other expenses that this could be used for. But, of course, property tax is the most obvious one, so let's start there and see how that goes and whether the program is working and get the kinks out, and then we can talk about other ways that we can help our seniors deal with the rising costs of living in Alberta as our economy strengthens, as we enter yet another welcome oil and gas resource boom.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Deputy Speaker: Standing Order 29(2)(a). The hon. Member for Calgary-Glenmore.

Mr. Hinman: Yeah. I always appreciate the thoughts and the review that the hon. Member for Airdrie-Chestermere brings to these bills. He stimulates my thinking as he brings forward his ideas. The question that I have and what I was thinking about as he was talking: you know, should we set a limit on whether someone is eligible for this? I think that age is certainly something to look at.

When we look at the other four jurisdictions – P.E.I., Ontario, B.C., and I keep forgetting the other jurisdiction that has these – I guess I'm concerned because when I look back at history, in my neighbourhood, you know, in the '60s the house was worth about \$12,000. By the '70s it had doubled and a little bit, and it was worth \$30,000. By 1982, when we were kind of peaking in the housing industry, it had a little better than tripled to about \$100,000 to \$120,000. Then it kind of steadied off, and then we saw it accelerate again.

It's interesting because it's eligible income. If we go to that, you know, the pensions are kind of set, yet someone again might have invested a lot and have assets outside their pension plan, and therefore they can bring money in and out. In my mind I don't know that I want to see it tied to income level because of the variation. There are more and more people that are buying their homes late in life and maybe just barely have it paid off, so their income is at a good flow.

I guess I just have a few questions. You know, you talked about a formula or something to see whether or not someone is eligible on their income level. But for myself, I guess, I wonder whether that's really something to look at, that if someone has reached that

age, they could just access this because they've chosen to. They might have actually put that into their plan, once this is set up and going forward. That income of \$2,000 or by this time maybe \$4,000 a year is something that they're planning on. Any other further thoughts or comments on that?

Mr. Anderson: Well, those are very good points. I guess I just worry about somebody who is, let's say, a senior who is very wealthy, making \$120,000 to \$150,000 a year or something like that – they do exist; there are more than you would think – just from their investments and so forth and then using this as essentially a tool to increase their income, frankly, kind of unnecessarily. I mean, there is a cost to government on this. It's not a total cost, but it's a deferred cost to the government. We don't want this to turn into some kind of . . .

Mr. Hinman: A gravy train.

Mr. Anderson: Yeah, essentially a gravy train for those. This is meant for a very specific group of people to cope with the rising cost of their property tax in their real home, you know, the home that they've paid off the mortgage for and so forth and have built some equity in. I just want to make sure it's not abused in that regard.

I'm open to ideas on that. I wish the government would give us the details on it prior to passing it, as you mentioned.

The Deputy Speaker: Standing Order 29(2)(a)?

Seeing none, any other hon. member wish to speak on the bill?

Seeing none, the chair shall now put the question.

[Motion carried; Bill 5 read a second time]

Bill 6

Property Rights Advocate Act

[Adjourned debate March 8: Mr. Prins]

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Airdrie-Chestermere.

Mr. Anderson: Thank you. I welcome this opportunity to speak to Bill 6, the Property Rights Advocate Act, in second reading. This one I'm going to vote for, so that makes three for three today of government bills. [interjection] I know. It's tempting. Maybe one day we'll let you come over with us. I mean, that can work both ways.

Bill 6, the Property Rights Advocate Act, is certainly one that I'm going to support. However – I'm sorry – I'm not going to be too flowery in my language on how we got to this point. I know that will shock people. I don't give the government much credit in this regard for this act, and I'll explain why.

10:10

If the point of an advocate is to give a voice to vulnerable members of society, then there's perhaps no group of citizens in Alberta that needs greater protection from their own government than Alberta landowners if you look at this government's record over the last few years. Unfortunately, Mr. Speaker, this government's flawed bills have stepped all over the rights of landowners, and they're still on the books today. An advocate, though a strong first step in recognizing that a problem exists, fails to tackle the real problem of the poor state of property rights in our province.

Bills 19, 24, 36, and 50, legislation that was passed by this very same government, still exist, and they are the very reason landowners feel that they are in need of protection. Let me tell

you: it is incredible to see that even now, after all the different amendments and all the different bills and all the different marches around Alberta on the junkets, the travelling road show with all these different ministers, and so forth, anger with this government in rural Alberta over the property rights issue is stronger than it was even at the height, one or two years ago, because still this government has not listened.

Nowhere has that been more clear than with regard to Bill 50. This is a bill that this Minister of Energy as well as the current Premier went around Alberta – I don't know about the deputy Premier. I didn't notice that he spoke against it nor some of the others. Specifically those two individuals spoke against Bill 50, spoke against the way that it had circumvented the proper regulatory process.

The Minister of Energy gave a very fine, eloquent speech about it on his campaign YouTube website when he was running for the PC leadership, explaining very clearly and very correctly on every point that Bill 50 was absolutely wrong headed, that it circumvented the proper independent needs assessment process, that the lines were probably not needed. Although that would have to go through the regulatory process, they probably were not needed because of the ability to create electricity from local generators using natural gas such as is being done in and around Calgary with the new Shepard plant and so forth. That would probably lessen the needs for these new lines if not eliminate them completely, certainly the north-south lines between Edmonton and Calgary. Certainly, it would make it so that we wouldn't need both. We may need one but probably not both.

These were clearly laid out, and it was eloquent. It was correct. I know it's a position that that member held for a very long time prior to that. I don't know when the Premier decided to be opposed to Bill 50, but she was during her leadership race. No doubt about it. There was some hope although she made kind of a bizarre finding where she decided that the heartland transmission line was appropriate after she was elected. The heartland transmission line was apparently fine. Now, she did mention during her time running that she thought that one was needed. So although I disagree with her on that, she did mention that.

However, she specifically said that at least one of the north-south ones was not likely needed and that certainly we should go through the proper regulatory process before determining whether to go forward on that. So she froze those lines, and for a time there it looked like maybe she was going to at least cancel one of them for the time being or that maybe she would go back to the drawing board completely and have AltaLink and these other companies go through the proper regulatory process, a needs assessment.

Instead what we got is a group that was quickly appointed. Although they had some expertise in the field, they were no more knowledgeable than, for example, the Minister of Energy, who had just a few months earlier gone through and explained why these lines were not needed. So it's not like this panel didn't have a clue, but they were certainly not engineers. They were not people that were any more qualified than the Minister of Energy, the Premier, folks like Keith Wilson, or energy experts around the province, whether they were working for Enmax or even companies like TransAlta, who have frankly admitted that the regulatory process was not properly followed and that there probably wasn't a need for two lines. Even folks like that were very clear that this process needed to go back to the drawing board.

But she skips all that and goes to this committee. This committee comes back and says: no, we're going ahead with the two lines, but we do admit that the process used to arrive at these lines being built was completely flawed in virtually every respect.

They didn't go through the regulatory process. This is the government's panel. They didn't go through the proper regulatory channels. That can't happen going forward. Cabinet shouldn't have that unilateral power to circumvent the regulatory needs assessment process and so forth. In other words, yeah, you did it all wrong.

It was completely wrong headed. The system was totally bastardized, but: "Don't worry. We're going to still go ahead with these lines because we still think they're needed. Then the next time, 25 years or 34 years down the road, when you want to build more lines, then go through the process." At that time go through the proper process. It was absolutely stunning.

Of course, what that has led to is a lot of the anger that you see in rural Alberta, and that's very reflected in the polling that you see around the province right now. People are mad about this issue, especially in rural Alberta. So would it be nice to have a property rights advocate act to tell folks, kind of like a grief counsellor, why they've been aggrieved and why the government, yes, has stepped on your rights? Yes, you don't have due process; and, yes, they didn't do that proper independent needs assessment, which means there are these big, horrible lines going over your lands and taking up your viewscapes and all of that sort of thing.

Yeah, we can have an advocate, and that's better than nothing, I guess. But what would have been real leadership would have been this government saying: "You know what? We blew it on Bill 50." Repeat the bill. Go back to the drawing board and say to AltaLink and ATCO: go through the proper regulatory process. And if they pass that proper regulatory process, then they could go forward and build the lines. I don't think they would if it was a truly independent panel, but at least we would have actually had engineers and people that knew what they were talking about, electrical engineers and so forth, bringing their testimony forward before a panel, the panel weighing the evidence and getting to a decision that would actually be one that Albertans could respect and could be confident that they weren't being getting gypped, that these were lines that were actually needed to keep the lights on.

People are very upset about that. There is reason to be upset. Rural landowners are not the only ones that should be upset with Bill 50 in particular. Urban voters should also be upset with Bill 50 because these costs are all going to be on the bills of urban ratepayers. They calculate a very small – it's just a couple of bucks a month or whatever it is. Just a couple of bucks a month. Unfortunately, that's not necessarily true if the industrial users get off the grid because of increased expenses to their electricity bills and if they want to do on-site cogeneration and so forth and get off the grid. Those costs will then go to the regular ratepayers that are still on the grid, so those costs could go very high. It's just one more cost on their bill. What was once \$2 or \$3 becomes \$10 a month, becomes \$20, \$30 a month. Who knows?

Pretty soon it becomes a problem for those seniors, for example, that we were talking about earlier and the problems that they have living on their fixed incomes as prices go up. So we should not be callous to just a few dollars more a month on our bills. It's always just a few more dollars. It's always just a few more tax dollars, a few more dollars on the bill. A few more this, a few more that. Pretty soon we're overtaxed, and there are too many fees. People can't afford their rent. People can't afford to put food on their tables and so forth. We've got to try to bring costs down, not find reasons to drive costs up.

So I hope that this property rights advocate will be able to do something constructive other than to be a grief counsellor for the lack of property rights that are enjoyed in this province.

10:20

I am shocked that this government did not see fit to pass Bill 201, brought by the Member for Calgary-Glenmore, to strengthen property rights in the Alberta Bill of Rights even further than they are right now. I thought it was a very reasonable proposal that should have been in there and would have made the property rights advocate's job a lot easier because there would be clearer definitions in the Bill of Rights as to what property rights entail.

There's probably not enough time to talk more in second reading about Bill 50, Bill 19, Bill 24, and Bill 36, but the one that really gets me is Bill 50 because at least with Bill 36 and Bill 19 and a little less so with Bill 24 there's a genuine debate and a disagreement of opinion on the ideas of that bill. Bill 50 is different. I know that the Premier – at least she said it during her leadership race – and I know that this Energy minister know that what happened with Bill 50 was wrong, yet they still went through with it. They still went forward with it. It's not right, and that's why Albertans in rural Alberta right now are supporting, at least if you believe the polls – and I know that polls are polls, but if you believe the one released most recently, the Wildrose is leading in rural Alberta, and there's a reason for that. [interjections]

I enjoy it when the other side laughs. I love it when the other side laughs at that. I'm just looking at the polls. Maybe it's a total lie, and they can go back to sleep; they have nothing to worry about. [interjections] You'll win 80 seats. You have nothing to worry about. Go back to sleep.

The Deputy Speaker: Hon. member, let's talk about Bill 6.

Mr. Anderson: Absolutely. If they could just get it through their heads that one of the biggest reasons they are losing badly in southern rural Alberta and are now tied or losing in northern rural Alberta is because they have entirely butchered property rights over the last four years through these bills. Bill 50 is, in my view, the most egregious example of that.

If we are interested in having a property rights advocate, that's great, but it's window dressing. It doesn't get to the bottom of the issue, and the bottom of the issue is: repeal Bill 50 in particular. Repeal Bill 50. Repeal all of those bad land bills, but particularly Bill 50, and send those power lines back to the drawing board. Go through the proper regulatory approval process to see if we can't get away with not having to build all of those lines and save Alberta consumers money and save some of our viewscapes and save some of our farmland and save a lot of money for this province and still be able to keep the lights on. That is the whole point of why that bill needs to be retired.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Deputy Speaker: Other hon. members? The hon. Member for Calgary-Varsity.

Mr. Chase: Thank you very much. My hon. colleague from Airdrie-Chestermere did a very good summation in trying to show the damage that Bill 6 is attempting to correct. He rightly pointed out the problems with bills 19, 24, 36, and 50, which I don't think any single piece of legislation – this is probably the third or fourth attempt by the government to try and correct the problems associated with Bill 50, which is basically about expropriation.

After seven years in this House I was pleased to see that the government finally made the children's advocate independent of the ministry and had the children's advocate report directly to the Assembly. After the fact I'm assuming that's what this property rights advocate person is going to do, to be a sort of intermediary, hopefully an individual rights champion, to a degree a referee.

This government controls the powers of referees to a very great extent. We've seen cases of individuals such as our Ombudsman leaving before their term was up out of frustration in trying to advocate on behalf of Albertans. I'm not convinced that the individual who receives this position will be given the power to fulfill the position. Auditor General Fred Dunn left before his time was up because of the frustration of interacting with this government, that would accept his recommendations and then fail to act on them.

It seems that the government is being pressured to create other positions, for example a seniors' advocate. Now, good governance, in theory at least, should not require somebody outside of the ministry to advocate on behalf of individuals approaching the ministry for a resolution of their concerns, but we're seeing more and more external advocacy positions being created.

Another example of an individual who quit prematurely and talked about death by a million cuts was Frank Work, our commissioner for privacy, because of the way this government withheld information and blocked him.

We've had ministries interacting against each other in the form of occupational health and safety under the Ministry of Human Services getting static from the Seniors ministry with regard to hearings, so I'm not convinced.

While Bill 6, establishing a property rights advocate, heads in the right direction, the failure within ministries to serve the needs of Albertans and then the failure through crossministries to work together – a prime example of crossministerial failure is the Auditor General attempting to get information from the Securities Commission in order to complete an audit and being stonewalled for such a length of time.

So we can create this so-called property rights advocate sheriff, but if we only give him a tin star and no other powers beyond that star to advocate on behalf of individuals, then it appears that it's just more window dressing.

Now, what we've seen in the eight years that I've been here is a move of this government from legislation into regulation, to empower ministers to such an extent that they singularly overrule any other commission. A good example of a commission being sidelined and ignored is the Alberta Utilities Commission. Now, there have been problems, obviously, with the spying and so on and needing a whole battalion of sheriffs to defend the people on the boards from the advances of 80-year-old women who object to having their property expropriated, but we had the potential.

I have frequently praised the Member for Foothills-Rocky View for bringing forth the equivalent of a land-use framework bill that would, using water as the basis, divide Alberta into six regions and then determine, almost like a traffic cop, what was allowed in which of the various regions. In other words, there'd be a plan, a laid-out set of rules governing what went where and under what circumstances individual rights are superseded by public good. Maybe to a small extent Bill 6, the Property Rights Advocate Act, will be able to a small degree be that traffic cop, but if we'd had the land-use framework established, then bills 19, 24, 36, 50, and now 6 would quite likely have been unnecessary. But what's happening now in the province, whether it's clear-cutting in the Castle or clear-cutting in Bragg Creek, is that it's, you know: go for broke; do whatever damage that you're allowed under legislation; first in right, first in time to undertake; and then we'll let your descendants figure out the problems afterwards.

10:30

In Bill 6 the property rights advocate powers are sort of in a position like the Human Rights Commission of being a quasi-judicial circumstance where they can't overrule a ministry. All

they can do is potentially go on bended knee and open hands to a minister and say: you know, think twice about expropriating this person's land.

The hon. Member for Airdrie-Chestermere talked about the lack of expert advice, the lack of outside scientific, empirically based knowledge, as he was talking about, circumstances.

Now, I know that there are a number of members in this House who represent Calgary constituencies who attended a couple years ago the presentation by Enmax about local power generation, this being natural gas, which is considerably cleaner and more efficient in terms of its power delivery than two lines hauling coal-based, prehistoric, emission-spouting energy from Wabamun all the way down to Calgary. Finally the government recognized and took the cap off wind power generation limitations that they'd put on it for so many years. But the reality is that Calgary, with a population exceeding 1.3 million, cannot only generate its own power through this gas-powered, locally generated electricity but will not suffer the power loss that questionable lines coming all the way from Wabamun do.

The government has committed to decommissioning these old coal-fired generating systems, and the government has suggested that, well, we only use clean coal in Alberta. I haven't seen any white lumps of coal, but that's what the government would have us believe. We are building these transmission lines to hook up with power sources that are going to be decommissioned. You have to question the logic of putting all this money into projects that lose power along their lines and are an environmental eyesore, which gives Alberta an even blacker eye.

Now, we've tried very hard to justify our oil sands and talk about alternative energy sources, and scientifically we know that the amount of emission from any oil sands development is minuscule in comparison to coal-generated power, yet here we go with two transmission lines using outdated heavy-polluting energy sources. It makes no sense.

How can the sheriff appointed by Bill 6, the property rights advocate, say to the government: you're using outmoded forms of energy transmission and outmoded transmission lines to bring this energy down south, which will magically then find its way to be connected to the Montana tie-line. Without the expertise, without the power this advocate is not going to be able to change the wholesale handover to TransAlta Utilities and ATCO energy that the public will pay for. The bill seems to vary between \$5 billion and \$15 billion. There's discussion as to whether some parts of the line will be buried or not.

Good luck to this property rights advocate in straightening out problems that this government has caused and failed to correct. I wish the individual well. I will be supporting Bill 6 because anything that intercedes on behalf of Albertans opposing this government's unilateral expropriation has got to be of some value, albeit limited.

The Deputy Speaker: Standing Order 29(2)(a). The hon. Minister of Energy.

Dr. Morton: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased to rise to speak to Bill 6 and the three Cs and the A.

The Deputy Speaker: Standing Order 29(2)(a). Five minutes. Go ahead.

Dr. Morton: That's right. Three Cs and the A: courts, compensation, consultation, plus an advocate. That's what Albertans have been looking for when it comes to property rights protection: access to the courts, due process, the right to fair compensation as provided under the Expropriation Act and under common law for

takings and also consultation, and on top of that we've added an advocate, not in a department where there might be some taking going on but in the Justice department, where you have an independent advocate trained in legal matters and trained in property rights.

The opposition party here has spent two and a half years scaring landowners and muddying the facts. Bill 36, of course, protected property rights, access to the courts, compensation, and consultation. The hon. Member for Airdrie-Chestermere stood in this House and praised Bill 36 two and half years ago, and he has changed his mind.

Mr. Hinman: He's seen the light since. When will you?

Dr. Morton: Yes, he has, for fairly clear reasons.

Let me switch, then, to his comments on Bill 50. He commented on the fact that I was critical of Bill 50 last year during the leadership and prior to that. Indeed, I was. [interjections]

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. minister has the floor.

Dr. Morton: I think part of being intelligent, Mr. Speaker, is knowing what you don't know, and I don't think either of the two gentlemen there would claim themselves to be energy experts. I certainly don't either. So when I ended up being the Minister of Energy and responsible for Bill 50, I did what I think an intelligent person does, and we appointed a committee.

The integrity of this committee has been impugned. I'd remind Albertans that one member is a professor emeritus at the University of Saskatchewan with five books on electricity and a member of the Royal Society. Another is the dean of the faculty of management at the University of Alberta. His research area is on energy economics. The third member was a member of the Alberta Utilities Commission. Three people, independent and well versed in different aspects of electricity.

They listened to all the groups, and what did they hear? Nobody disputed this – nobody disputed this – that the growth that Alberta is experiencing is the single biggest predictor of what we need in terms of new energy. Since the need for north-south reinforcement was first identified, 700,000 people have moved to this province since 2002. By the very earliest date that one of these lines could be in service, which would be 2015, another 200,000 people will be here. In the meanwhile, the GDP is growing at 3 per cent or 3 per cent plus a year, again the strongest single predictor of energy need. Nobody who appeared before this committee disputed that.

I would say this on the issue of gas. Will there be more gas-fired production? Absolutely. Will it be near Calgary? Absolutely. But it will also be up in some of the existing coal plants in brownfields. As older coal plants are phased out, you'll see greater use of gas. There is social acceptance already there. There are existing connections. They're concerned about money, saving hundreds of millions of dollars in connections. These brownfield sites are already connected to the grid. Perhaps most importantly, the existing brownfield sites have water licences. Water licences are hard to get unless you're Enmax. Water licences are hard to get in southern Alberta.

Mr. Speaker, I can sum up very quickly. When I'm presented with facts that show that the opinion I previously held was wrong, I change my mind. I suggest some of these other hon. members do the same.

10:40

The Deputy Speaker: You have 30 seconds under 29(2)(a).

Mr. Anderson: Absolutely. Well, yeah, it's funny how his difference of opinion from a couple of months ago to now is

completely based on principles and not knowing the information before, but the stand that I took when I wrongly took a speech that your office had prepared for me as a rookie MLA and read it and made that . . .

An Hon. Member: You were just a mouthpiece.

Mr. Anderson: Exactly. Unfortunately, I was just a mouthpiece.

The Deputy Speaker: Hon. member, the 29(2)(a) time is finished. The hon. Member for Calgary-Glenmore on the bill.

Mr. Hinman: It is very interesting, that last question from the Minister of Energy on 29(2)(a), where he got up and wanted to explain why his ability to get new information and change was okay, but other people seem to do it for different reasons than that.

On Bill 6 I guess I have to disagree with my colleague in that he's going to vote for it. I'm going to vote against it because the whole purpose of Bill 6 is to try and put a Band-Aid on something that's wrong, and I don't want to put on a Band-Aid. I don't want to start a whole new property rights advocate at this point, with an election looming. Again, this government perhaps wants to go to the people – obviously, they do – saying: “Don't worry. We'll have an advocate for you now. You don't need property rights. All you need is an advocate because we're going to consult with you, we're going to give you the courts, and we're going to give you the compensation but not in all jurisdictions and not in all areas.” If you actually own the title to a property, you will, but if you have a lease, a mineral lease or a forest lease, other areas like that, the consultation, the compensation, and access to the courts, it's still up to the wonderful minister to decide whether or not they're fair. I'm astounded.

Mr. Anderson: He just said he doesn't have any expertise.

Mr. Hinman: Yes. And he has no expertise. That is a bit of a conundrum.

Mr. Anderson: He had to appoint a committee to figure it out.

Mr. Hinman: An expert committee.

So, Mr. Chair, I have some real problems with Bill 6 in the fact that this is purely a bandage for a wound that should be sewn up by repealing bills 19, 24, 36, and 50, which many have talked about very well.

Bill 36 is interesting. It divides the province into seven land-use regions and authorizes cabinet to implement sweeping regional plans for each area of the province that override whatever had previously been in place. This means that central planners – central planners – like our fine Minister of Energy at the Legislature rather than locally elected and accountable municipal councils will ultimately get to decide on what activities are going to be permitted or prohibited on private land in every region of this province. I've listened to him say that he would trust elected people over and above the judicial courts. I find that quite astounding, but it was enlightening when I heard him talk on that.

This act also allows cabinet to extinguish existing rights held under licences, permits, leases, and approvals with limited or no compensation. I spoke with one miner who really contemplated taking out a mineral lease in Alberta because he said that it's one of the worst areas. But he went to SRD and got their assurance: no problem; that area is not going to be under the lower Athabasca regional plan. He put two years of sweat equity into that mine only to have it swept out from under him because LARC changed its plan because another big business said: we might want to put in a

hydro dam. So all of a sudden it was changed, and he doesn't have any compensation, he doesn't have any consultation, and he has no access to the courts. I'm sorry, but a land advocate isn't going to help him either.

It's just a joke. It's just wrong. How they can sit over there and say that it's okay, that these regional planners are going to look after the province. That isn't what this is about. It's about looking after investors. It's about looking after property owners. It's about looking after businesspeople who have leases and permits and other approvals to go forward. Yet this government and, again, their wonderful central planners are going to speak on that and say whether or not it's okay to go ahead.

The smaller acts of 1924 and '36 are trumped and are designed to give licences to Albertans to operate businesses. Whether it's the Forests Act or the Public Lands Act or the Water Act, each of them is mandated to distribute their licence for various industries in a sustainable way. The Forests Act, for example, is explained on the SRD website. “This Act establishes an annual allowable cut in coniferous and deciduous [trees]. It prohibits persons from damaging the forest in any way and allows the Minister to construct and maintain forest recreation areas.” So there are conservation provisions in it. Those who get a tree harvesting licence assume that they are granted the freedom and right, the licence, to harvest certain trees. This would be a reasonable assumption until now.

After LARP, the lower Athabasca regional plan, came out, we now know that these licences are liable to be extinguished if the minister decides suddenly that for whatever reason, because nobody can appeal or demand a rationale, he wants to extinguish their licence in his regional plan. What is in Bill 6 that changes this fact? Nothing. The advocate will simply tell the landowner: oh; there's no appeal, there's no consultation, and there are no courts. Then he might include his landowner's complaint in a report at the end of the year. How wonderful.

The point is that all kinds of industries and professions rely on these individual acts to plan their business and hire employees. They even base their decision on whether they want to come to Alberta to do business and hire people on the reliability of this framework. As indicated, there are stewardship provisions already built into them, but these new superacts, especially the Land Stewardship Act, trump all of this and throw it into doubt.

The argument is that we need to think about sustainability or stewardship or conservation, but the acts we are talking about include this consideration. Some of these acts we're talking about even have conservation in the title: the Coal Conservation Act, the Oil and Gas Conservation Act, the Oil Sands Conservation Act. If they're not doing their job, Mr. Speaker, why not bring each of them in to make the adjustments, like the government does all the time? We need rule of law, not an advocate to explain to landowners which superlaw takes his rights to appeal and gives arbitrary powers to the minister and the cabinet. It's just not right. Bill 6 isn't needed. Property rights are needed. An advocate isn't needed. We need the courts and the due process of law to ensure that investment will go on.

What's kind of interesting to me is that when I first got elected, one of the first I want to say draconian economic decisions of this government was to come up with a fair share for Albertans, and that caused us a lot of grief. We're still, I think, trying to struggle and recover from that in different areas. They went through many, many amendments. I think it was six. Was it six amendments to the new royalty framework?

Mr. Anderson: I lost track.

Mr. Hinman: They finally had to revert to what it was. I don't know whether we've got four amendments now or how many we're going to go through, I guess two amendment acts. This Bill 6 is a third amendment act. [interjection] I'm sorry; I'm confusing the former Minister of Education.

Mr. Hancock: You're confusing yourself. The royalty framework worked perfectly fine.

Mr. Hinman: Oh, listen. Now he's telling us that the royalty framework worked perfectly fine. So why on earth did we ever go through such a prolonged procedure and so many tweaks and keep saying, "Oh, we're going to change this, and we're going to change that"?

This is the problem with this government. They don't even realize the damage they do. They're like the bull that's gone through the china shop. It has no recognition of china, doesn't know that it's done anything wrong. Therefore, we have to worry about where the bull is going to run next. It's so bullheaded that it doesn't know that it doesn't belong in there.

The problem that we have with Bill 6 is that it's the third attempt of this government to bandage up the problems of ignoring and walking away from property rights here in the province. Although some are going to say, "Well, at least let's put the Band-Aid on," I'll say: "No. Let the bleeding continue. Let the damage be shown so that people will react sooner rather than later."

10:50

We've had two and a half years. It's interesting. The Minister of Energy talks about the fearmongering that's going on. I think of the fearmongering that this government has been doing to get a power line from Edmonton to Calgary for – what is it? – eight, nine years now, since 2002, and he's telling us that it's critical now?

What the report actually said was that we needed one, that a 500-megawatt line from Calgary to Edmonton would be more than adequate and probably would only cost \$500 million, one-seventh of the current thing. [interjection] It's interesting that he says that no one denied the growth. What they all did argue about, except for those who were actually building the lines, is that we don't need the lines. We can build the power plants, level the playing field.

What's really most interesting about the critical line committee is that they said, you know, that they were given the parameters of this government to come out on that decision, but the parameters were wrong. Even they said: now that we've given the government the go-ahead which they want to have to build these lines, we still will say, as the Premier and the Energy minister said, that this belongs back at the AUC.

Even after they were forced, because the parameters say that you need to make a decision, they said: you know, future decisions should go back to the AUC. It was very plain, very obvious, and when asked about the economics of it, even they said: "Well, no. It's more about the footprint. It's not about the economics." If it was the economics and we needed that, one line would suffice. We don't need two. We certainly don't need two DC lines.

Technology has changed somewhat, but still the cost is exorbitant. It really has to be looked at as to whether or not that's the right thing. This Bill 6, the Property Rights Advocate Act, isn't going to address any of that. Those costs are going to occur on the bills of the residential people of Alberta, and it'll be a domino effect. As industry is driven out of this province, just like

they did with our new royalty framework – they drove industry out. The taxation wasn't able to be brought in to meet our needs.

We're still at a \$16 billion deficit because of the incompetence of this government and the legislation that they bring in that doesn't respect property rights or business licences in any form. They just look at it from their own selfish point of view.

We don't need Bill 6. We need property rights. We don't need a government that says that they're going to go out and consult after they pass new legislation. That isn't what the problem is. It's about having people with rights. That's what a constitutional democracy, Mr. Speaker, is all about, having the rule of law and being able to actually know in advance what the court should rule. We seem to have more and more arbitrary decisions. This government is fixated on the idea that if it brings it into the government policy area, we can therefore protect and plan for the future.

It's interesting. I've had a little bit of experience with land use and buying property in different areas of the province, and it's amazing how it changes over the years as elected people are brought in because they're not representing the local people. One thing I can assure you, Mr. Speaker. With this centralized decision-making in Edmonton the local people will not be able to reverse and change these laws.

Of course, this government is going to say: well, we know better. Central planners always do say that: "We know better. We can plan better for what you need in your area. You just don't understand." They're going to step on lots of rights going forward. It'll be to the detriment of the industry here in the province. It's wrong. It shouldn't be passed. I would just hope that we'll have an election before this government, because they're going to pass this bill, spends the money to set up a property rights advocate at the expense of the taxpayers when all we need to do is just protect the property of those people here in the province.

I'll look forward to some piercing questions under 29(2)(a) on this. Thank you.

The Deputy Speaker: Standing Order 29(2)(a). Hon. Minister of Energy, you have five minutes.

Dr. Morton: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I suspect that everybody in the Assembly here tonight would agree that in repeating things that aren't true, no matter how many times you repeat them, they're still untrue. I think that if any Albertans happen to be listening tonight, they would have no idea what's actually in Bill 6.

For the sake of clarity, I'd just like to read a few key sections from Bill 6 to put into context some of the misleading comments that we've heard from the hon. gentleman there. The preamble is very clear here:

Whereas the Government of Alberta believes that land owners should be consulted about proposed legislation that affects their property rights.

So consultation, the first of the three Cs.

Secondly, they believe "that land owners should be appropriately compensated where their lands are affected." So compensation, the second of the three Cs. [interjections]

The Deputy Speaker: Hon. Member for Calgary-Glenmore, the minister has the floor for five minutes.

Mr. Hinman: I heard lots from him when I was speaking.

Dr. Morton: That was somebody else.

Courts, compensation, and consultation. If there are any citizens of Alberta still listening, let me take them to section 2(1) of Bill 6, application of the Expropriation Act.

2(1) The Expropriation Act applies to an expropriation authorized by the law of Alberta and prevails over any contrary provisions that may be found in the law.

It prevails. The Expropriation Act prevails, and it provides very clear rights for an administrative appeal and, if you're not happy there, to the courts. This prevails over Bill 36 if that's his big concern.

Then I would take him to section 2(2).

Where a person has a right to compensation as a result of an expropriation or compensable taking . . .

I emphasize: a compensable taking in law.

. . . that person must have recourse to an independent tribunal or the courts, or both."

Now, a compensable taking, Mr. Speaker, refers to loss of value as determined in the common law. Expropriation is under a statute, and it sets out the rights to an administrative appeal and then access to the courts. This extends it to a compensable taking, and a compensable taking is a loss of value in land pursuant to it could be a private action or it could be a government action. It addresses precisely – precisely – the type of adverse impact that our friends in the third party have been complaining about. Again, it guarantees recourse to an independent tribunal or the courts or both.

Let me conclude, then, by going to section 4, complaints, which is the office of the property rights advocate.

A person may make a complaint to the Property Rights Advocate . . . relating to

- (a) an expropriation of that person's land, or
- (b) a compensable taking of that person's land.

Again, either under a statute or simply through an adverse impact of a government act that would negatively affect value.

This is section (2):

The Property Rights Advocate shall prepare a report . . . provide a copy of the report.

I skip down to subsection (5) now. If the advocate determines that there has been something wrong or if there has been misconduct on the part of a government authority, that report is admissible in a court of law or an administrative tribunal or both. So you have exactly what an independent advocate is supposed to be, somebody that helps a landowner. The landowner doesn't have to pay for this service. It's an independent advocate that will study the situation, file a report, and if a wrongdoing has been found on the part of a government act or government acts, that report is then admissible in a court of law or the administrative tribunal.

What else is there to say? They have spent three years confusing the fact here, and we have finally now put out the three key issues: compensation, consultation, and courts. I know why they're upset. [interjections] Without this issue how the heck are they going to get any votes? Courts, compensation, consultation, and an advocate to take the side of landowners: that's what Bill 6 brings.

The Deputy Speaker: Section 29(2)(a) is done. It's finished. [interjection] Hon. member, the five minutes for 29(2)(a) have terminated.

Is there any other member wishing to speak on the bill?

Seeing none, hon. Minister of Environment and Water, do you wish to close the debate?

Mrs. McQueen: Close the debate. Question.

The Deputy Speaker: All right, then. The chair shall now call the question.

[Motion carried; Bill 6 read a second time]

11:00 Government Bills and Orders Committee of the Whole

[Mr. Cao in the chair]

The Chair: The chair would like to call the committee to order.

Bill 2 Education Act

The Chair: Are there any comments, questions, or amendments to be offered with respect to the bill? The hon. Minister of Education.

Mr. Lukaszuk: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. It is with great pleasure that I rise today to move an amendment – I believe we'll number it as A1; the table clerks have the requisite number of copies for distribution – to Bill 2, the Education Act. We'll give some time for the pages to circulate that amendment.

The Chair: Let us pause a moment. The page will deliver the amendments to the members.

Hon. minister, you can proceed now.

Mr. Lukaszuk: Thank you. We all know, Mr. Chairman, that change can create concerns and anxiety among those impacted by change. We also know that in a society as diverse as ours, there is always a balance to be struck between individual values and beliefs and the values and beliefs of society as a whole.

Our education system, Mr. Chairman, must strike this balance. It must both respect individual values and beliefs and reflect the common values and beliefs of Albertans as embodied by foundational legislation such as the Alberta Human Rights Act and the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms. I want to ensure that Bill 2 appropriately strikes this balance and addresses a concern that has been raised by many Albertans since the introduction of Bill 2; namely, the role of parents and family life in a child's education. This is important for all families in Alberta, of course, but for families who choose home education for their children, this is of special significance. For these students, learning happens in the home and is integrated into the family's life rather than at a set time of the day.

The crux of the matter, Mr. Chairman, lies in three elements already contained in the Education Act. One, the Education Act speaks to the government of Alberta's commitment to providing choice to Alberta families in education programs and methods of learning. Two, the Education Act also speaks about religion, and like in the School Act it allows parents to exclude their children from religious instruction or exercise. Three, there are certain elements in the Education Act, some new additions and some retained from the School Act, that reinforce the role of parents within a child's education. These concepts together play a foundational role in a child's education and, indeed, in a child's life. However, I believe that it is necessary to clarify and articulate the connection between these three concepts.

We heard from a number of home-schooling parents that they were concerned that the legislation was not clear. They were concerned that government was requiring that they teach things they do not agree with. Let me be clear, Mr. Chairman. We believe that parents determine the religious instruction of their children. Let me underscore that. We believe that parents determine the religious instruction of their children.

Accordingly, I propose to add a new statement to the preamble of the Education Act to read as follows:

Whereas the Government of Alberta recognizes that parents have a right to choose the religious and ethical traditions in which their children are raised; that a child's education begins

in the home; that parents play a foundational role in the moral and spiritual formation of their children; and that these principles are reflected in the commitment of the Government of Alberta to provide parents with choice in education, including public schools, separate schools, Francophone schools, charter schools, private schools and home education programs;

This amendment to the preamble honours the government of Alberta's commitment to choice, to respecting conscientiously held spiritual beliefs and ethical traditions, and to respecting parents' rights when it comes to these very important matters.

Mr. Chairman, at this point I conclude, and I adjourn the debate.

[Motion to adjourn debate carried]

The Chair: The hon. Government House Leader.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I move that the committee rise and report progress and beg leave to sit again.

[Motion carried]

[The Deputy Speaker in the chair]

The Deputy Speaker: I shall call the hon. Member for Edmonton-Calder to report.

Mr. Elniski: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The Committee of the Whole has under consideration a certain bill. The committee reports progress on Bill 2. I wish to table copies of all amendments considered by the Committee of the Whole on this date for the official records of the Assembly.

The Deputy Speaker: Having heard the report from the hon. Member for Edmonton-Calder, does this Assembly agree?

Hon. Members: Agreed.

The Deputy Speaker: Opposed? So ordered.

The hon. Government House Leader.

Mr. Hancock: Mr. Speaker, given the hour and given the progress I would move that we adjourn till 1:30 p.m. tomorrow.

[Motion carried; the Assembly adjourned at 11:09 p.m. to Wednesday at 1:30 p.m.]

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Province of Alberta

The 27th Legislature
Fifth Session

Alberta Hansard

Wednesday afternoon, March 14, 2012

Issue 17a

The Honourable Kenneth R. Kowalski, Speaker

Legislative Assembly of Alberta
The 27th Legislature

Fifth Session

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Drysdale Sarich
Evans Snelgrove
Groeneveld Swann
Hinman Xiao
Jacobs

Standing Committee on Privileges and Elections, Standing Orders and Printing

Chair: Mr. Prins
Deputy Chair: Mr. Snelgrove

Amery Mitzel
Boutilier Notley
Calahasen Pastoor
DeLong Quest
Doerksen Stelmach
Forsyth Swann
Jacobs Tarchuk
Knight Taylor
Leskiw Zwozdesky
McFarland

Standing Committee on Public Accounts

Chair: Mr. MacDonald
Deputy Chair: Mr. Goudreau

Allred Kang
Benito Mason
Calahasen Rodney
Chase Sandhu
Elniski Vandermeer
Fawcett Woo-Paw
Forsyth Xiao
Groeneveld

Standing Committee on Public Health and Safety

Chair: Mrs. Fritz
Deputy Chair: Dr. Taft

Bhardwaj
Blakett
DeLong
Doerksen
Forsyth
Notley
Rodney
Rogers
Swann
Woo-Paw

Legislative Assembly of Alberta

1:30 p.m.

Wednesday, March 14, 2012

[The Speaker in the chair]

Prayers

The Speaker: Good afternoon.

Let us pray. Let us keep ever mindful of the special and unique opportunity we have to work for our constituents and our province, and in that work let us find strength and wisdom. Amen.

Please be seated.

Introduction of Guests

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

Mrs. Sarich: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It is an honour and privilege for me to rise today to introduce to you and through you to all Members of the Legislative Assembly 39 students from Northmount elementary school in the fine constituency of Edmonton-Decore. The learning motto for Northmount school this month just happens to be Honesty. I know that these are exciting, exuberant young people that will be the future leaders. I am happy to say that they are joined today by their teachers, which includes Mrs. Norma Nay, Mr. Derek Lutz, and Ms Jasna Mandic, and also parent helper Mrs. Denna Gates. I would ask them now to please rise and accept the traditional warm welcome of the Assembly.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Cardston-Taber-Warner.

Mr. Jacobs: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm honoured today to rise to introduce to you and through you to all my colleagues in the Assembly 27 grade 6 students and eight of their leaders from Taber, Alberta. These students have had about a six-hour bus ride to get here this morning, and I'm honoured to have them in our presence today. They are accompanied by their teachers Mrs. Selena Frizzley and Mr. Pat Pyne and parent helpers Mr. Kevin Pyne, Mr. John Muller, Mr. Perry Weinberger, Mrs. Shauna Pavka, Mrs. Larena Passey, and Mrs. Melanie Bos. I would ask these students and their leaders to please rise – I think they're in the public gallery – and receive the warm applause of this Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Red Deer-North.

Mrs. Jablonski: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Today I'm honoured to introduce to you and through you to members of this Assembly representatives from Hockey Alberta and from Red Deer College. Rob Litwinski is the general manager for Hockey Alberta. He lives in Red Deer. He has three children, two boys and a girl. His daughter and his son both play hockey, and this weekend he has the honour of travelling up to Fort McMurray for provincials with his daughter. Then we have Len Samletzki. He's a board member and the CFO for Hockey Alberta, and he's from St. Albert. Also, we have Michael Donlevy. Michael is the vice-president of community relations for Red Deer College, and he's also the board chair for the Westerner Exposition Association.

They are here today, Mr. Speaker, to help celebrate and honour the new partnership between Hockey Alberta and Red Deer College that I'll be speaking about further in my member's statement. I would ask them to stand and receive the warm welcome of the Assembly.

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

Mr. Johnston: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm honoured today to introduce to you and through you to all members of this Assembly Anthony DiNunzio and Nicolle DiNunzio. I would ask them to stand at this time. Anthony is a recent arrival from Pennsylvania, and he has come to Alberta because of the tremendous opportunities here. He will be working in the medical field. Nicolle is a constituency assistant for Calgary-Hays and keeps me on track and ready for work each day. I'd like you to give them the warm traditional welcome of this Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Stony Plain.

Mr. Lindsay: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's an honour to introduce to you and through to all members of the Assembly members of the Lapa family: Sarah, Natalie, Emily, and Andrew. They are a home-schooling family from Spruce Grove and moved to Alberta nearly three years ago from British Columbia. It's their seventh year of home-schooling. The Lapas are here today to observe the procedures of the House. I'd please ask them to stand and receive the warm traditional welcome of the Assembly.

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

Mr. Hehr: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's truly an honour today to introduce a young lady I met very briefly prior to us coming in the House today. She arrived in her Roman chariot like I did today. Her name is Mallory Pavka. She's from Taber, and she goes to St. Mary's school and is a grade 6 student there. Would everyone please extend a warm welcome to Mallory and welcome her to our Legislature.

The Speaker: The Minister of Education.

Mr. Lukaszuk: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Timing is everything. I would like to introduce to you and to all members of this Legislature a constituent of mine, Mrs. Deborah Price. Please stand up. Thank you kindly. Mrs. Deborah Price has been a visitor also in British Columbia's Legislature, and she was introduced over there and made her way into B.C. *Hansard*. Now she lives in Castle Downs, a great constituent. Now she will be introduced and will be in Alberta's *Hansard*. I certainly hope that she's not moving eastbound and that she's not moving to Saskatchewan any time soon. So to you and through you, Mrs. Deborah Price.

The Speaker: Are there others? The hon. Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development.

Mr. Berger: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. On behalf of the Member for Athabasca-Redwater it gives me great pleasure to rise today to introduce to you and through you to all members of the Assembly a group of agriculture producers from the Athabasca-Redwater area. They are members of the Athabasca-Redwater agriculture advisory committee, and I'd ask them to please rise and receive the warm welcome of the Assembly wherever they are.

Members' Statements

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Red Deer-North.

Hockey Alberta/Red Deer College Partnership

Mrs. Jablonski: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. On January 19, 2012, Hockey Alberta moved into its new home at Red Deer College. Hockey Alberta, also known over its 104-year history as the

Alberta Amateur Hockey Association, has a bold vision, to become the most progressive and innovative sport organization in Canada. By moving to the Red Deer College campus, Hockey Alberta took one more step in achieving this grand vision.

Hockey Alberta and Red Deer College believe that this partnership could become one of the most progressive relationships between a provincial sport association and a postsecondary institution in the entire country. Hockey Alberta serves a large membership of over 90,000 participants in this province through 200 local minor hockey associations and 200 teams in senior, junior, and female hockey.

Hockey Alberta and Red Deer College recognize that their partnership could further the mutual goals of both organizations. These goals include the development of leadership potential through the promotion of hockey and the enhancement of work experience opportunities for college students.

Also in partnership with Red Deer College a future sport administration village will serve as the hub of hockey coaching, refereeing, and leadership development for the entire province. Hockey Alberta along with Red Deer College plans to develop a facility that will act as a provincial training centre and provide resources to test new programming ideas, techniques, and delivery strategies.

The partnership of Red Deer College and Hockey Alberta's vision of a provincial training centre on campus at RDC is one that will help to carry Hockey Alberta towards its goal of becoming the most progressive and innovative sports organization in Canada.

Mr. Speaker, I would like to congratulate Hockey Alberta and Red Deer College for their wisdom in developing a partnership that will help Hockey Alberta become the most progressive and innovative sports organization in Canada.

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

1:40 Integrity in Government

Dr. Swann: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It's the Alberta Spring. After 41 years of PC government Albertans can see the rot and its dark cousin, cynicism, creeping into the province. The final straws for most people were the indecent 32 per cent income boost embraced by the Tory leadership, monthly pay for committees that don't meet, and a too-rich severance for MLAs, supported by the current Premier. To that add an antiquated electoral system that is totally controlled by the richest in the province. This government doesn't have the decency to reduce the \$30,000 limit on election year donations that grease the way to consecutive Tory majorities. Alberta, the best democracy money can buy.

Add the disgust people are feeling about their health care professionals being bullied and in some cases dismissed for daring to challenge the mismanagement of our cherished health care system. There are credible reports of preventable deaths and a very demoralized health care workforce. A further insult is the Premier's reversal on her commitment to have a public inquiry to investigate the many instances of abuse of power.

Seniors' care would be an embarrassment if it weren't so serious and life threatening, with more cases coming forward of negligence, harm, and financial exploitation of our most vulnerable.

And now the revelations about the Tory leadership candidate misappropriating funds for their campaign. It's too much. Mr. Speaker, Peter Lougheed must be grinding his teeth. Some citizens have felt their trust betrayed and pulled away from the stench, perhaps not realizing the need more than ever to be engaged, to

help elect members with vision and integrity. This PC government has gone too far.

What is needed is a made-in-Alberta revolution. Let's make the Arab Spring the Alberta Spring. If Egypt can do it, maybe there's hope for Alberta. I'm calling on all Albertans who care about democracy, public health care, public education, and our reputation as a responsible business and environmental province to meet with others in your constituency and investigate your candidates for these values. Yes, get mad.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Hays. [interjection] Calgary-Hays, you have the floor.

Retrospective by the Member for Calgary-Hays

Mr. Johnston: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It is with mixed emotions that I rise today to give what is likely to be my final member's statement as the MLA for Calgary-Hays. I have had the privilege of serving the great people of Calgary-Hays since 2004 and have seen our province go through good times and hard times.

Mr. Speaker, I would like to briefly comment on how well I feel we've done as a province while navigating through these difficult times and the downturn in our economy. I believe it's no secret that we were the best-prepared jurisdiction to weather the economic storm. Both our province's employment rate and average weekly earnings remained the highest in the country. Our population has also been growing at a rate higher than the national average, and our economic growth is once again the strongest in this country.

I would also like to mention the progress made in my home constituency and the Calgary area. From the Calgary ring road to the Deerfoot extension to the seven new schools built in my constituency and the new south Calgary hospital, we have followed through on the commitment to Albertans by responsibly investing in the infrastructure that our province needs.

In closing, Mr. Speaker, I would also like to commend the work of my colleagues here in this House. Again, I'd like to commend the citizens of Calgary-Hays for allowing me the honour of serving them for the past eight years.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker. [applause]

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Airdrie-Chestermere.

Mr. Anderson: Congratulations to that honourable member from Calgary-Hays.

Alberta's Representative in Asia

Mr. Anderson: Mr. Speaker, this Premier's indecision on the Gary Mar affair is embarrassing to herself and to Alberta's reputation in Asia, our most important emerging trade partner. As someone who lived in Asia for two years, honour and reputation are everything in these cultures, and this debacle is sullyng our province in those nations' eyes and making our provincial leadership look exceptionally weak.

The facts are not in doubt here. We know Mr. Mar had \$262,000 in personal debts from his PC leadership campaign that he needed to pay off and that he held a fundraiser to help him with that. We know an invitation was prepared which specifically invited guests to a \$400-a-plate dinner to hear Mr. Mar speak about business opportunities in Asia.

The invite also mentioned that a trip to Hong Kong was to be auctioned off, with the obvious implication that the trip would include hanging out with Alberta's number one man in Asia,

obviously an inappropriate use of a senior government official's position to personally profit no matter how you spin it.

We also know that someone involved with the dinner figured out that the first invite looked bad and sent out a replacement invite that only mentioned an evening with Mr. Mar and his wife, with no mention of the trip auction. Despite that, the trip was still auctioned off for \$20,000.

We know that Mr. Mar says that he didn't do anything wrong and that the Premier threw all of this to the Ethics Commissioner to investigate, only to find out that he has no authority in the matter. Now the Premier wants to refer this to one of her favourite things in the world – wait for it – a committee.

Honestly, Premier, how is this real-life leadership? It looks like an episode of *The Three Stooges*, starring Gary, Allie, and Moe Corruption. This shouldn't be hard. The facts are in front of you. Either Mr. Mar should be fired or sanctioned or exonerated by you, Premier, not by yet another committee and not after the election. Stop flopping around like a fish out of water and find your feet. If you are unable, I know a strong Alberta leader named Danielle Smith who is ready and able to step up and lead.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Seniors' Benefit Programs

Dr. Brown: Mr. Speaker, today I want to speak about our government's commitment to seniors. Alberta is a great place to work, raise a family, and retire. However, for some seniors retirement years can be challenging. That is why our government is committed to helping Albertans age with the dignity and respect they so deserve.

Alberta provides government support to over 425,000 seniors. The Alberta seniors' benefit is the best in Canada. It provides financial support to single seniors earning less than \$24,600 and to senior couples earning less than \$40,000 per year. We provide dental and optical assistance to lower income Albertans to help cover the cost of dentures and eyeglasses. We provide Blue Cross health insurance at no cost for all Alberta seniors. We have an excellent program for prescription drugs. Seniors pay only 30 per cent of costs up to a maximum of \$25.

We are the only province to provide assistance to low-income seniors with extraordinary expenses such as appliances. We're beefing up our home-care and nursing services to help those who have health challenges remain in their homes. We provide tax relief to all Alberta seniors by freezing the provincial portion of property taxes after 65 years of age, and we're bringing in a seniors' property tax deferral program as set out in Bill 5. This program will allow seniors to defer all or part of their property taxes until they sell their home, helping to free up money they would otherwise spend on property taxes. It will help seniors stay in their homes longer.

Mr. Speaker, our government will continue to improve programs and services so that Alberta remains the best place in North America to live and to retire.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-North West.

Library Services

Mr. Blackett: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased to rise today to speak to you about the continued investment being made to support the people and communities in Alberta through one of our most venerable institutions, the investment in this province's public libraries. I know how Albertans value libraries. I know how valuable they are throughout this fine province. They are one of our community meeting and learning spaces.

Public libraries enrich the lives of us all: families, new Albertans, people of all ages, incomes, and backgrounds. Through SuperNet and our partnership with the Alberta Library, TAL, and the Alberta public library electronic network, APLEN, public libraries bring the world to us.

Mr. Speaker, libraries are not just about books; they are meeting places in communities, and they are the hubs that help make these and keep these communities strong. Libraries help to break down social and economic barriers and are places where individuals, families, and new Albertans can search for a job, learn a language, or let imagination soar.

When my family and I enter our local Crowfoot library, I know that we are opening a door to possibilities. When I read to preschoolers, we're opening the doors to their future. Crowfoot library is a big part of my family's life and that of my community, and libraries play a big part in the lives of all Albertans.

Mr. Speaker, support for Alberta's libraries continues. Within Municipal Affairs' budget for 2012-13 a 5-cent increase in per capita rates for public libraries is being brought forward, which is a total of \$300,000. This increase is a reallocation of funds within the existing public library services budget in Municipal Affairs. It will go directly to public libraries throughout the province.

As I said, Mr. Speaker, libraries enrich our lives. The government recognizes this. This is why we direct funding to public libraries in the province, and we've increased it over the last four years. Work continues with valued library partners in this province to ensure that all Albertans, no matter where they live – from Coutts to Fort McMurray, from Hardisty to Blairmore – get to enjoy these most important institutions.

1:50

Oral Question Period

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

Long-term Care for Seniors

Dr. Sherman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Last week I met Grace Denyer's family. They were horrified at her neglect and by this government's failure to adequately fund staff and resource seniors' care facilities. Mrs. Denyer stayed at Youville, where a urinary tract infection went untreated for six weeks. She was routinely left in a diaper, which led to her screaming in pain due to her open wounds. Finally, she had a stroke, which was not diagnosed until five days later. To the government: why do you insist on spinning this issue instead of admitting that this government is failing our seniors?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Horne: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Well, this particular case, as the hon. member has mentioned, is a very unfortunate case, and the government certainly sympathizes with the resident and her family. What I will tell you is that we have very strict continuing care health standards in place across the province. They apply equally to residents in privately funded, publicly funded, and not-for-profit facilities.

Dr. Sherman: Mr. Speaker, this is one of more stories. Given that this government has starved the public facilities for funding for staff and tragically failed Mrs. Denyer, eventually her family felt forced to turn to the private system, the go-to option for the PCs, and that incredibly expensive system failed them as well when the private operator evicted Mrs. Denyer by ambulance, sending her to the Grey Nuns hospital. To the Minister of Health and

Wellness: don't you understand that when you starve the public long-term care facilities for funding, our seniors are going to end up in the emergency departments and acute-care hospitals, causing a crisis, costing us more, and eventually causing suffering for our seniors?

Mr. Horne: Well, Mr. Speaker, in every attempt to respect the privacy of the family, what the hon. member fails to mention is that the private facility that the resident moved to from the Youville Home was, in fact, a private assisted living facility. It has been explained to me that this facility may have advertised itself as a nursing home or a long-term care facility. If that was the case, that was certainly not an accurate representation of the care provided in that facility.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Dr. Sherman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. As for privacy, the family was on page A5 of the newspaper today and the facilities that this minister has starved of funding. To the Minister of Health and Wellness: given that this government's seniors' care policies are an abject humanitarian failure, will you please – will you please – just listen and have the heart to follow the Alberta Liberal lead and double funding for public home care and significantly enhance public nonprofit long-term care?

Mr. Horne: Well, Mr. Speaker, I suppose the notion that the hon. member would exploit the alleged facts of this case is probably not surprising to some members of this House, including myself.

What I will tell you once again, Mr. Speaker, is that the private facility to which the member refers is not publicly funded in any way. They are not under contract with Alberta Health Services to provide health care. They are in no way funded by this government to deliver any form of care. To the extent that they may have misrepresented the services that they provide to Albertans, we think that's very unfortunate for the family.

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

Alberta First Nations Energy Centre

Dr. Sherman: Mr. Speaker, in that babble I didn't hear any real answers. Let's change topics here. The First Nations have a history of co-operating with the oil industry, enabling activities on their land, but on Monday three Alberta Grand Treaty chiefs left the Premier's office angry and insulted after the Premier pushed the First Nations upgrader project over a cliff. The \$6.6 billion project would have attracted investment from the state oil companies of India or China, a golden opportunity for aboriginal people to take an equity share in our oil wealth as well as for Albertans, a no-brainer. Since the Premier seems to be campaigning today, to the Energy minister: don't you realize your negligence and arrogance has threatened relations between First Nations and our government and our economy?

Dr. Morton: Mr. Speaker, the hon. Leader of the Opposition could save us time and trouble if he would just read answers from last week and again from yesterday. We looked at this deal very closely. When the decision was made not to continue, it was nowhere near the point of development in terms of engineering, land acquisitions, siting, licences, and so forth that the other one was that was approved. Again, it was a business decision, opportunity versus risk. The risks were simply too high, too high for the taxpayers of Alberta.

The Speaker: The hon. leader, please.

Dr. Sherman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. This minister could save us all the trouble and just make the right decision.

Given that this would have been North America's first refinery in 30 years and would have created 7,000 jobs, a project to build real value into our economy, a project that just makes sense and improves lives of the aboriginal peoples and all Albertans, to the Minister of Energy: when you and the Premier killed the First Nations project, why didn't you first consider the effect that decision would have on our relations with our First Nations peoples? Why, Minister? Come on.

Dr. Morton: Mr. Speaker, perhaps the minister of immigration and aboriginal affairs would like to answer this as well. Again, this is a 6 and a half billion dollar project. I think the people of Alberta, the taxpayers of Alberta expect this government to make prudent decisions when it comes to projects, and the prudent decision was that the risk clearly outweighed the benefits.

The Speaker: The hon. leader.

Dr. Sherman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It is a prudent decision when other nations have billions of dollars to invest in Alberta. It's a very prudent decision. Given the well-known fact that Spotlight Strategies represents two other major projects of this nature and that the principal partners of that firm, Randy Dawson and Susan Elliott, are the former and current PC campaign managers, to the Minister of Energy: who's running this province? You guys or the PC Party insiders at Spotlight Strategy? Who is making these decisions, Minister?

Mr. Dallas: Well, Mr. Speaker, I think the hon. minister has clearly outlined the reasons that we weren't able to proceed on the refinery project, and those are the reasons. The conversation that we had with the grand chiefs and with the Premier was around the broader concept of economic benefit: too important, too broad to define by a single project decision. Too important.

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

Electricity Prices

Dr. Sherman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Yet again this government has found a way to combine blunders, gouging, and scandal when it comes to electricity prices. Deregulation is ripping off seniors, families, businesses, and these young people's parents. Now the government is rushing ahead with a costly power line rebuild at a scale we don't need. The panel which said that these power lines are necessary is chaired by Brian Heidecker, former PC Party vice-president and PC leadership campaign manager of the Minister of Municipal Affairs. This casts great doubt on the panel's impartiality. To the minister: why won't you order an honest and open needs assessment on this project?

Dr. Morton: Mr. Speaker, not only is the hon. member a leading medical expert; now, suddenly, he's an electricity expert as well. We appointed a panel of three experts and Brian Heidecker, an Albertan with a distinguished record of public service. They took two months, listened to all of the information, all of the interested parties, and made impartial recommendations. They persuaded us of the need.

Dr. Sherman: Mr. Speaker, the minister is right. What I am an expert at is looking at my utility bills, that have doubled.

To the Minister of Energy. Given that as an energy province we really should have the lowest power prices in the country and instead we have amongst the highest, and these will only increase with this expensive power line overbuild, why do you insist on rewarding those who finance your PC leadership election campaigns at the expense of our vulnerable seniors, working families, businesses, and eventually our economy? Why, Minister?

Dr. Morton: Mr. Speaker, the price of electricity in this province, the regulated rate option, which is what about 70 per cent of residential consumers are on, has averaged 8 cents a kilowatt hour over the last five years. Numerous studies have shown that is very much a good average relative to other Canadian jurisdictions that don't have a lot of hydro. Guess what the regulated rate option is for this month? Why, it's 8.3 cents, so we're back on to our five-year average. We have succeeded in providing good, solid electricity rates with no debt. If you look at the debt that other provinces have, millions of dollars of debt.

Dr. Sherman: Mr. Speaker, here's a minister who was caught speechless on that one.

Given that this government after lunch is still out to lunch on the issue of power prices and enforcement of our laws, I'd like to help you out, Minister, by providing another good idea. Will you follow the Alberta Liberal lead and bring in independent monitoring and raise penalties for companies that cheat Albertans, so breaking the law will never ever be profitable in this province again? Come on, Minister.

Dr. Morton: Mr. Speaker, the hon. leader is so in love with his own words that I'm sure nobody listening could possibly understand what he's even talking about except for me. I happen to know the incident that he's referring to, and I'm happy to report that it was detected in real time, and calls were made immediately, and that company has pleaded guilty. It has been charged and fined for the transgression.

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

2:00 Alberta's Representative in Asia

Mr. Hinman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The PC culture of entitlement, cover-up, and corruption continues, and the Premier continues to show her lack of leadership. She pushed her own appointed Asian representative and fellow PC leadership candidate out into the street, hoping someone else would either run him over or clean up another PC fundraising mess. Well, as it turns out, Madam Premier, you are the one driving the bus. We have all seen the invitations sent for the fundraiser. We've all heard what Mr. Mar thinks. What are you going to do, Premier? Run over him or stop and pick him up? Show some real-life leadership.

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Notwithstanding the string of unparliamentary language, innuendo, and accusations, that are totally unfounded, in the question, the hon. member should know that this government under this leader has made a very clear approach towards saying that everything is open and transparent. When the issue with respect to that fundraiser came to her, she did the right thing immediately and said: an investigation will take place. She did not say that a hanging would take place; she said that an investigation would take place, done by the right people.

Mr. Hinman: Well, she didn't take that long with the Member for Dunvegan-Central Peace. What a surprise.

Given her track record of sending things that she knows are wrong but that she wants done to one of her compliance committees like the Critical Transmission Review Committee, the Property Rights Task Force, or the Health Quality Council, why doesn't the Premier just tell Albertans what she believes? Is he guilty or not? This committee is a sham.

Mr. Hancock: Mr. Speaker, unlike other members of this House, one does not rush to judgment when people's reputations are at stake and when there are appropriate issues to be reviewed. No court passes sentence before examining the facts.

Mr. Hinman: Then she should exonerate him.

Is the reason the Premier continues to give such dithering responses and non answers because she agrees with Kelley Charlebois, your appointed man at the top of the PC Party, that the interpretation of ethical and unethical is very subjective? Albertans want to know if you can tell the difference between right and wrong.

Mr. Dallas: Well, Mr. Speaker, despite this hon. member's attempt to drag the reputation of an employee of the government of Alberta through the mud, the reality is that this matter is under review, and it's inappropriate to make further comments at this time.

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

Mr. Mason: Thanks very much, Mr. Speaker. Well, that's really interesting.

Private Operation of Long-term Care Facilities

Mr. Mason: No Albertan wants themselves or their family to be in Grace Denyer's position, evicted from a private long-term care facility because the fees were suddenly jacked up, yet this is exactly the sort of disaster invited by the Conservative plan to lift the cap on seniors' care accommodation costs and rely on private health delivery. Why won't the Premier admit that their scheme for more private seniors' health care will expose more Albertans to the same problems faced by Mrs. Denyer?

Mr. Horne: Well, Mr. Speaker, as I think the hon. member well knows, the private facility to which he refers is not a long-term care facility. It does not operate under contract with Alberta Health Services. It is not part of the range of affordable living spaces that are funded by this government in accordance with the values that seniors have told us they want us to observe: aging in place, health care brought to them as they need it, standards to protect the care and the accommodation that they receive, all provided in an affordable framework.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Well, you know, given that the daughter of Mrs. Denyer has some questions, I'd like the minister to answer them. Why is this facility allowed to advertise and accept long-term care patients when it's not licensed to do so? How can they increase their rent in excess of 44 per cent within weeks of her entering the home, and how can the facilities be allowed to dump a resident at the emergency room door when they decide they no longer want them? Answer those questions.

Mr. Horne: Mr. Speaker, with respect to the first question I have exactly the same question, and perhaps that should be put to the people that own and operate the facility.

It is not a long-term care facility. It is not under the auspices of a contract with Alberta Health Services, and it is not subject to the standards that are present in all continuing care facilities that deliver health care in this province. We are proud of those standards, Mr. Speaker. We enforce them rigorously through a variety of inspection processes, which the hon. members can see that we defend.

Mr. Mason: Given the disastrous situation that affected this poor woman, why is it that this minister is just washing his hands of the problem and saying: it's not our problem; it's too bad, but it's their problem? Why haven't you protected people from this kind of facility, Mr. Minister?

Mr. Horne: Mr. Speaker, as the hon. member well knows, the unfortunate case to which he refers involves a woman who was transferred from a public facility, that is subject to all of the same rate caps and standards I referred to, to a private facility. There are routine procedures that are used by families every day in this province to facilitate transfer from publicly funded continuing care facilities to other continuing care facilities. The MLAs on all sides of the House advise their constituents regularly of how these processes work. For whatever reason, they were not followed in this case, and unfortunately the lady in question moved to a private facility.

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

Long-term Care for Seniors (continued)

Dr. Swann: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Well, on Monday the minister of health told the House he's building thousands of continuing care spaces for seniors. Let me be clear. The experts, including Dr. Paul Parks, are saying that the urgent need is for fully medically supported long-term care beds. With 14,500 nursing home or long-term care beds we actually have fewer now in Alberta than we had in 2008. Why, despite having over a million people added to our population in 20 years and proportionately more seniors, does this province have only 74 more long-term care beds?

Mr. Horne: Well, Mr. Speaker, as far as this government is concerned, the experts on what people want to see in long-term care and continuing care options across this province are our seniors, the constituents that we serve. If hon. members opposite want to continue to engage in an ideological debate, we certainly leave that territory to them. Our philosophy and our practice and the extensive infrastructure spending that goes to opening thousands of continuing care spaces is based on Albertans' expressed wishes to be provided with health care in place as they age, living together as couples and families.

Dr. Swann: Mr. Speaker, I didn't know that providing seniors with long-term care was an ideological position.

Given that most of the spaces announced in December are supportive living, not long-term care, when will the government realize that medically supported beds must be the priority to clear our hospital beds, not private, for-profit alternatives?

Mr. Horne: Mr. Speaker, providing our seniors with the health care they require, preferably in their own home if not in a supportive living or a long-term care facility in or near their home community, is exactly what this government is delivering.

With respect to the hon. member's fixation, if I can say it, on a model from the 1970s, that emphasized institutional care only, whether or not people had a requirement for that level of care, this government doesn't subscribe to that philosophy.

Dr. Swann: By some magic this minister seems to feel that seniors no longer need long-term care. Sorry; the reality is still there. Given that the shortage of long-term care beds worsens ER overload and operating wait times and demoralizes health care professionals, when will this government admit its total incompetence to deal with seniors' care issues?

Mr. Horne: Mr. Speaker, what this government believes in and what this government is committed to is providing people a level of health care they need in place. It may interest the hon. member to know that despite the fact that the nursing homes operation regulations specify a minimum of one hour of skilled nursing care per day in a long-term care facility, in 2008, even, we were providing an average of 3.8 hours of nursing care per day to those residents. So we will continue to adjust health care needs to the needs of our seniors as they continue to age in place.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Manning, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

Patient Advocacy by Health Professionals

Mr. Sandhu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Yesterday one of the opposition parties introduced one of their candidates that will run in the next provincial election. As part of their political theatre they also used the opportunity to later make more claims of physician intimidation from this candidate. My questions are to the Minister of Health and Wellness. What can you tell us about these allegations?

The Speaker: Well, okay. Try.

Mr. Horne: Mr. Speaker, despite the nature of the question I can inform the House that I have no information about these allegations.

Mr. Sandhu: Mr. Speaker, my next question is to the same minister. If this candidate had concerns about advocating for his patients or, more importantly, if physicians who are currently working in Alberta have concerns, what options do they have to try to remedy that situation?

2:10

The Speaker: If this has to do with policy, go ahead.

Mr. Horne: Well, Mr. Speaker, it actually is a question of policy. There are a number of processes that are available to physicians who have concerns about their ability to advocate on behalf of their patients. Alberta Health Services has a new set of medical staff bylaws that not only set out a process for advocacy in the case of physicians who have concerns but that actively encourage them in the process of advocating for patients. AHS has recently opened a hotline for physicians and other health care workers who have concerns about advocacy matters. It is also encouraging the sort of open and ongoing dialogue in the culture of the health care system.

Mr. Sandhu: To the same minister: as these concerns relate to the appropriate level of mental health services, can the minister share any action that the government is taking to improve access to these services?

Mr. Horne: Mr. Speaker, in addition to providing an appropriate process and an orderly process for health professionals to raise concerns, this government announced \$40 million in funding a little over a week ago that will see the addition of 80 mental health beds at Alberta Hospital Edmonton.

In addition to this, we've provided funds for the early detection and treatment of mental illness among children and youth in our schools throughout the province, and we've provided funds to support housing initiatives under the Ministry of Human Services to deal with the needs of complex . . .

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre, followed by the hon. Member for Lacombe-Ponoka.

Residential Rehabilitation Assistance

Ms Blakeman: Thanks very much, Mr. Speaker. I find it wacky politics to dump on one vulnerable group in order to achieve a much-hyped target for another. Now, this government has abandoned both housing adaptation for seniors' independence and residential rehabilitation assistance programs in order to fund affordable housing for a different group. My questions are to the Minister of Municipal Affairs. Why did the ministry choose to redirect funding away from these two programs, HASI and RRAP, both of which keep low-income seniors and others in their homes, to build affordable housing which neither group could now afford?

Mr. Griffiths: Mr. Speaker, it was actually a federal program, RRAP, that was passed on to the provincial government on very short notice, so we didn't have time to create the program necessary to replace what the federal government had originally offered. On top of that, we realize that the Department of Seniors offers some incredible assistance to seniors, up to \$5,000, to deal with emergent issues, so we chose to direct those resources, without the time to create a new program, into something that would be very effective for all Albertans that need housing.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Ms Blakeman: Well, thanks very much, Mr. Speaker. But there was an agreement from the province to accept this money, so why did the government abandon those Albertans who had qualified for and were told they were successful in the residential rehabilitation assistance program when it was under the feds and were then told: go to the province; the province signed an agreement; get your money from them? What are these people supposed to do now?

Mr. Griffiths: Well, Mr. Speaker, I'm not going to apologize on behalf of the federal government for them stopping their program. When they decided they didn't want to run the program anymore but they would provide the resources to the province, they asked every province if they were still going to run the RRAP program. We indicated we would do some exploration, but we didn't have enough time to set up our own program. So we put it where it would best be used: for people who need affordable housing.

Ms Blakeman: Back to the same minister: how does building affordable housing for others keep vulnerable seniors and other low-income owners in their homes given that they can no longer access the very programs that made that possible like getting accessible bathtubs, grab bars, ramps into their homes? What are you talking about, Mr. Minister? [interjections]

Mr. Griffiths: Mr. Speaker, if this member would do a little bit of research, they would realize that Seniors and Health have exceptional programs in this province already to help people stay in their homes. We do not have to model the exact same program the federal government had, that they had to abandon about a month before, that they turned over to us. We do exceptional work to assist those who need housing supports in their community.

The Speaker: Let me try and understand this again. I recognize an hon. member to ask a question. The question is asked. Then I recognize an hon. minister to respond to the question, and as he starts to respond to the question, a whole bunch of people start yelling at him. This is strange.

The hon. Member for Lacombe Ponoka, followed by the hon. Member for Calgary-Varsity.

Farmers' Advocate of Alberta

Mr. Prins: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. From time to time our farmers, who are the backbone of our rural communities, may need help to navigate issues related to their farming industry and other agribusiness that they interact with. When farmers need this help, they can count on the Farmers' Advocate. This position has been vacant for several months, and I'm happy to hear that the government this morning announced a new Farmers' Advocate. My question to the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: who is this new Farmers' Advocate, and how was he chosen?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Berger: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Peter Dobbie, QC, has been appointed the new Farmers' Advocate for the province of Alberta. He brings to the position more than 20 years of experience as a lawyer advising farmers and agribusiness and as a resident of rural Alberta. Peter was selected through an open process. The position was advertised, and the candidates applied or were nominated by industry.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Prins: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. This is my last question. What is the role of the Farmers' Advocate, and what can we expect the new Farmers' Advocate to do?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Berger: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. For almost 40 years Albertans have received assistance through the Farmers' Advocate's office, whether for consumer protection, pursuing rural opportunities, or fair process. The office also administers the Farm Implement Act, providing consumer protection. The advocate's office assists landowners with managing their land assets, mitigating business risk, and maximizing future economic activity and opportunity as it relates to the interaction with the oil industry as well. The Farmers' Advocate will work closely with the upcoming property rights advocate as well to assist rural Albertans.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Varsity, followed by the hon. Member for Calgary-Fort.

Assured Income for the Severely Handicapped

Mr. Chase: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Last week we learned that despite the Premier's promise residents of the province's continuing care facilities will not be receiving a long-awaited \$400-a-month increase in benefits under the assured income for the severely handicapped program. Now we learn that those who do receive that increase are too often subjected to another increase: in their rent. To the Minister of Seniors: why is it that institutionalized AISH clients are not receiving the \$400-a-month increase that the Premier promised?

Mr. Horne: Mr. Speaker, in the absence of the Minister of Seniors I would be pleased to take that question under advisement and arrange to get the hon. member a response.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Chase: Thanks. That answer would be appreciated. I tried it in budget. I tried it in the Seniors meeting this morning. It remains unanswered.

What is the government doing to protect AISH clients from being gouged by unscrupulous landlords?

Mr. Horne: Again, same answer, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Chase: Nothing. Nothing. Maybe we should establish a committee to investigate, a panel to solve the problem.

When will this government commit to indexing all AISH benefits to the cost of living so that all AISH clients can live in dignity without the fear of losing their homes? Can you answer that one?

Mr. Horne: Well, Mr. Speaker, it is certainly the intention of this government that all clients receiving benefits under the assured income for the severely handicapped will live in dignity. That is precisely why the Premier fulfilled her commitment to raise AISH benefits by \$400 a month, and it is precisely the reason that a range of other benefits, including health care benefits, are provided to those clients.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Fort, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona.

Foreign Delegations

Mr. Cao: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. We may not realize how fortunate we are to live in Alberta and how great Alberta is on all fronts until we go outside of Alberta. Alberta is becoming increasingly important as a major player on the world stage. It is important that we are able to project a strong, positive, accurate message to all visitors whatever their purpose is. My first question is to the hon. Minister of Intergovernmental, International and Aboriginal Relations. As Deputy Speaker I've had an opportunity to host foreign delegates. Minister, how many . . .

Mr. Dallas: Mr. Speaker, we are very fortunate that virtually every week we're welcoming delegates, visitors, parliamentarians from around the globe, from across Canada. I don't know the exact number, but I can tell you that just in the last two weeks I've had the opportunity to meet with the economic minister from Finland and just yesterday with a parliamentary committee from Norway. We've had opportunities continuously.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

2:20

Mr. Cao: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. To the same minister: why are these foreign delegates coming to Alberta, and what are the benefits of hosting delegates from other countries?

Mr. Dallas: Mr. Speaker, it's obvious why they're coming to Alberta. Alberta is the economic engine for Canada. We can showcase key industry sectors. We can talk about the economic advantages of doing business in Alberta. There is a tremendous opportunity for everyone that comes, whether it's developing trade, attracting investment, or tourism. Tremendous opportunities.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Cao: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. To the same hon. minister: how is the minister capitalizing on these relationships and promoting Alberta world-wide?

Mr. Dallas: Well, Mr. Speaker, we have 10 international offices located around the globe. We can connect with virtually any individual, any corporation, or any elected parliamentarian anywhere on the globe, and we do so regularly.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona, followed by the hon. Member for Calgary-*Buffalo*.

Environmental Monitoring of the Oil Sands

Ms Notley: Thank you. Over a year ago a review panel confirmed that government has failed dramatically to protect water safety in the oil sands and that this task has to be handed over to an arm's-length body. Ten months later this minister's reaction is to appoint another panel to reconsider whether environmental protection in the oil sands really needs to be done by an arm's-length body. Will the minister admit that her plan is merely to ask the question repeatedly until she gets the answer that industry wants?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mrs. McQueen: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker, and to the hon. member for the question. You know, it's really quite amazing. We met with the writer of the earlier report, Dr. Schindler. I met with him, invited him to my office. He commends the steps forward to moving from the policy recommendations that we received, 20 recommendations, to a working group that will give us recommendations on implementation, so much so that he commented yesterday on three of the members that he actually recommended to us to sit on that panel.

Ms Notley: Well, Mr. Speaker, given that one member of the panel gave \$4,000 to the Premier's leadership campaign, that another member chaired the AEUB when it was spying on Alberta citizens, and yet a third was in charge while the government assured Albertans of so-called world-class monitoring, that has since been entirely discredited, how does the minister expect anyone to believe that recommendations from this panel will be anything but predetermined by your ministry on behalf of industry?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mrs. McQueen: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. Again I'll say that Dr. Schindler, who has written this and has given his comments on this, has recommended three of those panel members to us. He spoke yesterday to the media as well that he's quite happy to see

that we took his recommendation and that we appointed all three of those scientists.

Ms Notley: Well, speaking of Dr. Schindler, this week he released a report showing that government and industry claims about reclaiming lost wetlands are false. Given that the longer this minister waits to act on wetlands, the greater the loss to our environment for the sake of unmanaged industry growth, why won't this minister commit to independent mechanisms that will work for all Albertans on environmental issues rather than simply taking marching orders from CAPP behind closed doors?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mrs. McQueen: Thank you again. As the House knows, industry is mandated by law to do reclamation. There are two experimental peatland fens under construction at Syncrude and Suncor, and they have teams of internationally recognized wetlands scientists working with them.

In addition, I met with Dr. Schindler, and I asked him what his advice would be about moving forward with the report, and he said, "Perhaps if you'd meet with the other two authors of the report," which I will be doing as well.

Provincial Tax Policy

Mr. Hehr: This government has implemented a taxation policy that has led to them spending the billions of dollars in fossil fuel revenue received in the last 25 years. They've spent all of it in the name of lower taxes. This government has abandoned our heritage trust fund and has seemingly lost sight of the fact that once you sell a barrel of oil, you never have that barrel to sell again. To the Minister of Finance: would it not be in Albertans' long-term best interests to commit to a tax policy that ensures sustainable, more predictable funding and allows for savings for the future?

Mr. Liepert: Well, Mr. Speaker, if there is one thing this member is, it's consistent. His question is exactly the same one that he asked yesterday. I'd be more than happy to repeat it, but I suggest he just read *Hansard* from yesterday.

Mr. Hehr: I'd like that, but I'm trying to enlighten the minister. I'll go through it again. Given that we have a flat-tax policy, that sees a person making a million dollars a year pay the same rate of taxation as a person making \$30,000 a year, isn't that absurd given the fact that we have spent every last dime of fossil fuel resources over the last 25 years and have not saved a dime of that money?

Mr. Liepert: Mr. Speaker, there's a reason that this province has the greatest influx of people in the entire country. It's because we have a taxation policy that attracts people to come here to work and invest their dollars in this province. We're not going to apologize for that.

Mr. Hehr: Well, this one's different, so he should listen here. Given that the Canada West Foundation, the Parkland Institute, even the government's own panel have stated unequivocally that in order to protect Alberta's future, this government needs to raise taxes, why is this government not doing the right thing and acting on what these experts are recommending?

Mr. Liepert: I'll just repeat myself again from yesterday, Mr. Speaker, but I'll say that very soon Albertans will have an opportunity to pass judgment on whether they want to elect MLAs who are advocating for increased taxes, whether they want to elect MLAs who are suggesting that we should not use our nonrenewa-

ble resource revenues for critical infrastructure. We'll have that decision pretty quickly.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Cardston-Taber-Warner, followed by the hon. Member for Airdrie-Chestermere.

Municipal Emergency Management

Mr. Jacobs: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Earlier this week Cardston county repealed their emergency management bylaw after a group of residents complained that it infringed on their rights and freedoms. They said that under the bylaw emergency responders could enter or take their property without a warrant and without paying compensation. To the Minister of Municipal Affairs: can you explain what repealing the bylaw means for my constituents in this area?

Mr. Griffiths: Well, Mr. Speaker, I know I've heard from a few citizens in the area who are concerned. The local bylaw simply laid out how a local emergency would be managed and who would be responsible for it. But bylaw or not, the local municipality is responsible for managing the local emergency because there is still the Emergency Management Act in the province of Alberta that mandates that municipalities manage it. Those individuals in those areas will still be advised when a local emergency takes place.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Jacobs: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. To the same minister. Many municipalities have built their emergency management bylaws based on the provincial Emergency Management Act. Will you look at amending the provincial legislation?

Mr. Griffiths: No, Mr. Speaker, we won't amend the legislation. It's been in effect since about 1974. It mirrors the national legislation and the legislation in every other jurisdiction across Canada. In fact, almost every jurisdiction in North America has this legislation in place. It is only enacted when there is a crisis situation, an emergent situation, and it empowers local people with the responsibility because they have the responsibility but also the power to protect people and lives. That's the only time this is used. [interjections]

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Cardston-Taber-Warner is recognized. The next person I have here is Airdrie-Chestermere, but you seem to want to ask all the questions now, so we might just forget about you later.

The hon. Member for Cardston-Taber-Warner.

Mr. Jacobs: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My last question is also for the Minister of Municipal Affairs. Some of my constituents feel that powers granted to a local authority during a local state of emergency can be abused. What assurances can you give them that they will not be abused?

Mr. Griffiths: Mr. Speaker, I know from the hoots and hollers before that some of the members from the wild alliance indicate that this is about property rights. This is not about property rights. This is an issue where local municipal officials, local firefighters, local police officers, and local paramedics are trying to save lives. There is compensation provided in the rare necessary circumstance when property must be commandeered, but I can't think of a single Albertan that wouldn't want a vehicle commandeered if it meant saving their grandmother from a burning building. That's what this is about.

The Speaker: Okay. The hon. Member for Airdrie-Chestermere, with gusto.

Alberta's Representative in Asia (continued)

Mr. Anderson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. This Premier's indecision on the Gary Mar affair is embarrassing to ourselves and Alberta's reputation in Asia. We know that a \$400-a-plate dinner to hear Mr. Mar speak about business opportunities in Asia was advertised and that it included the auction of a trip to Hong Kong, with the obvious implication that the trip included a chance to hang out with Alberta's Asia representative, obviously an inappropriate use of a senior government official's position to personally profit, no matter how you spin it. Premier: in your opinion, was Mr. Mar's use of his government's position to personally profit appropriate? Yes or no?

2:30

Mr. Dallas: Mr. Speaker, this is going to sound somewhat repetitive because I addressed this exact same question yesterday. The matter has been referred by the Deputy Minister of Executive Council, who has requested an independent review. Commenting, judging the outcome of that review – you know, these suggestions: completely ridiculous in the context that we must wait before making comment.

Mr. Anderson: This is what governing without principles looks like, right there.

Given that we now know that someone involved with the dinner figured out that the first invite looked so bad and sent out a replacement invite that only mentioned an evening with Mr. Mar and his wife but no mention of the trip auction but then the trip was still auctioned off for \$20,000, I ask the Deputy Premier, who is also in charge of human resources: was Mr. Mar's use of his government position to personally profit appropriate, or is this just the latest in a long line of scandals showing just how corrupt the PC culture over there has become?

Mr. Dallas: Mr. Speaker, the employee in question has every right to a fair review of this. Commenting on this matter before that review is complete: inappropriate.

Mr. Anderson: This is a personnel decision. Cabinet ministers get fired all the time.

Given that the Premier clearly attempted to delay this being resolved until after the election by incorrectly referring the matter to the Ethics Commissioner, who doesn't have the authority to deal with this, and given that she is now wanting to refer this matter to a committee to come up with a recommendation after the election, will someone, anyone over there please help Albertans understand why such a blatant ethical breach is being swept under the rug until after voters have cast their ballots? It looks like yet another pre-election cover-up.

Mr. Dallas: Mr. Speaker, this review will be conducted as expeditiously as possible. Judging the outcome of that, commenting on that review prior to that: inappropriate.

New School Construction in Calgary

Dr. Brown: Mr. Speaker, residents in the growing community of Evanston in northwest Calgary have no schools in their community, and they're telling me that their school-age children are spending a lot of time on bus rides in order to get to class. All my

questions are for the Minister of Education. Can the minister advise what his government's policy is on busing young children to school?

Mr. Lukaszuk: Mr. Speaker, the policy is rather simple. Our policy is to build more schools. The problem is that in this province we have schools where we don't have kids, and we have kids where we don't have schools. Contrary to what the Member for Airdrie-Chestermere will say, we will be building schools right now for children who need schools right now so that we don't have to wait 30 years so we can pay for schools cash up front.

Dr. Brown: Can the minister advise what plans are in place to help these children in the community of Evanston, to build the schools that they need so that they don't have to endure these long school bus rides?

Mr. Lukaszuk: Mr. Speaker, a very, very important question. Right now the President of the Treasury Board, myself, and the Minister of Infrastructure are looking at a new fiscal framework to make sure that we can provide the children of today with schools for today so that parents can be proud of taking their children to buildings that are adequate for our educational programs and not have to wait for 30 years because some are ideologically so confined that they insist on paying for everything cash up front.

Dr. Brown: Mr. Speaker, can the minister inform the residents of Evanston when he will build an elementary school in Evanston?

Mr. Lukaszuk: Mr. Speaker, the lineup is long and growing longer. In a number of municipalities like Airdrie, Grande Prairie, Fort McMurray – yesterday I met with Leduc – and in many rural and urban areas there is a need for schools. The fact is that the need is undeniable; we don't question it. We need to find a fiscal framework that is responsible, that works for Albertans today, and that is responsible to little kids so that they don't have to be in basements and Legions just because some choose to pay for everything cash up front.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar, followed by the hon. Member for Rocky Mountain House.

Electricity Prices (continued)

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The maximum allowable price for electricity under Alberta's deregulation scheme is \$999.99 per megawatt hour. My first question is to the Minister of Energy. Is the government considering lifting that cap or removing it completely?

Dr. Morton: Mr. Speaker, that's why we appointed a committee to review the whole matter of the regulated rate option and how it's constructed. We're happy to report to Albertans that the regulated rate option for March is back down to an average of 8.3 cents, which is the five-year average.

In terms of how the RRO is constructed – and there are a variety of ways that it might be done; the question of caps is one – we're waiting for some advice from the committee, that I hope to announce the members of next week.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you. Given that the TransAlta Corporation has recommended that the cap be increased or lifted to \$2,500 and that recently TransAlta Corporation has donated \$50,000 to

five of the six PC leadership candidates, will this minister guarantee that the cap will not be lifted, as TransAlta suggests, to \$2,500 per megawatt hour?

Dr. Morton: Mr. Speaker, these guys are always chasing their own tail. First they insist on committees, an independent look, and then they come and say that we won't listen to the committee in terms of what advice they give us. I think I can say with a high degree of confidence that you're not going to see the cap go above \$998.

Mr. MacDonald: Again, Mr. Speaker, to the same minister: given that TransAlta would also ask that the AESO consider complete removal of the cap by the year 2015 and given the fact that they have given a generous donation of \$50,000 to five of the six leadership candidates, including yourself, will you guarantee that that cap will not be removed or increased? Guarantee it now.

Dr. Morton: Mr. Speaker, we know that some of the other parties are so bankrupt of issues that all they can do is try and raise fears of what might happen in the next year. It appears the Liberals have now fallen into the same trap. We have no intention of caps or these other things, but we've appointed a committee. I'm not going to sit here and say that the committee can't look at all options, but I can't imagine the scenario under which we would abandon a cap.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Rocky Mountain House.

Bear Management

Mr. Lund: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My questions today are to the Minister of Sustainable Resource Development. In south-western Alberta the ranching community is dealing with removal of dead animals to avoid the attraction of bears. Since the renderers no longer collect these carcasses for free, the collection is very costly for the ranching families. What is your department doing to reduce these costs for these ranchers so that they can follow the BearSmart best practices?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Oberle: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased to inform the House that my staff have been working pretty closely with the ranching community to reduce human/bear conflicts, which are a major cause of bear mortality. We've worked together with the community to purchase livestock carcass collection bins, and we've supported the pickup costs to reduce attractants.

I'm also pleased to announce, Mr. Speaker, that we just recently approved a \$60,000 grant to put a wildlife carcass composting facility at the Cardston county Chief Mountain landfill site. This will greatly reduce costs to landowners.

Mr. Lund: Thank you very much for that answer. I hope that if there are bears crawling into those collection bins, they don't get rendered as well.

My second question is to the same minister. Mr. Speaker, as we know, the bears will soon be emerging from their dens, so they'll be looking for a source of food. With the ranching community in southwestern Alberta so close to these dens, what is being done to reduce the risk of conflicts?

Mr. Oberle: Well, Mr. Speaker, I can assure the hon. member that the bears don't fall into the bins. They're bear-proof bins.

We're also working on putting bear-proof grain bins out there with bear-proof doors on them so that the bears don't get in there. We're putting out electric fencing. We've started a wildlife roadkill feeding program, a winter feeding intercept program. We collect through the winter deer and elk carcasses from roadkill, and we're going to start putting them out for intercept feeding to keep the bears away from private land and the food attractants that are there.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Lund: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Thanks for that answer.

I'm very curious because there's been a lot of talk about the population of grizzly bears. Could you enlighten the House as to what your most recent counts are telling us about the numbers?

2:40

Mr. Oberle: Mr. Speaker, I can inform the House that we have a little bit of a conflict here, and that is that we have an abundance of anecdotal evidence about increasing bear populations in the southwest and a community that's concerned about that, but I don't have any scientific data that would back up that surge in population. What we're doing is that we're expanding our DNA testing that went on in the south. We've put out rub fences, and we're going to expand that DNA program across the south and try to get a more scientific count. I'm not prepared at this time to act on anecdotal evidence.

The Speaker: Well, that concludes the question-and-response period for today. Eighteen hon. members were recognized; 106 questions and responses were given.

We will continue with the Routine in just a few seconds from now.

Introduction of Bills

Bill 7

Appropriation Act, 2012

Mr. Liepert: Mr. Speaker, I request leave to introduce Bill 7, the Appropriation Act, 2012. This being a money bill, His Honour the Honourable the Lieutenant Governor, having been informed of the contents of this bill, recommends the same to the Assembly.

[Motion carried; Bill 7 read a first time]

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

Bill 210

Early Childhood Learning and Child Care Act

Mr. Taylor: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I request leave to introduce a bill being Bill 210, the Early Childhood Learning and Child Care Act.

This bill will create a crossministry cabinet committee and will establish an early childhood secretariat, which will be tasked with creating an early childhood learning and child care framework. The development of the framework will require appropriate stakeholder engagement, and it will establish a number of performance measures to monitor its effectiveness going forward. The bill will also oblige the cabinet committee and secretariat to conduct a review of the existing child care subsidies and tax policy to ensure that there is no economic incentive in choosing one form of care over another.

Mr. Speaker, the early years of a child's life are of the utmost importance for development. I hereby move first reading of Bill 210.

Thank you.

[Motion carried; Bill 210 read a first time]

Tabling Returns and Reports

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Varsity, then Edmonton-Gold Bar, then Calgary-Buffalo.

Mr. Chase: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm tabling a further 20 e-mails, of the hundreds I've received, from the following individuals who say that the Castle wilderness is still a very special place and that logging in this protected area should be stopped to preserve Alberta's natural heritage: Brent Miller, Dr. John Brazner, Lynda McMurtrie, Jan Draper, Brenda Fitzpatrick, Jeanne Keith-Ferris, Shirley Holman, Heather Parsons, Emilie Magnan, Janet Pattinson, Hugh Whiteley, Susan Diane, Rejean Quesnelle, Irene Friesen, Wesley Johnson, Peter Young, Paul Davis, James Heck, Philip Adamson, and Anne-Marie Kelly.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

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

Mr. MacDonald: Yes. Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I have tablings today on behalf of and in support of the Leader of the Official Opposition's questions earlier today about the Critical Transmission Review Committee's chairman, Mr. Brian Heidecker. I would like to table five copies of the 2011 leadership campaign financial statement from the hon. Member for Battle River-Wainwright, which clearly shows Mr. Heidecker was CFO of the campaign and that his company, Drylander Investments Ltd., made a \$5,000 loan to the campaign at zero per cent interest.

As well, I have attached the biographies of the members of the critical transmission committee, which clearly state that Mr. Heidecker founded and owns Drylander. The corporate registration of Drylander Investments is also included.

Thank you.

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

Mr. Hehr: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. I have three tablings to back up my question to the hon. Minister of Finance. They are reports from the Parkland Institute, the Canada West Foundation, and the government's own report, all stating that our tax system is broken, the need for raising revenue, and how it will allow us to save for the future.

The first report is from the Parkland Institute, called Fixing What's Broken: Fair and Sustainable Solutions to Alberta's Revenue Problems.

The second one is by the Canada West Foundation, called Tax Reform.

The third is the government's own report indicating the need for raising revenue, Shaping Alberta's Future: Report of the Premier's Council for Economic Strategy.

Thank you very much.

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

Ms Notley: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I have here a bill and the appropriate number of copies of that bill from Camillo Esposito of Lac Ste. Anne. He shows us that his electricity charges for January 2012 were \$256.

I have three more bills here: one from Tammy Westlin of Fort Saskatchewan, who was charged \$250 for her electricity in January, another from Codados Heetun, whose electricity for January cost him \$176, and, finally, a bill from Don Bosak of Black Diamond for January 2012 in the amount of \$179.06.

Statement by the Speaker

Private Members' Public Bills

The Speaker: Hon. members, I'm tabling today a letter that I received from the hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre. I'll just quote from the letter.

I write pursuant to Standing Order 8(7)(c), requesting that Bill 203, Tobacco Reduction (Protection of Children in Vehicles) Amendment Act, 2012 be granted early consideration and be called in Committee of the Whole on Monday, March 19, 2012.

I read it into the record because copies were not circulated to anyone else. But I do want to raise this matter. I'll bring it back tomorrow and talk about it further tomorrow.

This has to deal with a request not often exercised or asked for in this Assembly. Basically, comments are recorded in *Hansard* going back to 2001 by this chair, saying that this is a matter that needs some review because in essence what we potentially have is a conflict.

Monday is private members' day. It's the only day of the week that members can actually deal with bills. We have an order that is clearly defined in our standing orders that basically says that on one day a member's private member's bill comes up, then it's dealt with, and then it goes to the next steps. Usually we follow the second readings. Then we finally get to committee.

When a member asks that a stage be advanced over another, it may come into conflict with another private member who would necessarily have his or her private member's bill on the schedule. So I would ask that members look at Votes and Proceedings of November 23, 2009, and *Hansard*, page 1940, November 23, 2009, the last time that I put a ruling in with respect to this matter.

In almost all cases I basically, essentially, going back to 2001, have provided caution with respect to this request because of the conflict potential with another member. But in most cases it has been worked out as a result of consultation with the House leaders. In this case today is probably the first opportunity that House leaders for other caucuses would be aware of this. So I repeat again those comments that I've raised in the past. If I receive some advice by noon tomorrow on this particular matter, it would be helpful. If not, I would have to make a statement tomorrow and probably decide on Monday if that would be given, depending on would the interest conflict with another member with respect to this.

I should also point out again, for a number of times now, that I raised this matter in 2001, and I suggested very strongly that this matter be referred to a certain committee for further advice to be provided to the Speaker with respect to this matter. Eleven years: I say it again. Tomorrow I'll say more.

2:50

Orders of the Day

Government Bills and Orders Committee of the Whole

[Mr. Cao in the chair]

The Chair: The chair would like to call the committee to order.

Bill 2
Education Act

The Chair: Are there any comments, questions, or amendments to be offered with respect to the bill? We are on amendment A1.

Ms Blakeman: That's what I was going to confirm. Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre on amendment A1.

Ms Blakeman: Yes, indeed, sir. I am the Member for Edmonton-Centre, and I am speaking on amendment A1. Thank you for the reminder.

This, I understand, is – what's the word I'm looking for? – a compromise amendment that is brought forward by the government, and given the majority this government has, it signals that, indeed, it will pass. On casual reading of it, it appears to be a pretty straightforward, motherhood, common-sense kind of amendment. It essentially says that parents have a right to choose the religious and ethical traditions in which their children are raised. Fair enough. A child's education begins in the home. Indeed, it does: potty training, you know, table manners. Yes, of course, obviously education begins at home. That the parents play a role in the spiritual and moral upbringing of the children: absolutely. Say please and thank you, follow the golden rule: exactly what we would expect.

At this point I'm starting to get a little curious about what all of this is doing in a bill about public education, which is the Education Act, Bill 2. Just let me double-check. Yes, indeed, the name does say the Education Act, and for that we're talking about education that's provided by the government, public education, in other words. So I'm starting to go: okay, what does this have to do with public education and a public education act? We're talking about what parents do at home with their children. Okay. Well, I keep reading. "These principles are reflected in the commitment of the Government of Alberta" – okay; no quibbles with that – "to provide parents with choice in education."

All right. I'm getting a bit more nervous here because again the word "public" is missing from all of this. It appears, as we've had with the change in the lexicon around health care, that we're seeing it again in a change of language that's used around public education in this province, where we went from talking about health care in which we meant upholding the five tenets of the Canada Health Act to just talking about public administration of health care and the single pair.

Well, that's interesting because if you look at what's being left out when you list only one thing out of a list, you notice that we're not talking about public delivery of health care anymore. We're only talking about public administration of health care but not public delivery, which means the door got opened to private delivery of health care, and we know where that got us. I would argue from my side that it hasn't been entirely successful. Actually, I would argue it wasn't successful, and it didn't uphold public health care, and by public I mean following all five tenets of that, not picking and choosing what suits you on any given day.

So I'm really interested when I start to go through this act, which is about delivering education in the province, which I assume is public education. Why would we be talking about private education? That's somebody else's business. I think we're talking about public education, but, no, the word "public" is pretty much gone. It's certainly not found in front of the word "education," not in this amendment.

Let me just back up: "to provide parents with choice in education." Uh-oh. It's one of those big words that this government uses that always makes me nervous – yes; I can see the Member for Calgary-Lougheed is agreeing with me – because choice took on an entirely different meaning under this government. Choice went from meaning that on a standardization, on a level playing field, all things being equal, all those other provisos in there, a choice was between two things that were on an even footing. That's completely gone out of this province.

Back to education as a way of understanding how this government operates. Choice in health care went from being a choice of two equal things to a choice of two unequal things. Instead of looking at whether you were going to get your MRI inside the government system, well, no, there are so many problems with that now that you get it privately, but then you're paying out of your own pocket, which wasn't one of the tenets of health care that we started out with, one of those five I was talking about.

The word "choice": there are a number of them, and the list is getting longer. When this government uses the word "choice," my antenna goes up, and I think: uh-oh, that's not going to be the best thing in the long run for Albertans. When they use the word "flexibility" now, that also makes me start to look around to see how Albertans are going to end up paying more out of their pockets for the same thing they used to get before covered under health care.

A responsibility, that's the other one. When I spoke on this bill before, I talked about that concept of responsibility. But responsibility under this government has come to mean an entirely different thing. It means: "You're on your own, babe. Deal with it." It's kind of a take it or leave it situation.

Once again I'm looking at this amendment: "to provide parents with choice in education, including public schools" – there we have it – "separate schools . . ." Okay. I'm assuming we're talking public and private school boards and the offering of Protestant and Catholic education as is found in the Charter and the Canadian Constitution. Let me just dig that out again so I've got it here. I did flag all of this before to make sure I knew what I was talking about. Yeah, section 23 covers minority language education rights, in which education is to be provided in English or French according to the majority, but the minority is also to be recognized and instruction given in the minority language where the population merits it. There are guidelines there.

The other place you find it is under section 29. Oops, sorry; no, it isn't. Section 29 is making sure that nothing that's in here derives from the rights and privileges that are guaranteed under the Constitution "in respect of denominational, separate or dissentient schools," which is part of the religious proviso, which is the Catholic and Protestant.

Let me just find that specific right. It looks like it's in section 93. Oh, yes. Protestant and Catholic schools. So that's what's actually guaranteed in the Constitution to be provided. We've got public schools and separate schools, which is the religious concept of Protestant and Catholic. We all understand that that does not include any other religion because once you start a list, if you're not on the list, you're not there, so public and separate, francophone schools, which, again, I gave you the section in the Constitution which covers that. Then we've got charter schools, which do not appear in the Constitution or in the Charter, and private schools, which do not appear in the Constitution or the Charter.

3:00

For those people that have written to me, thank you for your interest and for following me, but you actually have to have it in the Constitution. You can't read another part of the Constitution and assume that means that it covers you. That's what I mean by lists. If it's not actually in there, it's not there, and it's not covered, which is why you end up with people campaigning to get more things covered under the lists: charter schools, private schools, and home education programs.

I'll go back to what I was saying before about freedoms, rights, and protections. That is what is actually in the Constitution, where it lays out the freedoms. Of course, everything that is in there as a freedom or a right is "subject only to such reasonable limits prescribed by law as can be demonstrably justified in a free and democratic society." So we always have to remember that there are limits, and there are reasonable limits to everything that is given here. You know, the common example of that is that my right to swing my fist around ends at the end of your nose. I'm not allowed to swing my fist around and bash you in the nose.

An Hon. Member: It should be before the end of your nose.

Ms Blakeman: Yes, it should be before the end of your nose.

So there are reasonable limits that are set out here. These are not absolute freedoms and rights. Of course, the freedoms are freedom of conscience and religion; freedom of thought, belief, opinion, and expression, including freedom of the press and other means of communications; freedom of peaceful assembly although that's very difficult to do in this day and age given the amount of security in this building; and freedom of association, to get together with whoever you want. You can't say: you can't meet with that group or meet with this group. Those are your fundamental freedoms. That's what's in here. That's all that's in here. Okay? If it isn't in that list, it's not here, and it's not a freedom that is granted by the Constitution.

Now, rights is the next section. That's where you get into things like democratic rights, which is the right to vote. And these are rights. You need to read it carefully because sometimes it's citizens; sometimes it's individuals. "Every citizen of Canada," not every person in Canada, "has the right to vote." Every citizen of Canada has the right to vote in an election, et cetera, et cetera, and then it goes on with how they write that.

You've got mobility rights, the right to come in and remain in and leave. Again, that's every citizen, not every individual. Every citizen.

You've got legal rights. Watch the language here. "Everyone" – everyone, not every citizen, not every voter, not every man or every tall person – "has the right to life, liberty and security of the person and the right not to be deprived thereof except in accordance with the principles of fundamental justice." Then it goes on to talk about your other rights.

This wording becomes really important when you're trying to interpret this stuff. It's important to know that in our Constitution we give legal rights to everyone whether you're a citizen or not, whether you're tall or short or a man or a woman, whether you're abled or differently abled. Everyone gets a legal right, but everyone doesn't get a mobility right or a democratic right. So the language gets really important here.

By the way, folks, this is not hard to read. The Constitution is not a hard document to read. I'm reading it out loud to you now. It's not filled with really cumbersome language. It's actually a really easy document to read.

Equality rights is the next issue. Again,

Every . . .

Every.

. . . individual is equal before the and under the law and has the right to the equal protection and equal benefit of the law without discrimination . . .

And here comes a list.

. . . and, in particular, without discrimination based on race, national or ethnic origin, colour, religion, sex, age, or mental or physical disability.

And onto this has now been written sexual orientation as a protected ground. Now, that appears as a right, but the list is actually a list of protections. So, remember, I talked about freedoms, rights, protections. The list is actually protections.

Then we go into official languages, French and English, and on we go in the rest of the Constitution: minority language rights, enforcement, general, application of the Charter. Then you're into the whole rest of it: the distribution of legislative powers and the division of regulation of trade and commerce, raising of money, borrowing of money, postal service, census and statistics, et cetera. So I recommend it highly. This is not hard to read, and it's not a long document, but it does get really important when we start looking at stuff like this.

So we know that the public schools are definitely protected and listed specifically. The separate schools are. The francophone schools are. But charter, private, and home-education programs are not. Well, what are they? If we're going to put them in a preamble, what are they? Well, I believe – and I'm going to, I hope, get corrected by legal jurisprudence experts – they would be called an accommodation, or a privilege that is extended by a body such as this government. So this government is going to agree to accommodate them. There's no requirement that the government do that, but they can accommodate, and they have here included them as an accommodation: charter schools, private schools, and home-education programs.

I think what we need to be very, very careful about here is that we continue with an understanding that this is about public education, and the point of this act is public education. I as an individual do not believe that private schools should receive any public dollars. I just don't believe it. If you're in a private school, you're in a private school, and you pay for it. I understand that a lot of the private schools in Alberta, in fact, are not big, fancy, highfalutin schools with uniforms and all of that how-de-do. They are several families getting together and having their children schooled in a particular religious ethic, if I can put it that way. Sometimes it's because of distance that they are getting together and sort of having their own private school. I just don't believe public funding should be going into it, and I'm not ever going to believe otherwise.

I fundamentally believe in public education, and I think it is one of the services, one of the programs, one of the major values that government should be providing for everyone, not just its citizens but everyone in the province. What we need to know at the end of this is that when you as an employer are hiring someone, and they say, "Yes, I went to school in Alberta," we know what their qualifications are at the end. We know generally the program of study that they've had. We know what they're expected to be able to do. That's what I expect from a public education. If you want to come to me and say, "I've got a private school education," I'm going to look at what you did because I'm going to expect that it was not in the public system.

Home education. There are reasons for doing home education. I know two people quite well, one who was home educated and one who did home education for their child. They had very good reasons for doing so. Here's my hesitation. I want to make sure that kids that are home-schooled, in fact, end up with that same

level of education. I do not want to hear, as some of the letters I've received have pointed out to me, that they are offended that they might be restricted from teaching their child that the homosexual act is a sin. That disturbs me to my core. It is not something that I would like to think we are educating our children to believe. Children are born without discrimination. I don't want to have it in Alberta, in my province, that we would be having a publicly funded system in which that is being taught as part of school, as part of education.

Now, let's go back to the preamble that we're debating. The government

recognizes that parents have a right to choose the religious and ethical traditions in which their children are raised; that a child's education begins in the home; that parents play a foundational role in the moral and spiritual formation of their children; and that these principles are reflected in the commitment of the Government of Alberta to provide parents with choice in education, including public schools, separate schools, Francophone schools, charter schools, private schools and home education.

I can agree with most of that, but I'm really struggling with the last three.

3:10

Now, if charter schools are going to be in the public system, as they are in Edmonton – and here we do a little shout-out to Mike Strembitsky. God bless him because he anticipated this. He made sure that all the charter schools in Edmonton are inside of the public system. They exist in the Edmonton schools. I have one. The Nellie McClung charter school for girls is in the junior high portion of Oliver school in my fabulous constituency of Edmonton-Centre. So grades 1 to 6 are regular kids from the neighbourhood, and the junior high is the Nellie McClung school for girls. They're drawing from across the city. Charter school, yes – parents raise additional funds for them and do different kinds of programming with them – but it's part of our school system. It's run out of one of our schools. Very good. I just think the world of that particular program, but it's in the system.

Outside of Edmonton these charter schools are not part of the public school board. I don't know how you guys handle that. I think this is where it starts to get away from us when we're putting taxpayer dollars, collecting it from their property taxes, and putting it into schools that don't seem to want to be part of our public system. That's where I really start to struggle with this. [Ms Blakeman's speaking time expired] Oh, shoot. We'll try again.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Airdrie-Chestermere on amendment A1.

Mr. Anderson: On amendment A1. Thank you very much, Mr. Chair. I'm happy to stand on behalf of the Wildrose caucus and will start out by saying how much we support the rights of parents to educate their children in the manner which they feel is best. We feel very strongly about and with conviction believe in the UN declaration of human rights, which says very clearly that parents have a prior right – a prior right – to choose which education is best for their children. That is a very important human right. As someone with four young boys it's something that I hold in the highest regard.

Potentially, in my view, it's one of the most important human rights that there is. I can't imagine what must have gone through the hearts and minds of our First Nations people when their children were stripped from them, taken and forced into residential schools to be educated in a way that was not in line

with their parents' beliefs or according to their parents' wishes. I can't imagine what I would do. It's horrifying to think of it.

That and many other reasons is why I feel very strongly that when it comes to the education of our children, when it comes to what they are taught, the government should be, oh, so absolutely hesitant to interfere in any way with a parent's decision on how to educate their children. It should be a last resort. Only in the most absolutely obvious circumstances should the state ever regulate a parent's right in that way, much like we only regulate our freedom of speech when that speech is calling for a violent act.

Only then do we regulate free speech, just like these other rights: our right to freedom, our right to liberty, freedom of movement, freedom of mobility. Only when we take someone else's freedom away: only when somebody kills another or steals from another or breaks a law do we take that person's freedom away, when he has affected somebody else or taken their freedom away. Only then do we interrupt or interfere with those fundamental freedoms.

So, too, in education, which to me is a human right. It is in our Human Rights Act here in Alberta. It is in the UN declaration of human rights. I believe with all my heart that it is something that we need to respect. We cannot in a tolerant society – we hear a lot about tolerance, and tolerance is important, and equality is absolutely important. What about being tolerant of those that have different viewpoints? Where's the tolerance of them?

Now, I myself choose to have my children educated in a public school. We have a phenomenal public school in Rocky View school division, Nose Creek elementary, with an amazing reading program in particular, that has just been fabulous. The quality of the teaching, the quality of the school is something that my wife, Anita, and I feel is fantastic. We want our children to experience that.

However, if they were ever in a school where the quality of that education diminished or if there were values being taught in that school that were reprehensible to the values that I hold – that's certainly not the case now – if that were to happen, I would absolutely reserve the right to remove my child from that school or from whatever school it might be. Then I could choose to put them somewhere else for their schooling, whether that be in a home-school setting where myself or Anita would school them personally or whether it be in a nonprofit private school like a faith-based school, for example, or a for-profit school if we could afford that, which we can't, or a charter school, an independent school, which may focus on a subject matter that we felt our child needed – I don't think we are able to go to a Catholic school because I don't have any relatives that are Catholic – or, of course, a public school.

I think that it is something that we need to protect very carefully, and I commend the government, that historically has been very supportive of parental choice in education. I want them to know that as much as the Wildrose and PCs disagree on several different things, this is one where we have agreement. Parental choice in education is critical, and we will always support this government whenever they are moving in a direction of enshrining, protecting, enhancing school choice and parental choice in education.

Now with regard to the amendment from the minister, it's a good start. The amendment that the minister brought forward says in the preamble:

Whereas the Government of Alberta recognizes that parents have a right to choose the religious and ethical traditions in which their children are raised; that a child's education begins in the home; that parents play a foundational role in the moral and spiritual formation of their children; and that these

principles are reflected in the commitment of the Government of Alberta to provide parents with choice in education, including public schools, separate schools, Francophone schools, charter schools, private schools and home education programs.

Now, this is a good amendment, but it could be improved, in our view. How we choose to improve it is, in fact, the subject of a subamendment that I will bring forward now. I have the requisite number of copies, and we'll go from there.

The Chair: Hon. members, we'll pause for the distribution of the amendment. This is now known as SA1.

Hon. Member for Airdrie-Chestermere, you may continue now on the subamendment.

3:20

Mr. Anderson: Thank you, Mr. Chair. Subamendment SA1. Let's go over what this will actually do and how the preamble will change if this amendment is passed so that everyone understands. Essentially, if you go to the preamble of Bill 2 as it currently stands and go to the eighth recital of the preamble, it says, "Whereas parents have the right and the responsibility to make informed decisions respecting the education of their children." That would be removed from the act. In its place at the very top in the first recital, right under Preamble, before any of the other whereases or any of the other recitals in the preamble, it would then read as follows:

Whereas the Government of Alberta recognizes that parents have the paramount right and responsibility to make decisions respecting the education of their children, which includes a right to choose the religious and ethical traditions in which their children are raised; that a child's education begins in the home; that parents play a foundational role in the moral and spiritual formation of their children; and that these principles are reflected in the commitment of the Government of Alberta to provide parents with choice in education, including public schools, separate schools, Francophone schools, charter schools, private schools and home education programs.

Essentially, this would slightly alter or add to, just making it even clearer how important and how paramount the rights of parents are with regard to choosing the education that's right for their children and how important that responsibility is. It would just tweak it slightly to make sure that that foundational principle – because the original amendment from the government is very well worded, and the principles are all there, or enough of them are there.

If we can put that as the foundation at the top, I think that would clearly state to the parents of Alberta, regardless of whether their children are in public school, whether they're in charter school, francophone school, whether they're in faith-based schools, other private schools, or home-schooling, that this government will respect those decisions and that they will respect not only the decisions of parents to choose those options but also, importantly, that a bad option is no option at all. So, most importantly, the government of Alberta will never think to come into their home-school setting, whether it be through regulation or whether it be through an individual, to come into their faith-based school, to come into their Catholic school or any other school and tell those individuals what they can and cannot teach to their children with regard to their beliefs, specifically in faith-based schools and Catholic schools, where the faith part of that schooling is intertwined throughout the entire curriculum. I forget what the Catholic system says about it. Permeates. That's it. It permeates the entire curriculum.

Never should the government of Alberta or any bureaucrat who perhaps is abusing his position – I'm not saying that they do, but it just takes one – come in and say: "You know what? That part of your faith that you're teaching is wrong, and we're not going to let you teach it anymore." That is a very, very slippery, slippery slope.

We can all agree that we should not be teaching our children racial supremacy, that we should not be teaching them violence or disobedience of the law. I'm absolutely in agreement with that.

Again, going back to what we talked about before, the state should only limit a parent's right to choose the education for their children in the absolute most extreme circumstances, where it essentially turns from the parent's right and starts actually harming the child. Teaching violent acts and teaching protest of laws through violent means as opposed to nonviolent means should never be done, and we all know that. But with regard to teaching them the principles of their faith, of their parents' faith and so forth, that should not be limited except in those most extreme circumstances.

So that is the intent behind this subamendment. I hope that the government and all parties will support it and support the families that feel that their right to choose education for their children is one of the most fundamental rights that they enjoy. I'll tell you that I personally value this right as much or more than any other human right that I enjoy as a citizen of this country and of this province.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: On the subamendment, SA1, the hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

Ms Blakeman: Thanks very much, Mr. Chairman. I can't do this. Either we're going to talk about public education, or we're not, but if we're going to talk about public education, then it has to meet a standard that satisfies the societal expectation or need for a certain standard of education and everything that goes with that. I can't support interjecting the paramountcy clause into the clause that we have with amendment 1, especially when it contains that list.

I guess if you want paramountcy, then go and have paramountcy in private schools, but I don't believe in that paramountcy when we're talking public education because I think it's almost impossible to meet that standard. It's wrong as far as I'm concerned, so I can't support the subamendment.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

The Chair: Before I recognize the hon. Member for Fort McMurray-Wood Buffalo, may we revert briefly to Introduction of Guests?

[Unanimous consent granted]

Introduction of Guests

(reversion)

The Chair: The hon. Member for Grande Prairie-Wapiti.

Mr. Drysdale: Thank you, Mr. Chair. It's indeed my pleasure and honour to introduce to you and through you to all members of this Assembly some guests from Grande Prairie that are here today and had a meeting with the Minister of Finance a short time ago: from Evergreen Park, Bridget Henniger; from the county of Grande Prairie, Bill Rogan; Ross Sutherland; and I see that your partner, Everett McDonald, just stepped out. Would you all please rise and receive the warm welcome of the Assembly.

Bill 2
Education Act
(continued)

The Chair: The hon. Member for Fort McMurray-Wood Buffalo.

Mr. Boutilier: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. Indeed, it's a pleasure to rise in this Assembly to speak as a teacher pertaining to the subamendment put forward by the Member for Airdrie-Chestermere. I think it is an excellent subamendment, and I certainly hope and pray that the government and the Minister of Education will in fact listen to this very good subamendment. I understand by his facial expression that it appears that he's not going to.

That being the case, I would like to say that I believe in the support of faith-based schooling, that I support the paramount parental right of parents. I might add that my wife has been a teacher for over 15 years and, I'm proud to say, myself a teacher for over 15. But even more important than just being a teacher, which is of such paramount importance, I will say that the fundamental right of parents is paramount, that parents should be able to have the right to educate their children from both a moral and spiritual foundation in helping build our children. I believe this subamendment is doing something that the government has missed.

3:30

In fairness, if the government missed this before, well, I'm pleased to say that the Wildrose has been able to capture this. We hope that the actual government and the Minister of Education will support this subamendment because I think it is a fundamental value of all of us as parents, a parent's right to be able to both morally and spiritually teach our children. It is a foundation of our society.

As a teacher who has taught in the public and Catholic schools and – no matter what school, be it home-schooling, be it francophone, be it charter schools, be it public or Catholic, faith-based schools, it is so important to our society as well that parents have that right. It is a fundamental right that I think is so important for any parent, and that's why I as a member of the Wildrose caucus support this fundamental right in this subamendment. I pray and hope that the government will take heed of this subamendment, even though they overlooked this and the concern that has been brought forward, so that we can make the best law that gives parents the right to educate their child and also pursue other options available, be it through, as I mentioned earlier, faith-based schools, charter schools, francophone schools, public and Catholic schools – there's a variety of schools; parents have a choice – or home-schooling.

And I do believe that home-schooling – to the parents that are teaching their children at home, I just want to say that I applaud them. I do believe that as we go forward, this subamendment will be greeted with acceptance by this government because it is value based, it is nondiscriminatory, and it is essentially giving the paramount right to a parent to choose how they educate their children, and I think that is so important.

I might add that our child will be going to kindergarten next year. My wife and I started our family late in life, so next year our child will be going to kindergarten. I enjoy the freedoms as a parent. I enjoy the freedoms of the options that I have under the Education Act for that, be it in faith-based schools, public, Catholic, charter, francophone, home-schooling. It is all the right of a parent to make.

I will say that in the Wildrose caucus we do not support discrimination of any sort. We believe that parental rights are paramount to the building of our society. Consequently, I hope

that all members of this Assembly – and I offer to you as a teacher and as a parent that I believe that this subamendment is truly something that will strengthen the law of this Education Act that's coming forward. I trust and hope that everyone in this Assembly can agree on this subamendment put forward by the Wildrose caucus and the Member for Airdrie-Chestermere.

Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman.

The Chair: On subamendment SA1, the hon. Member for Calgary-North West.

Mr. Blakett: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I'd like to speak to this subamendment. You know, parents in Alberta have the right to determine what type of choice they have for their children's school, as has been mentioned before, whether it's Catholic, whether it's public, whether it's home-schooling, whether it's a charter school, whether it's a private school. We also have the ability to choose their friends and pick their clothes. We have the ability to decide which areas we're going to live in. But they're not all enshrined in legislation. Sometimes common sense has to prevail.

Back in 2009 we had Bill 44, about the Alberta Human Rights Act, brought before us. A large issue on that bill was the parental rights, which was supported by this government caucus, which was passed in this Legislature. We had a provision in there, section 9, that allowed for the opting out by parents on issues with respect to religious education, what we're talking about, and also sexual orientation and sexual education. Since September of 2010 there has not been one single, solitary, complaint by a parent in this province on that issue.

As we've debated this bill in the Legislature, one of the things that I remember saying is that we have to rely on the common sense and on the tolerance and values of Albertans to make the right decisions, and they have. I believe that the preamble that the Minister of Education has put forward adequately addresses this provision.

This act, as everybody knows, is somewhat superseded by the Charter of Rights and the Human Rights Act. Clearly, parental rights are specified there, and there is adequate provision. So if we're allowed to opt out of any program or anything in the curriculum with respect to religion, then we can't expect that a teacher would be a force. Whether it's home-schooling or any of those different forms, whether it's a charter school, private school, public school, Catholic education, French immersion, you name it, they would not have that imposed on them, especially home-schooling. So I don't think there's a need for that.

I certainly agree with the hon. Member for Airdrie-Chestermere about the importance of parents in education. We all, I think, agree in this House about the importance of parents in education and the importance of their determining what type of education they want. I just do not agree with the wording in this particular subamendment.

Thank you.

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

Ms Notley: Thank you. It's a pleasure to rise to speak to this bill in committee. I was going to originally speak to the amendment but now to the subamendment, but I expect the comments are not dissimilar in both cases. You know, there is a lot of conversation going on about this bill and the preamble of this bill. Frankly, there are a lot of people who, in my view, are exaggerating the implications of the preamble, exaggerating the implications to some extent of what was in the bill prior to this amendment.

I actually received an incredibly thoughtful letter from a member of my constituency, who is a home-schooler, who wrote at much length about the legal implications of the bill and the concerns that were raised by a subset of home-schoolers around the implications of the bill that were not actually founded in law, that the threat that somehow this bill meant that people would be coming into their house and telling them how to teach their kids was simply not accurate and that, in fact, the human rights code and the application of the Charter don't actually apply, frankly, in these cases. So it was interesting because it was a much more reasoned approach.

Also, though – and I was very pleased to see this – she said that as far as she's concerned, home-schooler or not, the values inherent in the human rights code and the values inherent in our Charter of Rights and Freedoms were absolutely something that she wanted to ensure that her children learned regardless of the setting in which they resided. And I agree with her.

Frankly, I think that the minister's attempt with the first amendment to change the preamble is largely window dressing. The Supreme Court of Canada has turned its mind to the issue of the legal relevance of preambles, Mr. Chairman. In most cases they almost never consider preambles in the course of interpreting and applying legislation. Really, what we are looking at is something that is attempting to deal with a political problem in a highly politicized pre-election environment. So that's what that's about.

Now, what the Member for Airdrie-Chestermere is trying to do is that he's actually trying to add a little bit of oomph to this preamble to potentially confuse the courts a little bit more, you know, to outline this issue of parental rights. As people in this Assembly would know, I don't know that there were two people more opposed on the issue of Bill 44 at the time that we had the conversation about Bill 44 than the Member for Airdrie-Chestermere on one side and myself on the other.

Mr. Anderson: And we're still friends.

Ms Notley: The Member for Airdrie-Chestermere notes that we're still friends. I like to think, you know, that I'm slowly opening his mind to certain issues. Who knows? At a certain point we might actually develop a consensus on that.

However, the bottom line is this, Mr. Chairman. This is not a simple issue, and any efforts to inject legal implications of some of the phrases that the Member for Airdrie-Chestermere or the Minister of Education are throwing in there are not simple issues.

3:40

You know, there's been incredibly heated debate in Ontario about how the school system there deals with publicly funded faith-based schools that, as a matter of their faith, insist on female students being separated from the remainder of the class at certain times of the month. Mr. Chairman, I say that that's not something I can support, yet to suggest that, is to be accused of not respecting people's faith. Of course, I do respect people's faith. The fact of the matter is that it's not black and it's not white. It's very complex.

What I do say, though, is that in this House, a public body, when we're talking about a public statute and the administration of public funds, I will always – always – look to our Charter of Rights and Freedoms, I will look to our Constitution, and I will look to our human rights code. In that case I will always look to the fact that nobody should be discriminated against, that no child should ever learn that it's okay for someone to be discriminated against, and that that code applies always.

The Member for Airdrie-Chestermere talked about extreme circumstances. We'd never want our kids to be taught that violence was okay. But is the general acceptance of Nazi thought okay as long as you don't attach it to violence? It's an interesting question. We don't ever want our kids to learn that physical gay bashing is okay. But is refusing to talk to people because they're gay okay? The fact of the matter is that if you breach the human rights code, if you discriminate against somebody overtly with violence, overtly by not letting them have a job, adversely by simply not letting them into your group of friends, and it just works out that coincidentally they never get employment in a certain sector, any of those ways, Mr. Chairman, are wrong.

In my view, any question that we would subject our Education Act to considerations which would undermine those fundamental principles – principles in the Charter, principles in our human rights code – is something that our party, the NDP, cannot accept. I just don't think there's a document or a concept or a group of values that more widely encompass and embrace all Canadians and all Albertans than those simple, fundamental notions of equality and human rights, and they are not notions that can be modified or exempted, where you can apply degrees of extremism to decide whether or not they should be respected. I'm a little concerned, as a result, that some of the conversation that's come up thus far suggests that there are degrees in certain publicly funded, publicly legislated settings. I would suggest that I can't agree with that.

So for those reasons I can't support either the subamendment and likely will not support the amendment either on behalf of the NDP caucus.

We remain very, very committed to public education. We respect the rights of parents to teach their kids about their religious beliefs and values in the home, and that's something that's very important to all families in Alberta. I also remain convinced that in our public sector, where all of us have to come together regardless of our religious background, there are certain simple concepts which must apply to all of us, and I would not ever want to see that jeopardized. So on that basis I'll be voting against the subamendment and, if I don't get a chance to speak on the amendment itself, also against that.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

The Chair: In the tradition of alternating government and opposition, the hon. Member for Calgary-Nose Hill if you wish.

Dr. Brown: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I do have some concerns with the subamendment as it's phrased. I would like some clarification from the hon. Member for Airdrie-Chestermere about what his understanding of the word "paramount" would be, whether that is in the sense that we would use it in a constitutional context, whether it means the ability to override or to veto. As the hon. member knows as a member of the bar, preambles are often referred to by courts in interpreting the legislation to which they're affixed. Would the hon. member concede that there is also a paramount right and a responsibility for society as a whole to ensure that every child has a reasonable level of competency and skills in order to succeed in a modern society, that being a minor, that society has an interest in ensuring that they achieve some educational skills, skills like reading and writing and mathematics, which would give them the opportunity to pursue a trade or skills or higher education?

In the context of the phrase which the hon. member is proposing, I'm wondering whether "the paramount right and responsibility to make decisions" really means to make all decisions because that's the inference that one could gain by the

wording, the plain meaning of it. If one has the paramount right and responsibility to make all decisions, does that include the overriding ability not to require the child to go to school at all? Does it include the paramount right to have your child not pursue mathematics, which they may have a distaste for? Does it include their ability to keep their child out of English classes or learning how to write and so on?

I would just ask for some clarification there because I do have some concern with the use of the word “paramount” in that context in terms of the parents’ rights.

Mr. Anderson: I’d be happy to answer that.

The Chair: You want to answer it?

Mr. Anderson: I’ll answer the question, and then we’ve got lots of time to debate, so we’ll all be good.

The Chair: Okay. The hon. Member for Airdrie-Chestermere on subamendment SA1.

Mr. Anderson: A very good question. There’s a lot of information in this preamble and in this act, tons of information, tons of rights, responsibilities. Lots of it is in here. There are some rights, in the view of this member, that are paramount. Obviously, the Charter of Rights and Freedoms governs this document, and obviously the courts, therefore, will interpret this document. However, within this document I think that it is completely within the purview of the Legislature and certainly it is appropriate here to assess which rights are going to be given the most weight. In answer to your question I absolutely, fundamentally believe that parents do have a paramount right over the decisions regarding the education of their children.

Now, it does go on to explain what that includes in the same clause. It says, for example: “The paramount right and responsibility to make decisions respecting the education of their children,” which includes “a right to choose the religious and ethical traditions in which their children are raised.” So I do think that within the amendment itself it does clarify what this applies to.

I think that at some point rights do come into conflict with each other – there’s no doubt about it – and a lot of times courts are asked to judge which rights supersede others. Do I feel that parents have the right to take their child out of school at a certain point? Yes, I do. I do believe that. I have an autistic child, for example, and if I ever thought that he was being bullied, if I ever thought that he was being harmed in any way in a school setting, I would reserve my right, whatever the law is, to take that child out of that setting and to protect him.

So I guess the answer is: yes, I do believe it’s a paramount right. If I had a child that who suicidal and who was being bugged and bullied in school and so forth, obviously I would try to work with that school to help alleviate the problem, but if it wasn’t relieved, then I would hold paramount my right as a parent to remove that child from the school. If there were no other options – perhaps it was in a rural area, for example – perhaps that means that that child would not be in school, and I would choose to home-school that child.

3:50

At some point you have to say: whom do you trust? At the end of day whom do you trust? Who has paramountcy in these cases? I think that except in the most extreme circumstances it’s parents, with the exceptions that are obvious; for example, child abuse, violence against children, et cetera, those types of things.

Obviously, when children’s rights are being taken away from them by their parents, that’s when government steps in.

In the absence of that happening, I believe that a parent has, without any doubt in my mind, the right to decide how their children will be educated and if they will be educated in a public school, a charter school, a home-school setting, what that home-school setting will look like and what will be taught in that home-school setting, with, of course, the caveats that if that goes into something where that child’s rights are being taken away or where it becomes abuse – I would include in the definition of abuse any type of teaching where you are teaching some sort of racial supremacy, where you are teaching that you should be violent against any group or anyone, for that matter – that is where the line is drawn, in my view. That’s where it becomes abuse and where the parent loses that paramount right.

Just as with, you could say, the Charter rights that are out there – the right of free speech, the right of freedom of assembly – all these different freedoms that we enjoy by virtue of being in the Charter are paramount to other things that go on in society; for example, driving on the road or some of these other rights that we enjoy because we’re allowed to do them. But they do not take the right over other rights that are more paramount that are listed in our Charter or listed in the UN declaration of human rights in some cases, which includes that parents will have the human right to educate their children as they wish.

I hope that answers your question.

The Chair: Hon. Member for Calgary-Nose Hill, do you want to get on the list?

Dr. Brown: Well, thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. My learned friend has given some specific examples where there would be a right for a parent to absent their child where they were being abused or where there was some misconduct or some malfeasance or perhaps where the child was perceived to be in some difficult situation. Would he not concede that if you give the paramountcy right to those parents, everyone would have those?

Does the hon. member take issue with the fact that we do have compulsory education in the province of Alberta, that until the age of 17 years one is required to give their child an education? We’re not talking about home education versus public education but the requirement to give kids the basic skills that they need to succeed in society. Are you saying that there should be no such thing as compulsory attendance at school for children?

Mr. Anderson: Of course that’s not what I’m saying. Of course not. I just gave the examples that I reserve the right to remove my child from school and bring them into a home setting and educate them there as per the act. I mean, this is not about whether there should be compulsory education – I think we can all agree that there should be compulsory education – but that how that education is conducted is up to the parent. That’s why we allow for home-schooling. That’s why we allow for faith-based schools and Catholic schools and public schools and private schools and francophone schools, and you can go through it.

In answer to your question, yes, I believe children have a right to be educated as well. We’re talking about those rights clashing. But when it comes to how their children will be educated, I feel parents have the fundamental, paramount right to decide how they will be educated excepting in the extreme circumstances where it turns into abuse of that child by either not giving them any education at all or by abusing them and so forth, the examples that I used earlier.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Calgary-McCall on subamendment SA1.

Mr. Kang: My question is: what kind of an education standard are we going to have if everybody starts to do their own thing? That's my question. If the parents pull their kids out of school and bring them home and start educating their own kids, what kind of an education standard are we going to have?

Mr. Anderson: As the member was asking, what if everybody starts doing their own thing? Well, the law right now, hon. member, is that you are allowed to bring your child home to educate them. That is the law now. I'm not saying that that should change. We should continue to allow that. Some home-school parents choose to follow a specific Alberta Education curriculum; others do not. There's a different track of education that they use for their children. It's not completely verbatim from Alberta Education. That exists now. It works, and people are happy with it.

In fact, the results that home educators get out of their children are fantastic. I would venture to guess – and it is just a guess. I will get statistics to back this up, or I will see if they're out there. If you took all the folks in public school and you tested them for the quality of education at the end of grade 12, I would bet that our home-schooled children in this province and those attending faith-based schools and so forth would be every bit as strong as those graduating if not stronger.

Parents care more than anyone else how their children are educated, and they will move mountains to make sure that they're educated in a way that's beneficial to them. For the state to assume that it knows best what's best for kids over and above what parents know about their child is, in my view, not a value that I can support.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Calgary-Fish Creek on subamendment SA1.

Mrs. Forsyth: Well, Mr. Chair, I'm pleased to stand up, actually, and speak. I guess the unfortunate thing is that I'm following a couple of lawyers, and I have to tell you that I'm not a lawyer. They talk from a legal perspective. What I'm going to do, I think, is talk as a parent and grandparent about what I think is important, and that's about the rights of the parents.

You know, one of the things that I have found interesting with this Education Act is that I can't even remember how long it's taken for it to come from when it started to where we are now in tabling the piece of legislation. I'm sure the Education minister would be able to provide us the stats and all of the consultation that's taken place on this particular piece of legislation.

What always amazes me when we get a government bill tabled – and I can think of several since I've been a member of the opposition . . .

The Chair: Hon. member, we have subamendment SA1.

Mrs. Forsyth: I know. I'm getting there if you'd listen, please. The important thing is that we have already got a bill that's just been tabled, and we've already had an amendment put down on the table as A1. Now we have another amendment, sub SA1. So that's where I was getting to.

Amazingly enough, Mr. Chair, we have a 186-page bill. It has been on the floor for a very short period of time, and the government has already put an amendment down as of, I think, late last night. Now, what's interesting is that the preamble that the minister has brought forward is, I think, exactly what people

are thinking. You can talk about some of the things when you listen to the debate, and as one of the things I think the member over there talked about common sense. What the Wildrose is bringing forward is the fact that all we're adding is that we believe it is "the paramount right and responsibility [of the parent] to make decisions respecting the education of their children, which includes," and it goes on from there.

4:00

Being with the Wildrose, we end up working long hours or late into the night doing our own research because of the budget, so I was up bright and early this morning doing some research and pulling some documents from the Alberta Education website. Some documents that I pulled off their own website that I found very fascinating talk about school choice. It says:

When it comes to selecting a school, parents and students can choose from a wide range of options. They can select from public schools, separate schools, Francophone schools, private schools, and charter schools. They can also access a number of unique and innovative programs – including home education, online/virtual schools, outreach programs and alternative programs. Parents can also opt to home school their children.

Then it lists the schools and school boards, and it says: "Choice is one of the most important principles Alberta's education system is built on," a very, very telling statement, to be very honest with you.

I think anyone in this province can say that we probably have one of the best education systems in this country. My boys are older and went through the public school system. We were very lucky with the teachers they had, and I liked the education program my children got in public school. My grandson is in public school.

What's interesting is the list of schools that you start going down. It talks about public and separate schools, and it goes on quite eloquently about francophone schools.

Under the law, parents whose first language is French have a constitutional right to have their child educated in French where there are enough students to warrant it.

Then it talks about private schools, charter schools, and then home education.

Parents who choose to educate their children at home assume primary responsibility for delivering and supervising their child's courses of study and work as partners with a school board or accredited private school to ensure the child's educational goals are being met.

It goes on to talk about other online learning programs and outreach programs, alternative programs.

I think one of the nice things, Mr. Chair, about living in this province is the choices that we have. With education choices I think that one of the things that we as parents – and it says very clearly in the preamble that the government

recognizes that parents have a right to choose the religious and ethical traditions in which their children are raised; that a child's education begins in the home; that parents play a foundational role in the moral and spiritual formation of their children; and that these principles are reflected in the commitment of the Government of Alberta to provide parents with choice in education . . .

And then goes on, as I indicated earlier.

. . . public schools, separate schools, Francophone . . . charter . . . private schools, and home education programs.

All that my colleague from Airdrie-Chestermere is asking for in his subamendment SA1 preamble is just repeating. Honestly, when we had our lawyers talking, they talked about preambles and all of that in the courts, and I for the life of me tried to understand what my colleague from Calgary-Nose Hill was talking about on

the paramount rights and children not being able to attend school. I think the Member for Airdrie-Chestermere covered it very well. I mean, we have the right as a parent to pull our child out of class if there are some problems.

Many, many years ago my son's best friend committed suicide. Mr. Chair, I read that suicide note in the House because his parents asked me to read the suicide note in the House. It was a very troubling time for my son at the time. Obviously, he had some difficulties with it because they were best friends and always together. We chose at that particular time to pull our child out of school, and we did that because we felt that he needed some intense counselling. He was a pallbearer at that particular time for that child. You know, I never thought I'd have to come to that decision where I would be pulling my child out of school for a couple of weeks to provide what we considered the intense counselling that he needed.

There are hundreds of cases when that will happen in this province. I remember when I was a member of the government and I was bringing my bullying bill forward, which I'm very proud to say is incorporated in Bill 2 now. It started as a private member's bill. Fascinatingly enough, when I brought the bullying bill forward, I remember the Calgary public board of education was up in arms about this bill. It was going to be a disaster. In talking to the Minister of Education at that particular time, Edmonton-Whitemud, the Member for Calgary-Nose Hill stood up and spoke against my bullying bill at that particular time, so it will be interesting for him when the majority of what I incorporated in the bullying bill is included in Bill 2. I'm going to look forward to hearing him speak about that.

Having said that, I think what the Member for Airdrie-Chestermere is only trying to do is just to make it very important and make it very factual that always "the paramount right and responsibility to make decisions respecting the education of children, which includes" – and it goes on – is the parents' number one priority and number one choice.

So, you know, we can listen to the member talk about the child not attending school or all of that. That's also included in the act, Member. It talks about when you're skipping – and I can't find it right now – or if the child is missing in action. I, like many people, have had a lot of phone calls on this particular issue. I think it's telling when people call us in regard to parents having the rights and the responsibilities to make decisions respecting the education of their children.

Mr. Chairman, I'm going to sit down. I'm going to continue to listen to some of the debate and hear what people have to say, and I look forward to that.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Airdrie-Chestermere on subamendment SA1.

Mr. Anderson: Yes. After my comments here I would like to invite the Education minister to respond to this subamendment if he is willing and tell us why he is or is not supporting it. If he is supporting it, that means that we can sit down and have a vote or can keep talking about it for a little bit, but I'd like to understand his reasoning for supporting it or for not supporting it. If I can't convince him, if I haven't convinced him yet, then maybe a little bit more time will convince him, you know, a little bit more talking, a little bit more argument and debate.

4:10

Why do we need to put it that parents have a paramount right to make choices with regard to education, to decide how their children are educated? You know, I brought it up a little bit earlier

very briefly, but choice is not enough in this context because choices are great, but choices can be taken away. They're very different – choices are different – than rights.

It's very good that the current government of Alberta is in favour of school choice, very good. It's very good that they provide these choices. We've talked about separate Catholic schools; public schools, of course; faith-based schools; francophone schools; home-schooling; private schools; et cetera. But these choices can quite easily be taken away in certain circumstances. Actually, not in certain circumstances; they can be taken away at any time. I'm not saying that this government has any plans to do so, but the fact remains that they can be taken away. That's why it's important to recognize in our language the difference between a clause in a bill and what the government of Alberta actually considers to be fundamental rights.

You know, I think that if we are serious about saying that parents have the right to educate their children, to make decisions regarding their children's education, then I would say that it is very important that we show that by the language that we use in the School Act. It was mentioned earlier. This is Bill 2, the Education Act. This is about public education. Well, the Education Act, of course, does not just encompass public education. It incorporates all education, as was pointed out by the Member for Calgary-Nose Hill. It says in here that until you're 17 years old, there's compulsory education for children.

Mrs. Forsyth: And attendance.

Mr. Anderson: And compulsory attendance for an education program for a child.

It does very much include home-schooling, private schooling, faith-based schooling, Catholic schooling, francophone schooling, all these different school choices, and, of course, obviously, public school. So I think that it's very important that we put this new language in the preamble, put it at the very top where it belongs because you have to start from somewhere.

Let's look through the different preambles here. The first one:

Whereas the following visions, principles and values are the foundation of the education system in Alberta;

Okay.

Whereas education is the foundation of a democratic and civil society;

Whereas education inspires students to discover and pursue their aspirations and interests and cultivates a love of learning and the desire to be lifelong learners;

Very important. Good stuff.

Whereas the role of education is to develop engaged thinkers who think critically and creatively, and ethical citizens who demonstrate respect, teamwork and democratic ideals, and who work with an entrepreneurial spirit to face challenges with resiliency, adaptability, risk-taking and bold decision-making.

It's getting a little prescriptive, but I agree with it as a parent.

Ms Blakeman: And as a citizen.

Mr. Anderson: As a citizen.

Whereas students are entitled to welcoming, caring, respectful and safe learning environments that respect diversity and nurture a sense of belonging and a positive sense of self;

Okay.

Whereas education is a shared responsibility and requires collaboration, engagement, and empowerment of all partners in the education system as necessary to ensure that all students achieve their potential;

Now, let's look at that one for a second. It sounds good. Education is sometimes a shared responsibility. Not always. Sometimes it is.

It isn't really if you're a home-schooling parent. You're not really sharing the responsibility with the Ministry of Education. You're not really sharing the responsibility with the local school board or any teachers per se. If they are in a public school, then yeah, sure, they're a shared responsibility.

We can go on. There are many more.

Whereas the educational best interest of the child is the paramount . . .

Oh, here we go. I didn't notice this. Check this out. I didn't see this. This is interesting.

Whereas the educational best interest of the child is the paramount consideration in making decisions about a child's education;

There you go. We can use "paramount" there.

Whereas the Government of Alberta recognizes the importance of an inclusive education system . . .

And it goes on and on and on and on.

Ms Blakeman: It's the paramountcy of education.

Mr. Anderson: Yes; I'm sorry. I did read through this bill when it was first tabled last fall, and I'd forgotten that they did use the word paramount in here. But that's good. So we know that paramount can be used.

I would say that the best interests of the child are best determined by the parents – that's what I would say – except in those situations where, clearly, the parents do not have the best interests of the child, they are abusing them and so forth. I would say that it's important, given this language that's being used here, that we make it very clear that parents have the paramount right to the education of their children.

I would challenge the other side. I already know what the Liberals feel about this, and I know what the NDP feels about it. We'll just agree to disagree on it. But I want to hear from the other side why they don't think we should use the word "paramount" when describing the rights that parents have to choose the education for their children. What's the reason? Do they not think it's paramount? What right supersedes it, other than in situations where abuse is occurring, where the child is being harmed, abused, so forth? Their rights are being taken away, in other words.

Should we not have that in there? Should we not show, should we not conclude or make very clear in the language that it's parents that have the paramount right? I mean, someone's got to have the paramount right. Who has the paramount right? Is it the state? Does the state have the paramount right?

Ms Blakeman: The educational interests of the child.

Mr. Anderson: Who determines the educational interests of the child? Who?

Ms Blakeman: The act.

Mr. Anderson: Who? No, no, no. Not the act. Who? The act is a piece of paper. Who determines the – and I'll let you speak to this. This is an interesting debate, I agree. You say that it's all about the educational interests of the child. So my question to you, my question to everyone here: who is in the best position to determine what the best interests of the child are? Is it this dead piece of paper? Is it some bureaucrat in the Ministry of Education? Is it the teacher or the school board trustee? Is it the principal of the local school? Is it everybody in this Assembly? Is it me for everybody in Airdrie-Chestermere? Is it the Minister of Education for everybody in his riding? Who determines that?

My argument is that the person or persons who are best able to determine what is in the best interest of the child is, in almost every circumstance, the parent. Unless the parent does something to forfeit that – by abusing the child, by hurting the child, by taking away the child's rights to an education, to anything, unless the parent abuses that right, in which case they then lose that right – they have the paramount right to determine what's in the best interest. Because if we don't do that, who do we leave it to? Who is ultimately in charge? Who ultimately decides?

We can't just use things like whatever's in the best interest of the child. Who determines it? Is it the Child and Youth Advocate? Is it the Minister of Education? Is it the Speaker? Is it the chair?

Mr. MacDonald: The Speaker.

Mr. Anderson: You know what? I bet you it might be the Speaker. Maybe he thinks that. But the point is – sorry, Mr. Chair. I'm sure you do a very good job in most cases, especially with your own children. Especially with them.

The point is that as a society we have to decide who is the foundational block, essentially: who gets first crack to make that decision of what's in the best interests of the child? My feeling is, without any doubt, that the individuals that are best in a position to make those decisions of what's in the best interests of the child are parents, unless they give that right up through abusing it.

4:20

And the examples are simple. Again, this is just a piece of paper. But what if the act says that – what if it's changed one day, and it eliminates home-schooling? You can't do home-schooling by this act. No home-schooling allowed, or it has to be done a specific way, there can be no values taught. It has to be done specifically in the way outlined by the Ministry of Education. Let's pretend that that happens. So essentially what you're saying at that point is that you are taking away the parent's right to determine what's best, and you are saying: look, we've determined that the state is going to determine what's best for our children. Okay? That's what that would do, in my view.

If I have an autistic child, which I do, and if the act told me that I had to have that child in a public school that was failing my autistic child, if that was the act, if that's what the Ministry of Education regulation said, or if some civil servant in there said, "You know what; we can't trust parents with these autistic kids because their needs are just so complicated; we've got to make sure that they're getting exactly what they need; we, the state, know what that is," I would say that I would be absolutely mortified at that point if the state was overriding what I thought was best for my child, for that particular child, if I, say, would want to bring them home and said: "That school is failing them. I'm going to take care of them and teach them from home, doing home-schooling."

So we agree one hundred per cent on – and this is going to shock a couple of the members in the Assembly, specifically the Member for Edmonton-Centre. I agree with you that the interest of the child is paramount, no doubt about it, but who determines what that interest is? That's the question in my view. You can put your faith in government to do that. Fair enough. That's one way of looking at it. You can put your faith in the locally elected school board. Fair enough. There are people that have that view. But I think that the very foundation of our society is built upon families, is built upon parents or guardians taking care of their children, and that means a lot of different things. There are a lot of different types of families out there. But you have to start somewhere, and for me it's the family, and it's the parent or

guardian of that child that has that fundamental human right to determine those things.

I would ask again of the other side: whose rights are paramount with regard to determining what's in the best interests of our children if not parents? I'd like to know that.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Medicine Hat.

Mr. Renner: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I've been listening with interest to the discussion this afternoon. I actually wasn't intending to participate in this debate. However, given that there is a significant amount of interest on this matter in my own constituency – in fact, I have agreed to meet with a number of parents who home-school when I return to Medicine Hat on Friday – I wanted to listen to both sides of the argument this afternoon so that I would have a much better understanding from a legislator's perspective and perhaps a better ability to have an informed discussion with my home-schooling parents when I meet with them on Friday.

I find that the subamendment that is before us is confusing the issue rather than enhancing the issue. The amendment that the minister brought forward is intended to clarify that nothing in the Education Act diminishes any rights or responsibilities that parents had under the former piece of legislation.

As you know, Mr. Chairman, the purpose of the Education Act is actually to update and replace the former School Act, and concerns were expressed. In section 16 there is reference to human rights legislation in Alberta and federal human rights legislation that didn't appear in the previous legislation. Well, the reason for that is that these pieces of legislation were actually passed by both the federal government and provincial government subsequent to that legislation and do have paramourty.

That's where it's very clear that paramourty applies. That's what the Constitution is all about. That's why we have a Supreme Court that determines whether or not legislation that has been passed by both the federal government and provincial governments and, indeed, even municipal governments conforms with these paramount pieces of legislation. So it wasn't in the legislation specifically, but it was still there. It still applied even though it wasn't there. Now all we've done is we've updated and modernized the legislation and we've reflected that these pieces of legislation do exist.

What we have proposed by the hon. Member for Airdrie-Chestermere is that we would say that the paramount right and responsibility to make decisions respecting the education of children lies with the parents. The concern that I have there is that I believe the options that are outlined in the amendment that was brought forward by the minister are very clear that the government recognizes that parents have a right to choose the religious and ethical traditions of their children and that education begins at home and all of the things that we've been describing this afternoon. And then parents have choices to make. They have an informed choice to make. They can choose a public school, they can choose a separate school, they can choose francophone schools, charter schools, private schools, or if none of those things fit with their doctrine, they can choose a home education program.

I believe that by putting this paramourty in place, we could potentially be compromising all of those other choices in the interests of ensuring that the home-school program is not compromised, and I believe that it is not. By saying that the parents have a paramount right to make decisions respecting the education of their children, that could bring chaos into all of those other choices. If a parent decides that something is being taught in a way that they don't agree with or that doesn't agree with their

ethical traditions, as others have made reference to today, if this were to be interpreted literally, that would mean that virtually every school and every classroom would have to have a separate set of rules of engagement for each child in the class, which is practically impossible for anyone to abide by.

We have generally agreed that the School Act will provide for some direction to school boards and to teachers to ensure that we have the kinds of programs offered in these kinds of group settings so that we don't impair the ability to educate the group by overemphasizing the individual rights of the members within that group, an interpretation of those rights. But we say that if, in the opinion of the parents, they believe that their children are not going to be educated in a way that they feel serves the best needs of their child and/or their belief system, they still have one final option, and that is home education.

That home education is flexible in the extreme. Parents have a multitude of ways that they can educate their children. They can do it in a classic way, you know, school goes from 8 in the morning until 5 in the afternoon or 8 until 2, or they can say that the home-schooling that we are dealing with with our children goes on throughout the entire day, and we never miss opportunities to have educational opportunities with our children. Therefore, they can do whatever they like in the best interests of their children to provide an education. At the same time, just like they have been up until this new legislation comes into place and just like every one of us within this room, they have to do so within the context of our human rights legislation.

4:30

It has nothing to do with whether they're home-schooling their children or whether their children are in a publicly funded public system. There are some basic beliefs that we as Canadians have entrenched in our human rights legislation that say that there are some limits on freedom of speech, and some of those limits have been identified and talked about today. You cannot write or encourage people to cause harm to others. Those same limits rightly should apply to all, whether you're in a public education system, whether you're in a home-schooling situation, or, quite frankly, whether or not you're standing up in government in one of the provincial Legislatures or in the federal Legislature. You do not have the right to cause harm to be done to other individuals through the things that you say, the things that you teach, the things that you espouse.

Mr. Chairman, I do not believe that this subamendment improves the amendment that's been brought forward. In fact, I believe that it will impair the ability of the system to provide a proper and thorough education for our children. Therefore, I will not be supporting the subamendment.

By extension, I just want to say for the record, because I probably won't get up and say it again, that I do support the amendment. I will not be supporting the subamendment, but I will be supporting the amendment that's on the table.

The Chair: Hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona, do you wish to speak to the subamendment?

Ms Notley: Well, yes. Sure. I was sort of incited into getting back into the debate by some of the comments of the Member for Airdrie-Chestermere, and then, of course, we had a bit of a conversation afterwards, so I'm not sure how much more of it is necessary. I mean, there are very, very interesting issues that are brought up in this when we talk about sort of the paramourty of parental rights. I wonder if it's black and white. You know, I don't know that the answer is always black and white.

I was just suggesting to the Member for Airdrie-Chestermere: what happens in that case where you've got a family who has a child who's in the school system and the school system has actually managed to find one of those very, very rare speech pathologists and psychologists that still reside within the school system – and they are becoming an increasingly infrequent breed, unfortunately. Nonetheless, they're in the school system, that has repeatedly assessed and reviewed and examined the child and has concluded that, in fact, the child is autistic and does need very specialized support. As most people know, there is about a two- or three-year window in which you can see 85 per cent of the improvement in a case with that particular disability, and that will occur if it happens right away, but the parent, unfortunately, concludes that for whatever reason they're not prepared to accept that diagnosis; they're in denial.

The literature on sort of the process of parenting and grieving amongst parents who have disabled children shows that that's a natural part of the process, but what if that process continues long enough, and the parents say: "You know what? We don't agree that that's what's going on with our child, so we are going to pull him or her out of the school, and we're going to take them home"?

To be clear, as I was saying to the Member for Airdrie-Chestermere, they're going to be loving, they're going to be caring, they're going to spend all their time with that child, and they're going to do everything they can to expose that child to books and whatever. But at the end of the day what's happening is that that child is not getting the kind of one-on-one intervention that could actually bring about a significant improvement in their projected educational and cognitive outcome. What do we do at that point? Do we say that it's the right of the parent to make that choice even though we know that the child may well pay for that in terms of really important life skills throughout their life because the window is not a big window in which you can significantly change those outcomes?

I mean, I see both sides, and I've talked to parents on both sides. It's not black or white. I guess that's my point. It's not black or white. I would struggle mightily if I was a teacher and I watched a parent refuse to let a child get access to that more sophisticated and effective and peer-reviewed intervention that would make a difference.

The other example I gave – and I'm not talking about home-schooling at all. Just to be clear, I have lots of home-schoolers in my constituency, and I know that the vast majority of them do a fabulous job of educating their children. I have no doubt that those children would score very highly on the kinds of tests on how you did at the end of the 18 years. I don't question that at all.

But what about that situation where, again, you've got a child in school, and the teacher phones home and says: "You know what? This child won't learn these key concepts in this grade around math and literacy unless there's more work done at home and more support given at home to help them get through that. We'd like to have him or her stay after school a little bit because we've got a special class that can help them just get over that bump in terms of literacy. If they don't get over that bump, then they're going to fall farther and farther behind." Let's say that happens. Then the family says: "Well, you know, that'd be great, but we don't have a lot of money, and our kid has just gotten a job at McDonald's for 15 hours a week. We need that money, so he can't do it." Well, you know, probably you're going to ultimately side with the parents. But it's not an easy decision.

You know, we had a long debate here yesterday about children's services. We didn't get the exact numbers, but I think we've probably got well over 10,000 children who are in care right now. Those children are in care because, unfortunately, the

parents were not best placed always at all times to be the paramount decision-makers. Hopefully, they will be again. Hopefully, the system works very hard to get to the point where that can happen really quickly. If that's the case, I do believe we are part of a community. I do believe the theory that it takes a community to raise a child. That doesn't mean it takes the state to take the child away. It doesn't mean it takes the state to reach into every family and say: we want you to teach this and this and that. No, no, no. The community needs to recognize and tolerate and embrace and celebrate diversity. But there is a balance, and I think it should be thoughtfully applied. I think that strident statements one way or the other, when we're talking generally about raising children, doesn't help anybody.

I just wanted to throw some of those examples out there because I think it demonstrates why it's not quite as black and white as people suggest. There are times when children can benefit from having a neighbour or a teacher or a doctor come into their life and say: "You know what? This is not going to be the best for you unless some other people step in." That's what we hope happens in our communities generally on a day-to-day basis anyway. We don't want to see families entirely isolated and children paying the price of that. We don't. That's not how we see our communities interacting with each other.

Anyway, my fundamental reasons for not accepting this remain those which I outlined before, which talk about how I am concerned about any language that would undercut the paramountcy of the human rights code and the Charter of Rights and Freedoms within our education setting generally.

Just to be clear, the Human Rights Commission would have no jurisdiction over this other than that slim amount that was given through Bill 44 because the Human Rights Commission has no jurisdiction over schools or this act. It only administers the human rights code, which is limited to employment and tenancy and – I don't know – one or two other things.

Ms Blakeman: Government services.

4:40

Ms Notley: Government services.

Ms Blakeman: Which wouldn't be public education.

Ms Notley: No, no. The human rights code does not apply to government services.

Ms Blakeman: Yes. That was Vriend. He wasn't offered the services of the Human Rights Commission.

Ms Notley: Okay. We'll have to have a conversation about that. Yeah. Interesting. I think we have to have a bit of a back and forth.

Anyway, all that said, it remains my concern about the paramountcy of the human rights code as we go forward in this important task of educating our children across the province. That would be my reason for not supporting this subamendment.

The Chair: The hon. Minister of Education.

Mr. Lukaszuk: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I have spoken a bit already about this act in detail, but a few things, I think, are worth highlighting once and for all. Number one, I want to thank the Member for Airdrie-Chestermere for highlighting the fact that this government has historically been and continues to be supportive of home education. That is exactly the fact. As a matter of fact, I also agree with the Member for Airdrie-Chestermere – and I thank

him for the compliment – in saying that this government has been a big proponent of choice. That is true as well.

As a matter of fact, I venture to say – and I hope that my colleague counterparts, other provincial ministers of education, don't take it as an offence – that I believe Alberta does offer the widest choice, the widest array of educational options for parents. The Member for Airdrie-Chestermere has quite eloquently listed all that are available. The fundamentals of Alberta education actually stem from choice, the fact that we recognize that we're not all the same, that we recognize that we all learn differently, and we recognize that we have different family values and beliefs and religions. As Alberta is becoming more and more cosmopolitan, our education system is so flexible that it actually accommodates all of that.

Now, the amendment that I tabled, not the one that we are debating right now, was meant to further highlight the fact that in Alberta Education we recognize that the fundamental right is that of a parent in shaping a child's moral, religious, spiritual education and that this happens primarily at home for parents that are sending kids to regular school-board-run schools or private or charter schools. But for those who choose to home educate, it also happens at home. Those are the things that we teach our children from the day they're born, and we will continue doing that as families. There is no room for government to be stepping into that at all.

This amendment further highlights the fact that that is an exclusive right of parents, and parents have been doing a good job for a hundred years in this province and will continue to do that.

The amendment that I have tabled is also to highlight the fact that nothing – and let me underscore that, Mr. Chairman: nothing – is to change in the delivery of home education. I thank the Member for Airdrie-Chestermere for highlighting that.

I'll tell you, Mr. Chairman, what frustrates me a little. This bill, that is known as Bill 2 right now, has been on the floor of this Legislature as Bill 18 for about a year. The now Minister of Human Services has done, I would say, a pretty thorough job of consulting on that bill through Inspiring Education and others. Then this bill was tabled here in the Legislature. There was some limited debate on it. But in a rare circumstance I had taken the bill off the floor of the Legislature and had given all Albertans one more opportunity to look at the draft Bill 18 and further consult on it. We have done that. We had seven town hall meetings throughout the province. A letter was sent to every child, so de facto every parent, in Alberta schools. We had parent telephone conferences, where literally in excess of 1,000 parents called in. The list went on and on and on.

What is really, I have to say, disappointing and perhaps even somewhat frustrating to me is that up until this moment I have had zero – zero – input from the Wildrose Alliance caucus. They have not sent me one memo on what they think should or shouldn't be in this new bill.

Mr. MacDonald: Did you invite them to your consultations?

Mr. Lukaszuk: By all means. Everybody was invited.

As a matter of fact, hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands-Norwood, your caucus was generous enough and contributed individually in many different ways.

But not one memo, not one letter. One meeting with the MLA from Airdrie-Chestermere, but not highlighting any amendments to the bill. Now that the bill is in its second reincarnation on the floor of the Legislature, amendments are being tabled. It's somewhat disappointing because, again, I'm venturing to guess that this bill is probably the most consulted piece of legislation that this

Legislature has ever seen, and I'm proud of that because this is one of the most fundamental laws that this Legislature will ever pass, that being the Education Act. It's unfortunate that that caucus now has such grave concerns, but they weren't raising it before.

Mr. Hinman: Point of order.

Mr. Lukaszuk: What further concerns me, Mr. Chairman, is the fact that the Member for Airdrie-Chestermere now admitted to the fact that he hasn't read the bill for over one year.

The Chair: Hon. minister, we have a point of order. The Member for Calgary-Glenmore.

Point of Order

Allegations Against a Member

Mr. Hinman: Standing Order 23(h), (i), and (j). Saying that they had no contact. I mean, it's just totally wrong what he's saying about the Wildrose. Most important, we're amending a government amendment. How on earth were we supposed to know ahead of time that he was going to do this? It's just absurd that he'd even bring that up. This is a government amendment that we're making an amendment to, but somehow we're supposed to go to consultation when he's the one who changed the bill. It's unbelievable. He has to retract what he said.

The Chair: A point of clarification, Minister.

Mr. Lukaszuk: Mr. Chairman, let's be clear. The Member for Airdrie-Chestermere has indicated that he is not happy with sections of the bill proper, and I know that he already has advised me that he will be tabling amendments to the bill proper as well. I don't need to retract anything. It is abundantly obvious that they are not happy with the bill proper and that they also will be tabling amendments, when they had a year and a half opportunity.

Mr. Chairman, what troubles me even further is the fact that the Member for Airdrie-Chestermere is on the record saying that he hasn't read the bill in over one year.

The Chair: Hon. members, I heard the two sides. My ruling is that this is a point of clarification. Both sides have explained.

Minister, please stay on subamendment SA1.

Debate Continued

Mr. Lukaszuk: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. As I was earlier saying, the fact is that this bill was well consulted. The one goal of this bill relative to home education is to maintain that as a bona fide option. We want parents to have that option. We pride ourselves on the fact that home education has such a flourishing history in this province. There is no intention by word or spirit of the act to curtail or change it in any way, and we will continue to do that.

Now, for anyone to insinuate that somehow parents' rights are in jeopardy because one day the government of the day may change that is quite disingenuous, Mr. Chairman. Any member of this Chamber, particularly the Member for Airdrie-Chestermere being, well, at least trained in law, if not practising law, should know the fact that any government of any day can change any law as long as they bring it to the floor of the Legislature with amendments or with another piece of legislation to replace it. So to be reassuring parents that whatever we put in this act will be cast in stone and will never ever be changed by any future govern-

ment is simply not being frank and forthcoming with those parents.

Going back to his earlier comments, the fact is that we do have a history of a Progressive Conservative government in excess of 40 years now that has actually grown the home-schooling program and supported it and any aspect of it. There is no reason to believe that this government would want to change the path in any particular way. I can tell you on the record right now that there is no intention among any members of our caucus to make any changes, and we won't be making any changes.

I hope that home-schooling parents have the satisfaction of knowing that they have a government in place that has supported and will continue to support their options as they have exercised them up until this point. We hope that they will continue exercising them into the future because they have proven to us and to the rest of Albertans that home-schooling is a viable option and is the right option for some children where they choose to exercise it.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

The hon. Member for Calgary-Glenmore.

Mr. Hinman: Thank you, Mr. Chair. This is truly an interesting discussion, and I cannot believe the direction that the Minister of Education just went in. I'm going to have to clarify a few of the utterly incorrect statements that he just made. I want to start off by asking the chair whether the Minister of Education just received this – I don't know whether it's 20 pages – the concerns from the Calgary board of education that just came in. Is he going to get up there and slander the Calgary board of education and all the other people that are bringing and sending information to us. Does he not receive any?

This government is notorious – notorious – for coming up with legislation and then saying that they're going to go out and consult. It's an insult to Albertans. It's an insult to children. It's an insult to all of the school boards out there. It's just one insult after another, Mr. Chair, what this member got up and spewed out of his mouth.

Let's get back to the amendment, which is an amendment . . .

4:50

The Chair: Subamendment SA1.

Mr. Hinman: Yes, but to government amendment A1, which just shows how incorrect he is. It's the government's amendment that we want to amend. Oh, we're supposed to consult because we're clairvoyant and knew what he was going to bring forward. This is just remarkable, the stuff that he wants to try and bring out here.

The Calgary board of education, again, has pages of concerns with Bill 2 that they just put out, oh, after a year and a half. Again, this government has such a poor track record, Mr. Chair, that they can say, "We've only changed section 16 and section 2," but the fact of the matter is that until they've gone through it meticulously, there isn't a school board, there isn't a parent, there isn't a teacher in this province that will trust this minister on the open face saying: "Trust me. Nothing has been changed." They've lost the trust of Albertans. They don't deserve the trust of Albertans because of their past behaviour.

I want to go on a little bit about subamendment SA1 and to read it in here again. Oh, we get to the small letters, the big letters; we're changing back and forth. What we're wanting to do here is to substitute "as the first recital," and we want to put in here "the paramount right and responsibility to make decisions respecting

the education of their children, which includes." We want the paramount right to the parents.

Because I was in meetings in my office, I haven't been able to listen to everything, but the hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre started off by talking about the 1982 Constitution Act and where our freedoms are and who is responsible. Everyone uses the analogy – she used it today – that I have the right to swing my arm until it hurts someone else. So you've got to stop just before the nose of someone else is what she talked about earlier. [interjection] Because you are scaring people. When you've gone into their personal space and they're worried, it crosses over.

Arguments are going forward by many of the members about what's the right of the parent and where it is when a parent is starting to do damage to a child – there's physical, there's emotional, all of these areas – but we have a child's advocate, and there is a process for them to be protected.

So to think that we need to have a School Act that's going to say that the state will supersede and step in on choosing, you know, where these kids need to go or who has the ultimate right – is it the Minister of Education, or is it the parent? That's really what this is about. Albertans are very concerned and rightfully concerned because of the track record of this government on infringing on the individual rights of the citizens of this province.

Mr. Hancock: That's ridiculous.

Mr. Hinman: The Minister of Human Resources says that it's ridiculous. I want to put that on the record because he truly is ridiculous in his comments with what he has said.

I remember when I was in Eckville how he got hammered down when he made those same comments to one Keith Wilson by making such . . .

Mr. Hancock: That was also ridiculous.

Mr. Hinman: Yes. A year ago. And he likes to interject and put in these ridiculous statements on truth. [interjection] It would have been a much better one.

The Chair: Hon. member, speak to the chair.

Mr. Hinman: Yes, Mr. Chair. [interjection] You know what that word means? That's surprising. [interjection] No. The other one that he was using.

What we want to talk about is: who has the paramount rights over our children and who's going to make the decision? I want to go back and maybe change the tone a little bit here. Albertans are grateful and I'm grateful for the system that we've had. Historically we've supported home-schooling; we've supported choice. I think that, as they like to echo all the time, this is one of the best places that provides one of the best educations for our children here in Alberta. Why? Because we've respected parents' rights to choose and then the choice of individuals to start other schools if they want to.

I know a wonderful lady who, in order to keep their public school alive in Warner, went out and did a lot of work and raised a lot of money to specialize in a hockey school for women. That's what we want. We want innovative Albertans to be able to come up with and look at new ideas and ways in which to keep their schools open or to meet the needs of their children so that they can be the best they can be.

Choice is just so critical if we really want to compete and keep up because that entrepreneur, those parents that are out ahead are going to come together and say, "We need this." Perhaps they can make that pressure on the public school board and say, "Provide

this for our children; we want to have this class in our curriculum,” or they could come and start their own private or charter school in order to do that. But we need to protect the parental right to make those decisions.

I’m always nervous when someone says that the state has greater interest in the children than the parents. Usually there’s again . . .

Mr. Hancock: We’re not saying that, though.

Mr. Hinman: Well, there is one that was kind of mentioning that, you know, they need interference and perhaps a doctor needs to step in or the school board or someone. The innuendo was certainly there that sometimes the parents aren’t informed.

That’s another interesting word here. On page 12 we have: “Whereas parents have the right and the responsibility to make informed decisions.” Again, it’s another part of the concern here, that they could say: “Well, they’re not informed enough. I’m an expert, so I can supersede that.”

What all of this amendment is and what the concern is – I know that the minister had the rally out front and again accused different members of instigating these rallies when, in fact, it’s his own bill and what they put in it that has caused the uproar, and it’s the past behaviour of this government that’s caused the uproar. The mistrust is why people are concerned.

Just today we had a question here on emergency services, and the Minister of Municipal Affairs made the comment that he wouldn’t know of an Albertan that wouldn’t want the government to come in and confiscate their car in order to save somebody. I say: “You know what? That’s what happens in a police state.” In Alberta I can assure you that what would happen when they came and said, “Can we use your car because we need to do this,” is that Albertans would give. You don’t need the authority to have the option to say: we’re confiscating this car. That’s offensive, yet that’s what this government wants. They want the authority to break and enter, to confiscate and do all of that.

Therefore, this loops over to why these same people don’t have trust in this government and say: “What is it? Why do they need legislation that’s so strong and worded such that there’s this loophole that would not allow the parents to make that choice for their children?” The Minister of Education knows better. He’s going to say: “This is what needs to be taught to your children. We know better.” Parents need to have that choice, and if it’s not protected and we don’t see it in here as paramount, we run into trouble.

Again, going back to the Member for Edmonton-Centre when she was talking about the Charter of Rights and Freedoms and going through that, as she eloquently said, it’s one of the few bills that actually reads quite easily. Albertans can pick it up and read through it. It is understandable. It goes through:

2. Everyone has the following fundamental freedoms:

- (a) freedom of conscience and religion;
- (b) freedom of thought, belief, opinion and expression, including freedom of the press and other media of communication;
- (c) freedom of peaceful assembly;

Again, she made the comment that with all of the security here, she didn’t know if that one was being respected, and I can understand her concerns and her comments on that. And

- (d) freedom of association.

Those are laid out there.

She also was very articulate in saying – and this is so critical in the rule of law – that if you have a list created and you’re not on that list, you’re not on that list. That’s the concern here. What is the list, how is it prioritized, and is this government going to

possibly infringe on the rights of parents by saying: “You know what? We know better. We don’t think that you’re teaching your children the right curriculum. You’re not teaching them the right arts. They need to be taught cooking,” whatever might come in as a new curriculum, saying, “This is what we need to do.” That’s fearful for many Albertans, especially those that are in the private and home-schooling area, where they want to have that right as a parent to make that decision on what is going to be there for their children.

5:00

Again, we know that in the Constitution and we know that under the rule of law you can’t teach hatred, and if parents are doing something like that, then there are already laws in place that we can do something about that. We don’t need these things in print and listed in this bill, the Education Act, yet they keep wanting to weave those things in, and because they weave those things in there, Albertans, parents become concerned.

It’s a simple amendment. It’s the right amendment. It’s very close to what the government has tried to do. Again, he’s accusing us because we didn’t consult with him. I guess, I have to say that, you know, let’s change that a little bit.

It’s an insult, usually, to try and talk to them on many of these things. They’ve been in here long enough that they just laugh at most of these things. Let’s just talk about bills 19, 36, 24, and 50. They laugh and mock about those. The Minister of Human Resources: I’ve been to the meetings where he does that and says that’s not true.

Mr. Hancock: Well, it wasn’t.

Mr. Hinman: He still wants to stand by that.

Mr. Hancock: That’s the worst abomination I’ve ever heard.

The Chair: Hon. members, the substance of the debate is subamendment SA1.

Ms Blakeman: Where are we?

Mr. Hinman: Keith Wilson in Eckville.

Ms Blakeman: Okay. All right. Focus in.

Mr. Hinman: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre wants me to focus back in here. I will try and do that, but it’s difficult with the government and all of their past behaviour. That’s why you make judgments, Mr. Chair. Because your relationships and the things that you’ve had in the past have an impact on your judgment, and the people of Alberta, thankfully, are going to be able to have a judgment on this government and their ridiculous bills that they pass, saying that they’re protecting rights when all they’re doing is protecting their power. All they’re doing is protecting their authority. They’re entrenching that power and authority over and above the citizens of Alberta, saying: “Trust us. We’re the government and we know best.”

That’s what the problem is. Many Albertans are phoning. They’re e-mailing. They’re writing letters. They’re concerned where the line is drawn on parental rights.

If they’re hurting their children – again, I do understand. I’ve seen the homes of parents that are illiterate that don’t want their children to go to school. We know that that’s wrong. That’s where the government and the child advocate can step in and say: “No. This child needs to be brought out and go to school.” And that’s appropriate. We understand that. But it doesn’t mean, though, that they can come and say: “You know what? We want you to teach

this curriculum in here because we think that this is right.” Those parents might not agree with that. Do we have that cultural diversity? Do we have that religious freedom that allows people to do those things? Parents are very concerned that they don’t.

I believe that it’s right, so what we need to do is look at this amendment, and we need to accept subamendment SA1 to the government’s amendment A1, and put in there, “the paramount right and responsibility to make decisions respecting the education of their children, which includes,” and then we can read through the bill. We all know what it includes going forward.

We would hope that others would continue to speak on this. It’s a very small change, but again as the Member for Edmonton-Centre says, if it’s not on that list, if it’s not written in there, it doesn’t exist. That’s why there’s a concern, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar, you have patiently been waiting.

Mr. MacDonald: Yes, I have.

I appreciate the opportunity to participate in debate on this subamendment. I would like to compliment all members from various parties for their contribution to the debate and the discussion this afternoon, not only on Bill 2 but also on this subamendment that has been proposed to us by the hon. Member for Airdrie-Chestermere.

I have been looking at this legislation for some time. I’ve had consultations with various groups. On the public record I certainly appreciate hearing from constituents. I’ve heard from home-schoolers, and I’ve heard from other individuals who have been expressing their opinion on this legislation. Certainly, I welcome their observations. I welcome their phone calls and their e-mails regarding this bill. It’s a very important bill, and it’s a very important discussion that we’re having this afternoon.

Certainly, we have heard various hon. members talk about the paramount right and responsibility to make decisions respecting the education of their children. Now, I can understand where the hon. member is coming from, but I really don’t think that when we look at this bill and we look at education in general – we’ve got to remind ourselves that we’re not necessarily just talking about public education like we should. Public education is a foundation of our multicultural community, our multicultural province, and our multicultural country. Without public education multiculturalism will not work.

Has the government accommodated home-schoolers? I believe they have. There is within the public education system in our constituency a school that is delegated to providing support for home-schoolers, particularly as they get into the subjects that one generally encounters in junior high and in high school. This program for home-schoolers for both the pupils and their parents seems to work quite well.

I have an opportunity on occasion to visit this facility and to visit during graduation time, and it is interesting to see the diversity of the student population, if I can call them that, and the communities that they call home. Some of the students come from as far south as Sylvan Lake, and certainly there are cases where they come from well north of the city of Edmonton. They do gather for their graduation ceremony, and both the pupils and the parents are very proud of their accomplishments, and so they should be. That would be one example of an accommodation that has already been made by the province.

Home-schoolers have every right to question the direction that this government is taking with this bill, as do citizens who do not have their children enrolled in home-schooling programs.

When we look at this bill and we look at the hon. member’s subamendment, I would certainly remind members that there are other parts of this bill that are important. It was touched on by the hon. Member for Calgary-North Hill. There is a section in here, and there’s a section in the current legislation, regarding compulsory education.

7(1) Every person who

- (a) is a resident of Alberta and has a parent who is a resident of Canada,
- (b) at September 1 in a year is 6 years of age or older, and
- (c) subject to subsection (2), is younger than 17 years of age, shall attend school.

Not may attend school, but shall attend school. It’s compulsory, and so it should be. I don’t know why if this bill is to become law, it is necessary to have this amendment.

5:10

When you go further into the bill, Mr. Chairman, you will see where individuals have responsibilities. Let’s start with part 3, section 31. Students have responsibilities, and they’re outlined here in this proposed legislation. Parents have responsibilities. School boards have responsibilities. Trustees have responsibilities. It’s outlined here, but let’s look at parent responsibilities.

Parents have the responsibility to

- (a) make decisions respecting the child’s education,
 - (b) take an active role in the child’s educational success, including assisting the child in complying with section 31,
- which is the section on student responsibilities. Parents must
- (c) ensure that the child attends school regularly,
 - (d) ensure that the parent’s conduct contributes to a welcoming, caring, respectful and safe environment,
 - (e) co-operate and collaborate with school staff to support the delivery of specialized supports and services to the child,
 - (f) encourage, foster and advance collaborative, positive and respectful relationships with teachers, principals, other school staff and professionals providing supports and services in the school, and
 - (g) engage in the child’s school community.

Sometimes in my work here I may be guilty of violating that because I’ve been busy, and perhaps I was not as engaged in my three children’s school community as I should have been.

These are legislative requirements that are in this bill already, so to suggest that we need to change this and make sure that parents have the right and responsibility to make informed decisions respecting the education of their children, that is what I see in here already. That is to be eliminated or struck, and we are to replace this with the subamendment as proposed.

There seems to be some thought or some chatter that there will be issues of discrimination. The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre talked about this earlier today. What happens if something goes wrong? Maybe this is what the hon. member is trying to attempt here with this subamendment, but when something does go wrong, the courts come into play.

All Canadian jurisdictions stipulate that no person may deny or discriminate on the basis of religion, creed, or a related concept in the provision of any service, accommodation, or facility that is customarily or ordinarily available to the public. This would of course include our entire school system. How have the courts worked in the past? I’m not going to take up the House’s time on this, but . . .

Ms Blakeman: Yes, you will.

Mr. MacDonald: No. But I will point out a case of a young Sikh student. Recently in the context of the Canadian Charter of Rights

and Freedoms religious discrimination was found by the Supreme Court of Canada where a school council of commissioners – the decision prohibited a traditional Sikh student from wearing his kirpan, sealed and under his clothes, to school.

The student in this case genuinely believed that he would not be complying with the requirements of his religion were he to wear a plastic or a wooden kirpan. Ultimately the court found the interference with the student's freedom of religion was neither trivial nor insignificant as it deprived him of his right to attend a public school.

The court found that while protecting the safety of students was a pressing, substantial objective and the prohibition against weapons was rationally connected to this objective, the prohibition did not minimally impair the student's rights as there are ways of wearing a kirpan without threatening safety in the school context. That's one example. That's how the courts worked. In another example no discrimination was found by the Canadian Human Rights Tribunal when a complainant was prevented from travelling on an airplane with a kirpan that was considered dangerous to the public. So there are examples here of give-and-take in the system. I think we should be aware of that when we're discussing the Education Act and this amendment.

Now, this is another rather interesting example, Mr. Chairman. It has been held that provisions in a will that provided for establishment of bursaries for students who were practising Roman Catholics did not violate human rights legislation or public policy. The Court of Appeal in Ontario reached a different result when they found that a trust established to provide for education of persons of white Christian Protestant and of British heritage violated public policy.

As you can see, when we have a look at discrimination in human rights and some of the case examples, there certainly are decisions made, and the decisions that have been made have been, in my view, wise and respectful of not only the individuals but the laws that we currently have. I guess what I'm saying is that I think we should have confidence in the courts, that we should have confidence that the courts will be flexible in adjudicating cases, and for that reason I really don't think that the amendment as proposed here is necessary at this time, nor is it needed.

Whenever you go through this bill, there are sections that certainly, in my view, would satisfy the concerns of a number of different groups. Certainly, as we work forward into this legislation or we go beyond the preamble, I will listen with great interest to the Minister of Education and others who may or may not want to comment on section 58, which is centring around religious and patriotic instruction or exercises and what a school board can do.

Now, with that, there is a definition of board in here that, in my view, does not include private schools. We do know that there is a lot of money going into private schools. We do know that the budget is going up. I believe the last time I looked, it was in excess of \$170 million, and that's what we need to have a look at.

Hopefully, Mr. Chairman, we will have more time during Committee of the Whole to discuss the role of private schools which are funded by the taxpayers within the entire school system in this province.

Thank you.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre on subamendment SA1.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you very much. I think I originally put myself on the list to rebut something that was about an hour and a half ago, so I've sort of lost my train of thought, but I did make a

couple of notes. Oh, yes, I know what it was. It was: who gets to make the decisions?

Mr. Hinman: That wasn't an hour and a half ago.

Ms Blakeman: Yeah, it was. That was.

A couple of points I want to raise about this subamendment, for starters the word "paramount" or "paramountcy." This is from Random House. I'm sorry that it's an American dictionary, but that's okay. Let's pretend it's all right. If you look at the word "paramount," it says: chief in importance or rank; chief; number one; top; foremost; primary. You can't have two number ones. You can't have two chiefs, two primaries, two top-of-the-totem-poles. It's not possible. We already have one paramountcy in here, and that is: "Whereas the educational best interest of the child is the paramount consideration in making decisions about a child's education." I'm pretty sure this amendment is not striking that out. No, it's not. You can't have two paramount clauses.

5:20

One, I would argue that this amendment is – I guess I can't say out of order because Parliamentary Counsel said that it was in order, and I would never argue with Parliamentary Counsel ever, at least not on the record. I think that's part of the argument here. The question that the Member for Airdrie-Chestermere was making is: where does the buck stop? Who gets to make the final decision?

I think what we've been wrestling with all afternoon here is that in your home with your child, outside of exact educational time, a parent does, obviously. Maybe it's not obvious, considering how long we've been talking about this. But I would argue that as a citizen in this province, as an employer, as a legislator, when it comes to public education, on behalf of citizens we legislators make the policy that gives forth those decisions.

In other words, I would say that when it comes to public education, the citizenry as a group makes the decision about what's in the best interest of the child so that we have a consistent standard. When a 25-year-old goes to apply for a job and says, "I was educated in Alberta," you say: "Okay. Then I will believe that you know math 30 or its equivalent, science 30 and its equivalent, social studies, English, whatever. I think I know as an employer generally what kids in Alberta are taught, and I will believe that you know that."

That's what I expect as the product, a consistency there. You know, don't misinterpret me there, that I'm somehow degrading people or something when I talk about product. You guys know what I mean here. There has to be a consistency of the outcome of what we're trying for, and to allow it to be up to every individual parent as to what they determine is the final educational outcome of their child is not a consistency here. It flows against the idea of a general public education.

My concern about this entire discussion and, to a large extent, this bill and particularly the government's amendment A1 is that it is moving us away from the tenets of a public education. The reason that I kept bringing up and walking everybody through what a freedom is, what a right is, what a protection is, what we must provide as education, and what an accommodation is is because I think we should not be putting the accommodation of home-schooling and private schooling and charter schooling, if it is outside of the public system, on the same footing as those public educations which are guaranteed in the Constitution and the Charter. They are accommodations, and I do not think they should be on the same footing.

As I said, I understand that there are sometimes good reasons for home-schooling a child, but I think that should be the exception, not the rule. I disagree with the government bending over backwards to offer – here we go with the air quotes – choice to parents around education. I expect children will go to school and get the same education. What is wrong with our public education that we the government – my own government, my hon. colleagues opposite me – feel that we have to give everybody an out, that we have to allow anybody that wants to do it differently to do it differently? Why aren't we defending public education? That's what we're here to do.

I don't understand. You have not given me a good argument, Mr. Minister, as to why we should be opening the door to everybody that wants to do a different education and gathering it and funding it under that chapter heading of public education. It's not. Private education is not public education. It should not receive one dime of public funding, in my opinion. A private school is a private school is a private school. No public funding.

I can see the reason for home-schooling, but I believe it should fall exactly under public schooling. You know, it must produce exactly the same outcome. If they want to do it over a 12-hour period instead of a six-hour period, fine and dandy, but the outcome should be the same. If there's a reason for doing that, okay; then don't put your kid in public school. But I expect the same result out of it.

I have failed to hear a compelling reason from any of the home-schoolers or from the government as to why we would put them on the same footing as public education. It's not. Unless they can meet that same test, then, no. That is the way I put it. Now, obviously, I'm going to be willing to make that consideration, but I'm not going to put them on the same footing. Definitely not private schooling. It should not be considered in what we're doing here. It's not public education. It should not be funded that way.

Charter schools, as I said, should be under the public school system, or they're not counted in either. What I see are constant exceptions, constant opting out. I mean, we still have section 11.1 under the Human Rights Act, which allows parents to opt out of everything. Why? It's public education. We have designed this to be the best possible education we can offer in this the richest of all possible provinces, so why are we allowing everyone to opt out? Do we really believe in our public education system so little that we have to allow anybody that wants to get out to get out? I just don't think our system should be degraded that way.

I think the more we do this, the more we end up with the Swiss-cheese system. The more people you allow to opt out, eventually, like with public health care, if you allow enough people to go out into the private system, now you only have the people in the public system who need very specific care and often more expensive care. I don't want to see that happen to my public education system in my province. I don't think that's what we're here to do as educators, to allow that system to degrade, to be Swiss cheese, to have holes constantly poked in it as we allow this group out and that group out and this group out. Why? Why are they allowed to be getting out? Why are we allowing them choice? What's wrong with the system we have? Why can't we support that system? I think it diminishes the whole. So, no, I won't support this.

One last thing. You know, there have been some digs taken at bureaucrats here. For the most part, I think people that work in the education system, that work in the ministry here, that help us develop policy and give us advice on it, and the people that administer that policy by working for the school boards, by being elected officials on those school boards, by interpreting that again, and by being teachers in the classroom deserve some respect. They work hard for our children. They are doing their best for our

children. I'm tired of people taking digs at them as though somehow they're sitting in a backroom trying to create the worst possible scenario for our children.

They're working hard for us. I mean, honestly, do you really believe that somebody that's hiring in the Department of Education goes: "Gee, how much do you hate this system? You really hate it? Good. I'm going to hire you so you can screw up every kid that comes through our system?" That's not true. They're working very hard to produce the best possible system. Why aren't we believing them? Have they really produced such terrible outcomes? Do we really have that many children that are out on the street right now that are terribly educated? Really? That's just not true.

Most of our kids do very well in public school, like, 99 per cent. They go out there, and they do us proud. Many of them go into the trades. They go to college. They get diplomas and certificates. They go on to university. They become citizens of our province and do very well for us.

5:30

Get some backbone, folks. Protect that public system, that has served us so well for so long, and quit allowing this very good public system to be opted out of by anyone who wants to get out. Defend the system that we have and insist that people adhere to it.

I'll climb down from that high horse. Sorry about that. But, honestly, I just think there's something wrong with what I'm hearing this afternoon, and that is a lack of respect and support for a public school system. I think that's what's important.

I'm going to be coming back on you, Mr. Minister, because I think you have caved in a number of other places in this act in which you should be upholding a public system. You can look forward to that. I know you're thrilled.

Just to bring this to a close, I can't support subamendment SA1, and further to that . . . [interjection] Yup. Yeah, that doesn't mean you're right, by the way. It just means you're wrong on both accounts. Let's get that clear.

I'm going to come back tonight, Mr. Chair. I thought I wouldn't, but I'm going to come back tonight because I want an opportunity to be able to speak on the main amendment again once we vote subamendment SA1 out.

I hope that's clarified what my position is just so that I'm not misunderstood. Okay. Leave it at that, Laurie. Sit down.

Thank you.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Airdrie-Chestermere on sub-amendment SA1.

Mr. Anderson: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair. This is a good debate, a good discussion. Or maybe not. Maybe it's not a good discussion. It depends, I guess, on who you ask.

It's too bad that it has to get personal, but the rhetoric that this Education minister, who is supposed to be looking after our kids, sometimes uses is just incredible. The games that are played. You know, he talked earlier about this amendment, that we somehow didn't give him amendments. In reality, Mr. Chair – and I'd be willing to table this – we gave our amendments to this minister two weeks ago, after studying Bill 2 and getting feedback from stakeholders and so forth. We wanted to make an effort to send those amendments to him through his staff so that he could see them. Actually, his staff asked us: what are your plans on the amendments? Two weeks ago we gave him those amendments, so what he said earlier was patently untrue. It's just brutal.

He also talked about that nothing had changed from Bill 2. He was just on an online forum saying that I hadn't read Bill 2 in over a year. Bill 2, of course, wasn't introduced until this year. Bill 18 was tabled last year, and we had an opportunity to look at it. Of course, it has changed, including, he might want to note, the preamble that we're talking about today. The preamble has changed. For example, you added the word "informed." Where parents have the right to make decisions regarding their children's education, you put "informed" before decisions, which changes the meaning. So you did change it, and we looked at it, and we got feedback on it.

What it shows to me is the disdain that this minister and others in the government have for this process here. I look at this process in a perfect world as an opportunity to amend these bills, to make them better, to give the opposition and government members, including noncabinet members, an opportunity to bring forth amendments, have discussion, go back and forth both in the House and out of the House, discuss how to make the bill better, and then bring it here and make amendments.

That's the Legislature that I wish existed because I think there are tons of phenomenal ideas over on that side of the House and over on this side of the House. The problem is that you've got a kind of God complex that exists with certain ministers over there, where they think: "No. I've ruled, and what I say has got to be the right way. I have done my consultation and my forums, and that is good enough."

You know what? The problem is that you didn't consult the people of Alberta because everyone in this room represents the people of Alberta. The point of being in Committee of Whole debating these amendments is so that the people of Edmonton-Centre can have a voice in this matter and can suggest some amendments, and the people from Bonnyville-Cold Lake will have an opportunity to be represented by their member and offer amendments and comments as will the people of Calgary-West or Calgary-Greenway or Banff-Cochrane or anywhere.

Yet we don't treat it like this. We don't treat each other – certainly, the government, this minister don't treat the opposition with that respect. We're here, apparently, to play games. That's all that we want to do is to play games. Well, that's baloney. We want to improve the bill.

My first comments on this amendment were very congratulatory to the minister. They were saying: thank you for getting most of this bill right and most of the preamble right. I even complimented the idea and the thrust behind his amendment. And then he comes back with these childish little comments and makes it into a big political theatre. Well, guess what? That's not what this is about.

We're trying to introduce a very simple amendment that is going to strengthen and enshrine further the rights of parents with regard to choosing what education is right for their children. I think that's a laudable effort. Instead, all we get is yipping from the minister. I thought that when the Member for Calgary-Nose Hill stood up and gave some comments and questions and so forth that those were very fair comments, very gentlemanly, very statesmanlike. We disagreed, but that's okay. The comments from the Member for Medicine Hat: the same thing. I disagree with him, but they were gentlemanly, and he had his point of view.

I just wish for a second that the partisan hat might come off of this particular minister, who's obviously a little bit concerned about the polling numbers and the fact that, you know, he may not have his position very much longer if he continues to be so chippy and arrogant. That, I think, is what his real worry is. Hopefully, we can get back to having a discussion, a gentlemanly discussion, on this bill.

Back to the bill. I thought the comments were very interesting from the Member for Edmonton-Centre. I certainly did not agree with them, but I can see a little bit more of where she's coming from, and I respect that opinion. I don't think that supporting school choice or the rights of parents is mutually exclusive or contradictory with or is saying that there's something wrong with our public schools. I don't see it that way. In fact, I think that school choice is a great strength to our public schools. I think it has made them better. I think the competition that has existed because of school choice within a publicly funded education system has really strengthened our public schools to the point where parents like me are completely confident in my current public school, which is why I choose to send my children there.

However, if you took that competition away, if you made it a monopoly on education, I think what would happen is that we would slide back into some of what you see in other jurisdictions around the world and particularly in Canada, where their education results aren't as good in their public system. I think that a classic example of this, in my view, is that the Edmonton public system is one of the best systems in the world. It has an incredible number of choices in it. There are faith-based schools within the public education system. It's fantastic that they've been able to find that balance because it's a tricky one, and it takes a lot of work and a lot of, you know, mistakes being made, and then you've got to go back and make sure you're okay and the parents are okay and everyone is feeling included and everything else. I think that's fantastic.

5:40

I think that the reason the Edmonton public system is so world renowned is because of the strength that it has derived from having to compete with other systems in this province to show parents and to prove to parents that it is the best place for their kids to be educated.

I know that in Rocky View school division I've had this debate with my trustees. They used to be my principal and vice-principal, at the same time, if you can believe that, when I was in school. They're now the trustees that I work with as MLA for that area. They would disagree with me on the aspects of the need for competition in the system, but I always tell them: "Look at Rocky View schools. Look at the reading program in Nose Creek, for example." Well, that program was derived from several charter schools in Calgary that do it.

It's having these little units of competition, these little innovative kind of petri dishes out there, that allows innovative ideas, education ideas, different pedagogies, different ways of educating children. Allowing that to occur has greatly benefited Rocky View school division. In fact, Rocky View school division just this last year put together in one of their schools a very, very innovative pedagogy where they essentially had four main themes. One was more sports-based. One was more science-based. I think space was another one. Nature and environment was another one. They would use these overall themes, and the parents would choose which kind of theme the Alberta curriculum would be taught through. It was an interest of a child. So when they learned physics, for example – that's a bad example because you don't learn physics then.

Pardon me?

Ms Blakeman: But we should. It's much more equal.

Mr. Anderson: Well, there you go.

Math, for example. A math problem about, you know, calculating how much distance someone covered in a certain

amount of time. If you went through the sports model or theme, you would learn how fast the hockey player is when skating from the blue line to the blue line if it's this distance at this speed. All this sort of thing.

They would use that whereas someone who was in the kind of a nature and environment track would say: "This is the distance between two mountains. If there's a horse going through it at this speed, how long would it take? What would be the incline?" And so forth. It's very interesting.

At first people were kind of like: whoa; what are they doing? But there are a lot of parents that were very, very happy with it. My kids aren't in that school; they're not old enough yet. It's a middle school. Anyway, I thought it was very, very innovative.

There was a problem with that because our schools are so overcrowded in Airdrie. Of course, you get first dibs if you live within the jurisdiction that's assigned. Some parents who were concerned with that and wanted to move to a different public school were a little bit upset about that, but that's a different problem. That's a problem of lack of school space rather than the innovation that was being shown there.

Anyway, that's certainly something that, in my view, I don't think we would have gotten if we didn't have the influence of charter schools because essentially that's what charter schools do. They are public schools as well, publicly funded, and it's first-come, first-served, and there's no tuition, so they're more like public schools than a private school. But they focus on something, whether it's music or new languages or whatever it is, that allows the child to kind of have a little bit of a different pedagogy or curriculum focus and so forth. I think it's very good, and I think that's why you see such innovation going on in our public system.

I hope that that clarifies at least where my viewpoint is coming from on this with regard to why school choice and parental choice actually are strengths to the public school and not detriments to it.

Now, why should we put this at the top of the preamble? Getting back to it, the hon. member made a very good point, I thought, when she said that the educational best interest of the child is the paramount consideration when making decisions about a child's education. Then she noted that it's kind of hard if you have two paramountcy clauses in the same one. I thought that was a very good point, actually.

Ms Blakeman: You'd just like to switch those.

Mr. Anderson: That's right. Let's switch them out. No, no, no. What I think would be good, actually – and perhaps we can talk about this over dinner; well, maybe not; I'm sure you have dinner plans, hon. member, but maybe we can all talk about it as a group here this evening – is that perhaps we can define what "best interests of the child" means and when the parent's paramountcy ends.

You know, it would be interesting to say, "Look, parents have the right to make these determinations until they infringe upon the rights of the child or hurt their legal rights or take away their legal rights" or whatever the wording is. I think that would clarify it and say, "Look, parents actually are the ones that have the paramount right to determine what the best interest of the child is until they lose that right through abusing it, through breaking the law, by taking away their child's right or not respecting their child's right" or whatever. That would be a very interesting conversation, and then we could come back to that. In that way, they wouldn't be mutually exclusive.

You could say that, yeah, the paramount right – I agree with the hon. member that it should always be in the best interest of the

child. Of course, in the courts we use that, best interest of the child. That should be the paramount consideration, not the paramount right but the paramount consideration, in making decisions about a child's education, and then maybe go on to say that it is the parents that have the paramount right to determine what that best interest is with regard to education until they've given that right up through harming the rights of the child and so forth under law. Anyway, something like that might be a very honourable and worthy thing to have in here to improve the wording of this bill.

Again, this is good debate. I would like to see some additional subamendments, for sure, on the preamble because I think I'd like to get the preamble right. I mean, we always just assume that the preamble is right. How many times have we just kind of all said: "On the title of the bill, are you agreed?" "Agreed." "On the preamble of the bill, are you agreed?" "Agreed." Well, I don't agree with the preamble here, and I think that we need to change it. I don't think that it adequately reflects, even with the amendment from the Education minister, the paramount right that parents have to determine the education that is best for their children.

I think that that would be a very interesting exercise in democracy, Mr. Chair, if we would as an Assembly come together and actually find something that works for more than just the governing party, perhaps have some kind of compromise that takes into account some of the things that some of the members of the Liberal or the NDP caucuses have said because I think that there might be some commonalities, at least on the best interests of the child. In my view, I haven't heard anything from the Member for Edmonton-Centre or the Member for Edmonton-Strathcona that would disagree with the fact that parents are the ones that are in the best position to determine what the best interest of the child is unless they hurt that interest of the child, unless they take away the rights of the child in question.

I'd be interested and very curious to hear some more debate on this issue if you think that you have anything to say, hon. member. But you have to promise to be nice – okay? – because we're getting back to gentlemanliness here and are actually having a good discussion and not sinking, you know, as mum says, to fighting the pigs in the mud, right? Okay.

Thank you.

5:50

The Chair: The hon. Member for Fort McMurray-Wood Buffalo on subamendment SA1.

Mr. Boutilier: Yeah. Thank you very much. Mr. Chairman, I will say that the hon. Member for Airdrie-Chestermere has made numerous points, and I certainly hope that the Minister of Education is listening intently, no different than we expect of our children when they're in school, to listen intently in terms of what we refer to as teachable moments.

I do believe on this important issue that I support faith-based schooling. I support the absolute, paramount right of a parent to raise their children and educate their children in no matter what way, be it through home-schooling like parents that do home-schooling, be it through charter schools, through public, Catholic, separate schools. Faith-based schools are so important as well.

I think that this subamendment that the member on behalf of the Wildrose caucus has put forward is an important one because it comes down to the foundation of our society. We all recognize the importance of the role of a parent in terms of determining, you know, how they bring up their children, and teaching is an important part of that.

As I mentioned earlier, I'm very proud to say that at one point in my life I had been trained in school to be a teacher, as has my wife, who has been a teacher for many, many years. In fact, that's where I met my wife, in an academic institution called Keyano College, that does a very good job. In our schools I also must admit how much I enjoyed it when I used to substitute teach as well. In terms of the important role that teachers play, I thank all teachers who play a role in educating. But at the same time the almost paramount role that a parent plays – I come from a family where my father was a teacher and then went on to be a vice-principal and a high school principal for many, many years. I'm proud to say that my father was well respected in the role that he does, just like so many teachers and parents that do an excellent job in educating their children.

This is really the foundation of our society, the idea that we have the right to be able to stand up here in this Assembly and say: I support faith-based schooling. I support the paramount right of a parent to raise their children, to educate their children, to ensure that the child gets the fullness of life by so many people in terms of whom they will encounter in their lifetime. But they also will learn the independence. It's like letting the birds go free from the nest. Ultimately, I know all parents believe that they have an important role in feeding the bird in that nest and having teachable moments so that as they go out into society, they go out into society well prepared.

I say that as a parent. You know, my wife and I were late starting our family, and someone said that, oh, well, I'm just a slow politician. But I will say that being 51 years old with our son Marc, who will be just entering kindergarten next year, I often talk about the importance of the role of a parent, but that is not in any way, shape, or form about the importance of so many other factors that influence our children.

I want to say that I don't know how many members of the Assembly are up at 6:30 or 5:30 in the morning, perhaps at my age, you know, up watching Treehouse. Be it parents or grandparents, watching that is something. In fact, it was kind of interesting. I made the comment, Mr. Chair, that someone said: you know, Guy, you watch Treehouse in the morning, and then you come to the Legislature and see Treehouse in the afternoon. The only difference, though, is that I'd say that my four-year-old has been giving better answers.

But in the spirit of collegiality here, I will say that it is truly – I believe it to be – a foundation of our society to be able to have that right to choose as a parent what is best for your child. I am convinced that every member of the Assembly that is in here today, I hope, does not disagree with that tenet relative to what is so important.

Mr. Chair, I want to say that I support faith-based schooling. I support schooling in the public sector, which I had the honour of being a teacher in. I support the educational systems that are in place, having attended a Catholic university, St. Francis Xavier University in Nova Scotia, which I'm proud to say was in fact considered to be the best undergraduate school by *Maclean's* magazine six years in a row. So important are home-schooling, charter schools, francophone schools, and our public and Catholic and separate schools as well as, of course, faith-based schooling.

It's so important. That's why I stand here today to indicate that I support the subamendment that's put forward by my Wildrose caucus member, the Member for Airdrie-Chestermere, because clearly I believe he is on the right track.

I want to say that in raising our children, clearly, all of us bring a wealth of training, be it from the lives that we have come from prior to entering this Assembly, no matter what profession that is. I know that every profession, no matter if you're a teacher or not, brings that wisdom of our society. The experiences that parents bring to their children I believe are equally important, and that's why it should be a paramount right of a parent to be able to raise their children. That is in both a moral and a spiritual way, which I believe are equally important, and at the same time ensuring that we follow the laws of this great country of ours and follow the laws of this great province of ours or the municipality where we live, you know, another building block of teaching our children.

There are many, many moments that we may use, but I do believe that this subamendment will reassure parents. This subamendment will reassure Albertans and will reassure Canadians of the fundamental right of being able as a parent to raise your children and the fundamental right of faith-based schooling and the fundamental right of making a choice between home-schooling or public school or Catholic school or separate school or charter school or francophone school. No matter what type of schooling it is, the fundamental right of a parent to be able to do that is really what this subamendment is all about. I would hope and pray that that is what everyone in here wants to achieve.

With that, we want to respect all Canadians, all Albertans in coming forward with this subamendment, and I think this really does do that. I really think that it's a teachable moment for the Minister of Education and his government. It's a teachable moment for him to actually listen intently to what the purpose of this subamendment is and take it not because it's coming from the Wildrose and the opposition party but because it's coming from a parent that cares deeply, no differently, I'm sure, than the Minister of Education cares deeply about the children of Alberta and his own children. That is so important, and that's very admirable.

That being said, Mr. Chair, I truly do believe that as we move forward with the Education Act, some of the positive things, feedback I've received from teachers – I have received a considerable amount of feedback. I especially want to thank Pastor Glen, who, in my view, provided me with some incredible insight into the importance of faith-based schooling. I thank him publicly here for his comments and support.

I find it so interesting that as we go forward, we want to make sure we don't rush into a decision, that we actually make the right decision for our children and our grandchildren. I know many people in here have grandchildren, and as much as I may be watching Treehouse at 5:30 or 6 o'clock in the morning, like the Member for Airdrie-Chestermere as well – I know the member from Calgary clearly does that – in fact, I will say that speaking to grandparents has provided such . . .

The Chair: Hon. member, I hesitate to interrupt, but it's 6 o'clock. The committee is in recess until 7:30.

[The committee adjourned at 6 p.m.]

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Province of Alberta

The 27th Legislature
Fifth Session

Alberta Hansard

Wednesday evening, March 14, 2012

Issue 18e

The Honourable Kenneth R. Kowalski, Speaker

Legislative Assembly of Alberta
The 27th Legislature

Fifth Session

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Legislative Assembly of Alberta

7:31 p.m.

Wednesday, March 14, 2012

Government Bills and Orders Committee of the Whole

[Mr. Cao in the chair]

The Chair: Hon. members, the chair shall call the committee to order.

Bill 2 Education Act

The Chair: We'll resume the debate on subamendment SA1 on Bill 2. The hon. Member for Calgary-Varsity.

Mr. Chase: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair, for this opportunity to speak on amendment A1. What amendment A1 does is that it legitimizes the illegitimate. The worst piece of legislation that I have come across in my eight years in this Assembly was Bill 44. Bill 44 in one sense attempted to recognize the equality of GLBT community members while at the same time not allowing students of those persuasions to have a voice in a public school setting.

I have no trouble, Mr. Chairman, with religious schools. I indicated my support, being a public school teacher for 34 years, which includes the separate school system. I support the fact that the separate school system brings religion into every aspect of their school experience. They have the Charter right, as does the francophone school, to have that support.

But when we start fragmenting the public education system by putting out 70 per cent of our per-pupil grants to a series of small religious schools that restrict entry into their systems based on religion, based on special needs, based on grades, then I don't see how we could possibly pay for and support those systems.

What this amendment A1 does is that despite the Education minister's discussion of bullying, it completely facilitates the bullying process. Children in a public school are not allowed to have any spontaneous discussion on matters of religion, matters of sex education, or on sexual orientation. Any spontaneity, any opportunity to discuss these matters could very well land a teacher before the human rights tribunal, and it puts a horrid cloak or cap on spontaneous discussions.

When I taught grade 7 social studies, I talked about world religions. I talked about the membership in those world religions, and I talked about some of the basic principles of those world religions. I didn't push a particular religious affiliation onto my students. I talked about it in generic terms, and I provided information. What amendment A1 does is that it prevents such discussions.

So while Bill 44, which amendment A1 is attempting to legitimize as part of the School Act . . .

The Chair: Hon. member, I heard you say A1. We are talking about subamendment SA1.

Mr. Chase: Subamendment SA1. Okay. Thank you. I'm sorry for my mistake in not saying subamendment SA1.

What happens with subamendment A1, which is basically an offshoot of A1, is that it overrides individuals' rights. I have no problem, Mr. Chair, with parents choosing to home-school, and if they home-school on religious principles they believe in, they have the right to do that. I don't have a problem with that. But where I have a problem is when children come loaded with baggage into a public school system and then basically hold their

class and their teachers hostage from any discussion that involves sexual orientation, reproduction, whether it be human reproduction or evolution in general, or protection for individuals of the GLBT choice.

Our public schools are there for everyone. They've been established for over a hundred years in this great province. When we start ghettoizing or segregating our education system into little packages, then the fabric of our public education system is undermined and destroyed.

What I see in both A1 and subamendment A1 is an undermining. When I spoke of Bill 44 and the damage it did, and the subamendment A1 relates to it, I spoke about the fact that at the time – I think it was 2010 or 2009 Alberta, but now we are in 2012 Alberta. We're not in 1925 Tennessee. This isn't the Scopes monkey trial. Forget the *Planet of the Apes*, Mr. Chair. We've got the province of the apes. We have people putting their apish, bully behaviour into our public school system and saying that if a topic such as transgender should arise in a classroom, we all have to put our hands over our ears, our eyes, and our mouths and run in horror into the hallway for fear of being brought before a human rights trial circumstance.

Mr. Chair, when our right of free speech is compromised, when politically correct becomes religiously correct according to a potentially fundamentalist viewpoint, then any open discussion is gone.

I am not a regular attendee within the four walls of a particular church, but when I went to the University of Calgary, I prepared weekly sermons for the religious group that I was affiliated with at the U of C. We didn't hang out signs, and we didn't pass around literature: come one, come all. Many of the discussions I had at the university involved Biblical discussions with members of the Campus Crusade, who felt that the only way for individuals to enter the kingdom of heaven or maybe the gates of the U of C was to be born again according to their religious principles. I have a lot of trouble when people use religion as a stick, and that's what I see happening in both amendment A1 and subamendment SA1.

7:40

Religion is a matter of choice. It's a matter of privacy. Using the Christian example, Jesus decried the Pharisees for their open display of religiosity. He talked about doing your prayers in the quiet of a circumstance such as a closet as opposed to beating people over the head with it.

Mr. Chair, I consider myself to be tolerant of all religions, and if people believe in their values and it helps them on a day-to-day basis, I don't have a problem with it. Where I draw the line is the public school system being subjected to particular persuasions. As I say, I appreciate the separate system and their charter. I appreciate the francophone system. But when discussions on science or discussions on human preferences are held hostage because teachers fear to talk about the various lifestyles of individuals – and I'm not suggesting that they promote a particular lifestyle, whether it's heterosexual or homosexual, but they should be at least allowed, if it arises in a classroom discussion, to have an open and frank discussion with their students.

When I taught elementary school, we sent home a form when we got into the plumbing of human sexuality. Parents were permitted to pull their child out of those discussions, but it was a very definite time frame and very definite planning. Parents were invited to a meeting beforehand, and we outlined the curriculum choices. I don't have any problems with that. But, Mr. Chair, if a student brought up a circumstance in my classroom with regard to what I had taught in a previous class, I didn't shy away from it. I

did my best to explain it without overlaying my particular moral principles or moral stance on it.

When science gets interfered with by religious beliefs or when social studies is limited because of religious overtones or a fear that someone is going to offend or, according to Bill 2, trying to prevent bullying, when a child is bullied based on a perception of their homosexuality, then we're in deep trouble.

Mr. Chair, among the subjects I majored in were French and art. A number of students in the art courses would appear to be less likely, for example, to be on my wrestling team that I coached for 25 years. That was their personal choice. But when we start trying to suggest that one lifestyle is superior to all others and damn those literally and figuratively who don't follow those particular religious precepts, then we're turning our public education system into a fragmented, ghettoized bastardization of what the public education system is supposed to be.

If people have strong religious beliefs, then they have choices. They can choose to home-school. They can search out a school that offers the same beliefs that they hold dear. They can attend the churches of their choice. They can have their services at home or in community centres as so many churches do because they can't afford the physical structure. But religion is supposed to be the way we conduct ourselves. In the New Testament we talk about loving thy neighbour and doing good to others even though they would potentially do us harm. When people have not got past the Old Testament of an eye for an eye, a tooth for tooth, then religion in that case is promoting violence, and that violence has been the basis of the greatest loss of life over thousands of years.

In the Crusades momentarily Christians were united, and they went over to beat up the Muslims. Then when the Crusades were over, they beat each other up, calling each other various heretics. The Spanish Inquisition was probably one of the worst examples of torturing a person till they confessed and then killing them. It was particularly hard to be a Jewish individual during that time period. You know, we see, for example, in Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* the beating up of the Jewish moneylender, Shylock, and the pound of flesh.

These topics such as *The Merchant of Venice* and the prejudices should be open for discussion and debate within a public school system. When we start banning books and suggesting, for example, that *The Catcher in the Rye* is inappropriate, then that type of censorship is extremely disconcerting to a public system. We are fortunate to live in a country where the rights of freedom of assembly and freedom of speech have been fought for, and if we lose these rights due to amendments like A1 or SA1 or attempting to change the public system into something that it is not, then I am extremely concerned.

Mr. Chair, having been a public school teacher for 34 years and with my grandsons continuing on, I don't want them to be limited in their discussion. I don't want the fact that my two grandsons are involved with a Hindu religion to be held against them within a public institution.

Last Saturday I had a visit from a very friendly couple, a man and wife of the Jehovah's Witness persuasion. I said to them: "Thank you. I have my own religion. I'm a Christian Scientist. My wife is a Presbyterian." They respected my individual choice, and they went on to the next door. I respected the fact that they felt the need to talk about religion on doorsteps, and I had that discussion with them. But, Mr. Chair, when it comes into a public school system and discussions are limited based on religious principles, then we've lost our public system, and our democratic rights have been eroded.

Thank you, Mr. Chair, for this opportunity to speak on subamendment SA1, which attempts to repair the damage of amendment A1 but falls short.

The Chair: The hon. Member for St. Albert on subamendment SA1.

Mr. Allred: Yes. Thank you, Mr. Chair. I guess I'm getting a little tired of the repetition coming from the other side here.

Mr. Chase: It was my first time. I apologize.

Mr. Allred: No, it wasn't from the last speaker; it's from previous to the break.

Mr. Chair, I initially had no intention to speak to Bill 2, the Education Act. However, my concern over Bill 4, the St. Albert and Sturgeon Valley School Districts Establishment Act, has drawn me into the debate on this amendment and subamendment. This amendment as well as the subamendment appear to be intended to address the concerns related to the teaching of religious values in schools.

7:50

Mr. Chair, much of my focus and debate on Bill 4 was the need to separate religion from education. The debate and many of the concerns I have received in the constituency about Bill 2 relate to the teaching of religion and religious doctrine in the schools. Upon reflection on this issue, it seems to me that the solution to this problem is staring us in the face, and that is the total separation of religion and schooling.

If we go back to our historical roots, it is clear that our learned forefathers saw the dilemma in mixing education and religion when they allowed separate schools to coexist with public schools. In allowing separate schools, they made a very clear proviso in the 1901 ordinance respecting schools when they decreed that the teaching of religion could only occur in any school, either public or separate, in the last 30 minutes of the day, and at that time those students whose parents didn't wish them to participate in the religious teaching were exempted from attending.

Mr. Chair, I'm just going to read again section 137 of the 1901 ordinance respecting schools. It states:

No religious instruction except as hereinafter provided shall be permitted in the school of any district from the opening of such school until one half hour previous to its closing in the afternoon after which time any such instruction permitted or desired by the board may be given.

It goes on to say that students that didn't want to participate or whose their parents didn't want them to participate were exempt and could go home.

It's unfortunate that we have allowed schools over the years to ignore this fundamental restriction on the mixing of the educational curriculum with religion to the extent that the religious doctrine permeates virtually every subject in some school programs. Churches and other religious institutions do a good job of teaching religion, and that is their bailiwick. Why do we usurp their rights and authority by allowing religion to be taught in the classroom?

What is the downside to removing religion from the classroom? Well, Mr. Chair, other than the obvious concerns that we are hearing at the doorsteps about the rights of students not to be taught certain religious beliefs, there is a larger problem that directly affects the teaching of a true educational curriculum. What is that? Well, every year there are more and more requests to cram more and more subjects into the educational curriculum. We no longer teach only the three Rs: reading, 'riting, and 'rithmetic.

We teach home economics. We teach shop, automotives, a multitude of foreign languages, careers, and many other great subjects that are of value to students in the future.

My pet peeve, Mr. Chairman, is the need to teach financial literacy. Financial literacy is relegated to a very small segment of one course that teaches about careers and an amalgam of other things. However, what could be more important in this day and age than the teaching of some basic fiscal criteria, a subject that is fundamental to our very existence in this money-oriented world? If there was ever a topic that could and should permeate every subject, it is the subject of finance and money.

Mr. Chair, in raising this issue, it is my thesis that if we return to our roots and relegate the teaching of religion to the 30 minutes after regular education instruction, that would free up time to teach some of these other, more relevant educational subjects. I don't mean to imply that religion is not relevant. I only mean to say that it's extra and always has been intended to be an add-on at the end of the day.

If we were to adhere to the constitutional provisions of the 1901 ordinance and the Alberta Act, we would solve a number of issues. We would have more time in the school day to teach a wide variety of other valuable subject matter. We would be satisfying those that have concerns with the teaching of religious principles in schools. In all likelihood we would eliminate the hot-button issue of human rights, and we would be complying with the constitutional principles set down by our forefathers, constitutional principles that still bind us 101 years later. As a plus, Mr. Chair, we would probably be doing the religious institutions a favour by allowing them to broaden their reach and fulfill a more complete role in society.

Mr. Chair, in conclusion, I would suggest that the obvious thing is to go back to the ordinance of 1901 and require religious education to fall at the end of the classroom day, and that would probably solve all of our problems. Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: On subamendment SA1 the hon. Member for Calgary-Glenmore.

Mr. Hinman: Yes. It's been an interesting discussion, and, yes, I'll kind of work backwards, being the last speaker. I think that he kind of exemplifies what the problem is and the frustration with why this very subamendment is going forward. He's sitting here saying that it's about religious rights when this whole amendment is about parental rights and who gets to make the decisions. I can appreciate him trying to explain that there's a religious influence in the school and permeating, as he says, through all the different courses.

I think that one has to take a step back and realize that everybody has their own belief values. Everyone has their own principles. I don't know whether you call that religious in all aspects because if you look at an atheist, who says he doesn't believe in a god, he still has values that drive his principles. Whatever those values and principles each of us as individuals have adopted in our lives we use to guide ourselves, our own conscience.

I do want to go back to the Charter of Rights and Freedoms, the very first one, fundamental freedoms.

2. Everyone has the following fundamental freedoms:
 - (a) freedom of conscience and religion.

I think they put those two together in the first one because it is our conscience that's guided by our personal beliefs and values, where here we're talking our religious values, where some people want to say, "Well, I'm nonreligious," yet they still have values. So

their conscience is still part of the guidance in their decisions on what they do every day.

The whole purpose of subamendment SA1 is to prioritize who's going to have the final say on a child's education. It was interesting. The Member for Edmonton-Centre got up and talked at length and said that she absolutely believes that there should only be the public system that's being funded by taxpayers, and all of those other ones: I don't care about them; they can fund their own; if they want to do that, that's fine but not with taxpayers' dollars.

Mr. Hehr: I'm going to say that, too.

Mr. Hinman: That's fine.

What we're looking at here, though, are two things. One, who's actually in charge of the children? Is it the state or is it the parent? Two, what type of choice does that parent have? Again, according to how this bill is passed, what kind of choice will that parent have inside this new legislation on whether or not they can send them to a faith-based school or to an arts-based school or an athletic school or whatever they might choose to send them to?

There's a great deal of concern by Albertans with this government that they continue to infringe on those rights. The way this is written, though, it's trying to address those issues. We're still getting many e-mails, many phone calls from individuals who say: no, this isn't covering it. There was a home-school couple here before supper that I spoke to afterwards. They said: "Thank heavens that you're down there speaking to protect our rights and our choice as parents. Thank you very much." That's one couple here in Alberta that was here earlier. The purpose of the rule of law is to protect everybody and to allow that family to have choice.

Then we get the fearmongering from those who are saying: oh, but there are parents who make poor choices for their children.

Mrs. Forsyth: And there are.

Mr. Hinman: There are, but that doesn't mean you take away the choice for all the other good parents. We have legislation in place that if a child is not being raised properly, the government has a role to step in and take that child out, but they don't always do that. I've had to speak several times on a subject that I didn't appreciate at all, where the government and children's services failed to save a little child, a three-year-old child, after pleas from doctors and everyone: look, you need to get this child out of this dangerous situation. And they failed to act.

8:00

I personally do not believe this idea that because I'm elected or any of us in here are elected, we're all of a sudden superior to those people who aren't elected and that we're going to be able to make decisions and say: "Oh, this is in your best interest. You must realize that, and the reason why is because we're elected; therefore, we know better what's best for you." That just isn't the case, Mr. Chairman.

The basic question and the basic purpose of subamendment SA1 is to prioritize who is going to be the ultimate person to decide on the education of a child, what they're going to be exposed to, what they're going to be taught, and where they're going to be taught. If we listen to some members in this House, they say: "Oh, no. The government is going to come in, and we're going to do all of that." I just want to first state that government is comprised of human beings, no different than a family, and we're not immune to making mistakes. So that freedom of choice and that freedom of religious beliefs and conscience that are instilled in your children need to have that diversity and that allowance to go forward

whether that's a family that believes that meat isn't good and they want to be vegetarians, whether they want to dress in such a way to say that you shouldn't use bright colours and be that way, or whether they believe in the length of their hair, or whatever else. We should be willing to tolerate and accommodate those things so long as they don't hurt other individuals.

I'm somewhat disappointed that we haven't been able to progress on this subamendment. I just want to read in once more that what is being proposed at this time is that we put in the sentence

the paramount right and responsibility to make decisions respecting the education of their children, which includes . . .

Then this is the amendment of the government:

A right to choose the religious and ethical traditions in which their children are raised; that a child's education begins in the home; that parents play a foundational role in the moral and spiritual formation of their children; and that these principles are reflected in the commitment of the Government of Alberta to provide parents with choice in education, including public schools, separate schools, Francophone schools, charter schools, private schools and home education programs.

The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre brought up – again, the word that is being used here is “paramount.” Perhaps those with a better legal background than my own can clarify this. If in the preamble or section 1 it declares what is going to be paramount, I think any section after that would be subject to the one prior. So if, in fact, we're going into a subclause where the interest of the child is paramount, it's after the parent was paramount in making that choice. It would kind of go through the process: okay, it's being breached in this subclause, so we go up to the one above it, and move forward. Much like in the reverse case, if someone had a case locally against their school board and they didn't like it, then they'd appeal it to the provincial Court of Appeal and then the federal Court of Appeal. There's an order that we know that we go through in order to try and make things right if we feel that we've been wronged.

It's a very simple but important amendment. The real question isn't about freedom of religion on this one. It's about who ultimately has the authority and the responsibility for raising and educating a child. That parent can make that choice and say, “I choose to teach my child at home” or “I choose to send them to a private school” or “I choose to send them to a charter school, a francophone school, a separate school, or a public school.” That's what we want to entrench and protect in this new act, Bill 2, the Education Act. It's just very simple.

I'll also ask the question. This is kind of what consensus is, when you communicate back and forth. You're sitting there and listening and asking, you know: “Where's our misunderstanding? What's the definition of those words, and why are they defined that way?” If, in fact, that's what the government is trying to do with amendment A1, what is the fear of putting “paramount” in there unless everything that we're saying is actually true? That's why they don't want to accept this simple amendment. They don't think it's paramount, and they want to be able to overstep that at some time in the future for whatever reasons. At this point I won't even speculate on what those might be.

It's a simple amendment. It's straightforward. It just clarifies for those people that are worried who is paramount. Is it the state, or is it the parents?

With that, I would hope that the government would reconsider this and accept subamendment SA1 to their amendment A1 so that we actually know that priority and there is no further clarification. If they vote against this amendment, they're voting against all of those people in Alberta that at this point have that fear, thinking:

the state does want to pre-empt me as a parent, saying that I must teach them this or I must do that because that's the new curriculum.

That does remind me of something else on why it's so important to have choice and diversity. The way we progress as human beings is by those that are willing to take the risk and try something new. You know, they try something, and someone says: oh, that's crazy to do. They try it and, wow, it worked. And all of a sudden everybody beats a path down there.

It wasn't that long ago that my oldest son went to grade 1, and that was the year that they decided to switch the curriculum. They were now going to teach whole language. “Phonics doesn't work. We're going to teach whole language.” We went in there, and we fought with them, and we tried to get them to change and said: “Our son is struggling with that. Let's teach phonics.” But could we do anything? No. Because of where we lived, there was no choice to go to another school.

So for the first two years he went to that school, struggled, didn't learn to read, couldn't comprehend the whole-language bit. He needed phonics. Then we moved. When we moved, we got to a second school, and they didn't want to do it. But there we had two schools, and we had choice and were able to send him to a third school because the opportunity was there.

There are times when the government is going to say: “This is what the curriculum is, and this is what we need to teach. We know best. We're the new experts.” If, in fact, you think that that's not correct, then why do we have so many people working on curriculum, constantly tweaking and changing and bringing in new things, saying, “This is the new, proven truth, and this is the way we need to do everything, and this is the way we need to understand everything,” only to find out a few years later, “Oh, my goodness; there are such things as black holes.” There are quasars. There are all these other things that people will argue about until we discover them. Then we're enlightened. A new door is opened, and new information and new knowledge comes forward. We can't force everybody to be the first through the door or to be held inside that box. Choice is critical. Parental choice is paramount.

I hope that they'll accept this amendment. I want to thank the hon. Member for Airdrie-Chestermere for bringing this forward. It's critical. Once again, I want to remind the government that if they vote this down, they're saying no to all of those people that are concerned and that they're not willing to make a simple concession here. If, in fact, that's not what they're trying to do, then let's accept this amendment and move on to make some further improvements on this bill.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Calgary-Buffalo.

Mr. Hehr: Thank you, Mr. Chair. It's always a privilege to discuss issues in this Legislature. When we discuss bills, when we discuss amendments, and when we look at things, in the main I try to always remember: well, Kent, you don't always have the corners centred around good ideas. Nevertheless, in my view, part of the neat thing about this Legislature is that we don't all think alike, and we don't all come at things in the same way. I think that this bill truly highlights some of those differences.

8:10

In my view, this amendment to this bill clearly falls out of the parameters of what I would consider good legislative procedure, good policy for an inclusive school environment. Not a good preamble if you're wanting to build a society based on shared

values and learning opportunities to come together and care, share, and play together.

When I looked at this, at first blush I said to myself: is this really happening? I had read the initial act, and I didn't see any of this language contained in it. In fact, if you look at the original drafting of the preamble, I really liked some of the stuff that was contained in there. For instance:

Whereas education is the foundation of a democratic and civil society.

That's great. Okay?

Whereas the role of education is to develop engaged thinkers who think critically and creatively, and ethical citizens who demonstrate respect, teamwork and democratic ideals, and who work with an entrepreneurial spirit to face challenges with resiliency, adaptability, risk-taking and bold decision-making.

You see, that kind of stuff is what an education system is supposed to provide. The education system is not a church. Okay? Let's repeat that. Our education system is not a church. You go to school to learn how to read, write, reason, and get along with your fellow man. That's it. That is the role of education. I would say that the government's job as it plays a role in education is to provide those things that are required to provide a good education. They should support those endeavours which lead to a person becoming skilled, becoming educated, learning how to read, write, and reason and take part in a democratic society, and encourage them to be able to work and be ready to face the challenges of intellectual rigour that they will face later on in life. That is it.

It is not the job or role of government to either be involved in religious matters or actually be funding mechanisms that are of a religious nature. In fact, I think that's pretty much reflected in our Charter of Rights and Freedoms and other documents that clearly outline what our roles and responsibilities are. When you throw around terms like freedom of speech – sure, we all know we have freedom of speech, but it has limited rights of appeal to that. Sure we all have freedom of religion. You're allowed to teach your child what you want in your home. You're allowed to take your child to church, to Sunday school on Sunday, and stay for a worship service after. By all means. That is your freedom of religion, and I support that a hundred per cent.

But the government or the state should not involve itself in, to use a term that this government likes to use, picking winners and losers in a religious setting, funding these organizations that tend to divide society rather than uniting them. Mr. Chair, can you imagine an Alberta where we have a school system – let's just think outside the box here – for Mormon students, for people of the Sikh religion, for people of the Hindu religion, for people of the Jehovah's Witness faith, for people of the United church, for people of all sorts who want to start their private religious schools and go about doing business in that manner? Just imagine that. Does that seem like a society that a government should be trying to create or even fund? This doesn't seem like it fits in with the goals of what we want our school system to look like.

I'll go back to what our school system should look like, to what it says in the original drafting of this.

Whereas the role of education is to develop engaged thinkers who think critically and creatively, and ethical citizens who demonstrate respect, teamwork and democratic ideals, and who work with an entrepreneurial spirit to face challenges with resiliency, adaptability, risk-taking and bold decision-making.

That is it, and that, in my view, is what the government should limit itself to. Stay out of religion. Stay out of that. Let parents truly have their individual freedom, and let that be their responsibility. It is not the government's responsibility to indoctrinate

people or to fund situations that would indoctrinate people in any one point of view. That is the parents' responsibility.

On that measure, I have followed up on that line, and it fits in well with a discussion on this amendment. Currently we are funding private schools to the tune of 70 per cent of our public education system. Essentially, in my view, it has been a bit of a sop to people who choose on their own behalf to not go to public schools. It's been a bit of a vote-getter for this government. They said: "Oh my God. You'd better vote for us. You don't want those Liberals or New Democrats, who don't want religion in the school system, getting power."

But now – guess what? – these guys have one-upped you. They're going to 100 per cent fund these things. They have a new champion, okay? They're going to give him a whole hop. They're going to 100 per cent fund private schools. So your half measure, although it was good for vote buying, not necessarily good for society, has now led to you being one-upped by the Wildrose Alliance. You're no longer champions for these people despite the fact, so I don't understand why you're bending over backwards for them now when it creates the difficulties that I see.

Let's talk directly to what this says. This is the original A1. Then I'll get to how it fits very closely with what's in SA1.

Whereas the Government of Alberta recognizes that parents have the right to choose the religious and ethical traditions . . .

Sure. Why do you need that in the Education Act? Everyone knows that. Okay? You don't have to tell parents how to parent. They know how to do that.

. . . that a child's education begins in the home;

Sure. Yeah. Great. You're supposed to help kids with reading and writing, and reading to them at nighttime helps their educational development. Yup, parents don't need to be told that.

. . . that parents play a foundational role in the moral and spiritual formation of their children;

Yes. Having been raised by a lapsed Catholic and a Christian Reformed person, I know that those spiritual and moral values were instilled in me, and I find myself attending the United church nowadays to reflect my spiritual beliefs. But, now, here's where this bill goes completely off the rails, from my perspective. And that these principles are reflected in the commitment of the Government of Alberta to provide parents with choice in education, including public schools, separate schools, Francophone schools, charter schools, private schools and home education programs.

8:20

Well, if we go back to my initial point, that governments have no business telling people what religion they're going to view or what their freedom of conscience should be, why is this preamble in an education act to begin with? There is no necessity. The state should not play a role in these principles of how children are raised at home.

If you're talking about state intervention in religious matters, this actually does it. This actually, it looks like by my reading, compels the government to be committed to these different types of schooling and commits them to funding these programs – charter schools, private schools, and home education programs – for, I guess, the duration of this bill.

If you look at the Constitution Act of 1867 and if you then go further to our Charter of Rights and Freedoms, there is no right. There is a right for a public education system and, because of its historical roots, a separate system, which is the Catholic faith. That's it. That's all. All the rest we have made accommodations for.

We've done that through home-schooling, which, if a person has a real, fundamental bent with the education system, I can see some small role for that occurring in some cases. But there is no right for the state to have to fund private schools or to go out of their way to do this. There is none. We've decided to meddle in the religious element for some reason.

In my view, Mr. Chair, the thing is that I don't think it moves society forward. When I get back to what I said earlier, when you have 47 different schools with 47 different types of religious organizations running them and the like, well, I don't think that's good for society. It doesn't lead to cohesive neighbourhoods, to individuals learning about diversity, to individuals learning to respect others, to individuals actually coming together and having to work together.

You know, when we send our kids to schools where everyone looks the same, everyone believes the same thing, and everyone goes to the same church, what happens when they all get out into the work world and that doesn't happen? What really happens then? If we're really trying to build a school system – again, I go back to one of these.

Whereas the role of education is to develop engaged thinkers who think critically and creatively, and ethical citizens who demonstrate respect, teamwork and democratic ideals, and who work with an entrepreneurial spirit to face challenges with resiliency, adaptability, risk-taking and bold decision-making.

I don't see how any of this serves to do that.

The government has done this for years through the funding of private schools. First off, they started at 50 per cent, then went to 60 per cent and now 70 per cent. The party beside me is going to go to 100 per cent. Any of the literature I read out there – if someone can point me to some study that says that fracturing your education system with private schools is good for the society, please forward it to me. Please do that, because I'd be very interested to read them. Okay? Just find them, any unbiased opinions reflected by educators, by people who have done the analysis of how society's education system works. It starts with one publicly funded education system.

Leave all this religious stuff to the parents. That is their role. That is their responsibility. That is their right. The government has no obligation to be doing this other than some, I guess, idea that people in the backrooms want to indoctrinate, actually – I'll say the word "indoctrinate" – the other way. They want to indoctrinate religion into the educational sphere, which, in my view, Mr. Chair, is ridiculous. It's absurd. In my view, it is long past the day where it serves society to the betterment of us moving forward.

Alberta is not the Alberta of 1920, when we were primarily of two religions, the Protestant or Roman Catholic faith. We have 100,000 new people coming here in the next 10 years. We need 400 new schools built. People of all faiths and of all different communities are going to come here. They're going to read this preamble, and they're going say: well, we should build our own school, where all of our people can go, where we can all hang out, you know, and can all think alike, and we can all do that. That's what this is setting up. In my view, these two amendments, both A1 and SA1, move society in the wrong direction.

I'll start where I began, that I'm glad we all had the opportunity to speak about this, that we all shared our views. Hopefully, the government is doing its own studies as to whether funding private schools and creating this type of system, where we separate people on the basis of religion in an education system, is actually good for society. Ask yourself: is this actually good for society, or does it make you feel better that you're following your religious tenets? If it's making you feel better that you're following your religious tenets, well, that's not your place to be deciding that. Go to church

on Sunday. Figure that out for yourself. Don't bring this in to an education system that is supposed to deal with educating children.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Calgary-Fish Creek on sub-amendment SA1.

Mrs. Forsyth: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I'm pleased to rise again and speak on Bill 2, the Education Act, and especially to subamendment SA1, which has been brought forward by the Member for Airdrie-Chestermere. It's been interesting listening. I think we've been on this bill for the majority of the afternoon, and it's after 8.

I've just heard the Member for Calgary-*Buffalo* speak, and democracy is a fine thing. People are a wonderful thing because everybody is entitled to their opinion and how they feel about this particular piece of legislation.

I'm going to say that I'm proud to be an Albertan, and I'm proud to be standing in this Legislature debating a bill that offers parents so much choice. I think it shows that in society we have the ability now to offer so many things to so many people, whether it's public education or Catholic education. We've got francophone education, we've got charter education, we have private schools, and, of course, we have home education, which is one of the things that I think is pretty unique, for a parent to be able to teach their children at home.

I have had the opportunity over the last six weeks or so to be door-knocking and the opportunity to actually meet parents at the doors who are home educators and meet their children and talk to them. They seem to be doing pretty good considering that they're home educated.

We're having this discussion, and I think what's more important than anything – and I've again pulled some stuff off the Alberta Education website. I've lost it in the act, so maybe my friend can help me here on the side. Anyhow, the act talks about student responsibility. It talks about parent responsibility. It talks about the board responsibility and the trustees' responsibility.

8:30

You know, you go to the student responsibilities, and it's "a partner in education, has the responsibility to," and they have a long list. Then you go to the parent responsibilities, and it says:

A parent of a child who is a student or enrolled in an early childhood services program, as a partner in education, has the responsibility to

(a) make decisions respecting the child's education.

I think that is key. That is in section 32(a) of the act, part 3.

Clearly articulated on the Alberta Education website, they go into the role of the parents. "Parents play an important role in the education of their children. Their involvement and encouragement can help a child excel." Then it talks about taking an active role. Then it talks about the government of Alberta respecting parental choice. "The Government of Alberta believes parents have a right and a responsibility to make decisions respecting the education of their children." From the Alberta Education website I pulled off yet another one, and it talks about what home education is, and it goes on to talk about the strengthening of home education. It continues to talk about the roles and the responsibilities of parents.

After extensive consultation, from what I can remember and from what I understand from the minister, about Bill 2, I found it quite interesting how quickly he was jumping to his feet and accusing us of not consulting and not co-operating and bringing an amendment forward. But what was interesting was that he brought an amendment forward first. We're just responding to his amendment.

What is even more interesting, now that people are starting to hear a lot more about Bill 2, the Education Act, are the responses and the e-mails and, quite frankly, the phone calls that we are getting as MLAs. Lo and behold, this afternoon what arrives in our e-mail? A four-page letter from the Calgary board of education addressed to the minister. Then behind that are 14 pages in regard to the bill. One must say: I guess they didn't let anybody know how they felt, and they're just all of a sudden reacting to the bill. The funny thing is, Mr. Chair, that I know how this government thinks. They think it's okay to tell people what they're going to put in a bill without asking them what should be in the bill, and I find that quite irresponsible if I may say.

If this bill was the perfect bill, quite frankly, we wouldn't have brought the first amendment, and we would not be here debating and debating and debating. The amendment that the government has brought forward: I think everybody that has spoken up in regard to this has read into the record what the amendment is because it's important for people who may be watching or actually reading *Hansard*. I know that there are thousands of educators out there, thousands of parents that are watching and listening and following this. I've tweeted twice now in regard to the amendment, and it isn't long before everybody else is wondering what the heck is going on.

In the amendment the government talks about recognizing that parents have a right to choose the religious and ethical traditions in which their children are raised; that a child's education begins in the home; that parents play a foundational role in the moral and spiritual formation of their children; and that these . . . are reflected in the commitment of the Government of Alberta to provide parents with choice in education.

And they go on to that. Now, that's a pretty good amendment, actually, from the minister.

What our colleague from Airdrie-Chestermere brought forward was just a couple of lines that talked about the government of Alberta recognizing that parents have "the paramount right and responsibility to make decisions respecting the education of their children." I think that's where we go back to it being common sense. Of course the parent has the right to make a decision on education. The parents have a right to make a lot of decisions on behalf of their children, especially when they're young. You know, it's like: don't be touching that stove because it's pretty hot. As the Member for Airdrie-Chestermere mentioned, we want to have the right and responsibility to make decisions respecting the education of our children.

Having said again a few words – I spoke this afternoon – I'm going to ask everyone in the Assembly to support our amendment.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Airdrie-Chestermere on sub-amendment SA1.

Mr. Anderson: Well, it appears, Mr. Chair, that this government and this Education minister clearly do not have any intention of passing this amendment. That is too bad. I know that there are other amendments, so we're going to get to them right away.

I just want to say that I'm disappointed. I thought this was a very reasonable amendment. I can't imagine why on earth this government would vote against giving parents the paramount right over the educational choices of their children. I cannot for the life of me figure that out. It is inconsistent with what they've been saying. It's like this Premier, with the little wiggle room language that she often uses to get out of things; for example, the public health care inquiry. She used wiggle room there although I guess everyone in Alberta, you know, called her on it, and she's suffering some serious unpopularity because of it.

But this is why we need the amendment, because of the wiggle room in here that basically says in this amendment by the minister: "whereas the Government of Alberta recognizes that parents have a right." Well, what does "a right" mean? There are rights to a lot of different things in this world, but where do those rights rank? A parent's right should be paramount. It should be considered a paramount right, not just a right. It should be a paramount right, and then you work backwards from there.

In other words, if there are reasons to take away that parent's parental authority over how their children will be educated, then we do that, but you start first with the assumption. It's just like: presumed innocent until proven guilty. Well, this is the same thing. The presumption is that parents are going to make responsible, solid, good decisions for their child's education, and then you work backwards from there. So it's not just about a right; it's about a paramount right. Language does matter, and this government has once again failed to give any recognition to that fact.

You know, we have other amendments, that I hope they'll be more willing to look at as we go forward here, and I hope that they will continue to let us debate this bill until we are finished, until it has a good vetting. By the amount of e-mails and phone calls – you know, I've got to say that besides the royalty framework, for which I received the most negative mail at any time over the last four years, other than that one, I have not received more e-mails and communications than I have on this Bill 2, the Education Act. That says a lot about Alberta parents. It says that they care. It says that they love their children, that they want them to have the best education possible. But it also says that they want the paramount right to decide how their children will be educated, and they don't want that right superseded by any other right or any other principles that are listed in this very long preamble.

8:40

A lot of good things in the preamble, but essentially you're putting a parent's right to choose their education, a universal human right, on the same par as some other things which clearly are not in the same ballpark, important but not in the same league, as parental rights. That is very disappointing.

I hope people will support our amendment. We'll obviously have a standing vote on it so that we can all get on the record in this regard. With that, I'll close debate on this amendment unless someone else has something else to say.

Hon. Chair, for this one, if the bells go, can I move that we shorten the period of time to one minute for a standing vote? Would that be okay?

The Chair: We need to have unanimous consent. There's a motion to reduce the division bells to one minute.

[Unanimous consent granted]

The Chair: The division bells shall now be one minute.

We'll get back to subamendment SA1. Any others?

Seeing none, the chair shall now call the question.

[The voice vote indicated that the motion on subamendment SA1 lost]

[Several members rose calling for a division. The division bell was rung at 8:42 p.m.]

[One minute having elapsed, the committee divided]

[Mr. Cao in the chair]

For the motion:

Anderson	Forsyth	Hinman
Boutilier		

Against the motion:

Allred	Drysdale	Mitzel
Benito	Elniski	Notley
Berger	Evans	Olson
Bhardwaj	Fritz	Pastoor
Blackett	Hancock	Rodney
Brown	Hehr	Rogers
Campbell	Johnston	Tarchuk
Chase	Leskiw	VanderBurg
DeLong	Lukaszuk	Woo-Paw

Totals:	For – 4	Against – 27
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[Motion on subamendment SA1 lost]

The Chair: Now we are going back to amendment A1. Any hon. member wishing to speak on amendment A1? The hon. Member for Calgary-Varsity.

Mr. Chase: Thank you very much. Because of my initial confusion I was already speaking to A1 under the context of subamendment SA1.

My concern, Mr. Chair – and I'll not repeat my whole concern – is that when the government comes up with statements like this, which are the residue of Bill 44, which should never have been introduced into a freethinking provincial Legislature and which drives Alberta back into the backwaters of history at a time when evolution was considered in direct conflict with religious beliefs, then this regressive piece of legislation removes the right for this government to call itself progressive or conservative. Potentially some of the conservative aspects remain.

8:50

But we're in 2012, when rights and privileges that have been established historically – the freedom of separate schools, the freedom of public schools, the freedom of francophone schools – are part of our Charter of Rights. There aren't such charters that recognize, either historically or in a modern sense, that religious schools or charter schools or private schools have the same type of rights as the established schools. When the argument of choice is used to exclude as opposed to broaden individuals' selections, then that is unacceptable.

I've said before – and I don't want to hammer home the issue – that in some people's minds there is a confusion between the public system and the separate system. The separate system is just a Catholic version of the public system. It's historically had those foundational rights, and I support those foundational rights.

It concerns me when aspects of religion are permeated or osmosed into a public system that has wide values, that is inclusive as opposed to exclusive. What I see in amendment A1 is separating, excluding. I use the term "ghettoizing."

People have the right to their religious beliefs. In the case of the Catholic separate system they have the historical rights that have been given by law. I appreciate those protections given to them. When it suits the needs of the separate system to share space, possibly divided by a community centre or possibly divided by a gymnasium, fine. When their faith-based taxpayers determine that they require a separate facility with a separate gymnasium, that's their right, too.

It's interesting throughout the province how different groups have gotten together. For example, in Lethbridge there is a high school with a shared library. There is the example of a school in

Canmore. Those are examples where the Catholic faith-based individuals worked it out with the public system. There was no enforced circumstance whereby you won't get your funding unless you agree to share this common space. But that's the beauty of religious freedom and religious rights, to make those choices.

While I appreciated a lot of what former Education minister Dave King said about schooling when he suggested that schools should be completely secularized, I felt that that was going a step too far. Other provinces, I recognize, such as Newfoundland have tried in a fashion to secularize their systems. Quebec has moved some ways in that direction.

But respecting individual and religious rights does not give the right of one group over another to silence, whether it's a minority or a majority.

Whereas the Government of Alberta recognizes that parents have a right to choose the religious and ethical traditions in which their children are raised; that a child's education begins in the home; that parents play a foundational role in the moral and spiritual formation of their children; and that these principles are reflected in the commitment of the Government of Alberta to provide parents with choice in education, including public schools, separate schools, Francophone schools, charter schools, private schools and home education programs.

There isn't a sufficient separation between what is permitted in a public school. While the Charter rights are recognized, the ability to interfere, the leftover of Bill 44, still resonates in this amendment, and it changes the nature and historical reason for being of the public school system.

So, Mr. Chair, I will be voting against this amendment, which, as I say, takes us back to 1925 Tennessee and the Scopes monkey trial. I value our public education system, and I don't want to see it fractured or fragmented and broken up for the sake of a person's religious beliefs trumping the rights of individuals to have different beliefs but operate, hopefully collaboratively and collegially, as is the basis of most religions, under the same roof. Tolerance is absolutely essential, and A1, unfortunately, like Bill 44, in attempting to create tolerance, actually creates exclusion.

Thank you, Mr. Chair, for this opportunity.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Calgary-Buffalo on amendment A1.

Mr. Hehr: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I'll be brief because I outlined many of my arguments in my comments that I made on subamendment SA1 to this bill. Nevertheless, when I look at this bill and this preamble, it doesn't seem to serve the best interests of Alberta going forward, building an inclusive society that sees a role of public education as being a unifying factor in your local communities, being the locus of where kids learn reading, writing, and arithmetic and get the skills necessary to not only compete in the labour force but be part of a democratic society.

As indicated earlier, in my view government should limit its role in education to providing public education that provides for kids to come into a place where they can learn how to do those things, learn how to learn, and also learn some of those softer things, how to care, share, and play together in a society that recognizes them not only as individuals but as having some sort of responsibility to their fellow man. There's no place to learn that better than the public school.

If I can touch briefly on the Constitution and therefore the Charter of Rights, in 1867, when this great nation came into formation, the only thing protected by it was the right to a public school system, secular education, as well as our traditional Roman Catholic schools. That's it. We have made an accommodation for

home schools. If people do not see an opportunity for their children in that, they can go to home-schooling. I understand that to an extent, that if you just can't handle the public school system, well, there should be an option.

Nevertheless, where we've muddled in this murky middle ground of funding for private schools – and the private schools that can set up shop were basically a religion of, like I said before, a Hindu religion, a Jewish religion, a Sikh religion, a Mormon religion, a United church school – it simply doesn't seem to serve the overarching goal of what our government should be involved in.

9:00

The government should be involved in providing educational opportunities for the children in a manner that leaves religion out of the equation. If the people choose to do it otherwise, well, they choose to do it without government funding. Okay? That is their choice. If they can fully fund this, then government funding for these mechanisms that serve to divide communities on arbitrary characteristics should not be included.

This bill basically is sort of a call to arms for people who want to do this sort of thing. When they open up this act and see this language at the beginning, they'll come and say: "Well, I guess that's what we're supposed to do. The government wants us to set up our own shops, to have our own schools and to not take part in a public education system."

If you break this down by the actual wording,

whereas the Government of Alberta recognizes that parents have a right to choose the religious and ethical traditions in which their children are raised; that a child's education begins in the home; that parents play a foundational role in the moral and spiritual formation of their children,

that's fine. That's great. I understand that. Why it would be in an education act is another question. I think that's just a universal understanding that's enshrined under our freedom of religion in the Charter of Rights. Why do you need to be redundant and say something that everyone knows right in an education act?

By putting it here and then by adding this clause:

and that these principles are reflected in the commitment of the Government of Alberta to provide parents with choice in education, including public schools, separate schools, Francophone schools, charter schools, private schools and home education programs.

Like I said, the only things that are protected under our Constitution are the public and francophone schools. All this other stuff is government made, meddling into areas that they don't need to be meddling into, supporting operations that have no fundamental role.

The primary role doesn't appear in many cases to be with the provision of education but the provision of religious teaching in some cases. The government should not be meddling in that business, should not be financially supporting these institutions. It only serves to divide our communities and does not move society forward.

Furthermore, I would still appreciate the members of the government recognizing that religion is great but – you know, I, too, go to church. I go to the United church, and I do that on my own time. If others choose to do so, that's great. That's freedom of religion. You have freedom of religion to teach your kids whatever you want at home. But an education system that the government provides should not be involved in those things, in the funding of those mechanisms.

If you look at the statistics coming out of how governments which have gone down this path of splintering communities and offering a voucher system or a money-follows-the-child model, that the Wildrose is advocating, that is not something that, at least

in the studies that I've seen, adds to an overall good education system of that society.

I can't just point out the Wildrose in this session. This government has enabled this with their half measure of 70 per cent funding to these schools, which, in my view, has served to divide communities and not bind them.

Like I said, I got most of these points out on the subamendment. That's my story, Mr. Chair, in this element, and I, too, will be voting against this amendment.

Thank you.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Calgary-Bow on amendment A1.

Ms DeLong: Yes. There has been quite a bit of discussion recently in terms of how we should be just supporting a public system because all of the studies show that that is what's best for society. Well, if you want to find the data to support funding going to other sources, it's right here in Alberta.

You know, I often disagree with the Calgary public system, the Calgary public board. That's my local board, and I often disagree with some of the things they do. But bottom line, Calgary public provides one of the best education systems in the whole world. The result that we get out of the Calgary public board is comparable to Finland. It's comparable to anywhere in the world in total. Sometimes we come in third. Sometimes we come in fourth. A lot of the time we come in first. That public board produces some of the best education in the whole world. Okay?

That is a public board who is in competition with all these other choices that we as Albertans provide to the parents. What we have done there is put all of our public boards on notice that they have to – they have to – produce the best education that they possibly can. So all of our public boards are striving. They're working hard. You know, they believe in what they're doing, and they are working hard to produce the best possible education in the world. It's because we are providing that choice that they have really stepped up. We have to admire what they're doing, but it is because we have set up this overall choice where the parents have the control and the parents can send their children to the school of their choice. As a result, our public system is the best public system in the world.

Thank you very much.

The Chair: Any other hon. member wish to join the debate on amendment A1?

Hon. Minister of Energy, do you wish to speak on amendment A1?

Dr. Morton: Yes.

The Chair: Please go ahead.

Dr. Morton: Mr. Chair, it would appear that there is considerable concern on the parts of some Albertans about the inclusion of the reference to the Charter of Rights and Freedoms and the Alberta Human Rights Act in section 16 of the act. They're concerned that this potentially abridges or erodes the authority of parents to choose what their children are taught. I'd like to say that I share this concern and that I respect this concern, and so does the majority of our PC caucus. That's why we've brought the amendment that's before the House today.

This amendment for the first time in Alberta and, really, for the first time in Canada provides an explicit recognition of the right of parents to choose the religious and ethical traditions in which their children are raised. After declaring the principle that parents have

a right to choose the religious and ethical traditions in which their children are raised, it elaborates on that principle. It states:

that a child's education begins in the home; that parents play a foundational role in the moral and spiritual formation of their children; and that these principles are reflected in the commitment of the Government of Alberta to provide parents with choice in education.

So it states the principle, and then it goes on to elaborate on all of the different choices, the policies that follow from that principle. These choices include

public schools, separate schools, Francophone schools, charter schools, private schools and home education programs.

I would ask the members of the Assembly: in what other province can you find this type of choice in offering students and parents and families choice in education? I would suggest that not only is this right in principle, but it's right in practice, too. Why is it that Alberta consistently – consistently – outperforms every other province, every U.S. state, and indeed most of the rest of the world? In standardized tests our kids, the graduates of this program, are the top five in the world, and I would suggest it's because, one, there's choice, which creates competition between the different systems; and, two, it involves the parents. Speaking as a previous social scientist, I can tell you that the strongest predictor of success in children's education is parental involvement. This is what choice does. It makes the parents partners with the teachers in education. So I think Alberta should be recognized and this bill should be recognized for being the first province in Canada to explicitly recognize parental rights.

9:10

I'd like to go on, then, to point out that there's a second provision in public policy in Alberta that also acknowledges the importance of parental authority and parental responsibility when it comes to what their children learn. I'm referring here, Mr. Chair, to the Alberta Human Rights Act, section 11, which was amended in what's known as Bill 44 in 2009. This section – again, this is the Human Rights Act of Alberta – requires that in matters that are done . . . [interjection] Yes. Some good support over there from our hon. Member for Airdrie-Chestermere.

It requires that when school boards or teachers are dealing with matters of religion or sexuality, parental notification is required and, if the parent is concerned about that, the right to opt out for the students. Here again, I would suggest, you see a strong, explicit protection of parents' rights to guide the ethical and religious traditions in which their children are raised.

Importantly, the inclusion of reference to the Alberta Human Rights Act inside section 16 of the Education Act embeds that principle of parental authority inside the act. So not only does the new preamble that we're discussing now recognize this right to parental authority; it's put into the text of the act by inclusion of the Alberta Human Rights Act. Again, I think this is something we can be proud of. I ask those who are critical here: what other province has this type of protection for parental authority when it comes to the ethical and religious instruction of their children?

Thirdly, I would like to point to an article by Professor Dale Gibson, distinguished professor emeritus at the University of Alberta, Belzberg professor of constitutional studies, and a member of the Royal Society of Canada. I'm referring here to a paper that he is the author of called *Towers, Bridges and Basements: The Constitutional and Legal Architecture of Independent Schooling*. Professor Dale Gibson makes the case, and I'll read it from page 3 of the copy I have here.

Although the question cannot fairly be said to be beyond doubt, there is a strong reason to conclude that parents have the constitutional right to determine the shape of their children's

education. That right is, I believe, rooted in at least three distinct provisions of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms.

Now, I'll go on and point out what those three provisions of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms are. It's freedom of conscience and religion, section 2(a); freedom of expression, section 2(b); and the right to liberty in section 7. Professor Gibson points out how the Charter of Rights protects in different ways that right to parents.

I'll give you one example here. This is quoting from page 6 of Justice La Forest's decision in the case of *R. versus Jones*.

Those who administer the province's educational requirements may not do so in a manner that unreasonably infringes on the right of parents to teach their children in accordance with their religious convictions. The interference must be demonstrably justified.

There under section 2(a), freedom of conscience and religion, Justice La Forest finds protection for the right of parents in the Charter. Again, for those Albertans who are concerned about the inclusion of the Charter in the text, section 16 of the Education Act, it's the actual inclusion of the Charter that can protect that freedom of expression for the rights of parents.

I turn now to freedom of expression, section 2(b), quoting from page 8. This is Professor Gibson's view:

I am strongly of the opinion that both parental decisions that their children should be educated at home or in an independent school and the educational activities themselves, are, even in the absence of any religious component, constitutionally protected as important exercises of expression within the meaning of s. 2(b) of the Charter.

In other words, just the way section 2(a) protects the parental authority for those families who come at this issue from a religious tradition, a religious perspective, he's suggesting that freedom of expression protects the same right, the equal right, for parents who come to this issue from a secular perspective. So there's a balance between equal protection for families that have a more religious tradition or those who have an ethical position but based on secular principles.

Last but not least, I'd like to turn to section 7, the liberty perspective. I'd like to quote here Justice Bertha Wilson, again in the case of *Jones*, the same case. Justice Wilson, referring to section 7 of the Charter, the right to liberty and not to be deprived thereof, says:

Without doubt, it denotes not merely freedom from bodily restraint but also the right of the individual to contract, to engage in any of the common occupations of life, to acquire useful knowledge, to marry, establish a home and bring up children, to worship God according to the dictates of his own conscience, and generally to enjoy those privileges . . . recognized [as central] to the orderly pursuit of happiness by free men.

Again, to those Albertans – and I understand their concerns – who worry about the inclusion of the Charter of Rights or the Alberta Human Rights Act in section 16 of the Education Act, the Charter of Rights actually protects freedom of religion, freedom of conscience, freedom of expression, and each of those have been interpreted as protecting the right of parents to exercise that choice. So I think this strengthens the case.

Finally and lastly, I'd like to turn to a slightly different perspective. A lot of Albertans and a lot of Canadians, when they look at the Charter of Rights and the Alberta Human Rights Act, see it as a threat to parental authority, but there are many other Albertans and many other Canadians who, when they look at the Charter of Rights or the Alberta Human Rights Act, see it as a badge of protection and a badge of equal protection of the law. I'm referring here to new Canadians, families who have emigrated

from overseas, families who are of a different skin colour, a different ethnic persuasion, a different religion. They see the Charter, the equal protection of the laws, and the Alberta Human Rights Act, which prohibits discrimination based on race, religion, or colour, as at the highest level a badge of inclusion in Canadian society – Albertans and Canadians are proud of that – and, at a minimum, protection against racial, ethnic, or religious discrimination. This isn't just a simple symbol. It's a constitutional symbol in the case of the Charter and statutory in the case of the Human Rights Act.

9:20

I would suggest that this is good, that it's something we can be proud of and that we should be proud of, and that's why it should be included in the Education Act. Mr. Chair, I'd go on and point out that these new Canadians – in fact, the hon. Member for Calgary-Buffalo referred to the many different faith communities in Alberta. They're in the immigrant communities, the ethnic, multicultural communities: Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, Ismailis, Buddhists. They are part of that group who, when they look at the Charter of Rights and look at the Alberta Human Rights Act, see this positive protection, this symbol of inclusion, equal protection of the law.

But also, most of these people, not all but most, come from a tradition of strong families – it's one of the reasons for their great success – and they want to pass on their religious and ethical values to their children, indeed to preserve the very diversity that they're proud of, that the Charter protects, by passing on the religious and ethical values from one generation to the next.

Mr. Chase: Sharia law?

Dr. Morton: In other words, many of these same new . . . There we have the Liberals – I'd like the record to show this – making fun of Muslims. I'm glad the record will show that.

In other words, many of these same new Canadians who want the Charter of Rights and Alberta human rights included in section 16 because they see it as a symbol of inclusion, of equal protection of the law, also want their parental rights included, not just in the preamble but also in section 16, as it is included in the Alberta Human Rights Act.

Mr. Chair, for all of those reasons I'm very proud to say that I think that with this addition, the amendment adding to the preamble, Albertans should be proud of this. It recognizes the concerns that many Albertans have – and we understand those concerns – about parental authority, and it puts Alberta in the lead, in front of all other provinces, in recognizing the right of parents to choose the instruction matters in areas of ethical and religious values that their children are instructed in. I support very, very strongly this amendment.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Airdrie-Chestermere on amendment A1.

Mr. Anderson: Yes, on amendment A1. I want to thank the Minister of Energy for his comments. I agree with almost all of what he said, and I respect the work that he's done on that file throughout his career. Parental rights are something that I think were underprotected for a very long time, and it's good to see that, hopefully, there's a little bit of a renaissance going in that regard. The UN declaration of human rights . . .

Mr. Chase: More like the Dark Ages.

Mr. Anderson: I guess the hon. Member for Calgary-Varsity thinks the United Nations universal declaration of human rights is

something out of the Dark Ages. In the universal declaration of human rights it specifically states that a parent has the human right to choose the education that's best for their children. That is in the UN declaration of human rights. I don't think that's out of the Dark Ages, but it's good to see that that's actually being remembered now.

Where I disagree with the minister: although I think the language can be improved in this amendment – and we brought in a subamendment to that effect – this amendment, although an improvement, is just in the preamble. I mean, let's call a spade a spade. The fact that it's just in the preamble is really symbolic. It's good – I'm glad it's there – but it's really symbolic. I'm worried and I think a lot of people are worried that if we put something in the Education Act that, essentially, tells parents what they can and cannot teach their children with regard to their faith, which section 16 does, in a lot of people's view, indirectly do . . .

Mr. Hancock: So much is in the interpretation.

Mr. Anderson: Well, it is, but it's all about interpretation. That's the problem, that there are multiple interpretations of it. Some people might use that as a sword in the Education department to essentially instruct and tell parents and Catholic or other faith-based schools that they have to teach a certain . . . [interjections] Sorry, Mr. Chair; I'm losing my train of thought.

The Chair: The hon. member has the floor, please.

Continue, Hon. Member for Airdrie-Chestermere, and louder.

Mr. Anderson: Thanks. I wish the Government House Leader and others in here would participate in the debate instead of just yipping across the way.

Anyway, if I look up section 16, it says: "all courses or programs of study offered and instructional materials used in a school." Well, what is a school? Let's go back to school. It says specifically that a school means

a structured learning environment through which an education program is offered to a student by

- (i) a board,
- (ii) a person responsible for the operation of a private school,
- (iii) a person providing an early childhood services program,
- (iv) a parent providing a home education program, or
- (v) the Minister.

That's what a school is. It applies to home-schooling, faith-based schools, private schools as well as Catholic schools and public schools. It includes everything.

All courses or programs of study offered and instructional materials used in a school must reflect the diverse nature and heritage of society in Alberta, promote understanding and respect for others and honour and respect the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms and the Alberta Human Rights Act.

Now, that is something that according to most interpretations, certainly those interpretations that I have, would be fine. However, as we've seen over and over again in courts, it can also be used and interpreted a different way, as we've seen in British Columbia, for example, to force faith-based schools and home-schoolers and others that want to give their children a faith-based education to teach things that are not in line with their faith.

Anita and I are confident enough in our local school right now and with the relationship that we have with the principal and the teachers there that we can have our children go to that school without their faith being trampled on. However, that's not the case in every school and in every situation. The worry is that this will be used as a sword. If all programs must include a certain interpre-

tation of the Human Rights Act or the Charter, look at some of the things that have gone on in our Human Rights Commission in the name of the Alberta Human Rights Act.

Frankly, I would call them violations of freedom of religion, freedom of speech, freedom of conscience in the name of the Alberta Human Rights Act by the Human Rights Commission in their interpretations of that act and of the Charter. I worry that this will be used as a sword to interfere with a parent's right to teach their children according to their faith. [interjection] Oh, man, the Minister of Human Services just can't help himself.

9:30

I would say that you did point out how Bill 44 changed the Human Rights Act here in Alberta. That's fine and dandy. It's good. We shouldn't put something in this act that would make it necessary for parents to have to use the Human Rights Commission or the Human Rights Act to protect themselves, and I fear that this does that. It sets up kind of a showdown, so to speak. I don't think it's necessary, especially if you look at the previous definition that was under what was once the diversity and respect clause in the act that's being amended. It was essentially that education programs offered and instructional materials used in schools must not promote or foster doctrines of racial or ethnic superiority or persecution, religious intolerance or persecution, social change through violent action, or disobedience of laws.

I think that's a great definition. It's clear. It's not vague. It's not subject to any kind of real interpretation, in my view. I think that's pretty darn clear. A Catholic school or a faith-based school or a home-school: I don't think that would ever interfere with the teachings of their bona fide religious beliefs. So I don't see the need to change that definition from what is in there now to this one in this current act. I don't feel the need for it.

I know that it does scare a lot of folks. Like I said, I have not received more e-mails about any other subject except the royalty framework. This has really been something that's hit a nerve with folks. It's not just home-schools at all. It's a very large faith-based school group. I know that we have AKCS. It's a great school. We have a private school, a faith-based school in Airdrie. I've just been inundated by them with calls on this.

I know that we also have some Catholic groups that are very concerned about it as well, not the least of which is an individual, Bishop Henry, in an article that he did for the *Herald* this last week.

I do respect and I know the commitment that the Education minister brings to parental rights, and I think that this amendment to the preamble that we're on right now is better than what was there before. I really wish they would have accepted our subamendment that we brought in earlier, but they didn't.

However, I would hope that in addition to this the government would understand that because this is just in the preamble, we also need to look at section 16. We also need to make sure that we're not setting up an unnecessary battle between parents of children who are involved in faith-based education, whether it be home-school, private school, or Catholic school, and the Human Rights Act in Alberta. I think it's an unnecessary conflict. I think that by not recognizing that or by ignoring that and putting this section 16 in there, it sets up that potential problem, and I hope that we can consider that later on.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Leduc-Beaumont-Devon.

Mr. Rogers: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I am very pleased to rise to speak in support of amendment A1. This amendment makes it very clear, particularly in the way it starts out. It says:

Whereas the Government of Alberta recognizes that parents have a right to choose the religious and ethical traditions in which their children are raised; that a child's education begins in the home.

I believe that is a very profound statement. It's a very clear statement that speaks to the intent of this government in this bill, that we respect parental rights and that we are enshrining those rights in this bill.

I'm proud to live in this province, proud to live in a province where diversity is recognized – it is encouraged – and the fact that we have choice in this province, Mr. Chairman. We have choice in the way that we as parents educate our children, the greatest choice of any jurisdiction in this country. We have a strong public system. We have a strong system that recognizes the constitutional rights of Catholics to have a separate education system. We also have a francophone system that recognizes the rights of one of our founding peoples, French Canadians, of their mother tongue, to educate their children in that language.

We have charter schools, we have private schools, and home-schooling, which is specifically recognized not only in this preamble but also recognized in this piece of legislation. Mr. Chairman, home-schooling is the choice of many of my constituents, and this amendment leaves no doubt of our government's intention to respect and protect this choice. I'm proud that this act recognizes the supremacy of the Human Rights Act, the same act, which in itself, guarantees and protects these freedoms.

I will be voting in support of this amendment, Mr. Chairman. Thank you.

The Chair: The hon. Minister of Energy on A1.

Dr. Morton: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I'd like to, first of all, compliment the Member for Leduc-Beaumont-Devon for his articulate defence of the amendments. Again, he points out as a member of an ethnic minority the value that the inclusion of the Charter of Rights and the Alberta Human Rights Act has to minorities.

Mr. Hehr: As a minority I'm a wheelchair user, Ted.

Dr. Morton: Yeah. Respect that as well.

These communities whose success in Canadian society is based on strong family traditions value the Charter and value the Alberta Human Rights Act and at the same time value the recognition of the rights of parents that the amendment, the preamble adds.

I would like to address a couple of points raised by the hon. Member for Airdrie-Chestermere. His discourse would give the impression that somehow section 16 is totally different from the original or the previous section in the School Act on diversity. In fact, it's completely the same up to a certain point. I just want to indicate for the record what that point is.

Mr. Hinman: What page are you on?

Dr. Morton: I'm on page 29 of the bill, okay?

I quote here from section 16.

All courses or programs of study offered and instructional materials used in a school must reflect the diverse nature and heritage of society in Alberta, promote understanding and respect for others and honour and respect . . .

Up till that point the wording is identical to the previous wording in the analogous section of the School Act. You then have the new wording, which is after respect.

. . . the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms and the Alberta Human Rights Act.

Now, as I've already indicated, the Canadian Human Rights Act protects freedom of religion, freedom of conscience, freedom of

expression, and the right to liberty, all of which have been interpreted by various courts and by a number of our Supreme Court justices as protecting a right of parents. So the inclusion of the reference to the Charter of Rights in section 16 supports parents' rights. Similarly, in the Alberta Human Rights Act we've referenced that section, section 3, put in by Bill 44, which again recognizes the right of parents to be notified and the right of students to opt out.

Now, the concern that the hon. Member for Airdrie-Chestermere had is that this is all fine, but again it's subject to interpretation, which means it's subject to misinterpretation, and what are we doing about that? Well, Mr. Chair, precisely one of the purposes of a preamble is to give interpreters, in this case judges, a sense of the intent of the legislation; in other words, the words like in section 16: what is their intent? That's where the value of the current amendment is.

The amendment states very clearly that the intent of the government is to recognize

that parents have a right to choose the religious and ethical traditions in which their children are raised; that a child's education begins [at] home; [and] that parents play a foundational role in the moral and spiritual formation of their children.

That will act as a signpost to judges in the future to make sure that they interpret section 16 and the reference to the Canadian Charter of Rights and the Alberta Human Rights Act in a manner that is not only consistent with but actually protects parental authority.

Thank you.

9:40

The Chair: The hon. Member for Calgary-Varsity.

Mr. Chase: Thank you. In all this discussion what has been lost – and it's been lost in this province – are the universal rights of the child, and I'm not suggesting that they trump the rights of the parent, but Alberta was the very last province to consider the universal rights of the child. The excuse they used was that the universal rights of the child applied to countries as opposed to provinces. That was the lame excuse they used for not recognizing the universal rights of the child.

When we're talking about universal rights, the Vriend decision back in the late '90s extended the rights to individuals of the GLBT, transgendered, et cetera, circumstance. Now, Bill 44, which is all about amendment A1, says that, yes, we'll recognize your rights except in the classroom. We won't allow you to discuss sexual orientation. We won't allow you to discuss anything that might broadly be based on religious interpretation. We won't allow you to discuss in any particular depth evolution versus religion, and heaven forbid sexual education topics come up, which of course never happens at a junior high school, where my primary teaching experience was.

Now, when we're talking about rights, one organization's rights do not trump that of another, whether it's a minority or a majority. I support the rights of parents to home-school their children. What I do not support is the right to have some child, based on his religious beliefs, hold the other students in his classroom hostage because of amendments like A1, that in proposing to recognize each individual's rights, prioritize the rights. You do not have the right to discuss sexual orientation for fear of interfering with someone else's religious beliefs. You can't get into depth talks in terms of science and evolution because there might be some child who believes that man walked with dinosaurs and that God built everything in seven days. You know, for fear of being turned into a pillar of salt, you're not supposed to talk openly or objectively about a discussion.

If teachers are handcuffed by little Johnny or little Suzie, who is going to blow the whistle to the Human Rights Commission because the teacher defended a child who was being bullied and called a fag or some other deplorable circumstance because some other individual thinks their God-given right to discriminate trumps that of an individual to have an objective discussion on a wide variety of topics, then we're in real trouble.

Now, the hon. Minister of Energy talked about parental rights. In his political science class at the University of Calgary I'm sure that he didn't shut down topics when religion came into it. I'm sure he didn't shut down the class and say, "You two guys over there are holding hands; that's not acceptable in my classroom," or if someone was talking about gender discrimination, I'm not sure that he'd say: "Well, sorry. You can't write about that in a paper because that's not acceptable." But those are the same restrictions that he's willing to place under the name of parental rights into public school classrooms.

I realize that there are sensitive topics and there are appropriate places for those discussions. I respect parents' rights to decide at what point they have the discussion of the birds and the bees or the size of the stork that brought their little brother to the house and dropped him down the chimney. But, Mr. Chair, if we subject our public schools to such restrictions that topics cannot be brought up because they could potentially offend someone else in the classroom, then the majority of the topics of discussion are being frozen. They're being discriminated against, and the whole point of this so-called liberating piece of A1 does exactly what it's not intended to do.

It does not provoke freedom; it promotes priorities of prejudices. It does not allow objective discussions to take place. If someone is offended, they can drag the individual off to the Human Rights Commission. Our courts are the appropriate place because they are actual judicial centres as opposed to quasi-judicial. When we start meddling in public schools' objective, open debates and discussions and have that cloud of a human rights tribunal hovering over the right of teachers and students to engage in open discussions on a variety of topics, which might on an impromptu nature come into the classroom, then the whole point of education is lost.

School boards and the members of the Alberta Teachers' Association are not trying to take away parents' rights. If they feel that a public school is discriminatory and doesn't share their same values, parents have the right to go to a private school of their choice. They have the right to go to a charter school. They have the right to home-school. What they don't have is the right to interfere with the learning processes and objective discussions of the other children in that class. That's reverse discrimination. That's one individual holding hostage, based on his religious beliefs, the whole class and the teacher of that class. I don't know where this fear comes from in Albertans, that their rights are going to be trampled by open discussion.

Mr. Chair, I've been in this province for the better part of 50 of my soon to be 65 years, and I find this A1 an embarrassment. Alberta is a progressive province. It has all sorts of things to offer. As many individuals have pointed out, one of its strongest features is its public education system. So why are you driving a wedge into this public education system with this particular amendment A1?

Who is so afraid that their rights are going to be lost that this has to be put as a preamble? Does the Charter of Rights and Freedoms of this entire nation not override the need for such a preamble? Why is it that a small minority of individuals who feel that their religious rights are potentially compromised – in other words, the tail is wagging the dog, and the tail is now in the form

of a preamble into an Education Act that affects all the children of this province.

This is prejudice, Mr. Chair. This is not transparency; it's not accountability. I'm ashamed to be a part of a province that would preamble and prejudice the education, the public education, of students in this province. Individuals have the choice. They don't have to go to a public school. Don't bring the prejudices and indoctrination and beliefs into the public system. Don't break it up.

Thank you.

9:50

Mr. Anderson: Sorry. I do have to respond to this just because, you know, this is exactly why there are home-schoolers right now and private schoolers and Catholic school parents and so forth listening to this debate. This is exactly why they are so frightened, because they hear an individual . . . [interjection] Oh, trust me. They are frightened. They're frightened, hon. member, because, basically, this member just stood up and said that any individual – any individual – that would dare bring into a classroom their beliefs, any child who happened to be educated as a Muslim or a Christian and had a certain world view about a certain issue and had that belief and expressed that belief, that that somehow would be bigotry and bullying and persecution and so forth.

Ms Notley: Well, it might be.

Mr. Anderson: Well, it might be in a certain context, absolutely. But this is the problem. In so many cases it's not; it's just an expression of opinion. It's not an expression of violence. It's not bullying. It's just: yeah, this is what I've been taught; this is what I've read.

Then to hear this member – you know, I don't begrudge his opinion on it, but this is a schoolteacher coming in here and saying that if any child who believed in, say, just any kind of teaching that they had been taught in their faith that doesn't accord to his world view, essentially, they should naturally be subject to a human rights complaint, or they should be forced to be taught the truth, the truth according to that member or that teacher, whatever teacher it is.

Ms Notley: Is the Human Rights Code right or wrong? Is it the truth or not?

Mr. Anderson: Well, the thing is that tolerance is a two-way street. You can't just say: you have to tolerate my view. You have to be able to tolerate people that disagree, people that do have a faith background and so forth. This is exactly why we need protections in the Human Rights Act for parental rights. It's exactly why we need to make sure when we amend this Education Act that we're doing so very carefully and that we are making sure to protect the rights of parents and folks in that regard.

I remember very, very clearly in school being bullied in a classroom by a teacher as well as other members, who had a certain faith, because their world view saw something that I had been taught growing up, that I believed in, as being multiple different adjectives that I won't repeat here. As a child I remember it very strikingly. Boy, oh boy; it made me very uncomfortable and almost ashamed, because I was so young at the time, of who I was because some insensitive teacher had decided to take it upon himself to straighten a few things out. I'm not saying that this hon. member would have done that. I don't think he would have. But there are those out there who do not have that sensitivity, and they use their position to bully people who they disagree with into submission.

I mean, think about what has come through the Alberta human rights tribunals. There has been controversy after controversy after controversy with regard to criticizing the Sheldon Chumir foundation all the way to, you know, right-wing commentators all agreeing that these human rights tribunals have exceeded their authority when interpreting the Charter of Rights and interpreting that Alberta Human Rights Act.

Now we're saying in this legislation that we're going to make sure that those interpretations of the Alberta Human Rights Act, those values enshrined in what those interpretations were, must be taught and must be accepted in our classrooms. They must be taught to our children. That's what some parents, not all parents but a lot of parents, thousands of parents across this province, are very concerned about.

I think that if we're going to go forward and debate this, I hope that we can use rhetoric that's not designed to be – let's not be intolerant in the name of tolerance.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Calgary-Varsity.

Mr. Chase: Thank you very much. I want to make it clear that I'm talking about objectivity, not subjectivity. I would like to think that every child in every classroom would have the right to raise their issue and have their issue discussed. What I am not in favour of is one child's rights and beliefs shutting down an entire class's discussion.

I realize that in all professions there are bullies, and part of this Education Act is about bullying. I would hate to think that in any of my classroom experiences I bullied a child, and I know the hon. Member for Airdrie-Chestermere was not suggesting that I bullied. He did mention a circumstance in which he was bullied.

But the idea that somehow I am trying to limit parents' rights and to limit children's rights is the exact opposite of what I'm trying to accomplish. I want an openness, an opportunity to discuss, an opportunity to debate. When I taught in school, whether it was language arts or social studies, the importance of stating an objective, the importance of supporting an argument, the importance of coming to a conclusion based on an argument that you provided, that had some verifiable basis, was important. I realize that when it comes to discussions of religion, the verifiable nature of it potentially interferes with the mystery of it, which is part of the reason for religion.

I want to make it very clear that what I am saying is that I want the public system be open to a variety of beliefs, a variety of discussions, and to not be shut down by a particular viewpoint. The beauty of the public system is that there aren't filters. It doesn't filter you on the basis of your religion, it doesn't filter you on the basis of your IQ, it doesn't filter you on the basis of your ability to pay the extra tuition costs. Anything that infringes upon the ability for a discussion to take place where all opinions are valued and a student isn't put down or chastised because they have a particular belief may seem overly simplistic. In my classroom in a less than well-to-do socio-economic area, where bullying was prevalent because establishing your pecking order, frequently with fists, was a way to establish your personal value, I had a little sign at the front of my classroom with thumbs-up. There were to be no put-downs, that sign said, in my classroom, and I believe in that.

It is absolutely essential that the public system be able to discuss a variety of issues and not be gagged or handcuffed by a person's views or beliefs. All views should be openly discussed and people left to judge their own merits, not a teacher assigning a mark to the discussion but allowing it to take place in a transparent fashion.

I know the hon. Member for Calgary-Buffalo, whose parents are both teachers, would love to have an opportunity to weigh in on amendment A1 and the public system support.

10:00

The Chair: The hon. Member for Calgary-Buffalo.

Mr. Hehr: Thank you very much for recognizing me, Mr. Chair. I think what is going on tonight is an excellent example of why religion should be kept out and separate from things that the government is involved in providing like public education. This is an excellent example of the divisiveness and the strife and the angst that this causes. It's been caused tonight by the language put forward in the government amendment and by the subamendment SA1.

If I can dovetail quickly to some of the comments made by the hon. Minister of Energy, they were comical although absurd when he was trying to shoehorn various one-line quotations from case law to support the argument of certain rights into a school system. Really, it was my view that those quotations do not reflect the overarching case law that stems from the interpretation of our Constitution Act, which I said recognizes that the state has a role to play in public education, Catholic school representation, and francophone education, and that's it. That's all. The language coming out of the Charter of Rights and Freedoms recognizes the state's role in playing an agnostic arbitrator in the provision of educational services. When the government is involved in these provisions, it is to be nonreligious in its basis.

So when the hon. minister tried to shoehorn certain quotations from various cases, I found that, again, comical, a little bit absurd. If he would do some reviewing of the language around the provision of education and quote from those cases – and actually the hon. member from the Wildrose is correct. The decisions in B.C. reflect what the jurisprudence has overwhelmingly been in regard to public and separate education and what is allowed in those situations. The Supreme Court has been clear on this, and to suggest otherwise is utterly ridiculous in my view.

Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Calgary-Mackay.

Ms Woo-Paw: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I would like to take this opportunity to share my perspective on section 16 of Bill 2. First of all, I would like to say that section 16 includes wording such as that we “must reflect the diverse nature and heritage of society in Alberta.” For someone like me it speaks to the fact that in this very key legislation we recognize the significant role of our First Nations and some of the founding nations of this country. It also recognizes the diverse nature of our society, which is just critical for an increasingly culturally and racially diverse society and province such as ours.

Mr. Chairman, I would also like to stress the fact that policies and words impact different people differently. For me I think it is significant to our diverse student population in our society that we include wording such as that we recognize the importance of promoting “understanding and respect for others,” that we “honour and respect the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms.”

For the increasing population of newcomers and people of minority membership in our society the Charter stands for our dedication to equality and fairness. The Alberta Human Rights Act is one of the very few formal protections that disadvantaged groups in society have that recognize their disadvantaged stature. Currently that would include women, people with disabilities, aboriginal people, and visible minorities.

For those students who have to endure stereotyping, racial profiling, and racial slurs on just too many occasions, I think this symbolic way of including these groups in our legislation would help these people to develop a greater sense of belonging, which is significant and critically important.

I would also like to say that when this House says that we support the development of an inclusive and welcoming society and we would not stand up to protect the basic respect and dignity of people and students, I think we're being unprincipled and inconsistent.

I believe the preamble proposed by the minister is a balance between recognizing and providing protection to the disadvantaged . . .

Mr. Hehr: Did you read the amendment?

The Chair: Through the chair.

Ms Woo-Paw: I'd like to say that I support the minister's proposed preamble because it is a balance between recognizing the fundamental rights of parents and the need to recognize and provide protection to the disadvantaged and also to recognize the increasingly diverse nature of our society.

Thank you.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Calgary-Glenmore.

Mr. Hinman: Yes. I'm compelled to get up and speak more on the amendment after all that's been said. Again, my colleague said it best: you know, the intolerance of those who are preaching to be tolerant is an ongoing problem. I want to talk a little bit, I guess, about this so-called fear of religion that's being talked about and how it's, you know, stopping teachers from talking or discussing important issues in the classroom. Again, if I go back to the Charter of Rights and Freedoms, 2(a), the very first of the fundamental freedoms is the freedom of conscience and religion. That's the very first one on there.

You know, you can ask, “What's religion? What's worship?” and all of those things. I have friends where I would say that what they worship and what is most important in their lives is sports. Everything permeates that. When they talk about it, their examples, everything they do somehow has a sports connection. That's what they put into it.

A few people I know are into the fine arts. They love going to, you know, see the productions and whatnot. Everything rotates around that. When you're around them, that's what the discussion revolves around. It's about the arts and the great artists and the great musicians. That is what's around their lives.

Each of us has our core beliefs. So, you know, what is religious freedom? Is that belief freedom? Is it the freedom to worship who or what or where you want to worship so long as it doesn't infringe on other people's freedom to do so also?

10:10

The discussion that we're talking about here: I have to say that I'm very concerned about the direction it's going in, Mr. Chair. When we look at the government's preamble, I would have to say that when we were first moving back to it, I was against the preamble because it wasn't strong enough, and it didn't go paramount for the parents. But after listening to those who are speaking against the government's preamble, I have to go back to the fact that, yes, it is far better than not having it in there.

Obviously, we're to the point now where we're going to have to vote on that versus what many in here are saying against it, saying: “Oh, no. This is terrible. This is overriding the teacher's

ability and the curriculum, and it's all going to be taken askew here if we don't vote this amendment down." Because of that I'm going to have to now say, I think, that I'll be voting for this amendment though I'm disappointed that it doesn't have the clause that parents are paramount. That, to me, would make it one step stronger. The argument that's often said, "Well, if we've got people upset on both sides, I guess we've kind of settled somewhere in the middle": I guess that's better than either way on the two far extreme ends.

I want to talk a little bit more about classroom bullying because that's what a lot of this seems to be rotating around, the intolerance and the classroom bullying. Again, I'm always amazed at the bullying that goes on just on people's political views. I've got a son who is right now going to a university and taking political science. He very much has to write in accordance with what the professor wants, and his marks are reflected . . .

An Hon. Member: What school is he going to?

Mr. Hinman: Here in Alberta.

To think that teachers are above their own views is comical. I've gone through school. I've listened to the teachers who want to tell you what's right in poetry or what's right in English. I mean, what I loved was math, I loved physics, I loved chemistry, and I loved biology because there we had a textbook definition, and you could go back there, and you know: what stage is a blastula? And you can go and argue and say, "No, it's at this stage," and then: "Oh, yeah. You're right. I remembered it wrong."

But when it comes to a poem, when it comes to social studies and English or political science, heaven help us, we have what I want to call this bullying for the marks. If you want to get a good mark, you need to follow what the teacher is saying. It's the reality, Mr. Chair.

So for people who seem to think that if we just have this one principle in here, we're going to remove people's bias: that's ridiculous. We're all going to continue to carry what our core beliefs and biases are. Hopefully, as we become more enlightened, we become closer and closer together on that. I usually find that the reason why people are furthest apart is because they have the least understanding of the subject that those two individuals are arguing about. But if we can bring the facts together like lawyers, you know, what can we agree on?

Mr. Hehr: A great place to do that is the public school.

Mr. Hinman: But let's not say that someone doesn't have the right to have that child pulled out of a class that they don't want them exposed to, whether it's grade 5 or grade 7 or grade 3. Again, we see in British Columbia something getting woven into the whole system because that's their new level. This is what was acceptable, and government says that this must be in all of the curriculum, and it must be rewritten to reflect one point of view.

What we're trying to say here in amendment A1:

Whereas the Government of Alberta recognizes that parents have a right to choose the religious and ethical traditions in which their children are raised; that a child's education begins in the home; that parents play a foundational role in the moral and spiritual formation of their children.

This is what they're putting in there, and it's critical that parents have that right.

We have members in here that are basically saying that, no, they shouldn't, that when their child goes to school, they need to be wiped clean like a blackboard and not allowed to carry any of those beliefs that have been taught to them at home – they're going to get reindoctrinated – that therefore we just need to have

one public system, that's going to cover it all, and not allow charter, not allow private. It's wrong.

Mr. Chase: Allow it; just don't pay for it.

Mr. Hinman: Well, that's not allowing it because most of those families can't afford to pay for it, hon. member. They pay their taxes – and those are probably the ones that are paying the majority of the taxes – and you don't want to give them their right to the education of their choice. That's what this is about. What's probably the worst is that these individuals are saying that these parents shouldn't have the choice, that they know best.

Again, it goes back to what I was talking about when my child was in grade 1, that they know best. "We're going to teach whole language now. Phonics is thrown out." We make errors. It doesn't always work, so we need to have that tolerance. We need to let the different groups try the different things that they find that are new. There are always new things in learning, and we don't need to wait until the central curriculum board figures something out. That's why teachers are professionals. They have that ability to adapt and to realize that this child is having trouble learning in one area, and the best teachers can go through and relate to all the different kids in the class, not just the majority that are able to learn under the regular curriculum.

I just have to say, Mr. Chair, that I have been compelled to say that I'm going to support this amendment because it's far better than what we had before. I guess we'll get into the discussions further on the bill, after we've voted on this amendment. I can totally understand why I'm getting the e-mails that I am, because of the discussion that has gone on here. That, to me, is just showing the signs of intolerance that many groups have in saying: "We know best. This is what needs to be taught in the curriculum, even in the home-school." That's the way it's defined in this new bill, that the government will have the reach all the way into home-schools to say: this is what you must teach because this is our new curriculum that's going forward.

With that, I'll sit down, and perhaps we'll vote on this amendment.

The Chair: I recognize the hon. Member for Lethbridge-East.

Ms Pastoor: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I wasn't totally prepared to speak to this amendment at this point in time, but something has been said over there that made me think. What the Member for Calgary-Varsity has said is that where good discussion, where people can express their ideas, should be done is in the education system. The Member for Calgary-Glenmore has sort of argued against it. If a child has been educated properly in the values of their parents, they should be able to discuss those values because when they're older they're going to want to explain what their beliefs are.

I'm sure that we all in here have our own beliefs, and I can explain mine. I can probably defend them. But you should be able to explain to me why you believe what you do. Whether I agree or not is totally immaterial. The point is that I will understand someone else's thinking. I think that we're missing the whole point, being so narrow minded that we are afraid to defend what we believe in. If we have trained our children properly, they will be able to defend their beliefs and their actions in any kind of a conversation. Maybe not at the elementary school, but they will go home and say blah, blah, blah about the classroom, and the parents will be able to say: "You know what? This is one thought, but this is what we think. This is what we believe. Therefore, this is how we are going to live."

The Chair: The hon. Member for Calgary-Buffalo.

Mr. Hehr: Yeah. Just to clear it up for the record, the Alberta Liberals are not against private schools. I believe in everyone's right to go start a private school, to send their kids to a private school. I just don't believe the taxpayer needs to be on the hook to pay for that private school.

Thank you.

10:20

The Chair: The hon. Member for Calgary-Glenmore.

Mr. Hinman: Yes. I guess I need to articulate myself a little bit better because what I'm talking about is parental rights and parental choice if they choose not to have their child exposed to something at the time the government says that they need to.

She hit the nail right on the head. She's saying: oh, we're not going to do it in elementary school? There are many jurisdictions where they do. Where does it come through, and when does a parent lose his right to say, "No, I don't want my child exposed to that"? Unfortunately, the real problem why these individuals are sending the e-mails and are concerned is because subjects come up and they're not told in advance. I think there's been lots of debate about that in the past, that it's amazing how all of a sudden someone in the classroom asks a question, and off it goes into one of those areas because little Johnny or little Suzie asked the question, and the teacher thinks, "Oh, my goodness, I have to address this," and steps forward.

What we're talking about here with amendment A1 is parental authority versus the state authority and who is going to have the paramount responsibility for that child. Not all children mature and grow at the same time. I've got some nieces that, to me, are very naive compared to some of my other ones that live in the city or some that live out in the country. They come through at a different age. You cannot say that, well, in grade 7 this is what needs to be taught because that's what's needed in a place like Calgary whereas if they're down south, down maybe in Coutts or somewhere, they're not exposed to all of the problems and the drugs that they might have in Calgary, and parents choose to do it at a different time.

This goes back to the problem of saying that one shoe fits all. It doesn't. Maybe a size 3 child's fits all children at a certain time as they're growing, but size 3 doesn't mean that because they're three years old, they have to have a size 3 shoe. They might be into that when they're one. They might be into it when they're four. This is the problem when we have the state saying: "This is the curriculum. We know this is what needs to be taught, and this is the year that it needs to be taught."

The other interesting thing. For many of the home-schoolers the reason why they've actually brought their kids home is because of bullying problems. We seem, to me, to almost want to stick our head in the sand. We passed legislation and said that there's no bullying, that it doesn't exist. There's lots and lots of bullying that still goes on, and I don't know that we'll ever be able to stop all of it. Despite all of our efforts and all of our legislation about that, it can still go on. So children can be kept home. They might have a learning disability and are being just tortured by their classmates at school, so they're brought home. It's real. It happens.

One bill doesn't fit all, and therefore, you know, parental authority needs to be paramount. This amendment definitely brings that forward to a higher level because it's in the preamble. As the Minister of Energy is trying to say, that's the spirit by which the bill is to be interpreted, by reading the preamble and looking at it and saying: okay; what are we trying to do? This

preamble is a major improvement. I think it could have been a little bit better, but it is an improvement, and thank heavens for that. Because of some of the discussion that has gone on here tonight, I'm very concerned.

[Mr. Zwodzdesky in the chair]

Mrs. Leskiw: I wasn't going to get up and discuss it at all, but I feel I have to as a parent and as a teacher of 36 years, first of all as a parent and someone who's of Ukrainian Orthodox background that followed their traditions, followed their language, and instilled it in my own children in my home. My children went to French immersion; they learned Ukrainian at home. They were brought up in the Orthodox faith at home and the rites. I would even go back further, to what my father said, that in Canada he was never allowed to be the Ukrainian and the Orthodox person he could never be back home in Ukraine. We have those freedoms.

I like Bill 2, and I like what is said in it. I think the amendment addresses concerns from some parents who were a little bit uncomfortable with Bill 2 as is. As a teacher in a classroom we know that our different children's viewpoints come in, and we respect them. You will never get rid of bullying a hundred per cent no matter how hard a teacher will try, but I try to express the views of all the students and encourage them to express their views and encourage respect and tolerance in my students for all types of students.

I had Christians in my classroom, I had Muslims in my classroom, I even had children who were atheist, but they were never put down. They were told to respect one another even if they have a different point of view. Our curriculum does that. We taught different types of government. We taught how people did things in Japan, how people did things in China, how they did it in the Soviet Union. We encouraged our children to role-play and take the views of different people and learn about their different views and then try to think about how they would answer if they were standing in front of the class.

I resent the fact that one group is going to control what everybody else has to say and think. I respect everyone. We have francophone schools in my jurisdiction, we have Catholic schools in my jurisdiction, we have public schools, we have Christian schools, we have a charter school, and we have a lot of excellent, excellent constituents of mine that are home-schooling.

I may not be able to talk the legal jargon that some of the lawyers in this room can talk, but I can tell you as a person who strongly believes in democracy, who strongly believes in a good education system, which I think we do have in Alberta, that we are bringing up our children to be tolerant of all folks regardless of their religion, regardless of the colour of their skin or sexual orientation.

In school parents always had the right. When we got up to say the Lord's Prayer and sing *O Canada*, my Jehovah's Witness students would just get up and go into the hallway, or they would just stay there and bow their heads and think whatever they'd like to think at that time. When we had Halloween, the parents would choose not to send their children to school for Halloween or the Christmas concert. We respected the parents' rights to do that. There is nothing in here that takes the rights away from any parent. As a teacher of 36 years I don't see it in here; I don't.

An Hon. Member: Have you read it cover to cover?

Mrs. Leskiw: I have read it cover to cover two or three times. I even enlarged it to an eight and a half by 11 so that I could make notes in between the lines. Yes, I have read it. I have read it.

I really think I am a very open-minded person who respects everyone. Personally, I don't even think we need the amendment, but because there is an outcry that we need something – to me, I believe that my colleagues did an excellent job of addressing concerns of some parents in this province, and I thank them. I am going to support the amendment, I'm going to support Bill 2, and I think the government did a really good job of putting this together.

Like I told my parents that are home-schooling: "There is nothing to worry about. The rights you had before you have right now." No government is going to my house and tell me that I can't speak Ukrainian, that I can't celebrate Ukrainian Christmas or Ukrainian Easter, that I have to do it on the 25th when I know I do it on January 7 and that my Easter this year is a week later than everybody else's Easter. I'm going to still follow those. I thank this country for giving me these rights.

Thank you.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. Member for Airdrie-Chestermere on amendment A1.

Mr. Anderson: I really enjoy the Member for Bonnyville-Cold Lake when she gets up and says what's on her mind. I appreciate that passion. Maybe it's because she reminds me of my mom or something when she gets all excited about stuff. It's very great to see that kind of passion in the Legislature on a bill. I wish we saw more of it from different folks on different issues. Anyway, I do appreciate that.

I will say that we do have to focus a little bit on what we're talking about here. We're not talking about whether teachers in our schools, by and large, don't do a good job of respecting people's different religious beliefs and backgrounds and so forth. That's not what we're talking about. I think we all agree that they do. We're not talking about the fact that this government doesn't believe in school choice. They do believe in school choice. We've seen it. There are a whole bunch of things that have been brought up here that this bill or this amendment in particular is not really about, and I don't think anyone is arguing that.

10:30

It is a little naive to think that these – there was a statement given that because some parents had a concern with this, we had to do something, and now they're going to be happy about it. Well, I can tell you that's not the case. I don't think that there was any real consultation done on this amendment with the folks who have the problem with the original wording. I know that for a fact. I've received over the past hour well over 50-odd e-mails. Here; I'll read you a few to give you an idea of what we're hearing. They're listening in. There's actually quite a large group listening in live and just e-mailing away. It's crazy. I cleaned out my inbox this morning, and now I'm up to over 200 messages, mostly on this. It's just incredible.

I will say that it is naive to say that there's nothing for these parents to fear, and this is why. Ms McColl was contacted by a reporter and was asked whether this act would affect whether Christian home-schoolers could teach their Biblical beliefs in the home. The response that they got – because, obviously, there are some Biblical beliefs, as was pointed out very clearly earlier on, that don't necessarily conform with certain teachings, certainly, in the typical Alberta Education curriculum but are beliefs that are not extreme beliefs as it was mentioned that they were. No. A lot of these beliefs are held, in some cases, by a majority of Albertans but, certainly, a very large minority of Albertans in most cases, depending on what issue we're talking about.

When asked about this issue and if this act would force individuals in home-schooling settings to teach things contrary to their Biblical beliefs to their children, this reporter reports that according to McColl Christian home-schooling families can continue to impart Biblical teachings in their homes as long as it's not part of their academic program of studies and instructional materials. What they want to do about their ideology elsewhere is their family business, but a fundamental nature of our society is to respect diversity, she added.

Okay. So what is a home-schooling family or a faith-based school supposed to think about a quote like that coming from I think it's the deputy communications officer of the Department of Education? You can correct me if I'm wrong on that. If that's what that individual is saying, then how exactly is a Christian home-schooling family supposed to take that? Are they supposed to say, "That's okay, then"? What it sounds like to me is that this says that apparently there are two kinds of things that happen in the home-schooling setting or in these faith-based settings: one, you teach education over here; then after you're done teaching your children education, you can go over here and talk about religion or talk about your Biblical teachings. That's what it sounds like.

I'll tell you what. There are a lot of folks that, frankly, are not too happy with the idea of an official in the Ministry of Education making a comment like that because it's worrisome. I think it's worrisome. There was a comment here. It was Donna McColl – I hope I'm saying that right – the assistant director of communications, I should say. The same reporter is quoted as saying, in fairness to the Minister of Education, that the comments by this individual were unfortunate. Okay. Good. They were unfortunate. You can see why there is a little bit of worry among some parents.

This act is opening up a door for department officials to be able to essentially force faith-based schools, including Catholic schools, private Christian schools, private schools of other faiths, as well as home-schooling families that want their faith to permeate throughout what they teach their children – they're worried that this is not going to allow them to do so, that they are going to be somehow penalized or sanctioned or what have you. It's very worrisome to them. They are very passionate about it, as we saw on the steps of the Legislature a little while ago, where at least 500 folks came out with their kids to protest this act. I think that they have a good case to be worried. It's a slippery slope – that's for sure – for these folks, and they have a right to be worried about it.

I don't home-school my children. My kids go to public school, as I've mentioned. You have to understand that this is something these folks lose sleep over. This isn't something like where most of us go home tonight and go to sleep and we're happy. We know our kids are going to go to school in the morning, and we're fine about that. These parents are losing sleep over this, and they came to us. It's not like the Wildrose is out there advertising: oh, be scared; be afraid. They came to us and said: this is our concern. I think they have a right to be concerned. Now, I could say, "No, you've got absolutely nothing to be worried about," and then the deputy communications individual says that.

Frankly, a couple of the comments in this Chamber, not just from the Liberals but from over there on the Conservative side, are a little worrisome with regard to how they view parental rights in education. I thought they were worrisome, anyway. I know that a couple of the individuals right now speak so eloquently about how wonderful section 3 of the Human Rights Act was. I no doubt had a hand in penning that and am very proud of being involved in that amendment to the Human Rights Act. These same individuals when I was in that caucus spoke against that exact amendment.

You might be surprised at who they are. The point is that not everybody over there in the government feels the same way about parental rights as, say, the Minister of Energy does or, say, the Member for Lacombe-Ponoka does. I could go through them.

There are very diverse opinions. That's why it's important, in my view, to make sure that we are absolutely clear when we write anything to do with the education of our children that it is very, very clear that parents have the paramount right with regard to choosing what education is right for their children. It is in the UN declaration of human rights. It is a human right. The Supreme Court has said that it is a human right. Do you want me to read some quotes from the Supreme Court on this?

An Hon. Member: No.

Mr. Anderson: Are you sure? They're really good ones. Let's see. This is Richard B. and Beena B. versus Children's Aid Society of Metropolitan Toronto. Okay? Here; I'll find this again. I just had it.

An Hon. Member: We're sure interested.

Mr. Anderson: Well, you should be interested because you signed up for this job, and if you run for this office, you had better be ready to debate these issues and not be bored to tears. If you're bored, leave.

This is what they said. It's from the same decision, 1995, the Supreme Court of Canada . . .

An Hon. Member: There's intolerance.

Mr. Anderson: I'm saying if they're bored, leave. That's intolerant?

10:40

An Hon. Member: It's the attitude.

The Deputy Chair: Hon. members, through the chair, please.

Mr. Anderson: Well, the attitude is that apparently this isn't important enough. You don't think we should be here discussing it. You're not interested in what the Supreme Court has said about parental rights. That's what I heard. I would expect that if you're bored, you could just go. There's nothing holding you here, is there? Perhaps the whip.

Some of us are concerned about this, and parents are at home, literally dozens of parents at least, are listening to this conversation.

This is what the Supreme Court said in 1995 in the case I just mentioned.

The right to nurture a child, to care for its development, and to make decisions for it in fundamental matters such as medical care, are part of the liberty interest of a parent. The common law has long recognized that parents are in the best position to take care of their children and make all the decisions necessary to ensure their well-being . . . In other words, parental decision-making must receive the protection of the Charter in order for state interference to be properly monitored by the courts, and be permitted only when it conforms to the values underlying the Charter.

Then this is a Supreme Court decision on an education matter involving parental rights.

Those who administer the province's educational requirements may not do so in a manner that unreasonably infringes on the right of parents to teach their children in accordance with their religious convictions.

Mr. Lukaszuk: There you go. It applies.

Mr. Anderson: Yeah. Absolutely.

Mr. Lukaszuk: It's on the books.

Mr. Anderson: Yeah. You didn't seem to be in favour of that a couple of years ago, Minister.

Mr. Lukaszuk: It's already on the books.

Mr. Anderson: That's right. Thank goodness it is. Thank goodness somebody was willing to . . .

The Deputy Chair: Let's continue talking through the chair. I'm enjoying listening to all sides on this. If you could direct your comments here.

Mr. Anderson: It's clear that parental rights need to be paramount, and we need to make sure that we do not do anything in our laws that challenges that. I've heard nothing but challenging that.

It's funny. We've been debating this amendment from the minister, and the hon. Member for Calgary-Glenmore has been standing up and essentially saying that after hearing some of the stuff in here, he is now supporting this, yet still there are some government members over there that seem to be attacking the Wildrose for our strong position on this. I'm not quite understanding that. I thought maybe there would be some back and forth, but it seems that apparently we're on different sides of this issue. We're saying that we think we need to strengthen this further, that we need to make sure that parents feel comfortable that they will have the paramount responsibility and the paramount rights with regard to the education of their children.

I do not trust this minister or any politician or any human being who says: just trust me. I don't buy that. We have laws for a reason. We pass laws for a reason. This minister has not, in my experience, shown time and time again . . . [A cellphone rang] That's all right. Start dancing. There's music being played in here.

I don't see that this minister has an overly strong track record, in my view, of standing up for parental rights. He seems to have gotten religion, so to speak, with regard to parental rights since becoming Minister of Education, but I would like to see a little bit of a longer track record before I say: "Oh, yeah. This is just fine. I'll trust you." I think parents around this province who care about this issue feel the same. So we will be bringing other amendments.

I have no qualms about supporting this amendment that the minister has brought because it's better than what's there now, but it should be stronger. It should recognize the paramountcy of parental rights and education, and it does not do that. But it is a stronger language than what is in the bill now, so I will sigh and reluctantly support the amendment.

The Deputy Chair: Thank you.

The hon. Member for Calgary-Bow, followed by the hon. Member for Calgary-Varsity.

Ms DeLong: Thank you very much, Chair. This is something that I've been interested in for quite a while, and that is parental rights. I am always looking for opportunities to strengthen parental rights. This government has been moving in that direction very strongly, but I am really concerned that there is so much misinformation around this – so much misinformation – and there are people working, it seems, to create more misinformation.

You know, something that just blows my mind is that people are concerned about section 16, which is the Alberta Human Rights Act. It is not the Ontario human rights act. It is not the

Canadian Human Rights Act. It is the Alberta Human Rights Act, and in the Alberta Human Rights Act parents – parents – are the ones who have control over religion.

Let me actually read what is in the Alberta Human Rights Act, section 11.1:

(1) A board as defined in the School Act shall provide notice to a parent or guardian of a student where courses of study, educational programs or instructional materials, or instruction or exercises, prescribed under that Act include subject-matter that deals primarily and explicitly with religion, human sexuality or sexual orientation.

What this does is that it puts the parents in the driver's seat here.

Let me go on.

(2) Where a teacher or other person providing instruction, teaching a course of study or educational program or using the instructional materials referred to in subsection (1) receives a written request signed by a parent or guardian of a student that the student be excluded from the instruction, course of study, educational program or use of instructional materials, the teacher or other person shall in accordance with the request of the parent or guardian and without academic penalty permit the student

(a) to leave the classroom or place where the instruction, course of study or educational program is taking place or the instructional materials are being used for the duration of the part of the instruction, course of study or educational program, or the use of the instructional materials, that includes the subject-matter referred to in subsection (1), or

(b) to remain in the classroom or place without taking part in the instruction, course of study or educational program or using the instructional materials.

(3) This section does not apply to incidental or indirect references to religion, religious themes, human sexuality or sexual orientation in a course of study, educational program, instruction or exercises or in the use of instructional materials.

The thing is that this is the Alberta Human Rights Act. Now, I know that generally in some parts of society human rights legislation has a bad name. It really does. It has a bad name for actually persecuting people, you know, and sort of pushing things in a direction that they don't want to be pushed in. But this is Alberta. This is the Alberta Human Rights Act. In Alberta we actually believe in parental rights. We believe that parents are the ones who should decide and should be in control when it comes to religion and when it comes to sexual orientation.

You know, there's this message that's going around the Internet saying: oh, it's terrible that our new Education Act refers to the Alberta Human Rights Act. But it's the Human Rights Act which actually protects parents. And they want that taken away? Shouldn't they be insisting that the Alberta Human Rights Act be referred to in this act? I mean, if they really do care that parents are the ones who should be making these decisions, then why aren't they insisting on it? You know, there's just way too much misinformation out there. Somehow we've got to start getting the actual facts out there.

10:50

So if there is anyone at 10 to 11 at night who is watching what's going on here in the Legislature, please – please – talk to your friends and actually get the message out there that this is Alberta. We're not talking about what's happening in Ontario or Quebec or wherever else, somewhere down in the States. We're talking about Alberta, where we really care about parents and their rightful place when it comes to their children.

Thank you very much.

The Deputy Chair: Thank you.

The hon. Member for Calgary-Varsity.

Mr. Chase: Thank you very much. I just want to read into the record the universal declaration of human rights, article 26(2). We've heard quite a bit about article 26(3), but I'd like to put on the record article 26(2), which has a rather broader view.

Article 26(2) of the universal declaration of human rights states:

Education shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and to the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. It shall promote understanding, tolerance and friendship among all nations, racial or religious groups, and shall further the activities of the United Nations for the maintenance of peace.

Now, Alberta isn't an anomaly when it comes to respect for individual rights. Somehow it's being suggested that in other provinces they have less concern for parental rights than we have in Alberta. It worries me to think – and I'm not being facetious here – that there are parents losing sleep over the fear that they'll no longer have the right to home-school their child. That worries me. It also worries me that in a similar manner individuals felt that the long gun registry gave the police the right to come to their homes, kick down their door, and take their registered long guns.

Mr. Chair, I see this as a degree of paranoia that is not brought forward by the laws and protections, whether it's the Alberta Charter of Rights or whether it's the universal rights or whether it's the Canadian Charter of Rights. If we have people who feel so isolated and so harmed by a system such as the public education system that they think their rights are going to be eroded, then we need as an Assembly, as a government to communicate to these people that they are equal participants in the larger discussion in Alberta with regard to education.

The individuals who came and stood up for their rights to home education had every right to do so, and there wasn't all of a sudden a descendant of sheriffs hauling them away because they were concerned about their right to home-school their children. Somehow the public education system is being portrayed as intruding on individual families' values, whether religious or secular values. I don't know how it has come over the hundred years of the existence of the public school system in Alberta that suddenly now it's being viewed as the oppressor, and therefore we have to make sure that amendment A1 is there to keep those public education trustees, teachers, violators of human rights from interfering with the God-given rights of individual parents to educate their child both in terms of their curriculums and their religious views.

The public system upholds the rights of all individuals regardless of creed, regardless of race, regardless of religion, regardless of the size of their wallet, regardless of whether they decide to pray to multiple gods or to a single god. They're welcome in the public school system, and that is the strength of the public school system.

Having a strong public school system does not suggest that other systems are disenfranchised or that they do not have a right to exist along with the public school system. The majority of Albertans send their children to the public school system, whether it's the separate version of the public school system or the secular version of the public school system, by their personal choice. In the same manner other individuals have equal rights to send their children to a private school, to a charter school, to a religious school, or to home-school them.

I don't understand where amendment A1 is coming from that suggests that those rights aren't already here, why it feels the need to add an extra clause or preamble to guarantee rights that

currently exist, whether they're universal rights, whether they're provincial rights, or whether they're Charter rights.

What I fail to understand, Mr. Chair, is the reason for the fear in this province that somehow their rights are going to be relinquished. I don't think that's the intent of this government. I don't think it's the intent of the Wildrose Party should it form the next government. It's certainly not the intention of the Liberals, and I don't see the NDP suddenly appearing and kicking in front doors and hauling off home-schooled children, kicking and screaming, to be placed in the prison of the public school system.

At some point, Mr. Chair, we have to get the paranoia out into the open, and reach out to these people who feel that their rights of religion, their rights of education, their rights to bring up their children are being somehow taken away by the public school system. Paranoia is an unfounded fear. We obviously need to do a better job of educating our populace about what public education in Alberta stands for. Amendment A1 doesn't do it.

Thank you.

The Deputy Chair: Thank you.

Are there any other speakers to amendment A1?

If not, are you ready for the question?

Hon. Members: Question.

[Motion on amendment A1 carried]

The Deputy Chair: We're back to the main Committee of the Whole debate now on Bill 2. The hon. Member for Calgary-Buffalo.

Mr. Hehr: Thank you, Mr. Chair. Bill 2, like I said at the beginning of the debate before these unfortunate amendments from the government side and then to pile on the Wildrose side the unfortunate amendments that, in my view, were unnecessary to do what's needed to provide quality education here in this province to our students – you know, the bill had some good things in it. Some of it I couldn't always disagree with.

11:00

Nevertheless, if I look at the bill in its total, it is a very prescriptive bill. It, in fact, leaves a lot to regulation. I guess from the Alberta Liberal side, we were disappointed that it didn't have more teeth to it in the fact that it would say things or even aspirational goals like would be in the preamble on class sizes, on issues like that that we believe are of fundamental importance to the future direction of bettering Alberta student outcomes and allowing our students to achieve to the best of their abilities.

I guess one of those other things we would have liked to have seen in the Education Act was some recognition by the government that school fees should not be charged at our local schools. From our side of things we believe that school is a basic right and an obligation for governments. It's a good thing for governments to be involved. It allows people from all walks of life, whether they're rich or poor, to go to the local neighbourhood school and to take part and learn how to become engaged citizens, critical thinkers, and participants in a modern economy as well as a democracy.

We think those are good things, but we believe there should be something that is provided at least for the public education system and the constitutionally protected separate and francophone situation which should be paid for out of the coffers of the revenue generated by the province. When you add an element like school fees to it, that detracts from equality of opportunity, the ability of

a child to take part in the education system whether they're rich or poor, whether they're born of a rich family or not, an ability for parents to know that the one thing that they don't have to worry about is at least the cost around education.

We've seen over the course of time school fees gradually creep up. I hate to always be the person talking about when I went to school, but when I went to school, there were no school fees. You showed up on day one, and oftentimes even the school contained the notebook, the pencils. All that stuff was provided for in our education system, and that has changed somewhat, Mr. Chair. In fact, we see families now facing bills sometimes of up to \$185 per child to go to a local public school. If they have two or three children, possibly four, this is a significant impediment, we believe, to the concept of equality of opportunity and the goals of what a public education system should be.

This extends not only to what I say on school fees in terms of what they do at the school but also to transportation fees that have been summarily passed along by either a lack of funds by the school boards or the school board passing along those costs to parents. We believe it's an obligation of the government to provide free public education. To be fair, if you're not going to build a school in a neighbourhood where children reside, then you should be on the hook for the transportation costs as well.

You know, we believe the government has a role to play in creating educational opportunities, and these fees detract from that principle and detract from people being able to ensure their ability to attend school with the impact of what has happened or what their financial status may be. You can imagine the case, even in some instances where the difficulty of a parent comes in when they can't afford school fees. I have heard that in Sturgeon county that school board has enlisted bill collectors to actually enforce school fee payments. Now, that is what I have heard. I do not have confirmation of that, but I heard it from a fairly good source that this is happening. That is some of those things that I find would be unfortunate here in Alberta, a province with the wealth and the forward thinking that many people have in this province, to have that occur.

On that note, I would like to pass out this amendment to all my colleagues in the House and then if I could speak to that. I'll just read it in so that people can have an advance before I speak to it. It says:

Mr. Hehr to move that Bill 2, Education Act, be amended in section 13

- (a) in subsection (2) by adding "Subject to subsection (4)," before "A board may charge", and
- (b) by adding the following after subsection (3):
 - (4) Tuition fees charged by a board under subsection (2) shall not include an amount for
 - (a) textbooks,

The Deputy Chair: Hon. member, before proceeding, it sounds like a lengthy one. Why don't you present it to the pages and then continue with your reading of it? This will be amendment A2.

Mr. Hehr: King Solomon could not have offered such a wise suggestion, Mr. Chair, so I thank you for that.

The Deputy Chair: Thank you. With the permission and concurrence of all members, we'll allow him to continue reading it so that we can get a little bit of a head start on understanding it.

Continue on.

Mr. Hehr: Well, hopefully, the page brings me back a copy so that I can refer to it and go from there.

The Deputy Chair: Hon. member, would you just wait one second, and we'll return one copy to you. Then we'll invite you to continue reading it into the record.

Okay. Hon. Member for Calgary-Buffalo, we invite you to continue with what will be called amendment A2.

Mr. Hehr: Okay.

- (b) lab equipment,
- (c) school maintenance or renovation,
- (d) transportation, or
- (e) any other items prescribed by regulations.

The hon. Minister of Education has stated that he is against school fees and believes that – I'm not trying to put words in his mouth. I believe that he believes that these should not be charged for at our local school boards: things like textbooks, lab equipment, school maintenance or renovation, transportation and the like. So I think by adding this into the act, it would provide some guidance to school boards and, more than guidance, it would outright say: here's what you're doing, and you better follow the Education Act on this process or you're going to hear about it. I know the minister has stated that he is having conversations with boards right now, trying to get to the bottom of what's being charged. This would be the clearest, easiest, most efficient way to ensure that this practice is not followed or happening in Alberta.

Those are my comments, Mr. Chair. I'd appreciate hearing other members weigh in on this issue, whether they believe this amendment fits within the kind and character of the Education Act.

The Deputy Chair: Thank you, hon. member.

Are there any other speakers? The hon. Member for Calgary-Varsity, please, on amendment A2.

11:10

Mr. Chase: Thank you. Speaking in favour of amendment A2. Based on my 34 years of experience in the school system, I think it's important to go back somewhat in history. I'm not going to go back to the creation of the first wheel or the discovery of fire, but I would like to go back to 1992-93 Alberta. Prior to 1992-1993 school boards collected half of their funds from the education portion of local property taxes, and the government supplied the other half. Now, in 1993 the opportunity for school boards to assess and collect their own fees was taken away, and at that point, in taking away the local autonomy of school boards to make decisions as to how their funds were to be collected and expended, the government took over the responsibility, the entire responsibility I would add, of funding for education.

Now, I know in my experience as a teacher – first at Jerry Potts elementary, then at Langevin elementary-junior high, at Sir John A. Macdonald junior high school, and then finishing up at F.E. Osborne junior high in Varsity – that parents felt the need, the necessity, to augment the money supplied by the government in order to buy sufficient sets of textbooks. F.E. Osborne was in a fairly well-to-do, middle-class to upper-middle-class district, yet we did not have sets of textbooks for each of our students. We had a class set, and at the end of the day students, first-come, first-served, could sign out a textbook to take home. At the high school level textbooks were basically rented, and if the textbooks were returned in a reasonable condition, then the fee for the rental would be returned.

Parents at F.E. Osborne, as I say I note the middle-class socio-economic circumstance, felt that it was necessary to supplement the money provided by the government to purchase textbooks, to purchase lab equipment, to provide maintenance or renovations for the school. Half of the children that attended F.E. Osborne school came from Hawkwood, so transportation fees were a

concern of those parents, and the school board gradually started expanding the walking distance to schools for students in order to qualify for busing.

Now, we had a very strong parent council – and I was the teacher representative on that parent council for a number of years – and the parents felt that it was necessary to fund raise. We sold the traditional entertainment books, we adventured in magazine subscription sales, and the parents applied every 18 months to be a part of a . . .

The Deputy Chair: Hon. Government House Leader, are you rising on a point of order?

Point of Order Relevance

Mr. Hancock: Yes, Mr. Chair. Relevance. The section that's being amended is a section with respect to fees charged to out-of-province students. Clearly, in the section it says: "A board shall not charge any . . . fees with respect to the enrolment in a school operated by the board of its resident students or the resident student of any other board or the Government." The section that's being amended is section (2), which refers to fees charged to students that are not resident of any board or the government; in other words, out-of-province students.

The fact that they were selling books in their local neighbourhood and there were perhaps fees to rent textbooks in the local neighbourhood is entirely irrelevant to the amendment.

Mr. Chase: Thank you for that irrelevance note. I enjoy, actually, on CBC the *Irrelevant Show*. Maybe that's how I got sidetracked, hon. Minister of Human Services.

The point I was trying to make, which I personally thought was highly relevant, was that it's because of parents' desires to have the total education costs covered by the taxes that they pay into the system that, unfortunately, their education property taxes and those of their neighbours find their way into general revenue, and the whole reasoning, back to 1992, of the education portion of the property tax has been lost.

School fees, as the hon. Member for Calgary-Buffalo mentioned, whether they be for transportation or for basic necessities such as textbooks and lab equipment, are a surcharge upon the public system.

The Deputy Chair: Okay. Thank you for attempting to clarify that, but I think it's a good cautionary note that has been raised. If we could make it just a little more focused on what the actual amendment is and tie it in better, it would be easier to follow the debate. Thank you.

Mr. Chase: Okay. I will attempt to use either a reef knot or a granny knot to provide greater focus. [interjections] Maybe considering the constitution of tonight's Assembly, I should be using a sheet bend. Anyway, so much for my scouting knot-tying directing abilities.

Debate Continued

Mr. Chase: Parents are being charged a surcharge for students' education because the province does not provide the necessary funding for educational basics. The Liberals are suggesting that the school board is not the one at fault for trying to make up the fees that the province doesn't provide, yet they're the ones that oversee the fee collection, that has been passed on to them by the province. What A2 is suggesting is that school fees be eliminated,

that the province use the funding from the educational portion of the property tax, which now only accounts for about 35 per cent, I believe, of the true cost of education, and increase the allotment such that these extraneous fees are no longer required.

Hopefully, hon. Chair, I have better focused attention on the need to eliminate school fees. Thank you.

The Deputy Chair: Are there any other speakers to amendment A2 as moved by the hon. Member for Calgary-Buffalo? Hon. Member for Calgary-Mountain View, are you rising on this amendment?

Dr. Swann: Yes.

The Deputy Chair: On A2, then.

Dr. Swann: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I will speak to the issue of school fees. I'm hearing from especially some of the lower income constituents in Calgary-Mountain View and some very close to my grandchildren, who inhabit the school near where I live, that school fees are a burden and that many of the people living in the inner city, as I do, struggle with the extra costs associated with elementary and junior high school, where my grandchildren go.

I guess the question for us is to consider the investment we're making in our young people, the investment we're making in especially those who are struggling in our society to not only get the financial means together to live a healthy life and to feed their children well and to pay their bills and to provide some reasonably stimulating activities for their children but also the whole investment we're making in future generations. There is no better investment that we can make than in our children.

If we are forcing families to scrimp and in some cases not get proper nutrition, not get the kind of recreational opportunities, the field trips, if they're compromising the kinds of quality-of-life issues that many of us have enjoyed, we are not serving the long-term best interests of this province, and we're not serving the health and developmental needs of children. It strikes me that education is the very most foundational service that all governments should provide for their children.

11:20

The fee is now ranging between \$300 and \$500 in some schools – and it's about \$300 in the school that my grandchildren go to – to cover field trips and extra materials in the schools and artistic endeavours within the schools and so on. I'm not sure about the transportation issues, but clearly some students are either putting their families in an embarrassing situation, or they are forgoing some of these activities which bring the students together, which help them have a shared experience, sometimes outside the school, and enrich their lives in ways that are really hard to measure.

From my point of view, there is no more foundational a contribution that government can make, that the public purse can make than to a stable, fully supported educational system where we are not either nickel and diming people or forcing them into positions where they are making tough choices in their families about what they can and cannot participate in and share in with their friends and colleagues.

Mr. Hancock: Alberta should front those for B.C. and Saskatchewan students?

Dr. Swann: For every student who is here. I mean, how long do you think they're going to stay? We don't know if they're going to migrate here, and I would hope that anyone in Canada would fund the supports that are necessary for children to reach their potential.

It's distressing to me to think that we're going to nickel and dime or actually compromise family life because of these impositions, which for us in the upper and middle classes are not a barrier. But I know from my own family's experience in some of these schools that it's a serious barrier and an embarrassment and a shame, actually, for many in these lower income families who are simply not able to share in those experiences with others.

I don't see why we would discriminate between children of the province and children outside the province who have moved here to do whatever months or years of school they will be taking here. Their families are struggling, and we are putting them into the position where we're saying: "These activities in the school are a little bit elite. These you may not be able to participate in. With these you may not be able to feel equal to other students in the school." Of course, kids are merciless in their judgments of others who can't meet the same standard or participate in the same activities or who don't have the same skills as a result of not participating in some of those same activities.

That's what public education is. It's an equalizer. It's providing the same foundational base for all citizens. To me, the psychological well-being and, obviously, the physical well-being of children and choices around good food and activity opportunities as well as the specific formal learning opportunities have to be supported. It flies in the face of what we say we want for the future, which is a healthy, well-behaved, articulate, well-rounded population, when some are increasingly strained by their own financial circumstances.

The recent book by Kevin Taft highlighted the notion that income for individuals in Alberta has not gone up very significantly at all in real dollars since 1989 whereas corporations' has gone up about 434 per cent in terms of their net real dollars. Real dollars for 2009 was the measurement he was using, comparing the last 20 years up to 2009.

I think the reality is, especially in Alberta, where we see a tremendous disparity now between the wealthy and the less wealthy, is that we're seeing much more of this pinching at the bottom of the income ladder, where parents and families are having to choose between very important recreational, artistic, and in some cases essential activities around, say, computing and new technology, that some schools are simply not sharing in. A school in my neighbourhood is a case in point. They don't actually have more than a couple of computers.

The question becomes: how do we enhance the capacity of all these children and their families? Investing in the children is investing in the families. They all become more capable, more esteemed, more healthy and balanced families and contribute to the community when they feel supported, when they feel included, when they feel equal to the rest of the students.

It's basically trying to eliminate discrimination, eliminate inequality, eliminate the great and growing disparity, in this province more than perhaps in any other province, between wealthy and lower income, which Taft has expressed very well. Richard Wilkinson has indicated very, very well in his book around income inequality in populations the social, educational, and developmental problems. Inequality, more than poverty itself, creates the kinds of environment in which tremendous social problems develop.

I'm really disappointed that there is even much of a debate here. Our goal should be to try to create social capital, create social equity, create reduced income disparity. We express that in our commitment to children, to this most foundational of all our developmental experiences, which is the school system. I hope people in this Legislature are getting that. I think most people here

do value this. It seems like a small point to eliminate these school fees, and it is a small point for most of us. That's the problem. We don't live at the ground level, where as a doctor I used to see people struggling to meet their basic needs, to make choices between utilities and rent and activities and nutrition and recreation and creative pursuits.

This is translated very much into increased behavioural problems, learning problems, acting out socially, criminal addictions problems. We don't seem to see the ramifications of inequity, if I could put it that way. Again, it's not a burden for 80 per cent of our population. Why are we not creating at least one institution in this province where everyone is equal, where everyone is given exactly the same opportunities unless there are extra things parents can afford and want to do?

But within the school system there should be no disparity, there should be no inequities – and I'm belabouring the point – that create unnecessary stress in a society that's already stressed and competitive and finding itself alienated and divided as a community. We're simply adding to that by not recognizing the need for eliminating this relatively minor thing called school fees, which is a symptom of a society that still believes so strongly in individualism and competition and trying to be better than the other. This just feeds that notion that if your dad isn't earning enough, you don't get certain things in school that your peers get.

Well, surely, there is one institution in our society that should be able to come to grips with this and say: "This is the leveler. This is the level playing field, where we're going to make sure everyone feels equal up to the age of, well, at least grade 9." In high school there are all kinds of extra issues that come up and expensive sports and artistic endeavours that we perhaps can't fund, but surely in kindergarten through grade 9 we could create a really level playing field, an equality, a sense of co-operation and community building and support and encouragement, which is what this is all about. We're building a Canadian and an Albertan dream. We're building a sense of real solidarity, where we appreciate you regardless of what you are able to afford in terms of activities.

11:30

I don't need to go on further, Mr. Chairman. I've said what I needed to say, and I appreciate very much the sentiments behind this. As the hon. Member for Calgary-Buffalo has indicated in his amendment, we on this side of the House happen to see a world where there's greater equity, greater equality, and a greater sense of community. The other side seems to value competition, individualism, and the market over everything else. It's a symptom, I guess, of the differences and why ultimately Albertans are going to have to choose what values they see reflected on the two sides of the House. It's coming up very soon.

I hope Albertans will come back to their roots and recognize that notwithstanding the tremendous amount of money these folks will be able to throw at the election, notwithstanding the amount of hype and promises that this government continues to make to people, they simply are not able to follow through on the centralist values of equity, sustainability, community building, and a real sense that we have to do this in a different way if we are going to move into the 21st century without even more social problems, even more costs related to learning and behaviour and lack of productivity and mental illness. We have to make a fundamental shift in what we are trying to do as a society. Alberta stands out, it seems to me, in Canada in terms of the kinds of social indicators that suggest we are not building a health society, we are not contributing to equity, we're not contributing to a stronger sense that we are working together for a common purpose and that

everyone has to succeed for us to be a healthy, sustainable, prosperous province.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

The Deputy Chair: Thank you.

I have the Minister of Education next on the list.

Mr. Lukaszuk: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I've reviewed the amendment carefully. I'm not sure if the hon. member who tabled the amendment recalls, but in question period, when he asked questions relevant to school fees, I thought I was clear, but I will repeat for the record that I have asked the Department of Education to review any and all school fees that are being charged in the province of Alberta by all of the 62 school boards and to analyze whether the school fees are in any way duplicating any of the funding that is provided through the Ministry of Education by the taxpayers of Alberta for provision of public education and, where there are duplications, to make sure that we set forth a policy for all school boards outlining what is and is not an appropriate fee placed on parents and students in our schools.

The fact is, Mr. Chairman, as is well known, we're passing a budget right now in the province. The budget has increased from \$6.8 billion to \$7.1 billion every three years. It's the first budget ever in the history of the province that is sustainable for three years and predictable. It's not a skimpy budget by any standard compared to any jurisdiction in North America and, frankly, world-wide.

We need to look at school fees and see why they're being charged. There are instances, Mr. Chairman, where school fees are appropriate, where parents are choosing programs that are definitely of choice or choosing schools that are of choice, that are more distant than the nearest one available – transportation in that case is appropriate – where there are extracurricular activities offered, which are optional. School fees may be appropriate. But there ought to be no fees for provision of what we consider in Alberta to be basic education. The word "basic," actually, is the understatement of the year because we know that what we consider basic actually is world-class education. No fees ought to be charged for provision of that public education, that is required to graduate and obtain an Alberta high school diploma.

We will be reviewing that. Simply putting about five line items of what one should not be charging fees for is one way. The amendment will be one way of addressing it, but it's not detailed enough. We will be looking at the actual fees that are being charged, what is and what isn't appropriate. We'll also get parents involved. We'll consult with parents to find out what they feel is or isn't appropriate, and we will have a policy developed on school fees in this province over the next few months.

Thank you.

The Deputy Chair: Thank you.

I have the Minister of Human Services next.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Well, I rose earlier with respect to relevance when Calgary-Varsity was speaking, and I want to say that for the most part I really enjoyed the speech by the Member for Calgary-Mountain View about the need for equality and equity in our system and his view on school fees. Unfortunately, both of them were referring to something entirely different than what's the subject of the amendment.

Just a quick review. Section 13 is about tuition fees, not actually school fees but tuition fees. Section 13 provides that "a board shall not charge any tuition fees with respect to the enrolment in a school operated by the board of its resident students or the resident student of any other board or the Government." In other words,

resident students of any board, which covers most of the province, or the government, which covers those areas in the province that are not covered by a board, cannot be charged tuition fees.

There are no tuition fees charged for a resident student. So who's a resident student? Well, a resident student, Mr. Chairman, is defined in the act, surprisingly. It's "a person who is entitled to have access to an education program under section 3 and who meets the requirements of section 4."

Well, what does section 3 say? Section 3 is:

Every person

- (a) who [was] at September 1 . . . 6 years of age or older and younger than 21 years of age,
- (b) who is a resident of Alberta, and
- (c) who has a parent who is a resident of Canada.

A person is "a resident student of the board of the school division in which the student resides." That's a very important change in the act that should be pointed out. Previously you were a resident defined by where your parents live. Now you're a resident defined by where the student lives, so if the student lives in Alberta, by definition they're a resident student, and they're a resident student of a board if they live within the confines of the jurisdiction of the school board, which covers most of the province, or a student of the government if they're in one of those areas that's not covered by a board.

Under section 13 no tuition fees shall be charged by a board for any student who actually lives in Alberta. What is subsection (2), then? Well, subsection (2) allows a board to charge a tuition fee for anyone who is not a resident of Alberta. By that, your parents could be in Newfoundland as long as the student lives here. Call that the hockey team amendment if you want. They came to play hockey at a school in southern Alberta, they're a resident student, and we don't charge tuition fees. But if you're a foreign student who is coming here for an education because we have an excellent education system here, that's not the purview of the taxpayer of Alberta. Therefore, school boards are entitled to charge a tuition fee. So it's a foreign student, essentially, from outside the country, because if you're a student from inside the country, you live here, and you're a resident student.

What the hon. member's amendment is attempting to do is to say that those tuition fees that we're charging to students who come from the United States or some other part of the world should not include costs for textbooks, lab equipment, school maintenance fees. This is not the school fee issue that the hon. member was addressing very eloquently. This is a question of tuition fees for foreign students. I'm not sure if that's what he intended to amend, but that's what he's trying to amend.

I would suggest that Alberta taxpayers are wonderful people. They fund a wonderful education system. But I think you have to draw the line somewhere at what they're expected to fund in terms of students of the world. So this section 13 allows for tuition fees to be charged to students who are coming from foreign countries, essentially. It's not about the school fees at all.

The Deputy Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Hehr: There's a saying in politics: why let the facts get in the way of a good story or a good question? So I will stand by the amendment, and I'm sure if the hon. Minister of Human Services with his legal acumen and the like could find a better place for this in the act or a more appropriate place, that would be – well, if he agrees with the spirit of what the hon. Member for Calgary-Mountain View stated, which it sounds like he agreed in principle with, I'm assuming that this amendment will be showing up, then,

from the government side as they go forward and, with his background, get into the legislation.

I guess from our side, you know, we would still stand by the spirit if our exact placement is not correct in that we would like to see this in the legislation to provide for some of those things that we believe in. Equality of opportunity: whether you're born into a rich family or a poor family, you get one place where everything is equal, where you can build your life. You can go forward and build your life to the best of your ability not impeded by wealth or other constraints that are, frankly, sometimes because of your circumstances. So I appreciate the hon. member going through, I guess, the technical faux pas of our amendment. Nevertheless, I believe the thrust of it is clear enough and the intent of it is clear enough that this could be redrafted if the government wished.

11:40

I also appreciate the hon. minister's comments in that he is trying to look into this matter regarding school fees. I believe that if he is looking into it, it will have to continue to be regularly monitored, vigilantly covered in that his budgeting process is going to have to recognize that education has certain expenses attached to it. The minister did mention his three-year budget and how it was going to provide the necessary sustainable funding to education. There's a saying in insurance contracts that sometimes what the large print giveth, the small print taketh away. There are many things in the Education budget that are funded, you know – for instance, the teachers' pension liability, some maintenance issues, some other infrastructure issues – that don't necessarily apply directly to classroom funding. I will remind the minister that for that there is only a 1 per cent increase this year when there is a 2.5 per cent inflation rate – at least, that's what the government numbers say – and that we'll have an increase in students to our population.

Nevertheless, those are my comments. I appreciate the minister looking into school fees and the hon. Human Services minister for pointing out the error in our ways and that possibly this will come back as a government amendment because he seemed to support what the Member for Calgary-Mountain View was saying.

Thank you.

The Deputy Chair: Thank you, hon. member.

Mr. Hinman: I'd just like to assist the hon. Member for Calgary-Buffalo. It's section 57 that school fees are under. Just so you realize, it's all subject to regulations. There's nothing in the act that actually addresses school fees. It's going to be in the regulations. There isn't anything in here. It doesn't say that. "The Minister may make regulations respecting school fees," and "Notwithstanding section 13, a board may charge a parent of a student fees in accordance with the regulations."

The Deputy Chair: Thank you.

The hon. Member for Calgary-Varsity is next.

Mr. Chase: Thank you. I just wanted to thank the hon. Minister of Human Services for detailing the specifics of my irrelevance. Quite often my irrelevance is dealt with in a very generic fashion as opposed to specifying that we were wrong in talking about school fees under section 13. I want to thank the Member for Calgary-Glenmore for pointing out the correct section, being 57, but then also pointing out that it's in regulations and, to the best of my knowledge, the regulations aren't printed within the bill. Therefore the whole issue of school fees and how they're assessed and why they're assessed and their justification is in another document that is not open to the public system although it's the

public system that is being discussed in Bill 2. So my concern now has to do with the relevance of an act that puts things into regulation which are not available for the general public to see and interpret and understand.

Mr. Chair, this goes to a larger issue of the government's usage of regulations, a rulebook to conduct a game that only the government knows how that game is to be played out. While I appreciate the hon. Minister of Human Services, formerly the Minister of Education, pointing out the lack of relevance of the section we chose on school fees, it would be interesting if either the Minister of Education or the Minister of Human Services, previously the Minister of Education, could explain to the general public that pays taxes towards education why the regulations that govern school fees are not covered in the act because that's at the heart of the matter that we as Liberals are trying to resolve.

The Deputy Chair: Thank you.

Are there any other speakers to amendment A2?

Mr. Lukaszuk: To answer that member's question so the Liberals can focus on something else and have that question answered . . .

Mr. Chase: I'll be able to sleep tonight.

Mr. Lukaszuk: That's right. The member will be able to sleep tonight.

The member will probably agree that this particular act has been the most consulted piece of legislation in the history of this province. It went through two rounds of consultation as a bill, Bill 18 first and then drafted, the actual draft went before Albertans, and they had a chance to comment on the draft, and here we are with Bill 2.

Not similar because not as robust a process, obviously, will take place relevant to drafting regulations. The day-to-day operations – and operations of a school system of this size cannot be fully legislated. Imagine, hon. member, if a school board all of a sudden wanted to engage in some extracurricular activity or some program, some international travel opportunity for students, and then all of a sudden the act wouldn't allow them to charge extra fees. We would have to gather here in this Chamber and legislate additional fees. So matters like these are regulated, and regulations can be changed.

One thing Albertans should know – and I've already made that undertaking publicly to all stakeholders. When I talk about stakeholders, I'm not only talking about school boards and the ATA, but I'm talking about parents and students directly and not-for-profit communities, business communities, coaches, and community leaders and others. We will be consulting on drafting the regulations to this act to flesh out what the legislation actually means. There will be over the next year to year and a half a series of public consultations with stakeholders on the regulations that will be accompanying this act, so any and all parties involved will be able to comment.

One thing that this act actually puts into place that wasn't under the old School Act of 1988 is that it gives parents a real voice. Parent councils now will be directly feeding into the minister's office. As you would know, at my last town hall meeting teleconference over 1,000 parents actually called in. A very good exercise. The next one, by the way, is on March 19, and I imagine that many parents will call in again.

We're also formalizing student councils, students' unions that will now be feeding directly into the minister's office, so they will be consulted directly on an ongoing basis. Obviously, the ATA and the ASBA and the school boards have a direct line to the minister's office. So the drafting of regulations will be very well

informed by the taxpayers – and, frankly, the stakeholders are all Albertans – and those who are directly involved in education.

Thank you.

The Deputy Chair: Thank you.

The hon. Member for Calgary-Varsity.

Mr. Chase: Thank you. I want to thank the minister for extending the consultation to parents and to students as well as school boards and the Alberta Teachers' Association. The problem, Mr. Chair, that I see is that again we see consultation after the fact. What the hon. minister is suggesting is: "Trust us. Pass this bill. Accept it in all its glory or lack thereof, and then after we pass it, we'll come back to you, and we'll consult on the regulations. We'll have you provide your input, whether it's an electronic town hall or to a website or a direct conversation."

I'm pleased that the minister welcomes this after-the-fact participation, but my question to the minister is in all sincerity: after the consultation takes place, will the final regulations be published so that parents, school boards, students, and teachers know what the regulations are that govern the collection of fees at their particular institution?

The Deputy Chair: Thank you.

Hon. Minister, did you wish to comment?

Mr. Lukaszuk: Sure. Just very briefly, what is and isn't acceptable under school fees will be consulted on as a stand-alone item, and it will be consulted on prior to actually passing new regulations. I made an undertaking. I find it inappropriate that there is such a variance between school boards, and I want parents throughout the entire province to have a level of certainty of what is and what isn't appropriate. So this matter, frankly, may not need to be even regulated. We will have a decision on it, and we will have all school boards adhere to the same standards relative to what is and isn't appropriate for school fees.

11:50

The Deputy Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Chase: I realize it's 10 to 12, but I want to indicate both to *Hansard* and to anyone tuned in that am I still lucid.

The question I asked the minister – and I'm very pleased, Mr. Minister, that you're attempting to answer my information request. But when all is said and done and the consultation is over and it's been thorough, et cetera, et cetera, will the regulations be published so that school boards understand what their limitations are so that students and parents know what they're being charged for if, in fact, charges were made? We hope they won't. How can you regulate a fee or any other kind of circumstance when the individuals who are being regulated don't know what your regulations or rules are? That's my question.

Mr. Lukaszuk: They definitely will be published. Once we draft what is and isn't appropriate, that will be not only on our department's website, but it will be clearly communicated to parent councils, to the ATA, to school boards, and to any stakeholders, outlining what is and isn't an appropriate fee.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. Member for Calgary-Varsity.

Mr. Chase: Thank you. The School Act, based on the majority the government currently experiences prior to the election, will be passed. There is no doubt that that will occur. Can the hon. minister potentially project how long these extended consultations on regulations are likely to take place? Do you in your mind as

Minister of Education hope to accomplish this consultation and the publishing of regulations within a particular time period? For example, would you hope to have them in place by the end of the 2012 year?

The Deputy Chair: Hon. member, I would remind you that we're still on amendment A2. As soon as we have that voted, then we can proceed with the larger discussion in Committee of the Whole.

I'll invite the hon. minister to respond briefly if he feels that it's appropriate to do so.

Mr. Lukaszuk: Well, the only thing I can comment on at this point is that the Member for Calgary-Varsity is being very presumptuous at this stage that this bill will pass in this sitting of the Legislature. If our friends from the Wildrose and others continue to file amendments on a very narrow aspect of the bill – I know, based on this robust consultation that we had throughout the province over the last year and a half, that this bill is very popular. Your presumption may be wrong. So my commitment to any timelines at this point in time would be inappropriate because, frankly, I am not as confident at this point, at midnight, that this bill indeed will pass. I certainly hope so. There are hundreds of thousands of students and parents and stakeholders who hope that this legislation will pass, but that will be subject to the opposition, how long you want to sit here and debate it.

The Deputy Chair: Thank you.

I wonder, with that bit of a deviation, as I will refer to it, if we could get back to amendment A2.

Mr. Chase: Yes, and to refocusing on A2, which had to do with school fees.

Mr. Chair, it was suggested that I was being presumptuous, and prior to that it was suggested that I was being irrelevant. Therefore, I am wearing an awful lot of adjectives tonight.

With regard to the presumption, based on my eight years of reality in terms of debating a whole variety of amendments, it has been my experience, Mr. Chair, in every single session, whether it be spring or fall, that the government in some fashion or another has either brought in closure or time allotments to ensure that their bills are passed. For the hon. Minister of Education to suggest that the almighty combination of the Wildrose, the NDP, the independent, and the Liberals would prevent the important Bill 2 from being passed would be in my wildest dreams. The reality is that this government, unless it deviates from its previous courses of putting the hammer down in terms of the time left to debate and accusing the members of the opposition of frivolous amendments to interrupt the progress of the almighty Bill 2 – I actually find that rather presumptuous, Mr. Chair.

The education of Alberta students has been a key focus of my life for 34 years. It's been a key focus of the chair of our committee tonight. Fees and the cost of education to parents, as the hon. Member for Calgary-Mountain View pointed out, are a hardship. Whether or not we chose an irrelevant section or whether I have been determined to be presumptuous on the passing of this bill, the problem remains that schools fees, as A2 points out, are a hardship. It is our hope that the minister in consultation with the various groups – parents, teachers, students, and school boards – will work towards the elimination of those school fees through the proper funding and investment in education.

Thank you, Mr. Chair, for your patience.

The Deputy Chair: Thank you.

Are there any others? The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

Ms Blakeman: Thanks very much, Mr. Chair. I gather by the comments from hon. members opposite that there's some, shall we say, quibbling about calling textbooks, lab equipment, school maintenance, renovation, transportation, or other items tuition fees.

Mr. Hancock: No. The section you're amending has nothing to do with school fees.

Ms Blakeman: It says "tuition," and we're saying "tuition." Well, okay. Thank you for that very much. I appreciate that because, you know, I stood up, and I didn't know what I was going to talk about. Now I do.

Mr. Hancock: That's better than when you talk and you don't know what you're talking about. [interjections]

Ms Blakeman: That's why I'm here, you guys, to wake you all up, get you all focused again on the bill.

That's interesting. Yes, indeed, the section that we're trying to amend is tuition fees. I look at what, for example, is covered under what most of us think of as tuition fees, which are our university fees, our college fees. Even the fees that you're paying as an apprentice when you go back to NAIT or SAIT for that period of schooling time are called tuition fees. Does it include your pass into the sports arena? Yeah, it does. Does it include your student union fees? Yes, it does. Does it include the U-Pass?

Mr. Hancock: Just admit that you have the wrong section on this one and go on to the next one. There's an error made.

Ms Blakeman: No. I'm arguing that we're within our rights to call those tuition fees because that's what they're called everywhere else. It's true. When you went to university, did you pay a tuition fee? Yes, you did, and it included all of those other fees. So we haven't done anything – and, you know, I would never say that Parliamentary Counsel . . . [interjection] Thank you very much, but, you know, I noticed that there was a little mark on the bottom of what was handed out, and that mark is like a gold star. It's like a sheriff's star. It's Parliamentary Counsel, and they allowed us to do this. So I've got to say that I know that they are perfect in every way, and they would never allow me to make a mistake. I'm going to keep on this one because you guys are going to pass it.

One of the things that has been brought to my attention is collections and that school fees are now sent to collection agencies. Somebody phones you or shows up at your door . . .

12:00

The Deputy Chair: The hon. Government House Leader.

Mr. Hancock: Honestly, I have to rise again on a point of order with respect to relevance.

Point of Order Relevance

Ms Blakeman: And your citation would be?

Mr. Hancock: Relevancy.

Ms Blakeman: The citation is?

Mr. Hancock: It's a relevant citation. [interjections]

Ms Blakeman: No. The number is? [interjections] The citation: I'm sorry; I can't hear it. I'm waiting to hear the citation.

The Deputy Chair: Excuse me, hon. members. I'm hearing somebody trying to say 459, but I'm not sure that's what I heard.

Mr. Hancock: It would be 459, yes.

The Deputy Chair: Of *Beauchesne*? Proceed with your point of order.

Mr. Hancock: I know it's not appropriate for me to refer to the presence or absence of a member, so I will not. I'd just indicate that the hon. member missed the explanation on the section that says that this section only applies to tuition charged to out-of-country students. I would suggest that there are very few tuition fees sent to a collection agency to collect for unpaid tuition from a student from China. I mean, it just would not be a relevant thing for a school board to do.

This section is about tuition fees for out-of-country students. What you've tried to do is amend it with this amendment to say that it won't include various things. I know from the speeches that were made by other members from the opposition Liberal Party that what they're really talking about is school fees. That's a laudable thing to talk about. We had a wonderful speech except for that last part, where he tried to differentiate between the philosophy of the parties, from Calgary-Mountain View about school fees.

This really is the wrong section for what you've been talking about, and it would be great if we just realized that, voted on it, and moved on to your next amendment, which is probably on the right section you want to amend.

The Deputy Chair: Thank you. So it's just a point of clarification at this point, then. In the amendment there are tuition fees, and then there are all these other things that are perhaps normally referred to as school fees. Perhaps, hon. member, you might comment on that.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you. I would love to, now that I've finally heard a citation out of the Government House Leader.

In response to that, I would refer him to page 620 of *House of Commons Procedure and Practice*.

It is not always possible to judge the relevance... of a Member's remarks until he or she has spoken at some length or even completed his or her remarks. In practice, the Speaker allows some latitude – if the rules are applied too rigidly, they have the potential for severely curtailing debate.

That, I know, would be just unthinkable, a terrible thing for everybody sitting in this Chamber.

Debate Continued

Ms Blakeman: Okay. Fair enough. Relax. Relax. The error of my ways has been pointed out to me by one of my colleagues here, and indeed we have amended the wrong section. What we really wanted to do was amend I think it was section 57, which was on the school fees. You have to admire us for a good try at it, but we have erred in the reference that we've given and what we've tried to do.

Before we close, however, I do just want to note, taking my latitude, the issue around collections, whether it's for tuition fees or school fees, both of which I think would fall under the same category here. I'm quite concerned to hear that schools are sending tuition and school fees to a collection agency. I know that these are often a hardship for people, especially when they're coming in at about \$450 per child. To have someone phoning you and/or showing up at your door, probably phoning you in this day

and age, to collect that means that the school has sold the debt. It's not the school that's going to get the money anymore. It's collection agency ABC or XYZ or Triple-A or whatever it is they are going to be called. The school has sold the debt for 10 or 20 cents on the dollar to begin with, and now a collection agency is trying to collect it.

I always have problems when the government sells a debt to a collection agency because at that point they've given up on it. I don't know why they allow a collection agency to then hound an individual, especially around the collection of school fees, which I should have referred to in this amendment in an entirely different section.

Given that, I'm going to take my seat and let you vote on this.

The Deputy Chair: Thank you.

Are there any other speakers to amendment A2? If not, is the House ready for the question?

Hon. Members: Question.

[Motion on amendment A2 lost]

The Deputy Chair: We are now back to the Committee of the Whole discussion on Bill 2.

The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

Ms Blakeman: Thanks very much, Mr. Chair. No surprise to you, I have another amendment. I'll distribute this. I'm keeping the health of our security personnel in mind. I know it's good to get up and move around every now and then so that you don't get leg clots, so ever mindful of you, I'm going to hand out these amendments and talk about them.

This amendment is near and dear to my heart, and I guess this will now be called...

The Deputy Chair: Amendment A3. I was just going to clarify for the House as it's being distributed that this will be amendment A3. If you'd like to read it into the record while it's being distributed, that would be helpful.

Ms Blakeman: Okay. I'd love to do that. Let's hope I amended the right section. This is actually under my colleague's name. On behalf of my colleague the Member for Calgary-Buffalo I would like to move that Bill 2, the Education Act, be amended by adding the following after section 16, which is appearing on page 29 if anyone is following along at home or indeed here in the Chamber:

16.1(1) A board shall provide notice to a parent or guardian of a student where courses, programs of study or instructional materials, or instruction or exercises, prescribed under this Act include subject matter that deals primarily and explicitly with religion, human sexuality or sexual orientation.

For any of you that were around a few years ago, this is going to ring a bell because, in fact, this is what we would usually recognize as section 11.1 under the infamous Bill 44. Now, you'll remember that I talked a lot about Bill 44 when it was before the Assembly. Part of it was because I was so incensed that this particular section would be under the human rights code. It more rightly belongs under the Education Act. That's where it should be. It's about education. It wasn't about human rights.

If you actually follow along behind it, this is talking about and reinforcing the ability of parents to pull their children out and the requirement of school boards or schools to provide alternate educational materials for students whose parents have opted them out of particular classes. Now, I would rather see this entire clause burn in hell out of both acts because I just think it is inappropriate from the get-go. We already have protections in the old School

Act and in this current Education Act. [interjection] I don't know. Maybe it's all the Biblical references I've been hearing today.

12:10

You know, we already had protections in the old act and in the new act to allow parents to remove their children if they were uncomfortable with the subject matter. That was already in there. This section, what was 11.1 and that now I'm trying to add in under section 16, was overkill and was entirely inappropriate in that at the same time as we were trying to do what the courts had ordered for us under the Vriend decision – I'll just pause here, and we'll do a little historical vignette just to remind everybody.

In 1996 or so we had a young gay man who was working as a lab assistant, I believe, or as a lab instructor at The King's College here in Edmonton. When his sexual orientation became common knowledge for the school, they fired him. The young man tried to take his complaint about being fired to the Human Rights Commission here in Alberta. The Human Rights Commission said: sorry; we can't hear your case. He took that up to the appeal boards and all the way through all of the court proceedings to the Supreme Court saying that he should have protection against discrimination for the areas that are generally covered, that being employment, housing, and access to government programs and services. He was not given access to a government program and service, that being the Human Rights Commission. In fact, the Human Rights Commission's comeback on that was: we don't have that written on our list.

Earlier this afternoon we were talking about how important lists are when you get into constitutions, charters, and writing out legislation. If there's a list and you're not on the list, your particular section or whatever you're concerned about, if your thing is not on that list, it's not there. It's not covered. It's either not empowered, or it's not protected. That's what the Alberta Human Rights Commission was saying: "Hey, we can't help you. Because sexual orientation is not a protected ground under our human rights code, we couldn't help you."

What happened was that the Supreme Court did two things. One, they said: "Yes, it is. Sexual orientation is covered under the Charter because the Charter is a living document, and it has been expanded to take in sexual orientation as protected grounds." They went one step further, which they've never done in any other Supreme Court ruling. I'm going to do a little Laurie Blakeman paraphrasing here. They did not trust the government to actually write it in, so they said: "We are going to read it in. We're going to go on as though it is written there, and it will be a protected ground from now on. Furthermore, Alberta government, hop to it and actually write it in because it's read in as of now."

So the Alberta government, in its usual turtlelike rush towards inclusion and diversity in this province, took about 13 years, and they came up with Bill 44, which was to add sexual orientation specifically under the human rights code onto that list of protected grounds. Snaillike: maybe that was a better description because it leaves that slimy little thing. [interjection] Oh, I'm sorry: slug trails.

Anyway, we got to this wonderful moment when the Alberta government actually had legislation up where they were going to include this, and they did put it in. Then they included this horrible clause, which was just so misguided and backwards and evil.

An Hon. Member: Evil?

Ms Blakeman: Yes, it was evil.

Mr. Chase: Satanic.

Ms Blakeman: No. I didn't say that. Uh-uh. I didn't say that.

There we were on the one hand saying: "Okay. You're in, folks. We protect you." On the other hand we're saying: oh, well, actually, no. Whenever any discussion of sexual orientation comes up, so the very grounds that we're now saying that you're protected on – "You're in; you crossed to the right side of the street, kids" – we're now going to go ahead and say: "No, not quite the right side of the street. Any parent that wants to yank you out of school because that word is mentioned can do it." Huh? Left hand, right hand. Give, take. Two steps forward, four steps back. That's exactly what this clause was. So, overall, this whole clause is evil, evil, evil.

However, I am not in the party that won the most seats, and the party that won the most seats got to pass Bill 44, so I'm going to try and fix this because this should not be in the human rights code. It should be in the education code. It has one hundred per cent to do with education, not to do with human rights, so put it in the right place. If you have to have this here, as evil a thing as I think this is, please put it in the right place because it's embarrassing at a minimum and horrific at a maximum to have this in entirely the wrong act. Other countries, other provinces look at us and go: "Huh? Why on earth would they put it there? I don't know." But these are my wonderful colleagues in the Legislative Assembly, so I'm giving you the opportunity to correct this wrong and put it in the right place because, I mean, it does refer entirely to education.

So we had the first bit about how a board has to provide notice to a parent if there are instructional materials, programs of study which deal primarily and explicitly with religion, human sexuality, or sexual orientation. Then it goes on:

Where a teacher or another person providing instruction, teaching a course or program of study or using the instructional materials referred to in subsection (1),

which I just described to you,

receives a written request [from] a parent or a guardian of a student that the student should be excluded from the instruction, course, program of study . . . the teacher or other person shall in accordance with the request permit the student

to leave the class and take something else. Sorry. Subsection (a) is just to leave the class or the program or not read that material and get something else taught to them or to remain in the class but not take part in the actual instruction.

Once again, is anybody hearing anything about the human rights code in this? No. You're hearing about class, study, teachers, boards. Is any of this ringing a bell here, folks? It's about education. So if this is what you want – and you all said that it was – then put it in the right place.

The last section, section (3), was the saviour clause, the Hail Mary clause that you guys put in when I was able to stand up and say that you couldn't teach biology under the first things you'd done because, you know, what those worms get up to would essentially qualify this clause to be brought into being. So you put in the Hail Mary clause, which is:

This section does not apply to incidental or indirect references to religion, religious themes, human sexuality or sexual orientation in a course, program of study, instruction or exercises or in the use of instruction materials.

You know, that was: ha, ha, Laurie; now be quiet because we solved your problem.

Finally, the last part of this amendment, which I am moving, by the way, is:

- (b) in section 263 [of the act] by striking out subsection (2) and substituting the following:
 - (2) Section 11.1 is repealed.

Boy, you get into a lot of numbers in this game, don't you? Okay. Section 11.1 is repealed, which means it's taken out of the Human Rights Act and put into the Education Act, which is where it should be.

12:20

I'm asking you to do the right thing here. You know I wasn't keen on what you did in the first place. I still don't like it any more than I did, but at least if you could put it in the right place, please, so when people go looking for it, at the very minimum, it's going to be where they expect to find it. You've still got it, but please put it where it should be, and get it out of the Human Rights Act.

Now, I did supply this to the minister in advance because often the government members say: "Well, gee, Laurie, if you just would have given it to us in advance, we could have talked about it in caucus, and maybe we might have passed it." So I did, and I had a very nice letter back from him today saying: nice try, Laurie, but, no. But I'm still going to bring this before you and move it and say: "Please consider this. Please do this. Please do the right thing because, well, there are a number of reasons."

I think it would take a black mark away from what this province did in doing that give with the right and take with the left, or one step forward and two steps back, or however you want to describe it. It would take that away, and it would allow us to move forward. I bet I could even get support from the Wildrose because it would still be there; it would just be in the right place.

Mr. Anderson: Unlikely.

Ms Blakeman: Well, let's try it because I think this is important; I really do. I mean, I'm cheerful and I'm smiling and I've got a nice tone of voice here, and I'm not calling you expletive-deleted phrases. I'm trying to be warm and friendly. But I really think this is the right thing to do. I have come in here today to . . .

Mr. Chase: To save their reputation.

Ms Blakeman: Well, my colleague is suggesting that I came in here to save your reputation. No, I didn't. I came in here to ask you to do the right thing.

This is something that was very important to you. I understand that in your caucus there was a great deal of discussion, and it was an agreement that you came to that you really wanted this clause. I'm saying: "Okay. If you really have to have it, which I think you shouldn't, please put it in the right act." To continue on with this – you've all heard it. I've read it out. Anybody who is watching the live streaming at home or who reads this in *Hansard* afterwards will understand that this is entirely about education and teaching and course materials, and it belongs in the Education Act, not in the Human Rights Act.

I know that somebody on the other side earlier today did stand up and say that we have had – maybe it was the previous minister – absolutely no complaints brought forward under this. Fair enough. I don't think that's a judgment of whether or not this section is in the right bill. You can still bring complaints forward if you want to. It will still have the same effect if you put it in the Education Act. But, really, I think that's where it should be.

It's 25 after 12 on Thursday morning. I understand that, you know, we're not as bad as the Americans, so we can all be grateful for that, where they get into all these tag-ons – is that the word for it? – add-ons or tag-ons with their budgets and things.

Now I've got people on the other side signalling how many minutes I have left. It's okay; I have a timer. Don't worry about me. That's all right. I appreciate the concern.

But I think this whole thing came about wrongly. You know, this was a compromise. Whatever decision you guys came to in your caucus, fine, but don't compound that by putting it and leaving it in the wrong place. It's inefficient, it makes for crappy legislation, it makes for court cases, and I hate that kind of inefficiency.

I love that perfection of writing a good bill and having everything where it should be. It's a thing of beauty. It has motion to it. I hate it when this government screws that up, when they do stuff and I tell them, "This is going to be a constitutional challenge" and they go, "No, it won't; we do it perfectly." And, sure enough, it rolls around, and it's a constitutional challenge. That bugs me because then you guys use taxpayers' money to go to court to defend your stupid thing.

Okay. Let it go, Laurie; let it go. Please don't make me do that to you again when you could be doing what is correct by way of drafting a legal document, which is what this act is, correct in the moral sense that it is where it should be and not in the wrong place. This act could be thing of beauty, but it's not, so please approve this amendment.

Thank you very much for being fairly good listeners to me tonight. A few people are drifting off and there are a couple of conversations, but generally you listened to me, and I appreciate that because you don't always.

Thank you very much.

The Deputy Chair: Thank you.

The hon. Member for Calgary-Varsity has the floor next.

Mr. Chase: Thank you very much for this opportunity. I want to dedicate A3 and my standing up upon the request of the hon. Member for Livingstone-Macleod, who asked that I rise to the rescue. So I have risen. Oh, that's rather a Biblical expression.

Ms Blakeman: Rescue? Point of order.

**Point of Order
Clarification**

The Deputy Chair: Citation?

Ms Blakeman: Standing Order 23(h), (i), and (j).

Excuse me, Member, but there is no need of rescuing here. If you want to get up and debate this, get up and debate it. But you don't need to impugn any motives toward me as needing rescuing.

Thank you.

The Deputy Chair: Hon. member, do you wish to comment?

Mr. Chase: There was no impugning that the hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre, who is very capable of not only looking after herself but looking after the entire Liberal caucus, would need to be rescued. The rescuing was for the hon. Member for Livingstone-Macleod upon request, and therefore I am standing.

The Deputy Chair: Hon. member, the chair will rule that this is merely a point of clarification on your part, then.

Mr. Chase: Thank you. I appreciate that assistance.

The Deputy Chair: It's of interest that a member from your own caucus is calling a point of order on you, perhaps a bit tongue in cheek. Nonetheless, I think it's a point of clarification more than a point of order. Proceed now with the main debate.

Mr. Chase: Thank you. I would never want it suggested that my assistance was required for any member, especially the Member for Edmonton-Centre, who has considerably more experience and knowledge based on her numerous terms in this House than myself.

Debate Continued

Mr. Chase: The hon. member, in putting forward amendment A3, was trying to make the best of a worse situation. While she and I very much disagree with the notion of Bill 44, the hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre was saying: "At least, if you're going to deal with this, put it in the right place. It doesn't deal with human rights; it deals with education in the classroom."

Personally, the section that I would like to see bolded and, potentially, the only section that I would like to see remaining within this area is section 3. This was what the hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre referred to as the Hail Mary pass. It says:

This section does not apply to incidental or indirect references to religion, religious themes, human sexuality or sexual orientation in a course, program of study, instruction or exercises or in the use of instructional materials.

For example, if a person were to say, "Holy cow, pistil-packing flower stamen, you seem rather bent," then that would not constitute an appearance before the human rights tribunal because it just arose in an incidental manner.

12:30

Now, certain topics – and I've spoken to one earlier – such as sex education, which is part of the curriculum, which is referred to in 16.1(1), are very clearly defined. Letters go home, parents are consulted, and so on.

I'm not sure whether it'd be required that – as I mentioned before, in grade 7 world religions is part of the social studies program – all parents receive a copy of the syllabus indicating that at some point in the year a discussion of world religions will take place so that the parent can then exclude their child from that discussion.

With regard to sexual orientation, I'm not aware, at least not while I was teaching, of any specific courses, whether in science or in health with regard to phys ed, that dealt specifically with sexual orientation, but if there were sections that were in the prescribed curriculum dealing with sexual orientation, it would be relatively easy to inform the parents that those discussions would be taking place.

I'm not sure that section (3), however, whether you want to call it a Hail Mary pass or a get-out-of-human-rights-tribunal jail free pass, would cover a teacher if a student in an impromptu fashion got caught up in a side discussion.

I'd be interested, when the hon. members of the government caucus apply the flame-thrower to A3, whether they will suggest that section (3) comes under Bill 44 or in the Education Act, Bill 2, where it should be placed, whether that does provide sufficient protection to either a teacher who allowed a discussion of an impromptu nature to go, or whether, in fact, a parent or a child, a student, could bring forward a charge of prejudice against another student who brought up the topic in the first place.

This is why this whole human rights/Bill 44 is the subject of such confusion and why the hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre, who needs no rescuing or help, has indicated that Bill 44 should basically just be toasted, and she referred to a potential Biblical location where that toasting could take place. I think Norwegians refer to it as Hades. In our standard English understanding we talk about hell, whether that's a geographic location where certain

members of this astute Assembly may find themselves burning at some point in the future remains to be seen. [interjection] I think the Member for Livingston-Macleod may have the fire starter in case hell freezes over during the debate on A3.

I appreciate the hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre bringing forth this correction, attempting to save the Alberta government the embarrassment of a misplaced clause and thereby correcting it through amendment A3. What I would offer to this House in the way of a trade-off or a deal would be that if the hon. members opposite accept amendment A3, I will go home, and they will be able to go home a little bit sooner as a result. If for no other reason than to send me packing, I would suggest that you support amendment A3.

Thank you, Mr. Chair, for this opportunity to discuss a number of hot geographic places and the need for sending people and bills there.

The Deputy Chair: Thank you, hon. member.

Are there any other speakers to amendment A3? The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

Ms Blakeman: Well, I was just suggesting that if I stopped talking, would everybody like to vote for it?

Mr. Hinman: Show of hands.

Ms Blakeman: Let me try that.

Once again, I'd just wish to urge my colleagues in the Assembly to . . .

An Hon. Member: Question.

Ms Blakeman: Yes. I will call the question immediately, as long as you quit bugging me, and the more you bug me, the longer I'll talk. You should have known that by now.

Once again, I'll just urge my colleagues to do the right and appropriate thing and approve this amendment. I know that the minister is right here. He can just give you the thumbs-up signal – so can the Government House Leader – and allow us to do the right thing with this bill, or I will hound you forever about this. In your dreams 10 years from now – you're out of politics – a little voice will come in your head from Laurie Blakeman going: you should have done this, and here are all the reasons why. You just don't want that happening. You just don't want that happening. Not that I'm threatening you, but that's what'll happen.

I'll call the question, Mr. Chairman.

The Deputy Chair: Thank you.

I see no other speakers, and the question has been called.

[Motion on amendment A3 lost]

The Deputy Chair: We are now back to the main debate at Committee of the Whole on Bill 2. Edmonton-Centre, please proceed.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. At this time, always in, of course, immense concern for my colleagues here that you get enough movement in your legs so that you don't have that thing that causes a stroke – thank you so much – there's another amendment being handed out. That amendment, which would now be amendment A4, is changing an exact definition under the interpretation section, which is section 1(1). We're striking out section (d), which is the bullying section, and replacing it with this wording:

(d) “bullying” means repeated and hostile or demeaning behaviour by an individual in the school community where the behaviour is intended by the individual to cause harm, fear or distress to another individual in the school community, including psychological harm or harm to that individual’s reputation.

What we have currently in here is that the definition – sorry to repeat this, but what’s of most importance here is that it just talks about behaviour by a student,

where the behaviour is intended by the student to cause harm, fear or distress to another individual in the school community, including psychological harm or harm to the individual’s reputation.

So it’s all based on an individual. It doesn’t recognize that it is possible that this can happen by more than one. This amendment is intended to capture and prohibit, as much as the previous one did, bullying behaviour by any individual in the school community.

It’s bringing in both the possibility of staff bullying students and also workplace bullying. That’s a key point to me, that in fact we don’t have that under the Human Rights Act, unlike the fact that under the Human Rights Act we have an entirely inappropriate clause which truly belongs in the Education Act. That little voice is going to come back in your heads forever.

12:40

It is one of the issues that we have not successfully captured in education or in other places, which is understanding that bullying can happen on all levels and between levels. It isn’t just bullying of a student by a student or by a group of students to a group of students, but it can be from teachers or staff or even janitors. I remember one janitor we had in our elementary school, and he bullied. He bullied students. He just scared the bejesus out of them. I don’t know whether we didn’t know that we could complain to other teachers or to the principal that that’s what was going on, or maybe they felt that they didn’t have any way of controlling that behaviour or any right to say anything to the individual, but this wouldn’t allow that situation to happen. It would recognize that anywhere in that school community bullying between anybody and anybody is not accepted.

What you’ve got right now is that you only deal with students, yet in the rest of the Education Act you do talk about your expectation about how boards behave. You talk about your expectation about teachers. You talk about responsibilities and codes of conduct from expected different members of the school community, but nowhere in there do you recognize that one group could be bullying another, and I think it’s important that we do that.

One of the consistent complaints that I’ve had while I’ve been the critic for human rights has been that we don’t cover workplace bullying. I think it’s the area that the Human Rights Commission gets the most complaints about that they can’t deal with because, again, they don’t have anything in their act which allows them to do anything with it, in the same way that the act used to not protect people’s sexual orientation.

Bill 44 opened it up to protect that and at the same time took it away by allowing us to discriminate against them in schools. But, essentially, that is a missing piece in our human rights code. This does allow us to at least take a step forward in the school community and go: “No. We understand that it can happen between any group of people in that school community, and we want it stopped. We want it clear.” You know, if somebody wanted to take this to a higher authority, they would be able to, but otherwise we’re only talking student to student. So what

happens between staff and teachers or the principal and the janitor or anybody else is currently not covered.

Dr. Swann: Lunch room supervision.

Ms Blakeman: Lunch room supervisor, yes, in the school community. Well, that would be interesting, and that’s where it needs the interpretation, right? I can remember parents phoning my mother . . .

An Hon. Member: This is a white flag. Call the question.

Ms Blakeman: Oh, excellent. I’m so glad to hear that. Now, why couldn’t he have done that before? [interjections]

The Deputy Chair: Hon. members, the Member for Edmonton-Centre does have the floor, and the chair was enjoying listening to her. Please proceed.

Ms Blakeman: I don’t want you to enjoy me. I want you to be convinced by me. I’m here arguing a point. I try to be entertaining, I try not to bore you, but the point is that I’m supposed to be convincing you of something. So, you know, try it. Okay.

All right. I will take a leap of faith.

Dr. Swann: I’ve got to speak to this. Absolutely.

Ms Blakeman: If I let my colleague speak, does that mean you’re withdrawing it?

Some Hon. Members: That’s right.

Ms Blakeman: Okay. It’s a risk we’ll take.

Anyway, thank you very much for considering this. I think I have managed to convince some of you, and I appreciate that understanding because bullying is a big deal right now, and we’re all coming to terms with that. We as legislators could do the right thing and protect some people.

Thank you very much.

The Deputy Chair: Thank you.

The hon. Minister of Education is next.

Ms Blakeman: Holy.

Mr. Lukaszuk: Not holy, just honourable. Not holy.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman. It is a quarter to 1 o’clock, and even though some of those who may be following us or perhaps reading the *Hansard* tomorrow may think that we had a lot of fun over here – and we did. We’re laughing and trying not to enjoy each other as the hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre reminded us. But the topic that she actually raises is a serious one, and it requires some serious consideration.

As a matter of fact, one of the things that I pride myself on – and I know that the Member for Edmonton-Centre shares with me very strong feelings about it – is the importance of eradicating bullying in any possible way we can as adults. We owe it to our children, we owe it to our society, and we owe it to the future of our province. We know that bullying has a variety of faces. It occurs in many different ways, for many different reasons.

I have actually had an opportunity today with the Minister of Human Services to meet with a large group of young people at Government House. One of the groups is focusing on eradicating bullying. They gave us just a quick overview of the different kinds of bullying there are. Kids can be bullied for a number of reasons. It could be about a child’s weight. It could be about a child’s

ethnicity. It could be about hair colour. It could be homophobic. There are a number of reasons, and the fact is that none of it can be tolerated in our public schools.

So any amendment that further strengthens that and then widens the scope of bullying should be adopted to make the bill even stronger, sending a strong message to our schools and our young people and anyone involved that we definitely must do what we can to eradicate bullying.

I would recommend that all members of this House support this amendment. Thank you.

The Deputy Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Hinman: I will just be brief because I think that that is universal. We all understand. We've all seen bullying. We realize the problems that it causes.

Again, I appreciate that the Member for Edmonton-Centre in her due diligence picks things out that were missed. Again, talking about law, when you start the list, in the government's form it says "by a student." Thereby, that's all it is, just a student, and we know that that isn't the only thing. So this amendment, which I will support, is inclusive to anybody that's in the school community.

I appreciate her due diligence in spotting that and making this bill better. That's what we do and why we stay here into the wee hours of night, to make sure that if we can, we make an improvement. This is a very important one because we don't want any bullying anywhere in the school community.

It's an excellent amendment, and I appreciate her finding that and bringing that amendment forward.

The Deputy Chair: Thank you.

The chair would be pleased to recognize the hon. Member for Calgary-Mountain View.

Dr. Swann: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. I won't be long either, but I think it's a critically important amendment that all members of the House should support.

I had a personal experience. My son was bullied by a teacher for over two years, because she ended up being his teacher for a couple of years. It was very difficult for us, first, to identify it and then to get it addressed at the school board level and, finally, to get him out of the class and into a more constructive area. So it's critically important to me that we not focus solely on student bullying, bullying of peers. As the Member for Edmonton-Centre has said, it can come from any staff person. It can come from any parent who has some kind of a role in the school. It can come from after-hours activities, whether it occurs in a sports or a musical event after and outside the school jurisdiction in some way or, at least, off the grounds of the school.

[Dr. Brown in the chair]

I've heard from a few parents already about the school act, that that was an oversight, that they seriously wanted to see that addressed, so I'm very pleased to hear the minister say that there is a strong basis for expanding the circle of potential abusers and ensuring that we be inclusive in our language and not simply refer to just peers or students.

I enjoin all members of the House to support this amendment. It will speak favourably of our work tonight. It will speak favourably of a bipartisan or nonpartisan approach to common sense and to the best interests of our children and our schools and our communities.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

12:50

The Acting Chair: The chair recognizes the hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Creek.

Mr. Zwozdesky: Thank you. I, too, will be brief, but it's incumbent upon me to say a few words of support for this motion because I am the MLA for a constituent that you will have seen and heard from on many occasions. Her name is Betty Wedman. She lost her son to a bullying incident. He felt it necessary to commit suicide. In the discussions that I've had – and I've had many – with Mrs. Wedman, she has indicated her support, in slightly different words but, nonetheless, for a motion like this to be brought forward at some point.

We know what the tragedies of bullying can be. Some of us have seen it, and some of us may have even lived it. But to hear Betty Wedman tell her story is something else entirely and something entirely different than perhaps some of the other accounts you will have heard.

Bullying is in the act, and I want to thank the hon. Minister of Education and the previous Minister of Education as well for having supported the inclusion of bullying in a formal sense in this act.

With that, I just want to put it on the record, hon. Chair, that I fully support this amendment in its current form.

The Acting Chair: The hon. Member for Calgary-Varsity.

Mr. Chase: Thank you. And I want to briefly thank the Member for Edmonton-Mill Creek for bringing up the circumstance of Betty Wedman, who approached me when I was first a critic for children and youth services. She told me the story of how her son's bully followed him from school to school. Her son had tried to avoid this particular individual by changing high schools. Then, unfortunately, it turned out that the person who had done the bullying followed him to his new high school, and eventually the culmination of the previous bullying that he had received resulted in him taking his own life.

[Mr. Zwozdesky in the chair]

Mr. Chair, it's extremely important to note that Alberta has the highest suicide rate in the nation, and bullying is frequently what leads to that terrible choice where an individual can no longer tolerate the conditions under which they have been placed.

I appreciate very much that this government has recognized that the definition of a bully has to be extended beyond a student. From a personal experience of having being bullied in grade 8, it does cause you to withdraw into yourself to a large extent. In grade 8, for example, I was fairly close to six feet and probably weighed about 160 pounds, and I considered myself capable of defending myself. On a one-on-one, and in some cases a one-on-two or a one-on-three, I was able to do that. But when an entire grade 8 class decided to initiate me at recess, which was the circumstance in Richmond Hill in Toronto, it had a very negative impact on me.

In terms of a positive impact, I believe I was a better teacher because I was aware of the conditions of bullying around me with students. I chose to teach in a certain manner that did not put students at a disadvantage. I also found that coaching wrestling for 25 years gave a number of students a sense of self and a sense that they could defend themselves. As a result, I am very grateful that members of all parties here tonight support amendment A3.

An Hon. Member: A4.

Mr. Chase: A4. Thank you very much. At five minutes to 1 I lost track of the numeration.

Thank you very much, Mr. Chair, and I look forward to the question being called.

The Deputy Chair: Thank you.

The hon. Member for Airdrie-Chestermere.

Mr. Anderson: Thank you, Mr. Chair. As the Wildrose Education critic I wanted to make sure to quickly get it on the record here that I support the amendment. It's a very thoughtful amendment from the Member for Edmonton-Centre.

As the Education minister said earlier and as other members have said, this is a very sensitive and important area that we need to address. There are so many kids that are bullied, and there are things that happen to them that are just things that adults, I don't think, unless they've been involved in bullying when they were young, can understand. Unfortunately, with some children there's just not a filter, and lot of times, for whatever reason – sometimes it's just a product of their environment; sometimes it's just a product of the way that they act – they feel the need to lash out and attack and bully others that are vulnerable in order to feel special about themselves or to validate themselves.

It's done for many different reasons, and it can vary from day to day, but we need to do whatever we can to make sure that it's identified as quickly as possible, that we try to bring a resolution to it in a way that not only helps the person who's been bullied but also helps the individual who's doing the bullying to understand what they're doing and understand the consequences of what they're doing so that they don't do it again. If it persists in any way, shape, or form, it's imperative that the needs of the child being bullied are taken into account first and foremost. If that means removing the individual that's bullying from the school setting, that's what it means.

Growing up and seeing it, seeing others and being bullied and so forth, I think it was almost acceptable 10 to 15 years ago in the eyes of some people. I think it was almost like: hmm, that's just the way kids are; that's just the way it is. That has led to some very tragic consequences and suicides and premature dropouts and all kinds of heartache for parents and so forth.

I think that this is very important. I also think it underlines, again, what the Wildrose has talked about earlier, and that is the rights of parents to be able to remove their children from situations where the schools do not in some cases satisfy the parents with regard to a bullying issue. In that case parents desperately need the right to be able to remove their children to another setting.

Hopefully, through this act and, hopefully, through the amendments and, hopefully, through a change of culture that won't be necessary as much, and we can put a halt to bullying in the public system or in any system so that it doesn't come to a point where someone needs to be removed from the school because of bullying or because of being bullied.

I support the new definition here by the member and thank her for bringing it forward.

The Deputy Chair: Thank you.

Seeing no other speakers, I hear the question having been called.

[Motion on amendment A4 carried unanimously]

The Deputy Chair: Thank you, hon. members.

We are back to Committee of the Whole on Bill 2.

Ms Blakeman: Thanks very much, Mr. Chair. All right. Another amendment here. [interjections] Hey, you guys are welcome to spring to your feet at any time and call an end to the evening. [interjection] Okay. Happy to help. Thank you very much.

Once again, thank you to the security people that are assisting us tonight. And while I'm thinking about it, thank you to the *Hansard* staff, that have to hang in here as long as we hang in here.

1:00

Mr. Hancock: And record every word.

Ms Blakeman: And they have to record every word, so thank you for that.

Dr. Swann: And a few words that they never heard before.

Ms Blakeman: And a few new ones.

The Deputy Chair: Hon. members, we have before us amendment A5.

Ms Blakeman: You do. You have amendment A5.

The Deputy Chair: Proceed, please.

Ms Blakeman: Okay. Concentrate on this one because it makes a number of references here. In section 27(1)(d), which appears on page 35, what we're trying to do is make sure that both charter schools and private schools are included in all of part 3, which is the responsibilities and dispute resolution. What happens right now is that they're exempted. As I said, if we're going to have that list and we're going to say that charter schools are accommodated, then they're going to get accommodated like everybody else, and ditto for private schools.

It is unacceptable, particularly when there is public funding going to this – just another little bugbear of mine. You know, I'm a powerful woman, but I'm afraid I cannot quite defeat all of the votes of the men across from me. I think it's important that these considerations are placed upon people with charter schools and . . . [interjections] Can you just let him go out to the lounge and have a break? You have enough people here, Mr. Whip. Couldn't you let him go? Then quit poking him. Just let him sleep.

Section 27 is the application to charter schools. It basically says:

The following provisions and any regulations made under them apply to a charter school and its operation, and a reference in those provisions or those regulations to a board or a trustee is deemed to include a reference to the operator of a charter school or a member of the governing body of the operator of a charter school, as the case may be.

This says: okay; everything that's going to come under this applies to a charter school. Good. All right.

It names a number of sections, and then we get to (d), which appears on page 35, which is the responsibilities and dispute resolution section. It says, "Part 3 except sections 33(1)(k) and 34." Okay. Big mystery here. What's 33(1)(k) that it would be so amazing that it would exclude charter schools from its application? Well, 33(1)(k) says:

develop and implement a code of conduct that applies to trustees of the board, including definitions of breaches and sanctions, in accordance with principles set out by the Minister by order.

Well, why on earth wouldn't you include charter schools in that? [interjection] Okay. Well, you guys are going to have an opportunity to get up and explain this one. What I'm being told

from across the floor is that it is excluding charter schools because they don't have trustees on a board.

Mr. Hancock: But not as defined by the act.

Ms Blakeman: But not as defined by the act. But they do have people that are in charge of them, and I don't see why they'd be excluded. The government is going to have to prove to me how charter schools still have to develop and implement a code of conduct that applies to definitions of breaches and sanctions in accordance with the principles set out by the minister by order. So go ahead and prove that to me.

You know, once again, if you guys are going to do this stuff and you're going to create that list, if you're going to separate out and allow charter schools, then you need to be specifically including and applying everything that applies to a public school, that applies to a charter school, and that applies to a private school. Once again, I do not believe private schools should receive public funding. Just so I'm on the record.

Section 34 is the trustee responsibilities, which the government will now argue, because a charter school doesn't have trustees in particular because they don't have a school board, are exempted from the responsibility to

- (a) fulfil the responsibilities of the board as set out in section 33,
- (b) be present and participate in meetings . . . and committees . . .
- (c) comply with the board's code of conduct, and
- (d) engage parents, students and the community on matters related to education.

I don't see why they have to be excluded from that.

Then it goes on. The second section under this amendment, section (b), is specific to private schools. Once again, it's saying in section 30(1)(d), which is on application of the act to private schools:

- 30(1) The following provisions and any regulations made under them apply to a registered or accredited private school and its operation, and a reference in those provisions or those regulations to a board or a trustee is deemed to include a reference to the person responsible for the operation of a private school or a member of the governing body of the operator of a private school, as the case may be.

Then 30(1)(d), which again is in part 3, sections 31 and 32 and division 7.

Section 31 is the student responsibilities, which I think you guys have already been through. Surely, I don't have to read this into the record. We've already talked about student responsibilities.

- A student, as a partner in education, has the responsibility to
- (a) attend school regularly and punctually,
 - (b) be ready to learn and actively engage in . . .

Mr. Hancock: It's all good.

Ms Blakeman: You've read it? I'm sure you have, but I don't know that the rest of your colleagues have. I did hear somebody talking about it earlier in the day, which is why I thought it might have been read into the record.

It's allowing that to be struck out, and it's allowing section 32, which is parent responsibilities, and part 7, the education professions

and occupations section – I don't even know if I can find it fast enough because I didn't mark the page number down. [interjection] Page 130? Thank you. Thank you very much for the assistance I'm getting from the previous Minister of Education, the current Minister of Human Services. It strikes out those exemptions and applies all of part 3 toward the private schools.

That's my argument. If you're going to be empowering and including private schools and charter schools under this act, you should be having all requirements, codes of conduct, responsibilities of people in charge, whether you call them a trustee or an owner or whatever else you want to call them. I don't think any of these people should be exempted from the requirements that have been put upon the public schools. There's just no reason to exempt them.

I'm asking for support. I'm getting a lot of giggling and yawning from the other side, but I still assume you're hanging in there with me. I would like to see this amendment passed.

I'd like to officially move amendment A5. Thank you.

The Deputy Chair: Thank you very much.

Are there any other speakers to amendment A5?

Seeing none, are you ready for the question, then?

Hon. Members: Question.

[Motion on amendment A5 lost]

The Deputy Chair: The hon. Government House Leader.

1:10

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I move that the committee rise and report progress and beg leave to sit again.

[Motion carried]

[Mr. Zwozdesky in the chair]

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Calder.

Mr. Elniski: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The Committee of the Whole has had under consideration a certain bill. The committee reports progress on the following bill: Bill 2. I wish to table copies of all amendments considered by the Committee of the Whole on this date for the official records of the Assembly.

The Acting Speaker: Thank you, hon. Member for Edmonton-Calder.

Does the Assembly concur in the report?

Hon. Members: Concur.

The Acting Speaker: Those opposed? Accordingly, so ordered.

The hon. Government House Leader.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. In light of the hour and the progress I move that we adjourn until 1:30 p.m.

[Motion carried; the Assembly adjourned at 1:12 a.m. on Thursday to 1:30 p.m.]

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Province of Alberta

The 27th Legislature
Fifth Session

Alberta Hansard

Thursday, March 15, 2012

Issue 18a

The Honourable Kenneth R. Kowalski, Speaker

Legislative Assembly of Alberta
The 27th Legislature

Fifth Session

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Legislative Assembly of Alberta

1:30 p.m.

Thursday, March 15, 2012

[The Speaker in the chair]

Prayers

The Speaker: Good afternoon and welcome.

Let us pray. As we conclude this week's deliberations and return to our constituencies, we pray that we will be renewed and strengthened in our commitment to better serve our constituency and all Albertans. Amen.

Please be seated.

Introduction of Guests

The Speaker: Hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre, do you have an introduction?

Ms Blakeman: I do, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: Proceed.

Ms Blakeman: You could tell how excited I was when you called upon me, I know.

Once again I am very proud to introduce to you and through you to all members of the Assembly members of the Imperial Sovereign Court of the Wild Rose. Now, you know that everything good happens in the fabulous constituency of Edmonton-Centre, except for what happens in Edmonton-Calder. I'm very pleased that the court holds so many activities in my fabulous constituency of Edmonton-Centre. I'm going to do a member's statement later, but I would like to introduce them and have them rise when I mention their names so that you can see them in all their glory. We have two board members with us today from the court, Kari Sorensen and Michelle Pederson. Imperial Grand Duke XXXVI, Yeust Bobb, I believe is here; indeed, he is. Imperial Grand Duchess XXXVI, Clara T, is coming; Imperial Crown Prince XXXVI, Stiffy Steele; His Majesty Emperor XXXV, L.J. Steele – hi, L.J. – and Her Majesty Empress XXXIII and Empress Regent XXXVI, Marni Gras.

Please join me in welcoming these wonderful people to our Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Justice and Attorney General.

Mr. Olson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's a pleasure today to introduce to you and through to all members of the Assembly a group of parents and students from the Wetaskiwin and Camrose home-schools. This bright young group of students and their parents are here today to see the Legislature Building and to take in the history of the building and also, of course, to observe question period. I know they're going to have wonderful time here. I'm a little bit nervous, though, because they've told me they're coming up to have a look at my office afterward, so as we speak my staff is scrambling to clean it up. They are seated here in the gallery, and I'd ask that they all rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of the Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Tourism, Parks and Recreation.

Mr. Hayden: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It's indeed a pleasure for me today to introduce to you and, of course, through you to all members of the Assembly a group of very bright young

individuals who have travelled here today. One of the students told me they left really early, at about 6 o'clock, and travelled here from Morrin, Alberta, which, of course, is in my constituency of Drumheller-Stettler. Today we have with us 18 grade 6 students from the Morrin school. They're seated in the members' gallery, and they're accompanied by their teacher and parent helpers. I had an opportunity to chat with them today, and I also had an opportunity to be at their school last week as we looked at the modernization that's taking place. Today as I chatted with them, they had unbelievable questions, I dare speculate maybe the best that I will have had heard today. I'd now ask them all to please rise and receive the warm welcome of the Assembly.

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

Mr. Bhardwaj: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I have two introductions today. First off, I would like to introduce to you and through you four residents of my constituency of Edmonton-Ellerslie. Prior to question period I met with Tracey Marshall Craig, Kathy Murphy, and her two young children, Ava and Finn Murphy. Tracey is the chair of the Summerside playground subcommittee, and Cathy is also a member of the subcommittee. These two women have worked tirelessly on the Summerside playground project. As you well know, lots of work goes on in new communities in developing playgrounds. At this time I would ask my guests to please rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of the Assembly.

Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. My second introduction today is a group of students from Ellerslie campus, elementary and junior high school. These bright young students are here today to observe the proceedings of the House, and it is my pleasure to have them here. Joining them are Mr. Blair Faulkner, Mrs. Farhat Naqvi, Miss Amanda Pearce, and Mrs. Angela Sawula. At this time I would ask all of my guests to please rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of the Assembly.

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

Mr. Xiao: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I am so pleased to rise today to introduce to you and through you to members of the Assembly a group of very bright, very intelligent students from Talmud Torah School accompanied by their teacher, Ms Sherry Helland. I had the opportunity to have a brief chat with them. They really enjoyed the tour. Now I would like to ask them to please rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of this House.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Human Services.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Each year I have the honour and privilege of introducing to you and through you to all members of the Assembly Rotary exchange students. This year is no exception. Accompanying my guests today is Jack Clements, a long-time constituent of mine and a good friend. Jack is a member of the Edmonton downtown Rotary club and has served with this Rotary club and our community for many years. Accompanying Jack are three exceptional Rotary exchange students.

Anna-Marie Robertson from Edmonton will be an exchange student to the Netherlands during the 2012-13 year. She's an only child with a single-parent mom and has a keen interest in international affairs and conflict resolution. She's very excited to be an ambassador for Edmonton and about all the learning to come. While she does not envy our MLA job, she does acknowledge its importance and is here today to learn more about the work that we do.

Saskia Dietrich comes from a little town close to Berlin, Germany. She has indicated that to go on this exchange was the best decision that she has ever made. She has met many people and made many friends and experienced many cultures. Her mother is a physical therapist and her dad is an engineer, and neither have been to Canada. Saskia indicated that the only thing that she misses is German chocolate.

Noora Savolainen comes from Raisio, Finland. She started figure skating when she was four years old and loves to watch hockey. Her father is an ice hockey coach for her brother's team. Mr. Speaker, I was able to show her the picture of Gretzky and me in my office after Gretzky's last game in Edmonton. She is also a lover of music, and she wants to learn more about our language and culture and share her Finnish culture and customs with us. Spending a year in Canada has allowed her to improve her English and make many friends.

Mr. Speaker, these are truly amazing students with many special talents. May Saskia and Noora have a rich and rewarding Alberta experience, and may Anna-Marie experience all there is to experience in the Netherlands and come back to Edmonton enriched and rewarded. My guests are in the members' gallery. I'd ask them to rise and be rewarded with the traditional warm welcome.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for St. Albert.

Mr. Allred: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my privilege today to rise and introduce to you and through you to the rest of the Assembly a very good friend of mine and successor as the Progressive Conservative candidate for St. Albert, Steven Kahn. He is a long-time resident of St. Albert. He is very involved in the community and has participated in almost every sport you could imagine. He's managed a family software business with over 70 employees and has markets across Canada and, actually, internationally. Please welcome the next MLA for St. Albert, Steven Kahn. Please stand.

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

1:40

Ms Woo-Paw: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It is my great pleasure to introduce to you and through you to all members of the House six members from the Little Red River board of education. They are in Edmonton for their conference, so I have invited them to come tour the Legislature, attend question period, and have a short visit with the Minister of Education. They are seated in the members' gallery. Please stand as I call your names: Mr. Dennis Laboucan, chairperson of the board; Marylou Grande, board member, Fox Lake; Alvina D'Or and Karen Tallcree, board members of Garden River; Tina Seeseequon, local board chairperson of John D'Or Prairie; and my friend of over 20 years, Mr. David Yu, who immigrated to Alberta, Canada, in the '80s from China. He received his master of education here in Alberta and has worked on various reserves and is currently the director of education for the Little Red River Cree Nation. I would like to ask the members of the House to extend their warmest welcome to our guests.

Ms Notley: Today I'm very pleased to introduce to you and through you to this Assembly a group of guests from the Battle River-Wainwright constituency. My guests are part of a group of about 30 landowners representing an organization called Concerned Neighbours in Partnership that wants to give people in their area a voice on ATCO's east Alberta transmission line. Together they collected hundreds of signatures from fellow Albertans who are

concerned about property and landowner rights, a petition which we'll be tabling today. I would now like to ask my guests to rise as I call their names: Deb Kirk, John Kirk, Marilyn Matthiessen, Midge Lambert, Bill Leithead, Marion Leithead, Denise Miller, and Dale Kroetsch. I would now ask the Assembly to join me in offering them the traditional welcome.

The Speaker: The Leader of the Official Opposition.

Dr. Sherman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure to introduce to you and through you to this Assembly a very distinguished guest sitting in your gallery. He's the Hon. Jim Karygiannis, Member of Parliament for Scarborough-Agincourt in Ontario. He has served his constituents in the House of Commons since 1988 and currently acts as the Liberal Party critic for multiculturalism. Joining him is his assistant, Mr. Nikolaos Mantas.

Mr. Karygiannis is a strong advocate for social justice and human rights. He's rallied MPs to condemn acts of barbarism perpetrated against religious and cultural minorities all around the world. He's also well travelled, having served as an official election observer in Pakistan and several other countries. Mr. Karygiannis is often quoted as saying that RACE stands for respecting our neighbours, accepting our differences, celebrating our rich diversity, and embracing our heritage. Mr. Speaker, this is something that we do every day as MLAs in this House to make Alberta a welcoming place. Mr. Karygiannis, welcome. A great Canadian. I'd ask him and Mr. Mantas to rise to please receive the traditional warm welcome of this Assembly.

Thank you.

Members' Statements

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Lethbridge-East.

Health Care System Accomplishments

Ms Pastoor: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. In this Assembly time is spent discussing the complex issues facing our public health care system. The work of building the health system is never done, particularly in improving the access to care. Action is being taken, and I'd like to highlight some of the recent accomplishments.

There are advancements in improving access to health care services right across the province. Forty primary care networks operate each day to serve Albertans' primary health care needs. Additional funding will be invested this year in primary care networks, and three family care client pilot projects will be rolled out later this month. Our seniors will receive expanded home-care services, more adult day programs, and a province-wide, 24-hour telephone helpline run by registered nurses.

Each year there are a thousand new continuing care spaces, to expand our system by 5,300 spaces by 2014-15. Mental health services and addictions services are being expanded, with more counselling and psychology services programs in our schools and a \$15 million renovation to Alberta Hospital Edmonton. That is good news.

Research and innovation procedures are saving lives and speeding recovery for thousands of patients every day. Heart failure patients are now being seen within two weeks after referral through the Mazankowski and the CK Hui Heart Centre, lung cancer patients have faster access to treatment through rapid access clinics, and the provincial stroke strategy means more Albertans are getting timely access to urgent stroke treatment. Insulin-dependent diabetics will have more coverage for supplies

that they need to monitor their blood glucose. Albertans can be proud of the health care system.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre. [interjection] Edmonton-Centre.

Imperial Sovereign Court of the Wild Rose

Ms Blakeman: Thanks very much, Mr. Speaker. Today I was able to welcome and introduce a number of guests from the Imperial Sovereign Court of the Wild Rose, part of the imperial court system of drag queens and kings which exists across Canada, the U.S., and Mexico.

Mr. Speaker, I've been honoured for several years to introduce the reigning court to this Assembly. I do this because I am very proud of my drag queens and kings for their style, elegance, and skills. I also do it because I want people to know of the important charitable work these courts do across the continent.

These courts take their protocol seriously. Few events I attend these days are truly formal or black tie never mind white tie, but these guys and gals take their long, carefully followed series of ceremonies and requirements, and they more than meet the dress code.

Now, each upper house of newly elected empresses and emperors is expected to travel to visit other cities in Canada, and that means new frocks, new shoes, new accessories, and hair. The higher the hair, the closer to God.

It's a tremendous personal commitment. This year, their 36th, no one could make that commitment of time and money so, according to protocol, the previous three empresses and emperors were asked to serve as regents, and today we have one of the three regent empresses, Marni Gras, with us in the gallery.

As a joint decision the regents are focusing their fundraising efforts on youth in their community this year, which includes the fyrefly youth leadership camp, a new camp the court created with HIV Edmonton for children with HIV and their families called the Millicent's Red Diamond camp, and they support safe place initiatives in Alberta schools and antibullying campaigns and projects. And by a safe place they mean for all children, not just those of the GLBT community.

The immense heart and generosity of the International Sovereign Court of the Wild Rose and their empresses and emperors is a great credit.

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

Property Rights

Mr. Prins: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I am pleased to rise and thank Albertans for their valuable input into an important matter, property rights. This past January several hon. members took part in a province-wide initiative to gather feedback from Albertans. The goal was to find grassroots solutions to the property rights concerns that Albertans have raised.

In February the government released a document that outlined what we heard along with the solutions provided to the Property Rights Task Force from Albertans and the government's response to these recommendations. The viewpoints provided by Albertans were consistent and can be broken into four overarching themes.

First, Albertans told us that they must be actively consulted about decisions that affect them. Albertans also told us that they need to be assured that they have access to courts, and Albertans expect appropriate compensation. Most importantly, they asked for an advocate to help them navigate through the process.

I'm very pleased to say that we have responded to Albertans with Bill 6, the Property Rights Advocate Act. The property rights advocate, under the Ministry of Justice and Attorney General, will provide independent and impartial information to landowners and will work to ensure property rights continue to be protected.

It's very clear Albertans expect government to protect their property rights and to ensure their core values are represented when decisions are made in the public interest. I'm very proud that under our Premier's direction we're using the comments and solutions provided to us by Albertans to make improvements that will benefit all landowners.

Thank you.

Oral Question Period

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

Long-term Care for Seniors

Dr. Sherman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. A week ago I met with family members of Tatiana Marchak, yet another senior who suffered severe neglect due to this government's failure to adequately fund staff and resources and monitor seniors' care facilities. On Friday evening January 10 Tatiana fell and hit her head. Her face was very badly bruised. Despite her obvious need for medical care emergency medical services was never called, and she died in a bed at St. Michaels a few days later. Given the overwhelming evidence even from the Health Quality Council to this government and to the Premier: why are you intentionally neglecting our seniors?

1:50

Mr. Horne: Mr. Speaker, this government extends our deepest condolences to the family of the lady to whom the hon. member refers.

What I must tell you, Mr. Speaker, is that I have checked into this case, and based on the information I have received, I have determined that this lady was under the care of a physician at the time of her death, that all of the appropriate procedures with respect to care assessments, case conferences, and compliance with standards were appropriately dealt with throughout the case.

What I must say to you, Mr. Speaker, and, I think, on behalf of many members of this House: this hon. member was a parliamentary assistant to the minister of health at the time of this incident. What did he not report that incident at . . .

The Speaker: The hon. leader.

Dr. Sherman: Mr. Speaker, the gloves are coming off. I was the parliamentary assistant, and I said to this government and Premier: I've lost faith and trust. They're failing our seniors.

To the minister: do you understand that by intentionally starving our public long-term care facilities of funding, a policy, Minister, that you implemented, that you were in charge of, that that minister administered – you've been starving these facilities and failing to monitor seniors' facilities – this government is responsible for abject humanitarian failure.

Mr. Horne: Mr. Speaker, the question that should be asked by all members of this House is: if this hon. member had knowledge of this event at the time that it occurred in January of 2010, why did he not report it under the Protection for Persons in Care Act? If he chose not to report it, why does he raise it along with very graphic

and inappropriate pictures in the media on the eve of an election? Why is that?

Dr. Sherman: Mr. Speaker, for once you're actually going to get a real, honest answer to a question, and the opposition will answer it. I actually just found out about this last week. I didn't know about this.

Mr. Speaker, to the Premier: given that the severe neglect of seniors such as Audry Chudyk and Grace Denyer has been dismissed by this minister and this Premier as unfortunate incidents, are you just going to look at this picture of Tatiana Marchak and say that this is just another unfortunate incident? The family wants this story told.

The Speaker: The hon. Deputy Premier.

Mr. Horner: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. That was a disgraceful political play. He talks about dignity for seniors yet releases a picture of a senior who is obviously lying dead in a bed. I think that Albertans will look at that and judge for themselves.

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

Dr. Sherman: Mr. Speaker, the family wanted that released so it never happens to any senior again.

Alberta First Nations Energy Centre

Dr. Sherman: Let's move on. The multibillion-dollar First Nation upgrader was so attractive to Chinese and Indian state oil companies and state banks that they would have competed for an equity stake if this government had not killed the project. PwC's study for the government of Canada confirmed the economic viability of the project. Senior Alberta Energy officials said that it would have paid the government itself \$20 billion over and above royalties. Equally important, the project would have meant . . .

The Speaker: The hon. minister. [interjection] The hon. minister. [interjection] Hold on. Hold on. There's a time factor in questions and answers. I've recognized the hon. minister.

Do you wish to proceed or not?

Mr. Horner: Well, Mr. Speaker, I'm not sure what the question was.

The Speaker: The hon. leader.

Dr. Sherman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. To the Minister of Energy: India, China, PricewaterhouseCoopers, your own officials from the federal government, the indigenous peoples, and British Columbians say that this is a good project. They say one thing; the boys in the backroom say another. Do you even have an inkling of how deeply offended Alberta's First Nation treaty chiefs are at the Premier's and your arrogance in dealing with them and rejecting this project? Who is right?

Dr. Morton: Mr. Speaker, there was no arrogance at all in dealing with the First Nations. We met with them. We knew it wasn't good news. We told them that we deemed the risk too high to proceed. Albertans should understand – the Leader of the Opposition obviously doesn't want to understand – we want more upgrading. We have hundreds of thousands of BRIK barrels, but we're not going to commit to projects that are not economically viable and put the Alberta taxpayers at risk.

Dr. Sherman: Mr. Speaker, let me get this right. Given that others in the world want to invest money here, create better jobs, especially for the indigenous peoples, and they have buy-in from everybody, a no-brainer, does the minister or the Premier have any explanation as to why they were so insulting to the First Nation chiefs in rejecting something that just made sense?

Mr. Dallas: Mr. Speaker, that is the most ridiculous mischaracterization of the way that these discussions were handled that one could imagine. Right from the time that the Premier asked me to handle this ministry, I met twice with the Assembly of Treaty Chiefs. We've had a protocol meeting. The Premier and I have met with the grand chiefs. The meeting that the member refers to was done most sincerely and as directly as possibly could be done. The reality is that if this project is viable . . .

The Speaker: Third Official Opposition main question. The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

Ms Blakeman: Thanks very much, Mr. Speaker. When the Premier and the Minister of Energy kicked the First Nations upgrader project into the gutter, it was at the conditional commitment agreement stage. This stage involves zero risk to the province. The agreement required the First Nations to spend about \$200 million further developing the proposal. It also required the project in the end to be nearly three times as profitable to the Alberta government than the North West upgrader, which the province has already approved. To the Premier: why the higher standard for this project?

Mr. Horner: Well, Mr. Speaker, they're comparing apples and oranges a bit here. The North West upgrader and this project are two totally different projects. They're at two totally different stages. The hon. member earlier had referenced how this project, they felt, was very, very viable. We hope that given the market, given the status of where the logistics of getting product to market are, projects will proceed. They don't necessarily need to have government intervention. We get projects unsolicited to us on a regular basis. Our job is to . . .

The Speaker: The hon. member, please. [interjection] The hon. member, please.

Ms Blakeman: Thanks very much, Mr. Speaker. Back to the Premier: would this project have been approved if it had the backing of three Calgary-based oil companies instead of three First Nations companies?

Dr. Morton: Mr. Speaker, for the, I think, third time in less than two weeks I'll repeat that it was strictly a business decision. We want more upgrading in this province. We have hundreds of thousands of BRIK barrels, but we cannot make commitments that are economically unsustainable. It's a risk to the Alberta taxpayer, and it's not one that we could accept and be responsible.

Ms Blakeman: Economically unsustainable. Hmm. I'm just curious. Back to the Premier again: is this, then, just a matter of the First Nations not contributing enough to the PC leadership campaigns given that MEG Energy gave \$65,000 to the five who declared their contributions, and the CNRL and Mr. Allan Markin ponied up \$135,000, combined, to the four of them?

Mr. Horner: Well, Mr. Speaker, Albertans across this province take part in the democratic process. We encourage that, in fact, and we ask that all Albertans would do that. Both the Liberals and the Wildrose have received contributions from the same players in this

particular enterprise, so obviously that's not an issue. We don't worry about whether they've contributed to any party. What we do is that we make a decision based on the value for all taxpayers in the province, all taxpayers.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Fort McMurray-Wood Buffalo.

Municipal Taxation

Mr. Boutilier: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Last week the Premier was on radio with taxpayer-funded campaign ads promising no tax hikes. We now find out that one of her promises has come crashing down. Taxes are indeed on the rise. For instance, the city of Calgary's most recent report confirms a 7.2 per cent hike in the province's share of education property taxes, amounting to higher taxes for families. To the Premier: how can you look Albertans square in the eye and tell them you aren't raising taxes when, in fact, you are?

Mr. Horner: Mr. Speaker, it's very simple for me to do that because this is a very simple matter. We have not raised taxes, and we have not raised taxes in this budget. We have frozen the rates on properties. The assessment has gone up because there's more property being built in this province. There are more values being done. The rate of taxes in this province has not gone up. It has not gone up in this budget, and it's not going up next year either.

The Speaker: The hon. member, please.

Mr. Boutilier: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Again to the Premier: given that Calgary isn't the only city in Alberta reporting provincial tax hikes, given that Edmonton, Vermilion, and my community of Fort McMurray among others have higher provincial taxes this year, would she consider putting together an Excel spreadsheet so that she can let us know how much her broken promise on taxes will cost us all?

2:00

Mr. Griffiths: Mr. Speaker, I've answered this question before. I've clearly laid out and it's clear in the budget that in 2011 the tax rates were the same as in 2012: \$2.70 per \$1,000 of assessment for residential and farmland property and \$3.97 per \$1,000 of assessment for nonresidential property.

Mr. Speaker, the amount of income tax collected and the amount of business tax collected in this province has gone up; the rates have not gone up. Alberta is the most prosperous place to be on Earth. People are making money, and I highly doubt they would like to see that go down.

Mr. Boutilier: Mr. Speaker, given that non answer, clearly, families' taxes are going up. Another broken promise.

Again to the Premier. Given that on page 100 of the fiscal plan of 2012 it says that "education property taxes will be frozen," what do you have to tell the thousands of Alberta families who are now going to be forking over more taxes to the government because you've broken your promise?

Mr. Horner: Well, Mr. Speaker, the hon. member obviously wasn't listening or cares not to hear the truth. The fact of the matter is that the province of Alberta is experiencing growth. We're experiencing economic activity that Albertans are enjoying and taking advantage of. Because we didn't raise the 10 per cent flat rate, our personal income taxes are still going up. They can't figure it out; the average Albertan can.

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

Long-term Care for Seniors

(continued)

Ms Notley: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Under this government's watch Alberta seniors' care system has descended into profound disarray. The number of heart-wrenching stories describing seniors suffering from lack of care in our ERs, in our long-term care, in assisted living, and in their homes is overwhelming. The Conservative government's response is to let seniors and their families fend for themselves. My question is to the Premier: will she acknowledge that the seniors' care system right now is facing a crisis?

Mr. VanderBurg: Well, you know, Mr. Speaker, it's really interesting. When you get out there with severely normal Albertans and you get into cases where there are long-term care facilities, supportive living, lodges, and foundations, our seniors are very, very happy.

Listen. I want to make sure everybody knows this number. I've said it a few times, but obviously we haven't heard it: 1.888.357.9339. This is the reporting line for abuse. Failure to report abuse is against the law.

Ms Notley: Mr. Speaker, this government is so out of touch. Given that this government's plan for the crisis is more unpendable private care and higher costs for seniors and their families and given that a senior has just been evicted from a private care home when her family refused to tolerate price gouging, will the Premier acknowledge that her plan to lift the fee cap will only cause more hardship and commit today that she will retain the fee cap now, 12 months from now, and for a minimum of the next four years?

Mr. VanderBurg: I've said very, very clearly in the Assembly that the cap is not going anywhere; it's staying. Until this Assembly, the whole Assembly, and until Albertans north to south and east to west have had a debate over the next 12 months, that's what will happen. This cap is staying where it is.

Ms Notley: So what I hear, Mr. Speaker, is that there is no commitment for the next four years and that the long-term care cap is going to go.

Now, given that we've tabled in this Legislature for years hundreds, if not thousands, of testimonials from the front line on short-staffing in seniors' care facilities and given that so many seniors are suffering from this crisis in staffing every day, why won't this Premier take meaningful action to protect our seniors and commit to legislated staffing ratios and clear standards of care in our seniors' care homes?

Mr. VanderBurg: Well, once again, Mr. Speaker, we have clear accommodation standards and clear inspections. We have publicly paid for health care in our seniors' facilities – publicly paid for health care – and we're going to remain doing that.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Currie, followed by the hon. Member for Calgary-Mackay.

Rent Regulation

Mr. Taylor: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. A constituent contacted me the other day to say that she had received notice from her landlord that he was increasing her rent by 34 per cent, from \$1,255 a month to \$1,682. Understandably, she's going to have to move. Hers is not an isolated case. With talk of a looming labour

shortage, the high price of oil, and a strong economy I'm wondering if this is the first sign of a rerun of 2005, when similar circumstances resulted in a housing crisis and skyrocketing rental prices. To the Premier: given that the attitude in the last housing crisis was that it was morally okay to charge what the market would bear no matter . . .

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Hancock: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. There is a market for housing, and the government has wanted to make sure that there's a wide variety of affordable housing available for Albertans. But in the private housing market prices can change. What we are seeing in Alberta is an improvement in the economy, in fact a considerable improvement in the economy, one of the best places in the country to live and work. We reacted when there were problems with housing prices previously, and we will certainly look at this situation to see whether there's any government . . .

The Speaker: The hon. member, please.

Mr. Taylor: Mr. Speaker, we certainly have not seen a 34 per cent increase in economic activity or in the growth of this economy in the last year.

Given that renters are not protected against landlords gouging them on the rent, will the government commit to implementing a yearly cap to prevent rent gouging?

Mr. Bhullar: Mr. Speaker, on this side of the House we believe in a free economy. Now, we have taken action to protect renters. Rents can only go up once per year. We will not apologize for the prosperity of this province and the prosperity that Albertans enjoy.

Mr. Taylor: Well, again to the Premier: given that it's no more fun being homeless in a booming economy than it is in a broken economy and given this early warning sign of another potential spike in rents, how will she act to ensure that protections are in place before renters are facing another widespread affordable housing crisis?

Mr. Bhullar: Mr. Speaker, let me be clear. Rents can only be increased once per year. Secondly, they must provide a three-month notice to renters.

Now, we on this side of the House have added many more affordable housing units, more than any other province in this country, and we're proud of that. On this side of the House we've made sure that Alberta enjoys the most robust economy of any province in this country, and again we're proud of that.

Provincial Economic Strategy

Ms Woo-Paw: Mr. Speaker, business leaders in my constituency and, indeed, across Alberta have identified potential labour shortages as a key obstacle to economic growth. I understand the Deputy Premier recently went to Ottawa to discuss this issue with our federal colleagues. I'm interested in knowing more about what was accomplished.

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Horner: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. Indeed, I just returned very early this morning from Ottawa. We had some very, very productive meetings with Minister Kenney and Minister Finley around not only the immigration file but also the needs of our industry. We had industry representatives that went with me.

As you may know and as many in this House know, there's an alliance of 19 industry associations that have come together in Alberta because of the urgency of this matter. I'm very, very pleased to say . . .

The Speaker: The hon. member, please.

Ms Woo-Paw: Okay. Labour is not the only factor that affects our economic prosperity. Quality infrastructure is also essential to supporting economic growth. Did your discussions also address that key issue?

Mr. Horner: Indeed, Mr. Speaker. I had the opportunity to meet with the President of the Treasury Board, with Minister Ambrose, and Minister MacKay. We did have a discussion around not only some of the areas where they've done something similar to our Bill 2, around capital planning, but also the building Canada fund, which we believe was very successful. We felt that the model that we started from has some areas we can grow to. I believe that the federal government is in tune with the infrastructure needs of Alberta, and we look forward to working with them in the future.

Ms Woo-Paw: Alberta's future economic growth will also depend on attracting more business and investment to the province. How can the federal government support our efforts to maintain Alberta's position as a leader in attracting investments?

Mr. Horner: Well, Mr. Speaker, again, we had some very interesting discussions around the key factor that will limit our growth, and that is the labour shortage that we're experiencing not only in our province but in a number of provinces in the country. Indeed, there are some things that could happen in eastern Canada that would start to use up some of the employment categories there, but also there are a number of employment categories in the United States. I believe we're going to have a very successful campaign with the ministers in the federal government on bringing skilled workers up from the United States.

Funding for Private Schools

Mr. Hehr: Choice in education is a United States-style code phrase for funding private schools. The Wildrose has signalled that they will adopt a money-follows-the-child philosophy that will fund these institutions. As the minister is aware, this practice led to a fundamental breakdown in the United States' educational system. To the Minister of Education: given recent developments has your government now gone all in and decided to adopt the Wildrose position that would lead to 100 per cent funding of private schools?

2:10

Mr. Lukaszuk: As a minister of children's education I fear any idea that comes from the Wildrose relative to education. I can assure you, Mr. Speaker, that we will continue the heritage of excellence in education in this province, and we will continue improving education in this province. We will allow the Wildrose to scare the children and their parents on what would happen if they were ever to be in government.

Mr. Hehr: To the same minister. Given that you already fund private schools to the tune of \$192 million, have you now permanently committed the taxpayer to fully subsidize these institutions?

Mr. Lukaszuk: Mr. Speaker, what we are doing is making sure that parents have choice. Parents are voting with their feet. They

can choose to send children to Catholic schools or public schools, charter schools or private schools, or they can offer educational programs at home. Parents get to choose. Because of the fact that these parents actually pay education taxes on their property taxation, it only makes sense that they also benefit from those taxes they pay. So up to 70 per cent – not paying for any additional fees or infrastructure – we are subsidizing the education of their children.

Mr. Hehr: Mr. Speaker, to the same minister: why has this minister sold out the public education system to right-wing groups without consulting with the general public or your educational partners?

Mr. Lukaszuk: Mr. Speaker, public education is something that Albertans are very proud of, and the majority of children in this province attend public schools. As a matter of fact, with the exception of private schools, all schools are funded publicly through the taxpayers of Alberta. Albertans are proud of investing in education, and we will continue investing in education. Now, what the other party chooses to do with education and how they would dismantle public education . . .

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Bow, followed by the hon. Member for Calgary-Mountain View.

Bullying

Ms DeLong: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. A soon-to-be-released documentary about bullying is causing controversy due to the fact that youth in the U.S. will not be able to view the film because of its restricted rating. The film called *Bully* was given an R rating because of its detailed depictions of bullying and coarse language. One teen activist in the U.S. has collected over 200,000 signatures on a petition that she presented to the Motion Picture Association of America to change the film's rating so that young people, whom the film is targeting, will be able to see it. My first question is to the Minister of Culture and Community Services.

The Speaker: The hon. minister, please.

Mrs. Klimchuk: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Youth in our province will certainly be able to see the film because it has been given a PG rating. B.C., Ontario, and Manitoba have given it the same rating. While there is certainly coarse language and scenes that may be unsettling to audiences, the whole issue of bullying cannot be glossed over. It's an important conversation that teachers, students, and parents need to have. As well, with the PG rating parents can make informed decisions with their children before heading to the theatre.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Ms DeLong: Thank you. The second question is to the Minister of Human Services. What is this government doing to prevent bullying and to protect its victims?

Mr. Hancock: Mr. Speaker, it must be perfectly clear to this House and to Albertans that bullying in any form is unacceptable and can have a long-term impact, in fact, even a fatal impact on students and others. That's why education and public awareness of the issue are so important. Human Services co-leads an initiative with Education. We work closely with communities, parents, and teachers to create awareness. We have a 24-hour bullying helpline, 1.888.456.2323. I would say that in addition to the movie that was

referenced in the first question, Albertans should be aware that our very own Glen Huser wrote a book about bullying called *Stitches*.

The Speaker: The hon. member, please.

Ms DeLong: Thank you very much. My final supplemental, but I consider it most important, is to the Minister of Education. What measures are in place to identify and protect victims of bullying in our schools? Our parents and our schools want to know.

Mr. Lukaszuk: Well, Mr. Speaker, bullying is not acceptable anywhere, anyhow, for any reason. This Education Act, that we are hoping to pass in this Legislature if members of the opposition allow us to pass it, will probably be one of the most effective education acts in Canada that addresses bullying. We need to eradicate bullying. We need to send a strong message that bullying will not be accepted in Alberta schools.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Mountain View, followed by the hon. Member for Leduc-Beaumont-Devon.

Sexual Assault Services

Dr. Swann: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. National data shows that a shocking 60 per cent of Alberta women will experience sexual assault after the age of 16, and that happens to be 50 per cent higher than the national average. Sexual assault is underreported across the country, and support systems in Alberta for survivors are hit and miss across the province, with serious underfunding. The government of Alberta provides only \$1.6 million through Human Services to nine sexual assault centres, averaging less than \$200,000 per centre, totally inadequate and resulting in inconsistent service.

The Speaker: The hon. minister, please.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. There is a very serious commitment to this very significant issue. In fact, violence against women is a very important subject for this government. Over the past 10 years we've had a crossministry task force on this. There's been considerable progress made. Some would suggest that one of the reasons the statistics are higher in Alberta is because of a higher level of awareness and a higher level of reporting. But that is not good enough. We have to do more. It's a very serious issue, and we take it very seriously.

Dr. Swann: Mr. Speaker, Calgary, Edmonton, Lloydminster, Grande Prairie, and Fort McMurray have four- to six-month waiting lists for counselling for women who have been sexually assaulted. How can that be acceptable in Alberta? What are you doing about that?

Mr. Hancock: Well, indeed, it's not acceptable in Alberta. It's not acceptable anywhere. It would be very, very good for us to be able to have services for people exactly at the time that they present and they need them. For that to happen, we need to have the personnel in place, we need to have the resources in place, and we need to have the caring and compassionate and collaborative social agency in the community in place. We're working on that through a provincial agency. We fund about \$1.7 million to that agency. That provides services through local agencies . . .

The Speaker: The hon. member, please.

Dr. Swann: Clearly, Mr. Speaker, the minister must see that that's totally inadequate for the women and families affected.

Why is the health department not involved in this and sharing in the commitment, when over half of the women in Alberta have been affected by this terrible travesty?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Horne: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. There is a joint approach. The Minister of Human Services and I together are working very closely on this issue. With respect to the Lloydminster situation, as an example, my ministry has provided as an interim solution a \$365,000 grant for 2012-13 to go to the Alberta Association of Sexual Assault Centres. This will provide two full-time counsellors and one clinical supervisor in the Lloydminster sexual assault centre. It is a mobile centre. It will serve Bonnyville and Cold Lake.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Leduc-Beaumont-Devon, followed by the hon. Member for Calgary-Fish Creek.

Long-term Care Accommodation Standards

Mr. Rogers: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. With an aging population bulging the ranks of our seniors, it is vital that the utmost quality of care is provided to our most vulnerable seniors. Any suggestion that this standard is not being met in any facility is alarming. My questions are to the Minister of Health and Wellness. Are there standards that must be adhered to in all continuing care facilities to ensure the safety and quality of care for residents, and if so, why does it seem that some people are falling through the cracks?

Mr. Horne: Well, Mr. Speaker, there most certainly are. The continuing care health services standards apply to any facility in Alberta where publicly funded health services are provided. Alberta Health Services is responsible for ensuring compliance with the standards. My ministry is responsible for oversight of Alberta Health Services and ensuring appropriate accountability within legislation, very strong legislation and very strong provincial standards.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Rogers: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Again to the same minister: is there enough money being invested into continuing care to ensure resident safety and the highest quality of care?

Mr. Horne: Mr. Speaker, again the answer is yes. Very significant financial investments are put into continuing care every single year, both in the form of money for capital expansion, for building a thousand new spaces a year, and in improving safety and quality throughout the system. Alberta Health Services spends approximately \$1.5 billion annually on continuing care, including home care.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Rogers: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My final supplemental to the same minister. Some Albertans are saying that the government needs to step up and make improvements to the continuing care system for Alberta's seniors. How are we doing?

2:20

Mr. Horne: Well, Mr. Speaker, we are always looking for ways to improve the level of service that's offered across the province. I think that, without any acknowledgement of some of the generalizations that are often made in this House with respect to quality of care, it's safe to say that we are always looking for ways

to improve. We are looking most particularly to make sure that the level of health care offered in any setting is appropriate to the needs of that resident. And where it cannot be done in such a way, we work with families, we work with health care workers to ensure that the patient can be moved to a setting where those health needs can be met.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Fish Creek, followed by the hon. Member for Calgary-McCall.

Long-term Care Serious Incidents

Mrs. Forsyth: Yes. Thank you, Mr. Speaker. In December we heard the tragic story of a 35-year-old disabled man dying after being scalded in a bath at a group home where he lived. The Seniors minister and this government's reaction was slow and lacked the transparency that many seniors and their families were demanding. Yesterday in Public Accounts the deputy minister said that there had been 22 incidents in the past year of serious injuries or death in seniors' accommodations in group homes. Why haven't we heard of this alarmingly high number before? What went wrong in these group homes, and what is being done to protect our people?

Mr. VanderBurg: Well, Mr. Speaker, any serious injury is one too many. I will admit that there were five serious injuries and there was one death in that 22. But, as I say, one is not acceptable. We have great staff, and we have great care. Things happen.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mrs. Forsyth: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Instead of avoiding this issue, can the Seniors minister give us some real answers and explain to Albertans what these incidents were and what the government is doing to make sure they don't happen again?

Mr. VanderBurg: I can tell you exactly, Mr. Speaker. The one death was due to a fall. The fall was serious, and the person died. That's something that happened. It was very unfortunate for that person, that family, and the place where they lived. The other serious injuries were, I would expect, other falls, but I can get back to the member with further details.

Mrs. Forsyth: Minister, these are year-old stats, 2010-2011.

Given that all Albertans want full transparency, to know that they can feel safe to send their loved ones to facilities under government care, why has this government been keeping these numbers away from the public?

Mr. VanderBurg: We have a very transparent and open process with our inspections and our accommodations. It's on the website. You can check any facility, Mr. Speaker. You can see when they've been inspected, what the issues are where. We're not hiding anything. [interjection]

The Speaker: Some people might include in the definition of bullying those who yell at others.

The hon. Member for Calgary-McCall, followed by the hon. Member for Lacombe-Ponoka.

School Infrastructure Funding

Mr. Kang: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. On Tuesday I asked about the Department of Education's ability to use schools as community hubs and, therefore, keep more of them open. The minister said school boards have to make hard choices, but I think

they would have to make fewer hard choices if their buildings could be used for other community purposes. To the Minister of Education: will he consider changing the school funding formula so that schools in mature neighbourhoods can stay open?

Mr. Lukaszuk: Mr. Speaker, our primary consideration is the quality of education that children receive in that school. As long as the number of children in the school is adequate for teachers and principals to satisfy themselves that they can still run a viable program and for parents to be satisfied with the viability of the program, the school should remain open. We can look at bringing in other allied services like daycares, before and after school centres, boys and girls clubs and YMCAs. But education is the vital point that needs to be considered.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Kang: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. To the same minister again: given that many mature neighbourhoods have a high proportion of immigrants and poor families, can the minister see that keeping schools open is a matter of social justice, not just a calculation of how many students are using the schools?

Mr. Lukaszuk: Mr. Speaker, let me reiterate. The primary consideration is the quality of education of children in the school no matter who the children are. All children are equal in our education, and they all deserve an equally high level of education. If the numbers warrant that a school stay open and if we can bring in additional wraparound services, particularly for immigrant communities, refugee communities, that is the right thing to do. But at the end of the day we have to have the high quality of education, which is reflected in the number of children that attend that school.

Mr. Kang: Mr. Speaker, I'm not saying we should compromise the quality of education.

To the minister again. The city of Edmonton recently announced plans to collaborate with different organizations, including school boards, to revitalize the older neighborhoods, but this minister said that community development is not his job. Can the minister tell us how many more schools are going to be closed because he has such a narrow focus for school buildings?

Mr. Lukaszuk: Well, since this member brought up this example, Mr. Speaker, Edmonton public school board right now has in excess of 40,000 empty seats, actually enough to accommodate the entire Edmonton Catholic school board and still have space left over. Indeed, those trustees have some difficult decisions to make, but all of their decisions have to be made primarily on what is best for children relative to the quality of education offered in the schools, not redevelopment of our neighbourhood or any other municipal considerations.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Lacombe-Ponoka, followed by the hon. Member for Calgary-*Buffalo*.

NOVA Chemicals Corporation Expansion

Mr. Prins: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. Last week in my constituency of Lacombe-Ponoka a large petrochemical company, NOVA Chemicals, announced that they are planning to spend up to \$900 million to increase polyethylene production at their Joffre plant in Lacombe county. My first question is to the Minister of Energy. What policies does this government have to encourage or facilitate this type of investment?

Dr. Morton: Mr. Speaker, I'd like to begin by acknowledging the good work that this member has done on the Alberta Competitiveness Council as co-chair of the petrochemical team. Their work has contributed to a program called the incremental ethane extraction program, which has created the additional supply of ethane which has made possible this good-news story of a \$900 million expansion at the NOVA plant in Joffre.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Prins: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. To the same minister: can he explain how this program was used for the Joffre plant expansion?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Dr. Morton: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'd be happy to. NOVA and its partner, Williams, have come up with a new way of extracting ethane from the off-gas at the operators in Fort McMurray. They extract this off-gas and then transport it by pipeline down to Joffre, 17,000 barrels a day. Without this, those off-gases would either go into the environment as pollution or be burned just as feed stock, so it's a great value-added story for Alberta.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Prins: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My last question is for the President of Treasury Board and Enterprise. The enhancement of the incremental ethane extraction program was just one of the actions recommended by the Alberta Competitiveness Council. Can you tell me what else the government is doing to increase Alberta's competitiveness and to support economic opportunities in the petrochemical industry and other sectors of the economy?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Horner: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. The Alberta Competitiveness Council is an important partnership between industry and government and has done a lot of good work identifying how we can take steps to improve our competitiveness. I, too, echo the Minister of Energy's comments about the MLAs that have been on these task forces with industry.

In the May 2011 report the council had 18 recommendations, priority actions to enhance our competitiveness in petrochemicals, chemicals, manufacturing, grains and oilseeds, and financial services. I'm pleased to report that we are making progress on all of these fronts, and next week we will be announcing . . .

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-*Buffalo*, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-*Manning*.

Provincial Tax Policy

Mr. Hehr: This government says that after the election it will look at all revenue sources. Code word for taxes. I don't think that's right, Mr. Speaker. With an election looming, it's time to discuss this with Albertans now, but like Kim Campbell this Premier seems to think elections are no time to talk policy. To the President of the Treasury Board: does his government understand that our tax and revenue policies have led this government to spending virtually all of Alberta's resource revenues over the course of the last 25 years?

Mr. Horner: Well, Mr. Speaker, as I understand it, this hon. member has been asking the same question in this House a number of times, and I would encourage him to review *Hansard*

for those answers. But I would say this. The tax policy of this government has allowed for the only jurisdiction in probably the western hemisphere that is experiencing the kind of growth, economic opportunity that we have in this province and no new taxes.

Mr. Hehr: To the same minister: given that this government's revenue policies are erratic, unsustainable, and we are mortgaging the future instead of saving for it, why won't the government repeal the flat tax, that sees a million-dollar-a-year executive pay the same rate as a \$40,000-a-year secretary?

2:30

Mr. Horner: Well, Mr. Speaker, I hardly think that a 10 per cent flat tax is erratic. I think, actually, it's very predictable, and it's something that Albertans and many coming to Alberta look to and say: that's why we're here. I hardly think that having no provincial sales tax is erratic. It's zero. People come to this province because of it. I hardly think that having the only jurisdiction in Canada where we are creating way more jobs than we have people for is erratic. It's a great opportunity. People come here because it's opportunity.

Mr. Hehr: To the same minister. Unlike Kim Campbell, I believe an election is the time to discuss real issues. Given that this government concedes it must eventually raise taxes, why not follow the Alberta Liberal lead, show some guts and integrity, and have the discussion before the next election, not after?

Mr. Horner: Well, Mr. Speaker, the hon. Leader of the Official Opposition has certainly shown where the integrity is today, and it's not over there. We have not said that we're going to raise taxes. We have not said that we're going to change the budget that we have today, that we're going to pass in this House, I hope, in the very near future.

We could talk about how we do our capital plan, how we are going to leverage our assets. We're going to talk about the savings plan that we have for Albertans. We're going to talk about the operational reserve that we have, Mr. Speaker. We're going to talk about the fact that we have an operational surplus today and a cash deficit. We can do more, and we will.

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

Anthony Henday Drive

Mr. Sandhu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Anthony Henday Drive has been a massive project for the province so far. However, this project is not done, and my constituents are wondering when it will be finished. My first question is to the Minister of Transportation. How is the northeast leg of the Anthony Henday Drive progressing?

Mr. Danyluk: Well, Mr. Speaker, I can tell the hon. member that we are well on our way to completing the largest project ever delivered in the province of Alberta. This is a public-private partnership. We called for bids, and three bids have been submitted. We're very close to making the selection, and we'll announce that in May. This is very exciting because construction of this last leg will start this summer.

The Speaker: The hon. member, please.

Mr. Sandhu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My first supplemental question is also to the Minister of Transportation. When can we expect the Anthony Henday to be fully completed?

Mr. Danyluk: Mr. Speaker, I can say that it's anticipated that the project will be completed in the early part of 2016. There are going to be nine kilometres of new roadway and 18 kilometres of improvement. This new project is going to benefit not only the citizens but, of course, industry. We are a commodity-based province.

The Speaker: The hon. member, please. [interjection] The hon. member. [interjection] Hon. member, you don't have another question? I called you three times.

Mr. Sandhu: Mr. Speaker, no further questions.

The Speaker: You're fine? Okay.

The hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview, followed by the hon. Member for Red Deer-North.

Postsecondary Institution Spending Accountability

Dr. Taft: Thanks, Mr. Speaker. When it comes to academic freedom, this government must keep its hands off Alberta's universities and colleges, but when it comes to proper management controls, it has to ensure each institution is doing its job. The Auditor General's report this week makes clear that several of these institutions are failing this test badly. To the minister of advanced education. This government claims it wants world-leading postsecondary institutions, but after reading the AG's report, I must ask him: is this his definition of world leading?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Weadick: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. Yes, we have world-leading institutions that are delivering top-quality programs across the province. The AG did bring to light some concerns around finances in some of our institutions, and we take those recommendations very, very seriously, as do our institutions. We've made it very clear to our institutions that they must correct these financial issues that they have, and in fact we've set up some processes to support them as they move forward to correct some of these things.

The Speaker: The hon. member, please.

Dr. Taft: Thanks, Mr. Speaker. Given that these recommendations have been made in some cases for several years, it's pretty slow action.

To the same minister: what is his department doing to improve its accountability controls over postsecondary institutions before there is an expensive and embarrassing problem?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Weadick: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. After seeing these recommendations, we have set about creating a whole new training program for audit committee members within our boards of governors that operate our postsecondaries.

Beyond that, we've also created a team that will be called the audit support team. They can go into all of our postsecondaries, look at the Auditor General's recommendations, support our institutions as they move forward in correcting those, and also

look at other issues that may create challenges for institutions around IT and financial.

Thank you.

Dr. Taft: To the same minister: given the damaging censure this week imposed on three universities in Ontario for improper safeguards over corporate funding of university programs, when will his department start working to tighten controls over corporate and other influence on postsecondary programs, funding, and research?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Weadick: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Yes, Alberta is a very collaborative place, and we do have a lot of relationships between business and postsecondaries as they work to solve the problems of the world. We're very proud of those relationships, but we also stand behind our institutions being fully at arm's length, operating with full academic freedom, with the ability to do the projects that they value and see as important to Albertans.

Critical Electricity Transmission Lines

Mrs. Jablonski: Mr. Speaker, a number of my constituents in Red Deer have talked to me about transmission lines in Alberta. Last month the government accepted the findings of the Critical Transmission Review Committee. Can the Minister of Energy explain the government's rationale for proceeding with this massive infrastructure project? Do we really need two lines instead of one?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Dr. Morton: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The answer is, yes, we do, and the answer is because of the dramatic growth. Since the last time the north-south backbone of our system was strengthened, 40 years ago, we've doubled in size, from under 2 million to almost 4 million. Since the need for reinforcement of the north-south grid, which is the backbone between Edmonton and Calgary – 85 per cent of Albertans live up and down the highway 2 corridor – was first identified in 2002, another 700,000 people have moved to Alberta. By the time we get the first line built, by 2015 or 2016, we're looking at another 200,000 people.

The Speaker: The hon. member, please.

Mrs. Jablonski: Thank you. Some of my constituents have also talked to me about the availability of natural gas in the Calgary region. Will the Minister of Energy explain why we can't see more generation closer to Calgary? Would that not reduce the need for two transmission lines?

Dr. Morton: Mr. Speaker, it's an excellent question, and my constituents have asked me the same question. The answer is this. We're going to see lots more gas generation closer to Calgary. Enmax is building a plant at Shepard, TransAlta may build one at High River, but we're also going to see lots more gas transmission in the north on brownfield sites where existing coal plants are. There are all sorts of advantages there. You have existing sites, connections, community acceptance, but most important of all the brownfield sites in the north have water licences. Water licences are very, very hard to get in southern Alberta.

Mrs. Jablonski: Mr. Speaker, my next question is also to the Minister of Energy. Won't this cost too much, and what's the

point of building a world-class system that we can't afford? It's all because my constituents are afraid of having to pay too much money.

Dr. Morton: Mr. Speaker, another very good question and a question that I get from my constituents as well. The answer here is fairly simple. These two lines are going to cost around \$3 billion to build, but because they're intended to last, to serve Albertans for the next 40 years, we are proposing and we are undertaking to extend the financing, the repayment of this, over the next 40 years, not front-end loaded on the users for this first decade. The Premier has made a commitment, and I've made the commitment. We want to do what's right not just for the next couple of years but what's right for the next couple of decades. Spreading out the costs like that will protect consumers, commercial and residential, for the next decade.

The Speaker: Hon. members, we've expended the time allocated today for question-and-answer period. Eighteen members were recognized, with 106 questions and responses.

2:40

Statement by the Speaker

Anniversary of the First Session of the Legislative Assembly

The Speaker: Before we continue, I'd just like to draw to your attention the significance of this day in the history of the province of Alberta. One hundred and six years ago today, on March 15, 1906, some 4,000 people attended the opening of the First Session of the First Legislature in the history of the province of Alberta. This occurred at the Thistle rink here in Edmonton. As its first item of business the new Legislative Assembly elected Charles Wellington Fisher as its first Speaker. Fisher's nomination came through a nomination by Premier Alexander C. Rutherford, which was seconded by Charles W. Cross, the Attorney General and Member for Edson.

Premier Rutherford's speech at the opening of the First Legislature explained that the House would be "laying the foundations of empire in this new land" – I want you to listen very carefully – and he called to mind the significance of the role of the Speaker in this endeavour.

Members' Statements

(continued)

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

World Consumer Rights Day

Mr. Cao: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. Today is World Consumer Rights Day. Fifty years ago President John F. Kennedy outlined his vision for consumer rights. "Consumers, by definition, include us all," he said in his speech. In commemoration of that speech government and consumer organizations around the world recognize March 15 as World Consumer Rights Day each year.

Here in Alberta we know that a fair marketplace encourages consumer confidence and that consumer confidence is vital to the healthy and vibrant free-enterprise economy of our province. This is why the Alberta government has strong consumer protection laws and works hard to enforce them. Last year alone the Service Alberta ministry investigated more than 800 consumer complaints and recovered nearly \$1 million on behalf of consumers. The

courts gave offenders nearly \$131,000 in fines and in some cases jail time.

But enforcement is only part of protecting consumers. Consumer education is a basic right, and the Service Alberta ministry has resources to keep consumers wise on the problems out there. People who are aware of their rights and responsibilities and who know how to spot warning signs are in a better position to avoid scams and dishonest businesspeople. When consumers have concerns, they can call the consumer contact centre at 1.877.427.4088. The centre assisted more than 275,000 Albertans last year alone with information, referrals, and help in filing formal complaints. So while World Consumer Rights Day is being celebrated around the world, we promote consumer rights and awareness right here in Alberta that help us all.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-North Hill.

Social Enterprise

Mr. Fawcett: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It's an honour to rise today to talk about the need for a social innovation agenda here in this province, one where there is an important role for social enterprise in this agenda. Social enterprises are organizations that sell goods or provide services in the market for the purpose of creating a blended return on investment, both financial and social. Their profits are returned to the business or to a social purpose rather than maximizing profits for shareholders. Broadly speaking, they're privately owned ventures that have a strong blended financial and socially responsible return on investment.

Benefits to communities and society include stimulating economic revitalization, reducing poverty, creating employment opportunities and experience, reducing crime, addressing environmental issues, providing accessible health care, building social capital, enhancing cultural capital, integrating immigrants, and providing basic services to underserved communities.

But the most important benefit, Mr. Speaker, is facilitating social innovation. Social innovation usually happens between the profit, not-for-profit, and public service sectors, and it happens when perspectives of these three sectors collide to spark new ways of thinking.

Mr. Speaker, in the Manning Centre for Building Democracy's special briefing on big society and social responsibility this past June, Nicholas Gafuik, who is a good friend of mine from university, indicated that civically engaged communities are essential for better social outcomes and that government alone is just not enough. That's why I brought forward Motion 507 on the Order Paper under private members' business, where I suggest the government undertake a review of current social entrepreneurship in Alberta in order to aid the development of a platform that will encourage co-operation within and among the public, private, and not-for-profit sectors relating to social enterprise.

Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

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

Long-term Care for Seniors

Ms Notley: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. There are far too many seniors in Alberta not getting the help they need because of a government that has not acted. This failure is reflected in at least four ways.

First, in the long-term care centres we do have, there are no staff-to-patient ratios. As government funding falls short or profit margins are prioritized, staff are cut, they burn out, and patient

care is deeply compromised. We've shared countless reports of seniors being left in their own waste for hours, falling while unattended, or being fed in bed, where they are left to linger for days, yet this government has not acted.

Secondly, this government broke its promise to build new long-term care. Instead, long-term care spaces have disappeared. Long-term care provides the greatest level of medical care. Studies show that patients in long-term care end up in hospital much less than those who rely on lower care assisted living, yet the Tories repeatedly stick to their mantra, one that defies the evidence of all experts, that assisted living spaces with standards that are a moving target can somehow provide the care that is required by our most vulnerable seniors, so this government has not acted.

The government brags about funding new spaces in assisted living, yet after three years they cannot tell us what level of care is provided in those spaces. The minister of health had the audacity to suggest that the horrible experience of the Denyer family at a private assisted living centre happened because the centre misrepresented the level of care they provided. But if this government can't tell us what level of care their assisted living spaces provide, how do they expect vulnerable seniors and their families to be able to decipher the standards? So when it comes to protecting families and seniors from exploitive centres, this government has not acted.

Now, if that isn't all bad enough, this Premier proposes to lift the fee cap on long-term care although they refuse to come clean with Albertans on that until after the election. If this plan goes forward, exorbitant fee structures will be used for patient cherry-picking and as a tool for intimidating seniors and their families who don't behave. The Tories need to commit to keeping the fee cap, not for 12 months but indefinitely.

Once again, this government has not acted, and all Albertans, Mr. Speaker, will pay the price.

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

Goodwill Industries of Alberta

Ms Woo-Paw: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Goodwill Industries of Alberta is a not-for-profit agency that provides training and job opportunities for Albertans with disabilities and other barriers to employment. In Calgary Goodwill partners with persons with developmental disability funding agencies such as the Calgary Progressive Lifestyles Foundation, Columbia College, and Prospect Human Services. Donated goods and clothing are collected and sold in their retail stores to support employment programs for Albertans with employment challenges.

On March 9 the Minister of Seniors attended the grand opening of Goodwill Industries' new Chinook store in Calgary, and what a great celebration it was. Everyone who attended was given a T-shirt to wear that says One Man's V-neck Is Another Man's Future. This is such an appropriate slogan because it uniquely tells the story of Goodwill Industries, the items they collect and sell and the people they employ.

We all know that having a job means much more than just a paycheque. It gives us a sense of pride, a way to connect with our community, meet new people, and learn new skills. Employers who hire people with disabilities have learned that these individuals have plenty of valuable skills to contribute to their workplaces. Unfortunately, there are still attitudes out there in the job market that can make finding meaningful work a challenge for people with disabilities. That's why we need employers like Goodwill, who are willing to give Albertans with disabilities a chance to show us what they can do, and they can do a lot.

In 2011 Goodwill employed 34 PDD clients at four locations in Calgary. Goodwill has contributed \$6 million to the Calgary economy and saved over 4 million kilograms of used clothing and household goods from going into our landfills.

Mr. Speaker, Goodwill is an outstanding example for businesses in all of our communities to follow. Thank you very much.

Notices of Motions

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Advanced Education and Technology.

Mr. Weadick: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise pursuant to Standing Order 34(3.1) to advise the House that on Monday, March 19, 2012, Written Question 2 will be accepted, and Written Question 1 will be dealt with. Also on Monday, March 19, 2012, Motion for a Return 3 will be accepted, and motions for returns 1, 2, and 4 will be dealt with.

Thank you.

2:50

Introduction of Bills

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Strathcona.

Bill 205 Scrap Metal Dealers and Recyclers Identification Act

Mr. Quest: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I request leave to introduce a bill being the Scrap Metal Dealers and Recyclers Identification Act.

Mr. Speaker, this bill addresses a serious problem that exists across the province today. In the first 11 months of 2011 there was over \$1.5 million worth of copper wire stolen in Edmonton and Calgary alone. These thefts are only profitable because there's a market for the metal. My bill's goal is to close a large part of that market. My bill will permit the province to require that scrap metal dealers and recyclers keep a record of those they buy their metal from in order to facilitate catching sellers of stolen goods. I look forward to debating this bill soon with all hon. members.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

[Motion carried; Bill 205 read a first time]

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre on behalf of the hon. Member for Calgary-Buffer.

Bill 209 Homeowner Protection Act

Ms Blakeman: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Indeed, I am very honoured to be able to rise on behalf of my colleague the Member for Calgary-Buffer to introduce Bill 209, the Homeowner Protection Act.

Now, this bill is modelled on the B.C. legislation. The purpose of it is to strengthen consumer protection for buyers of new homes, to improve the quality of residential construction, and to support research and education respecting residential construction in Alberta. It establishes a homeowner protection office and requires residential builders to be licensed by the homeowner protection office. Residential builders can lose their licences if they contravene the act.

Home warranty insurance will now be mandatory on all new homes and must provide coverage as follows: three years on defects in materials and labour, five years on defects in the

building envelope, and 10 years on structural defects. Monetary penalties may be imposed on anyone who contravenes the act.

It also establishes a public registry of residential builders which lists their current licence as well as any suspensions or monetary penalties that have been imposed. If a homeowner is required to leave their home for a period of more than a month, 30 days, on account of needed repairs, the bill requires the home warranty insurance provider to cover any property taxes or utility fees during this period.

There are a number of other sections to it which I won't go into. I look forward to the opportunity to participate in the debate of this bill.

At this point, on behalf of the Member for Calgary-Buffer I move first reading. Thank you.

[Motion carried; Bill 209 read a first time]

Tabling Returns and Reports

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona, then Calgary-Varsity, then Edmonton-Centre.

Ms Notley: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'd like to table the appropriate number of copies of a petition signed by 293 Albertans and collected by Concerned Neighbours in Partnership. The petition reads:

We, the undersigned residents of Alberta, petition the Legislative Assembly of Alberta to pass legislation to repeal the Land Assembly Project Area Act . . . and its amending Bill 23 . . . the Alberta Land Stewardship Act . . . and its amending Bill 10 . . . the Electric Statutes Amendment Act . . . and Carbon Capture and Storage Bill . . . thereby restoring property and democratic rights of Alberta landowners.

Thank you.

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

Mr. Chase: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm tabling a further 20 letters out of the hundreds I've received from the following individuals who are concerned about the proposed logging in the west Bragg Creek area and who are requesting a complete facilitated and accessible public consultation: Shawn Bond, James Penman, Linda Torinski, Jane Snider, Daryl Gingras, Darlene Barrett, Jennifer VanZwam, Sheila More, Carol Ann Schmaltz, Lynn Gallen, Rod Burns, Deborah Klein, Keith Tanner, James and Paula Bildfell, Tammi Kozub, Peter and Linda Cruttenden, Giles Parker, and Matt Dymont.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

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

Ms Blakeman: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I'd like to make some tablings on behalf of the Leader of the Official Opposition of some documents that were referenced in the leader's questions of Tuesday, March 13. These are fact sheets provided by the Parkland Institute on research dealing with the aging population, for-profit delivery of long-term care, the Alberta Health Quality Council report, and a number of other fact sheets on care for seniors in our province.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: Are there others? The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre on tablings.

Mr. Elniski: Yes. Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'd like to table the appropriate number of copies of an e-mail I received today from

Mrs. Marion McIlwraith, the assistant principal at M.E. LaZerte school, thanking for the little bit of a member's statement we did last week on Thom Elniski. In it she states:

While Doug was speaking three of the Wild rose members were chatting quite loudly. I felt bad for Nicola, Thom's [widow] . . . They are definitely disrespectful and not good role models for the students who were watching. I hope I have it right that it was the Wild rose party, they were sitting on the far right side facing us.

I have assured her that it was.

Thank you.

The Speaker: Hon. members, the chair wishes to table the appropriate number of copies of a letter received today from the hon. Member for Strathcona's constituency with respect to private members' business.

I also indicated yesterday that I would make some comment today with respect to the letter that I'd received on Wednesday of this week requesting that a certain order of business be advanced. I indicated that members might want to refer to *Hansard* going back in the past.

Statement by the Speaker Private Members' Public Bills

The Speaker: I'll be rather brief here today because much of this is indicated previously in the Assembly. We dealt with it on November 27, 2001; December 1, 2003; May 8, 2006; November 23, 2009. I indicated then that the processes guiding us here in the Assembly is Speaker Schumacher's ruling of February 11, 1997, when he outlined a procedure for early consideration of bills. Point 3 was that if a member wants early consideration of his or her bill, they must write to the Speaker prior to the opening of the Assembly on the sitting day before the bill is to be considered. This certainly was done this week, when the Official Opposition House Leader wrote yesterday requesting early consideration on behalf of the leader of the caucus, and the letter was tabled yesterday as well.

Point 4 in the 1997 ruling is:

When a member requests that his or her Bill be considered before its due date, the Bill will be called after debate has concluded on the private member's public Bill that is then before the House or Committee of the Whole, assuming that no other Bills have reached their due dates.

In this case no other bills until a few minutes ago were even identified for being considered as the Member for Strathcona has just introduced his bill. So according to the practice and precedents which this Assembly has relied upon since 1997, Bill 203 will be the first order of business on Monday, March 19, 2012, after Orders of the Day are called. Once again the chair hopes that the next Legislature will review this issue.

As for Monday the chair notes that there may be time to have the Member for Strathcona move his bill for second reading if Committee of the Whole does not go the two-hour extension. Looking back for the length of the debate on this bill earlier this week, it did not reach two hours, in fact. One would suspect – and it seems to be almost unanimous consent of the Assembly, so one could almost think in one's head that the amount of time that would be utilized in committee on Monday would not be anywhere near that two-hour time frame, which, hopefully, will allow the hon. Member for Strathcona to stand and move his bill for second reading as well.

Of course, once again, the bill will be taken up and can be taken up when the Assembly reconvenes on April 2 following the constituency week break.

Tablings to the Clerk

The Clerk: I wish to advise the House that the following document was deposited with the office of the Clerk. On behalf of the hon. Mr. Bhullar, Minister of Service Alberta, response to questions raised by Mr. Kang, hon. Member for Calgary-McCall, and Ms Notley, hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona, on February 15, 2012, Department of Service Alberta main estimates debate.

Projected Government Business

The Speaker: Official Opposition House Leader, you go first.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. According to Standing Order 7(6) I would now ask the Deputy Government House Leader to please share with us the projected government House business for the week beginning the evening of Monday, the 19th of March, or perhaps the afternoon of Tuesday, the 20th of March.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Deputy Government House Leader.

Mr. Weadick: Thank you. Our projected government business for the week of March 19 will be second reading, Committee of the Whole, and third reading on Bill 7, the Appropriation Act, 2012. We'll be projecting Committee of the Whole and third reading on Bill 4, Bill 2, Bill 5, and Bill 6.

Thank you.

3:00

Ms Blakeman: Sorry. Excuse me. Could we get an expansion of that? We usually get when this is going to happen so that we're able to schedule to have the correct people on. You've told me what you're doing but not when. If you would be able to share that with me, perhaps a paper version a little later, that would help.

The Speaker: Well, let's do it now because we're in the Assembly, and all members have the right to know.

Ms Blakeman: Yes, sir. I agree.

Mr. Weadick: I would be happy to share a paper version with all of the members here later today.

The Speaker: Okay. So, hon. minister, that's to all desks, all members. There is some courtesy that's required in all of this.

Mr. Weadick: Yes.

Orders of the Day Government Bills and Orders Second Reading

Bill 7 Appropriation Act, 2012

The Speaker: The hon. Deputy Premier and President of the Treasury Board and Enterprise.

Mr. Horner: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure to rise today to move second reading of Bill 7, the Appropriation Act, 2012.

The act will provide funding authority to the offices of the Legislative Assembly and the government for the 2012-13 fiscal year. The schedule to the act provides amounts that were presented in greater detail in the 2012-13 government and Legislative Assembly estimates tabled on February 9, 2012, and then subsequently debated in Committee of Supply and policy field committees over the past many days.

Through Budget 2012 the government of Alberta is following through on its commitment to Albertans by responsibly investing in programs that support Albertans' quality of life without raising taxes and positioning the province to balance the budget by 2013-14. Seventy-five per cent of this budget is focused on the core programs of health, education, and human services. It provides Albertans with better access to health care and support for our growing seniors population while ensuring a better quality of life for the vulnerable and continuing to build the best education system in Canada.

It delivers on the Premier's commitment to invest in family care clinics, enhance AISH benefits, strengthen child care subsidies, and provide stable funding for education, postsecondary, and municipalities to improve their planning. Budget 2012 is the start of what we want to accomplish on behalf of Albertans and lays the foundation for what we are striving to achieve over the next 10 years.

I ask all Members of the Legislative Assembly to support this bill. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar on the debate.

Mr. MacDonald: Yes. Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Certainly, the hon. member is correct. There was quite a discussion on this budget through the committee process or whatever you want to call it these days. It was a process that many opposition members found quite frustrating. There were certainly many questions asked but very few direct answers.

I think that whenever we discuss any budget of this government, we have to be cautious. Budgets change here frequently. In this Appropriation Act we are certainly giving ourselves significant room to manoeuvre. The President of the Treasury Board and Enterprise may transfer money around. That's understandable. There are limits, and there have been limits set, but there's always a way around that. One only has to wait until the quarterly updates to see.

I had a discussion in budget debates regarding the estimates and the amount that is requested through this appropriation bill. I was never, never satisfied with the answers I received from the President of the Treasury Board and Enterprise whenever I brought this up. If hon. members look at the budget estimates, there is an actual amount in each and every department for 2010-11, there is a budget amount for 2011-12 and a forecast amount for 2011-12, and the estimates for the year 2012-13. One could go through each and every department, and I did with some departments. After I had this discussion with the Treasury Board president and his officials at committee, I thought I would reread what the minister had referred me to and have a second look.

The minister suggested that the changes that I was talking about in the actuals, in the audited financial statements from the annual reports from 2010-11 – the departments had been reorganized in October when the new Premier took over, and that is the reason why those amounts from the annual report would have changed.

The hon. minister directed me to page iii of the budget estimates. I challenged him then and I'm going to challenge the government now over the government reorganization and how there could be differences in the government estimates and how they would reflect differently in the annual report for 2010-11 of the government of Alberta, in Budget 2011, tabled on February 24, 2011, and in the third-quarter fiscal update, released on February 9, 2012.

Now, again, to be specific, there's no mention of any of the ministry's annual reports in this adjustment, if one wants to call it that. The principal changes to the government budget lines, or the estimates, the changes that are in amounts of \$1 million or more, are apparently mentioned in these three documents. You can go down the list. You have Human Services; we know where that came from. We have the Ministry of Intergovernmental, International and Aboriginal Relations. I must say that I had an event at a francophone community here the other day, and they were so disappointed that the Francophone Secretariat had been moved to the Ministry of Intergovernmental, International and Aboriginal Relations. They couldn't understand why that happened, and I had to admit to them, Mr. Speaker, that neither could I.

Now, the Ministry of Municipal Affairs, the Ministry of Infrastructure, the Ministry of Executive Council, the Ministry of Finance, the Ministry of Solicitor General and Public Security, and the Ministry of Treasury Board and Enterprise: these are the ones, according to the budget estimates, where there were significant organizational changes. So maybe there could be some budget changes.

Specifically with Alberta Health, in Bill 7 here there is a request for \$15.8 billion in expenses and an additional \$77 million in capital investment. This is what is requested through Bill 7 for the department of health. Now, the department of health is not on this list, but whenever you compare the budget estimates for the department of health with the annual report for 2010-11 – and I remind you that this is an audited annual report from the office of the Auditor General – I would like answers from the government, and I feel that these are reasonable questions.

When I look at this request for \$15.8 billion and then I look at the actual amount for Health and Wellness, which my research indicates was not changed whatsoever with the government reorganization in October of last year – so there were no changes in that – there's no explanation from the government on why the annual report indicates that in the communications budget of Health and Wellness \$1,701,000 was spent. But in this budget document, the actual is \$400,000 more. Strategic corporate support: again a different number, a number that's greater than what's anticipated in the budget estimates for that year. This goes on and on and on, and I would just like an explanation from someone on the government side as to why these numbers are different.

3:10

The President of the Treasury Board tried to explain, but I really don't believe, Mr. Speaker, that he understood. He pretended that he did and that it was my interpretation of this, but it's clear in here that there's a different set of numbers. These are actuals from 2010-11. I have the annual report before me. There's one that is so far out that I think the government should do some research on this and respond back to the Assembly here on Monday. I just need an explanation.

Now, I'm looking in government estimates, element 6.2, immunization support. In 2010-11 the actual in here that was spent was \$10,067,000, but if you look at the annual report for the same year, that was released last summer while the Progressive

Conservative leadership race was on, you will see where immunization support for operating expense and equipment/inventory purchases was essentially a hundred million dollars. That's a big difference. That's a 2010-11 actual, \$110 million, and this is an audited financial statement from the office of the Auditor General. Yet we have this big difference from what is listed in the estimates, and that total goes through to Bill 7, a hundred million dollars versus \$10 million. [interjection] Yes. I looked at this.

I also looked at a couple of other departments, including the other support programs amount in the actuals for Health and Wellness for 2010-11 in the estimates. It's stated here that the actual amount spent was \$13.1 million, but when I look at the annual report, the audited annual report, for other support programs it's \$37 million. So that's again a significant difference. It's close to \$24 million. What's going on here? When I look at other support programs under the same spending element, they're the same. Out-of-province health care services, \$107 million. It's the same; it balances. Why are some numbers the same and some numbers different?

Before we go any further, I would certainly point out one-time operating funding, half a billion dollars. So you would think that maybe that changed. But we see, Mr. Speaker, where it did not. That would be an example of one expense that was standard or consistent, but other support programs were not. Continuing care initiatives were the same. Health services provided in correctional facilities: \$26 million is what's stated in the annual report.

Before we go any further with this budget, I really think the government owes taxpayers and the Official Opposition an explanation as to why in two different government financial reports we have two different sets of numbers. I may be wrong here, but I thought that once an annual report was audited and it was published, if there was a change to the actual number, there would be an adjustment noted. Now, I would really appreciate an explanation on Monday or whenever we get back into debate on this. I would really appreciate an explanation to that.

I would also like a further explanation – and there's a lot of money here in rent supplement programs. I'm not saying that they are a bad thing, but I would like to know more before I vote on this bill. The rent supplement program along with associated revenue from federal transfers is now administered by the Alberta Social Housing Corporation out of its statutory appropriations. This program had previously been reported as part of the expense supply vote of the Department of Municipal Affairs. Both the corporation's and the department's comparable amounts have been restated accordingly, and that's explained here. The question I would have is: in the future are we going to have to go to the Alberta Social Housing Corporation to see how much of a rent supplement there is and where it is going or, essentially, which landlords are getting the supplement? How is that program going to be administered?

Ms Blakeman: It's gone, isn't it?

Mr. MacDonald: Well, this is what I don't understand about this note in the estimates. It's gone into Alberta Social Housing Corporation, and how does an opposition person or an interested citizen or a taxpayer figure out how much money is being spent and where? Is it inside the budget documents, or is it outside? I guess that's the question, hon. members.

Before I conclude, Mr. Speaker, I also have some questions about the AISH program which I never had an opportunity to get on the record during debate and also questions regarding PDD funding. I think that in light of the time I'd better do the PDD funding first.

Certainly, there are individuals, particularly parents of PDD clients, who are quite concerned about the inspection process of their home or the facility that is now being set up. I think it's being set up for the 1st of April. They're quite worried about, essentially, whether they're going to pass the inspection or not.

I find it quite interesting that this group is now being inspected on a regular basis when for other groups that we have thought should have been inspected for years, there doesn't seem to be any change on the part of the government to make sure that, for instance, let's say, nursing homes are inspected in a routine fashion and that the inspections occur at random times. They don't phone in advance and say, "I'm coming to Stony Plain on Thursday of next week" so that it gives the operator time to get everything all polished and organized. Random inspections have a purpose. The results of the inspection: make them public.

Speaking of public, in Public Accounts yesterday – and I haven't had a chance yet to check it out – it was implied by Alberta Seniors that all of the inspection reports from all facility inspections are available online. I'm looking forward over the weekend to having a look to see if I can find those inspection reports.

Ms Notley: You won't find much in them.

Mr. MacDonald: I won't find much in them. Will I be disappointed?

Ms Notley: You'll be a little disappointed at the specifics.

3:20

Mr. MacDonald: Okay. I don't want to pick on anyone here, but I was at a Hardisty nursing home the other day, and one of the children of a resident, a fellow that, I would assume, was well over 40, asked me about the inspection reports and where he could find them. I hope I didn't mislead him. I told him: well, I don't know that they're publicly available. I told him that they should be and that they should be right there on the bulletin board for you to look at, but they weren't there.

I hear that now in this budget year PDD folks are going to have to open their homes to an inspector and have the inspector look around. Maybe it's a good thing; maybe it's not. Whenever I hear from the PDD folks, they think it's an overreaction. They could be right because so many of these individuals and so many of these families are doing as much as they can so that other people can live in dignity and respect. I think we should always respect that, Mr. Speaker.

In conclusion with Bill 7, I can give the government members many examples of numbers that are totally different from the annual report when we're comparing our budget actuals in 2010-11 to what we're requesting this year in the budget estimates. I will sit down and work with the government members if they can provide me with an explanation as to why these numbers were changed with some amounts and not changed with others. We're not talking \$1,000 or \$500,000 here. In one case in the health budget we're talking in excess of \$100 million. I think taxpayers are owed an explanation before we vote on this budget.

Thank you very much.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona, followed by the hon. Member for Airdrie-Chestermere, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview.

Ms Notley: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's a pleasure to rise to speak on Bill 7 in second reading. This is, of course, a very important bill. This is the bill which will ultimately result in the approval of the budget that this government has put forward, the

first budget put forward by our new Premier and one which, at one point, I think the Premier and her staff had believed would circumscribe the political platform of the campaign that they hope to successfully launch. I think that in many people's eyes the decision to stay here to pass this budget is being seriously reconsidered in terms of its overarching wisdom. Nonetheless, we are here, and we are looking at this budget.

[Mr. Zwozdesky in the chair]

I have to say that it's interesting that this is a budget that the Premier would have decided to bet her government's political future on because it's not exactly a budget that I would describe, in the words of the Premier's well-known campaign manager, as bold. Really, it's a budget that I would describe as being the kind of thing where you're really frantically cleaning up because you've got a bunch of people that have suddenly announced they're coming over to your house and you forgot that you'd actually invited them. So rather than actually doing a proper cleaning, you're sort of sweeping stuff under the rug and hoping that nobody notices. That's sort of the sense that I get when I read through this budget and as I participated in the debates that we had over the course of the last five weeks.

Now, as someone who has spent a lot of time engaging in budget debate, who believes that budget debate is really a fundamental role of legislators, I need to put it on the record that I think it was an extremely antidemocratic, untransparent decision on the part of the Premier and those whom she directs to have three ministries have their budget debate on the same day. It's ridiculous as it is that we only have, you know, three hours to debate budgets that are up to \$14 billion, \$15 billion, but that, in addition, we had those budget debates happening at the same time as other ministries' budget debates was remarkably rushed and untransparent. It really undermined the quality of the oversight that could be given to the government's decision in this regard.

Generally speaking, we're looking at a budget that, I would suggest, is based on assumptions and presumptions which are highly optimistic in some cases, that probably are not terribly evidence based, that try to gloss over some of the significant policy challenges that this government has by sort of issuing a press release, attaching a couple of million dollars to it, and hoping that no one notices that they haven't really addressed the challenge and hoping that people will just give them one more turn, and that way they will make the hard decisions after the election. This is very much a *mañana, mañana* budget. This is: let's just sort of, you know, sneak this under, and then we'll have an election, and then we'll make the hard decisions, but we really don't want to have the conversation about the fundamental fiscal challenges that exist in this province.

Let me just start in a few areas. I guess the first thing that is really important to the NDP caucus – and we say this in pretty much every budget debate, but it's worth reminding people – is that a report of the parliamentary financial officer a couple of years ago did a 25-year review of all of the governments in Canada, federal and provincial, and went through that review and concluded that the governments most likely to balance their budget in Canada were NDP governments. Who knew? But, indeed, it was true. That's even taking into account the incredibly ineffective attempt at balancing the budget that we saw in Ontario under the now federal Liberal Leader, Bob Rae. The NDP even took responsibility for that failure in that set of statistics but still came out ahead as the government most likely to balance the budget.

One of the ways that happens, Mr. Speaker, is that we take a realistic view of our revenue situation, and we balance it in a way that meets the interests of the greatest number of citizens, not corporations who have their head offices in some city outside of this country, not the top 2 per cent of the most wealthy but the greatest number of citizens.

We think that there are three things that we could do that would generate more revenue so that we could actually have a realistic conversation about some of the policy challenges we have as well as a realistic conversation about places that need to be changed or reduced. The fact of the matter is that, you know, the general rate for corporate income tax in Alberta – and this is something that our party was the only one to vote against consistently as the government was reducing the rate of corporate income tax – is 10 per cent. The average of the 10 provinces is 12.3 per cent. No other province has a rate of less than 10 per cent. Given that Alberta has no sales tax, we already offer a significant tax advantage, so corporate taxes could be increased moderately while maintaining Alberta's competitive tax position, and in so doing, we could increase revenue.

Personal income taxes. Because of Alberta's flat tax upper-income Albertans pay the same 10 per cent as everyone else who has taxable income. No other province comes close to the 10 per cent rate that we apply for upper-income earners. Ontario's top marginal rate is 11.16 per cent – that's the closest – but upper-income earners in Ontario also pay a surtax on top of that. Newfoundland and Labrador are the next lowest, at a 13.3 per cent tax rate for their upper-income earners. So, easily, Alberta could increase just by one or two points what it is we are having our upper-income earners pay and still remain the most competitive province in the country. In so doing, we could increase the revenue coming into this province to deal with some of the unresolved and unaddressed and ignored issues that this government has not dealt with over so long.

The other thing, of course, that we talk about in our caucus is the fact that this government essentially capitulated to the oil and gas industry. They knew that the majority of Albertans wanted to see a fair royalty structure. Their own experts recommended that we needed to have a fair royalty structure. The Auditor General said that we needed to have a fair royalty structure. This government ran on creating a fair royalty structure, and then their friends in the oil and gas industry got angry and started threatening them and created another party, and then, you know, all heck broke loose.

Needless to say, we've not moved forward anywhere on that, and we are selling our resources for a song at the expense of our environment, at the expense of our children, at the expense of our future. It's the most horrendously negligent management of one of the richest resources in the world that I've ever seen, Mr. Speaker. The fact that this budget doesn't deal with that is just one of the many concerns we have about it.

3:30

Now, when you look at the expenditure side of the coin, Mr. Speaker, there are a few areas where we have concerns. Generally speaking, there were some good areas. I want to give the government credit for the change that they made to the AISH system. It's been long coming. I know that the minister is very conscious of the fact that the cheques go out March 26, which may also happen to be the day the Premier decides to drop the writ, and that's a little bit coincidental.

I certainly hope that going forward we will not have to rely on an election cycle to see some of our most vulnerable Albertans receive an income that would keep them within sight, at least, of

the poverty line. Of course, they're unfortunately on the wrong side of the poverty line in Alberta, but if we can at least sort of keep them moving forward somewhat, that would be a good thing.

It's good that we've put money into AISH. The concern that I have is that there are a vast number of Albertans who don't qualify for AISH. In the income support itself, the ministry recognizes that there is a vast group of Albertans who they deem as having barriers to full employment as a result of chronic illness, permanent illness, or permanent disability, yet those people aren't eligible for AISH. They live on an amount of money which is about – I don't know. I know that if that person has two children, as a single parent they receive something like \$1,100 a month. That's shameful in a province that claims to be as rich as ours, Mr. Speaker.

Advanced Education. Everybody is the first to sing the praises of advanced education and talk about how our future will be built on that. Unfortunately, this government is not the first to dedicate adequate resources to it. The ministry's total budget has once again decreased and this time by more than 2 per cent. I appreciate that some of that is capital expenditure, but there's a reason for why that capital expenditure was there.

They've been touting their three-year funding commitment, but it's no big celebration if we're spending three years telling people: "Guess what? We're going to pay you this amount. You can count on not getting enough for the next three years." That's not at all what we need. There are a multiplicity of areas within the advanced education system that are not receiving adequate support and where the quality of education and the accessibility of education in our province are deteriorating and going down. Here we are on the eve of another boom – at least that's what everyone says – and we're walking away from our advanced education system.

Education, K to 12. A critical, important issue. It's an issue that matters a great deal to me. Again, the same argument. In fact, it's even worse than it is with advanced education. This ministry and this Premier celebrated themselves repeatedly because they actually gave back the money that they took out six months ago, and somehow that was supposed to represent a change. Again, promising a three-year predictable cycle of funding, when it's very clear that the predictable cycle of funding is grossly inadequate, is not a victory. It doesn't help that we know that for the next three years we're not going to have enough money.

This budget assumes that salary increases for teachers will only be 1 per cent. Given what we know – that we're talking about a boom, that we know what the cost of living is, that MLAs here expect to receive 4 or 5 per cent – I have no idea why it is that we would budget on a 1 per cent increase for teachers. Clearly, we're going to shortchange it. So we're not dealing with that properly.

We once again continue to be one of the only provinces in the country that does not fund school lunch programs across the board for high-needs students. Our students pay for that, our children pay for that, and our educational outcomes reflect that.

We once again have failed to fund full-day kindergarten. A promise made, but it hasn't been done. I do not accept, Mr. Speaker, that it's something that we can't do or we can't start working on now. We do have the capital infrastructure to facilitate full-day kindergarten in a number of communities across the province. It is not necessary to put off rolling out that process to next year. We could have started that work in some communities this year, but we didn't want to do it because we didn't want to deal with the fact that it would cost more, and we didn't want to put that into the budget's bottom line.

Special needs. This year the province gave back some money in terms of special needs, and they put in, I think, about a 20 per cent

increase or something. But once you take into account population increase and inflation over the last three and a half years, where special-needs funding has been frozen, effectively all this government did was make up for what they've not been paying for the last four years with special-needs funding.

We have a special-needs education crisis in our education system. The plans that the government has in terms of restructuring it around action on inclusion, frankly, I think are flawed. If you are going to introduce that plan, it actually involves a significant investment up front, and that's not planned for, which means that the action on inclusion is going to be an utter disaster. Our special-needs children will pay the price, and the government knows that.

Capital expenditure. We're not investing enough in building new schools, in maintaining our old schools, and in doing it in a transparent fashion so that it's not subject to political gamesmanship.

Health. It's very possible that we don't need to increase funding in health that much, other than, you know, inflation and population, because it's so poorly managed right now. The problem is that this budget doesn't deal with that. This budget refuses to deal with the chronic shortage of long-term care beds. This budget pays only lip service to the desperate need for more home-care services, and this budget again pays only lip service to mental health services. By failing to invest in that, we are going to put greater cost pressures onto the most expensive part of our system, which is our acute-care system. It's this inaction which is jeopardizing our health care system.

I still believe that the plans that we saw two or three years ago, talking about different mechanisms of allowing for a privatization fee, are still being discussed over there, and I'm concerned about that. [Ms Notley's speaking time expired] That's all I can say at this point, Mr. Speaker.

The Acting Speaker: Thank you very much, hon. member.

Standing Order 29(2)(a) is available for any questions or comments regarding the previous speech. The hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview.

Dr. Taft: On 29(2)(a), Mr. Speaker. I was on the edge of my seat listening to the member's comments, and I'm wondering if she has more to say?

Ms Notley: Well, I do appreciate that from the member because there were just a couple of points left that I did want to mention.

We still at the end of the day in this province need a child care strategy that actually addresses the growing child care needs of Alberta's young families, and that's not found in this budget. In fact, this budget is yet another example of what this government loves to do. It likes to put just little pittances of money into something and then put almost as much money into the press conference to try to create an impression of having done something. In fact, our subsidy system means that even our lowest income parents are still spending \$400, \$500, \$600 a month on child care if they can afford it, which they can't. The majority of Alberta's families are still paying \$1,200, \$1,300 a month for child care, and that's if they can find it. So we're not dealing with that problem, and I think that's a real concern.

The other issue is that we're not anywhere in this budget seeing any plan to deal with the huge challenge faced by all Alberta consumers when it comes to our out-of-control electricity costs. There is no mechanism in this government to deal with the gouging of Alberta's consumers and business owners arising as a result of this government's ill-informed plan to embark upon deregulation. It's not there. It's unpredictable. I constantly have

people talk to me on the street about how they can't afford this government's mistakes. There's nothing in this budget that is indicating any plan on the part of this government to fix its mistake in that regard.

I think that kind of wraps up our primary concerns with this budget. I'm sure there'll be more that are raised over the course of debate. But I appreciate the time.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Acting Speaker: Thank you.

Anyone else under 29(2)(a)?

If not, we'll move on with the main motion on Bill 7. The chair will recognize Airdrie-Chestermere, followed by Edmonton-Riverview.

3:40

Mr. Anderson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Well, here we are at the end of a few weeks of budget consultations and estimates and nice treats during estimates and late night discussions in committee. We're here talking about the final budget.

I first want to go on the record, as others have done, and say how disappointed I am in the lack of democracy and transparency that this House uses in debating and passing budgets. To have 20 minutes, as a member of the third party, to go over a department's budget, some of which are massive budgets – Education, Health, Seniors, many others – 20 minutes to do that . . .

Dr. Taft: You have to share that with the minister.

Mr. Anderson: That's right. Twenty minutes to ask questions, in which the ministers generally take at least half, if not more than half, of that 20 minutes to answer, often not answering it – it just shows how little the folks over there think about this whole process, and it really is something. I can tell you and make a promise that, whoever the government is next time, the Wildrose will support any action that will improve this process, that will give opposition parties the time that they need and private members of the governing party the time that they need to go over line by line, if they'd like to, the different things in the budget to make sure that it is what Albertans want and to get feedback. This government has just been in power so long that it just wouldn't have crossed their minds, I don't think, that that is not democratic. It isn't democratic, and it's wrong.

Of course, this Premier, who talked all about change and transparency, has been as autocratic and untransparent and undemocratic as any of her predecessors if not more. It's a shameful display, and she's paying for it politically right now as is her caucus. I can't tell you how excited we are, Mr. Speaker, here in the Wildrose, to get this election going. We are pumped. We are absolutely pumped. [interjections] I notice that some of the more yippy ones are the ones that aren't running again, likely because they weren't going to win.

Anyway, we're prepared to go to the people of Alberta and, if elected, bring in a budget process next year that is going to be the absolute example in this country of how to pass a budget and how to pass a budget transparently, with input from the opposition and an opportunity for all Albertans' representatives to be able to put feedback into the process instead of just a few select backroom boys and folks around the Premier.

With that, of course, regarding the budget itself: complete train wreck. As the *National Post* said: Alberta's first NDP budget. Absolutely. This is Alberta's first NDP Premier. It is absolutely a travesty.

Ms Blakeman: We'd balance it.

Mr. Anderson: Well, you know what? You're right. You're right, hon. member.

I've got to say that the Manitoba NDP, in particular, is by far more fiscally conservative, more fiscally responsible, than this so-called Conservative government. By far. The numbers back it up in every single way. This government is incapable of budgeting, and then when you call them on it and say, "You are spending too much," what do they do? Just like typical left-wing socialists they stand up and they say: "Oh, you want to cut everybody's programs. You want to throw people out on the street. You don't want Tommy to have any schools." It makes you want to throw up after a while.

It's just incredible that a government that claims that it is conservative, that it is actually conservative, is the opposite of it in every way. They're not conservative. They're not. Forget that label. They're just not fiscally responsible. Period. That's the problem, and that's why they are having so much trouble, and that's why this budget backfired. People looked at it, and they said: "You know what? This is getting to be a joke. We're at \$105-a-barrel oil, and we can't balance a budget? We can't balance a budget at \$105-a-barrel oil. Really?" What a joke. What if oil goes down to \$80? Oh, \$80 a barrel. Imagine. That could never happen. No. If it did, we'd have a hole so large in our budget that you could drive the hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands-Norwood's former bus right through the hole in that budget. It's just crazy. You can't budget like this. You can't budget for \$105 a barrel oil and still run a \$3.1 billion cash shortfall, an \$800 million or thereabouts accounting deficit. It's absolutely unthinkable for any kind of government that says it's fiscally conservative.

I know that there are enough fiscal conservatives – I think there are – over there that are disgusted with it as well, but for some reason they don't stand up and say anything about it. They just get along, you know, go along to get along. They don't stand up for their constituents who are telling them to stop spending like drunken sailors.

What would we do differently? They say: "What would you do differently? You would obviously make sure that all the homeless people were thrown out on the street, and you would make sure that all the seniors would be kicked out of all their senior homes, wouldn't you?" That's right. Just like the typical socialist left-wing argument. That's what they say. That's the argument that has Greece bankrupt. That's the argument that has Spain bankrupt, the United Kingdom bankrupt, that has France nearing bankruptcy, the United States on the edge of bankruptcy. Because they act like a bunch of left-wing socialists. They don't know how to say no. They say yes to everything.

You have to in government prioritize just like regular families have to prioritize. You cannot run budget deficits. You cannot call yourself a fiscal conservative like the Member for Edmonton-Calder and act like a socialist. That's what he is. He's a left-wing socialist. He calls himself a conservative. [interjection] But you're not a left-wing socialist, are you? I'd probably trust you. I'd probably trust you with the budget far more than that member.

Ms Blakeman: I can actually balance it.

Mr. Anderson: Absolutely. I'm sure you would. At least you're truthful with where you want to go with taxes. I give you that.

This budget is a travesty, Mr. Speaker. Why do they repeat the same mistakes? Did you not see what happened to Kim Campbell in 1993? Did you not see that? Did you miss that part of history when you had an out-of-control, fiscally irresponsible joke of a

Conservative Party, being the federal PCs, run around and say, "Look how conservative we are," and run massive, massive deficits, raise taxes, raise the institute of the GST without cutting any income taxes, doing anything like that. Just a joke. You can't even call them a Conservative Party.

They go in there, and they get absolutely destroyed, especially in this province. Well, they got destroyed everywhere in 1993, actually, but swept out from this province, the Conservative heartland, so to speak, because they couldn't balance the budget. They replaced their leader with a nice shiny new leader, and – guess what? – she acted in the same way as the former Prime Minister had. Guess what? Same thing here, if not worse.

This Premier is more fiscally irresponsible by far than her predecessor was, and that's saying something because the predecessor wasn't that fiscally responsible. The mere fact that folks over there can honestly say that they have any kind of fiscal credentials is absurd. They don't. A monkey could balance this budget – a monkey could balance this budget – and these guys can't do it. It is absolutely ridiculous.

I wanted to wake people up. It's Thursday, you know. I just wanted it a little bit more lively here. We've got to get through another hour at least.

It is ridiculous. What would the Wildrose Party do differently? Well, the Wildrose Party would do a lot of things differently. Guess what? We think we're going to get a chance to do it differently in about five weeks' time starting. We're looking forward to it. I can't wait. And you know what? The first thing we're going to do is cut some of the absolutely wasteful, disgusting spending by this government.

First thing we're going to do is roll back cabinet salaries by 30 per cent. Then we're going to merge all of the MLA salaries into one, and we're going to roll them back. All the ways we pay MLAs, we're going to roll that into one, and then we're going to roll that back by 5 per cent. We're going to slash by 70 per cent the severance packages, these gold-plated jokes of severance packages that are out there, that are an offence, an absolute offence to the people of Alberta. This government voted a hundred per cent against my bill to reduce them by 70 per cent. We're going to do that as soon as we get back into this Legislature.

3:50

We're going to cut the carbon capture and storage program – \$2 billion gone. We are not going to waste a cent more of taxpayers' money on that kind of stupidity, that kind of just absolute corporate welfare at its absolute worst and absolute most ineffective.

We're going to make sure that . . .

Ms Notley: Is there effective corporate welfare?

Mr. Anderson: There is not effective corporate welfare. You're absolutely right. There is not effective corporate welfare. Thank you for pointing that out. See, you're more fiscally responsible than the folks over there. [interjection] What are we going to do?

Let's talk about health care. We're going to make sure that before we build any new facilities in this province, we have the staff to actually run those facilities. We're not going to just have empty buildings.

Today in the *Calgary Herald*, the Calgary south campus hospital – guess what? – delayed another eight months because they don't have the staff. They don't have the staff. They never planned for the staff. They don't have it in the budget to even pay for the staff, and it's because they don't have a clue how to run a popsicle stand. They couldn't run a lemonade stand if their life

depended on it because they would somehow find a way to bankrupt it. They would drink all the lemonade, give it to all their friends and say: "Why can we not afford to replenish the lemonade stand? I don't understand it. Where did the money go? I want to buy more lemonade, and I can't. Oh, no. What am I going to do? I'm going to borrow some money, so I can buy more lemonade for my lemonade stand." I mean these guys just have no clue. It is just really something else.

What are we going to do on infrastructure? They say: "Oh, you're not going to have any infrastructure. Wildrose won't build anything. We'll just sit there." No. We're going to have one of the most robust building programs in the country, higher than B.C., higher than Quebec, higher than Ontario per person. We're going to beat all of those folks, as we said in our alternative budget, but we're not going to spend so much money that we bankrupt our children over it. We can wait an extra 12 months for some of these projects. We don't have to have everything now because that's what fiscally responsible people and fiscally responsible businesspeople do. They make sure that they don't spend more than they take in. That's what they do.

That's what this government, this PC government, this PC Party that I used to belong to under Ralph Klein and ran for in 2008 when the Member for Fort Saskatchewan-Vegreville made a promise that he would never run a deficit, that he would never run a deficit in 2008. The promise that we campaigned on as a party was broken every single year over the last four years by him and by his successor. That is a broken promise, and it was unacceptable. You could maybe make an excuse for one year, when the bottom fell out of the market. Maybe in that one year there would have been a need to access the sustainability fund and run that one deficit. But five straight deficits is unconscionable, especially over the last two years when we have been coming out of recession and, frankly, coming out of recession very well because of the high price of oil.

That's what the Wildrose will do. We will continue to build infrastructure on a priority basis. We're not going to be putting up new \$350 million MLA offices. Of course, the damage is already done there. We've already got this building there. Like we couldn't survive in what we have now. As if that was a priority for Albertans while we have a school shortage.

We would make sure that we put the dollars that we did budget for infrastructure into projects that really mattered like highway 63 to Fort McMurray, so we can grease the economic engine of Canada and make sure that we don't have people dying on the roads going up there, and make sure our large trucks can get their equipment up there instead of waiting and dilly-dallying and just doing projects that absolutely are nothing more than make-work projects. Case in point: \$350 million new MLA offices. That has nothing to do with the people working on the offices. Put them to work doing something else. Put them to work building a school. Why on earth \$350 million for new MLA offices? Just ridiculous.

Why couldn't we do with the Royal Alberta Museum that we have for a few extra years? Why did we need a brand spanking \$300 million new one? Why? Because this government can't prioritize. They don't know what the difference is between needs and wants. That's why they failed, and that's why they're going to be replaced in four weeks from now, Mr. Speaker.

The Acting Speaker: Thank you, hon. member.

Section 29(2)(a) is now available. The hon. Member for Lethbridge-East.

Ms Pastoor: Thank you. I think that some of the hon. members' comments are, you know, probably legitimate. Maybe we could

put some things off. But every time the wind blows or it rains, the water comes into my office and floods part of my old office. Maybe we should be working in those sorts of conditions.

An Hon. Member: Plant flowers in there.

Ms Pastoor: I can grow flowers. What a fine idea. Maybe I could grow that flower that has those five little green things.

Well, the other thing is, if the member is talking about a school, maybe we can turn the Leg. Annex into a school and bus the kids in. What do you think of those ideas?

Mr. Anderson: Well, schools are good. I'm a little confused. It almost sounded to me like the hon. member was justifying the \$350 million spent on new MLA offices because she has some flooding. You see, that's the thing.

You know, there's a great story about a group of individuals. They're working at an engineering firm. They noticed that one of the doors on a bathroom stall wouldn't close. They kept trying to jam it in there, and they couldn't do it. So they got all the engineers in there, and they said: "We're going to have to move the whole wall. Then we're going to have to shift the roof because it's one of those hanging stalls. Then we'll be able to close the door." It would cost hundreds of thousands of dollars to do, and that's what they were going to go do. Pretty soon, after hearing this back and forth between all the engineers, the janitor came in, took off the piece from the door that was causing the problem, shaved it down, stuck it on, clicked it, shut it, and it worked, not a cost to the taxpayer. That's called the one-inch solution instead of the \$350 million solution.

Instead of replacing the whole building because there are a few drafts and a little bit of flooding, perhaps we can actually do some repairs to the office to make sure that the water doesn't come into your office. Wouldn't that be something?

The Wildrose is always going to look first to the one-inch solution, not the \$350 million new MLA office solution. That's the biggest difference, I think, between the mentality on that side, which is: whatever people ask for, whatever we want, we are going to pay for it now, and anybody who stands in our way, we're going to call them greedy, awful, little people that want to throw people out on the street. That's all we've gotten from these folks.

It's incredible every budget we go through. We've seen that the Liberal Party usually sends out a prebudget outline of suggestions that they have for the budget, and every year I am amazed at how more fiscally responsible their budget outline is than the folks on that side – I don't understand it – with the exception of this last year. I was worried about the tax increase, but they're going to do that anyway just after the election. You were just honest about it, I think. That's the difference.

These folks just have completely lost their way on the finances. They don't know how to make tough decisions. They don't know how to say no. They can't even say no to themselves. They can't even say no to themselves so much so that they gave themselves a 30 per cent increase in their salaries and a 34 per cent increase to their Premier's salary.

They have this ridiculous MLA pay scheme, where you have all these committees. Let's be clear why they have these committees, these no-work committees that we're talking about. Let's be clear what these are. These have been put in place so that the Premier can hold a hammer over top of the heads of MLAs. That's why it exists. The Premier cannot dock pay. The Premier cannot dock anyone's salary, but if an MLA gets out of line, as the Member for Calgary-Fish Creek did right after the last election when she went

after the former Premier as being not well liked in Calgary – guess what? – they didn't give her any committees. Oh, it was punishment for what she said during the election. They docked \$3,000 a month off her pay.

Now, they couldn't do that if it was one salary, you see, but they gave the salary based on committee pay so that the Premier, if someone gets out of line, boom, just puts the thumb down to make sure that they know full well that the Premier doesn't appreciate that. That's why it was set up that way.

That's why we have all kinds of different government committees over there. There are so many different government committees over there that you lose track. Obviously, there are the standard cabinet policy committees. Those are a little more transparent. But all these other ones? Incredible.

4:00

The Acting Speaker: Thank you, hon. member.

The hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview is next, followed by Fort McMurray-Wood Buffalo.

Dr. Taft: Thanks, Mr. Speaker. I'm going to take a somewhat different approach than the previous member. I'm just going to move on from that. I'd like to talk about the opportunities that we have in Alberta and how I would like to see a different kind of budget and a different approach to a budget.

I want to start from the fact – and I've said this many times in this Assembly and elsewhere – that Alberta is by most measures the richest place on Earth. Of course, we have in this great province a small population. We think of Edmonton and Calgary as big cities, but they're not, really, by world standards. You can put all of Alberta's population together, and it's about half of greater Toronto. It's like metro Seattle.

We have this huge province, a small population, and in addition, you know, to all the wonderful other assets we have here and the fact that geopolitically we're next to the biggest market, the richest country in the history of humanity, we have, depending on how you measure it, the second- or third-largest energy reserves in the world. If you take those energy reserves and divide them by the number of people who live here, we are incredibly wealthy, unbelievably wealthy.

I was actually looking at the corporate filings of Imperial Oil recently, and in their filings they value their energy reserves, what they have still in the ground – they haven't developed it all – undeveloped reserves, at about \$12.60 a barrel. Well, if we just took Alberta's oil reserves, that we own as the people of this province, and valued them at \$5 a barrel, there is over \$800 billion we'd be carrying on the books just at \$5 a barrel. That's more than 20 times the total amount of this budget.

This is by any measure an incredibly wealthy place, and we need to understand that because that puts a real responsibility on us. Too much money tends to make people stupid, and I sometimes think that we're all guilty of that when it comes to managing this province's wealth. This government I've taken to task – and I will continue to take them to task – for ending up in a situation in 2012, with this budget, where having governed the richest place on Earth for 40 years, our heritage fund is worth less than the year it was established once you adjust for inflation. Some \$240 billion in nonrenewable resource revenues is gone.

We're running deficits, and despite the claims of the Wildrose Alliance members we're not spending like drunken sailors, which I think is probably unfair to sailors. We have to do better than what's being done in this budget. I will remind the Member for Airdrie-Chestermere that he talked about bankrupting our children's future by running deficits. Well, there's more than one

way to bankrupt our children's future. Another way is to not educate them sufficiently or to not provide sufficient public services. I think there's a threat to bankrupting our children's future when we let thousands of them go to school hungry every day and we don't do anything about it.

Anyway, I want to address the issue of government spending in the context of the unbelievable wealth that we have here. We are told over and over, as we just heard – and, you know, it's about choice here – from the Wildrose Alliance and have heard from this government and many others that this government is spending a huge, huge amount, leading the country and so on. Well, Mr. Speaker, if you take those numbers and cut away all the spin and you adjust for inflation and you adjust for the fact that our population is growing so rapidly, in most areas we're spending well within the range of what's normal for Canadian provinces.

We're a little bit high on health care. We're not the highest. Believe it or not, Newfoundland spends more. It depends on the measurement you use, actually. By some measures we're the lowest in the country.

On education we're pretty much about where you'd expect to be. There was a ridiculous publication that came out of the University of Calgary's School of Public Policy – it was published in the *Calgary Herald* a couple of months ago – arguing that Alberta's education system should be cut 40 per cent in spending, and it would then equal Ontario. Well, it was drivel. It was ridiculous. It should have been an embarrassment to the University of Calgary that that came out of there. In fact, when you do a proper accounting of Alberta's spending on education, it's about what they spend in B.C. or Saskatchewan or other provinces.

The trend is not a skyrocketing trend. Over the last 20 years, once you adjust for inflation and population growth, health care spending in Alberta has climbed, I think, about 1.7 per cent a year on average. Spending on schools is virtually unchanged compared to 20 years ago. In fact, spending on human services in general has been very flat for the 20 years while the economy has grown in real terms by 70 per cent.

Infrastructure spending is wildly erratic in this province. In fact, too much spending is erratic in this province. From '94 until about 2004 we were spending at the bottom of the country on infrastructure. We all are paying the price for that now: roads that are potholed, buildings like the Legislature Annex and any number of schools and university buildings that leak and cost way too much to maintain.

It's no surprise that the Member for Fort Saskatchewan-Vegreville, when he was Premier, ramped up infrastructure spending. We had to. Even with the increase in infrastructure spending, Mr. Speaker, many of our roads, around half of our roads, in Alberta are going to continue to be in fair to poor driving condition. It's a fact of life that we have to spend money to maintain a modern economy.

I think – and we might overlap a bit with the Wildrose on this and more so probably with the New Democrats – we don't need to spend a whole lot more. An awful lot of the challenges in Alberta come down to fumbling management, particularly in health care. I want to drive this home again. In 21 years – I've kept track – there have been 13 different deputy ministers of health. How ridiculous is that? Thirteen different CEOs of the biggest government department in 20 years: well, no wonder there's chaos. And how many reorganizations?

I'm witnessing, through my family's experience right now, some of the terrible experiences that that disruption in health care has delivered. It's not that we need to spend a lot more; we need to spend smarter. We need to manage it better.

We also – and this is so fundamental for me – need to build up our heritage fund, and that's not happening in here. It's not happening in this budget. How can we live in the richest place in the world and have so little saved and be running deficits? It's terrible management.

The questions that come to my mind, Mr. Speaker. We have such a huge economy – gross domestic product per capita in Alberta is the largest in the world, way beyond not just the rest of Canada but the United States and Europe – yet we have no savings, and we're spending more or less what they're spending in B.C. or Saskatchewan or Ontario. Where's the money going?

Well, some of it is going to individuals, Mr. Speaker. On average Albertans as individuals are wealthier than other Canadians. We're among the wealthiest people on average in the world. That average is very deceptive. The city of Calgary according to both Stats Canada and, of all places, the TD Bank not only has the highest percentage of high-income people of any major city in Canada; it's got the highest percentage of low-income people. That average disguises the most unequal distribution of income in Canada, and not enough in this budget is addressing that.

There are higher personal incomes in Alberta, but they're not nearly what you would expect for such a rich place. What you find when you look at the data from Stats Canada and you really dig into it is that government spending has stayed pretty flat over the last 20 years. Personal incomes are up some, but it's profits collected by corporations that have really soared in this province and are scooping up far and away the largest portion of Alberta's growth.

4:10

I want to put a figure out there that I can back up with very good economic work and that, in fact, I've written about in conjunction with a couple of economists. For the five years 2004, 2005, 2006, 2007, and 2008, that boom, the Alberta economy on average generated profits, not revenues but profits, of a billion dollars a week every week. That's stunning. That's way beyond any rates in the rest of Canada, way beyond any rates in the United States, way beyond what's normal anywhere else.

What it tells me, Mr. Speaker, is that we are leaving too much on the table. We are giving away our wealth. We're not spending it on inordinate public services. We're not saving it in the heritage fund. We are letting it flow out through our fingers – and we are the owners of this resource – into the hands of shareholders, increasing numbers of whom are in Shanghai or London or on Wall Street or Bay Street.

That's why the Alberta Liberals have called for things like an increase in the corporate tax rate. Our corporate tax rate in Alberta is so far below what's normal in the United States or the rest of Canada or Europe that it's ridiculous, and that is how we are bankrupting our children's future, from the perspective that I take and that the Alberta Liberals take. We're giving our children's future away. We're not bankrupting it by spending too much on schools or hospitals. We're bankrupting our children's future by giving it away to corporations.

Everything I say here I can back up with the best data, unlike some of the ridiculous comments we heard earlier about \$350 million being spent on MLAs' offices. That's a stupid statement, if I may say so. We all know, including the person who made it, that that building holds far more than MLAs. The MLA offices take up a tiny corner of that cost.

Everything that I've said I can back up, Mr. Speaker, and I lay the challenge to the members of this Assembly to rethink how we as an Assembly are managing the unbelievable opportunity we

have. This is one of the last chances I'll have to address this Legislature, so I want to drive that message forward, that we need to do a better job.

I'll see if anybody wants to engage me under 29(2)(a). Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Acting Speaker: Thank you.

Hon. members, 29(2)(a) is available.

Mr. Anderson: Under 29(2)(a) I have a question. I guess I'm confused, and I'm trying to understand. It would make sense that the folks over there would side with the Liberal Party on this. The \$350 million new building – and I agree; it's not all going to be MLAs in there. I agree. There'll be other office workers, other government civil servants, and so forth. Probably a lot of the folks that are in the Annex now, I would imagine, will be moved over there. We have a nice, flashy new outdoor hockey rink and wonderful underground parking and all these tunnels and everything else. Just an honest question: how on earth is a \$350 million new building a priority right now when we have a massive deficit, we have a huge school shortage across the province, and we are building hospitals that have no staff in them.

The south campus hospital, for example. A letter just went out today saying that it's been delayed eight months after just being announced when they were doing that cabinet tour. They said that it was going to be mid this year. Well, it's eight months now. They've moved it back again. All of these things are happening because we don't have enough staff and so forth, yet we have money to redevelop the federal building. How is that a priority? I don't understand it.

The Acting Speaker: Hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview, you have about 30 seconds until we have the guillotine vote.

Dr. Taft: All right. Thank you, Mr. Speaker. That's a legitimate question. I mean, I appreciate engaging in an honest debate here. The issues around the mismanagement of the health care system and the fact that hospitals are getting built when we can't staff them is unacceptable. There was a laughable period last June, I

think it was, a particular week in which in the same week the then Premier announced hundreds of millions of dollars for new schools, and 500 teachers were getting laid off. So those are issues of bad management. There's no question about that.

The Acting Speaker: Sorry, hon. member. I do regret having to interrupt the hon. member, but in accordance with Standing Order 64(3) the chair is required to now put the question to the House on the appropriation bill on the Order Paper for second reading.

[The voice vote indicated that the motion for second reading carried]

[Several members rose calling for a division. The division bell was rung at 4:16 p.m.]

[Ten minutes having elapsed, the Assembly divided]

[Mr. Zwozdesky in the chair]

For the motion:

Allred	Fritz	Lindsay
Amery	Goudreau	Morton
Bhardwaj	Griffiths	Olson
Bhullar	Groeneveld	Rogers
Campbell	Hayden	Sarich
DeLong	Horner	VanderBurg
Drysdale	Jablonski	Vandermeer
Elniski	Klimchuk	

Against the motion:

Anderson	Boutilier	Taft
Blakeman	Notley	

Totals: For – 23 Against – 5

[Motion carried; Bill 7 read a second time]

Mr. Olson: Mr. Speaker, I move that we adjourn until 1:30 p.m. on Monday, March 19.

[Motion carried; the Assembly adjourned at 4:29 p.m. to Monday at 1:30 p.m.]

Bill Status Report for the 27th Legislature - 5th Session (2012)

Activity to March 15, 2012

The Bill sponsor's name is in brackets following the Bill title. If it is a money Bill, (\$) will appear between the title and the sponsor's name. Numbers following each Reading refer to Hansard pages where the text of debates is found; dates for each Reading are in brackets following the page numbers. Bills numbered 200 or higher are Private Members' Public Bills. Bills with lower numbers are Government Bills. Bills numbered Pr1, etc., are Private Bills.

*An asterisk beside a Bill number indicates an amendment was passed to that Bill; the Committee line shows the precise date of the amendment.

The date a Bill comes into force is indicated in square brackets after the date of Royal Assent. If it comes into force "on proclamation," "with exceptions," or "on various dates," please contact Legislative Counsel for details at (780) 427-2217. The chapter number assigned to the Bill is entered immediately following the date the Bill comes into force. SA indicates Statutes of Alberta; this is followed by the year in which it is included in the statutes, and its chapter number. Please note, Private Bills are not assigned a chapter number until the conclusion of the fall sittings.

1 Results-based Budgeting Act (Redford)

First Reading -- 4 (Feb. 7 aft., passed)

Second Reading -- 31-38 (Feb. 8 aft.), 125-34 (Feb. 13 eve., passed)

Committee of the Whole -- 124-34 (Feb. 14 aft.), 160-61 (Feb. 15 aft., passed)

Third Reading -- 164-65 (Feb. 15 aft., passed)

Royal Assent -- (Mar. 5 outside of House sitting) [Comes into force March 5, 2012; SA 2012 cR-17.5]

2* Education Act (Lukaszuk)

First Reading -- 115 (Feb. 14 aft., passed)

Second Reading -- 152-59 (Feb. 15 aft.), 187-88 (Feb. 16 aft.), 182-85 (Feb. 16 aft.), 256-57 (Feb. 22 aft.), 405-11 (Mar. 8 aft., passed)

Committee of the Whole -- 500-01 (Mar. 13 eve.), 515-35 (Mar. 14 aft.), (Mar. 14 eve., adjourned, amendments passed)

3 Appropriation (Supplementary Supply) Act, 2012 (\$) (Horner)

First Reading -- 115 (Feb. 14 aft., passed)

Second Reading -- 150-52 (Feb. 15 aft.), 161 (Feb. 15 aft., passed)

Committee of the Whole -- 185-86 (Feb. 16 aft., passed)

Third Reading -- 251-56 (Feb. 22 aft., passed)

Royal Assent -- (Mar. 5 outside of House sitting) [Comes into force March 5, 2012; SA 2012 c1]

4 St. Albert and Sturgeon Valley School Districts Establishment Act (Lukaszuk)

First Reading -- 236 (Feb. 22 aft., passed)

Second Reading -- 403-04 (Mar. 8 aft.), 480-88 (Mar. 13 eve., passed)

5 Seniors' Property Tax Deferral Act (Jablonski)

First Reading -- 298 (Mar. 5 aft., passed)

Second Reading -- 403 (Mar. 8 aft.), 488-94 (Mar. 13 eve., passed)

6 Property Rights Advocate Act (McQueen)

First Reading -- 236 (Feb. 22 aft., passed)

Second Reading -- 404-05 (Mar. 8 aft.), 494-500 (Mar. 13 eve., passed)

7 Appropriation Act, 2012 (\$) (Horner)

First Reading -- 513 (Mar. 14 aft., passed)

Second Reading -- 586-95 (Mar. 15 aft., passed on division)

201 Alberta Bill of Rights (Property Rights Protection) Amendment Act, 2012 (Hinman)

First Reading -- 69 (Feb. 13 aft., passed)

Second Reading -- 299-311 (Mar. 5 aft., defeated on division)

203 Tobacco Reduction (Protection of Children in Vehicles) Amendment Act, 2012 (Sherman)

First Reading -- 69 (Feb. 13 aft., passed)

Second Reading -- 427-36 (Mar. 12 aft., passed on division)

204 Land Statutes (Abolition of Adverse Possession) Amendment Act, 2012 (Allred)

First Reading -- 357 (Mar. 7 aft., passed)

Second Reading -- 436-38 (Mar. 12 aft., passed)

205 Scrap Metal Dealers and Recyclers Identification Act (Quest)

First Reading -- 585 (Mar. 15 aft., passed)

209 Homeowner Protection Act (Hehr)

First Reading -- 585 (Mar. 15 aft., passed)

210 Early Childhood Learning and Child Care Act (Taylor)

First Reading -- 513-14 (Mar. 14 aft., passed)

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Province of Alberta

The 27th Legislature
Fifth Session

Alberta Hansard

Monday afternoon, March 19, 2012

Issue 19

The Honourable Kenneth R. Kowalski, Speaker

Legislative Assembly of Alberta
The 27th Legislature

Fifth Session

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Legislative Assembly of Alberta

1:30 p.m.

Monday, March 19, 2012

[The Speaker in the chair]

Prayers

The Speaker: Good afternoon. Welcome back.

Let us pray. At the beginning of this week we ask for renewed strength in the awareness of our duty and privilege as members of the Legislature. We ask for the protection of this Assembly and also the province we are elected to serve. Amen.

Ladies and gentlemen and hon. members, we'll now be participating in the singing of our national anthem. We'll be led today by Mr. Paul Lorieau, and I'd invite all to participate in the language of one's choice.

Hon. Members:

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

The Speaker: Please be seated.

Introduction of Guests

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Human Services.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It is a pleasure for me to rise today and introduce to you and through you to all members of the Assembly a bright and enthusiastic group of 35 grade 6 students from Westbrook elementary school. Westbrook elementary school is located in my constituency, but as of the anticipated drop of the writ it will move to Edmonton-Rutherford and be in the constituency of the Member for Edmonton-Rutherford. Accompanying these students are their teacher, Arlene Walker, and parent helper, Najat Tarrabain. They're here this week at the School at the Legislature. They're seated in the members' gallery, and I'd ask them to please rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of the Assembly.

Mr. Speaker, it's also a pleasure for me to rise and introduce to you and through you to members of the Assembly another bright, enthusiastic group of 29 grade 6 students from Brander Gardens elementary school, also located in my constituency of Edmonton-Whitemud. Accompanying the students is their teacher, Natalie Gago-Esteves. I must say that Ms Esteves has brought classrooms to this Legislature every year, I think, certainly in the last four or five years, and has certainly been a regular. She's accompanied by Erin Regan. They're seated in both the members' and the public galleries, and I'd ask them to please rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of this Assembly.

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

Mr. Prins: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure to rise before you in this Assembly to introduce to you and everyone else a group of students and visitors from the Lacombe outreach school. There are 21 students and four adults. The adults are Mr. Darcy Blum, Ms Donna Benson, Ms Travis Mills, and Mr. Keith

Godlonton. I hope that they have had a nice day here and enjoyed their visit. I would ask them to rise and receive the warm welcome of this Assembly.

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

Mr. MacDonald: Yes. Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It's a pleasure to rise and introduce to you and through you to all hon. Members of this Legislative Assembly another delegation from the Suzuki charter school in the constituency of Edmonton-Gold Bar. We have 39 visitors this afternoon, and they're led by teachers Miss Shannon Eremenko and Mrs. Ashlee Carl. Suzuki charter school is a very fine school in Edmonton-Gold Bar, and they put on many concert recitals throughout the city, including in the Legislative Assembly here at Christmastime, of course. I would urge all hon. members, if they do have a chance, to please go to their spring recital at the Winspear. It's an exceptional concert. They're in the public gallery, and I would now ask the delegation to please rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of this Assembly.

Thank you.

The Speaker: Hon. Member for Calgary-Varsity, do you have a special guest today?

Mr. Chase: A very special guest. Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I would like to reintroduce to you and through you to all members of the Assembly my extremely loving, supportive, and, as members of this House will appreciate, patient wife of 43 years. Heather, please stand and receive the recognition.

The Speaker: The hon. Deputy Premier.

Mr. Horner: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's an honour to introduce to you and through you to all members of the Assembly four teaching professionals from Red Deer. While attending the St. Albert food bank annual auction last year, Mr. Laurie Stamp bid on a special tour of the Legislature, and I'm pleased that he was the highest bidder. He couldn't be here with us today and has graciously asked four teachers from St. Thomas Aquinas Catholic school in Red Deer to join us. They are Christa Smereka, Crystal Mason, Angela McLean, and Landon Stamp. Christa is a student teacher studying at the University of Alberta, Crystal is a grade 8 social studies teacher with 10 years' teaching experience, Angela is a grade 7 social studies teacher with five years' teaching experience, and Landon is a grade 6 social studies teacher with one year of teaching experience and was raised in St. Albert. I had a great opportunity to have lunch with these four fine individuals who are teaching Alberta's youth. They are seated in the members' gallery this afternoon. I would ask that they rise and that the Assembly give them the warmest of welcomes.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Advanced Education and Technology.

Mr. Weadick: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Indeed, it's an honour for me today to introduce to you a very special group of students. These are students from the Council of Alberta University Students, or CAUS for short. CAUS represents the interests of over 70,000 of Alberta's university students from across the province. I meet with them on a regular basis to discuss issues and concerns that they might have. The group hosted a reception a little bit earlier this morning and had the opportunity to meet with some of our MLAs and have a discussion around some of the topics that they think are extremely important. I'll be meeting with this group a little later in the week. I'd like to ask them to rise as I introduce them: from Lethbridge Mr. Zack Moline, Farid

Iskandar, Matt McMillan, Petros Kusmu, Andrew McIntyre, Armin Escher, Hardave Birk, Duncan Wojtaszek, Rory Tighe, Dylan Jones, Andrew Williams, Julia Adolf, and Raphael Jacob. If we could give them the warm welcome of this Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Medicine Hat.

Mr. Renner: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. As you know, behind every successful MLA is a strong support system at the constituency level. The key to that support system is the constituency office. Today I am very proud to introduce the person who has masterfully handled every constituency file that came across my desk for the past 14 years. As a matter of fact, I strongly suspect that when I leave office this spring, more people will miss her than will miss me. I'm proud to introduce to you and through you to all members of the Assembly Mrs. Allyson Sadden, constituency manager extraordinaire. She's accompanied today by her son Brooks, who is visiting the capital city for the first time. It may be of interest to you that Allyson and Brooks are the granddaughter and great-grandson of Canada's oldest citizen, Mrs. Cora Hansen, who celebrated her 113th birthday with the Premier and the Minister of Seniors last week. I would ask that they stand and be recognized by all members of the House.

1:40

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Innisfail-Sylvan Lake.

Mr. Ouellette: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It gives me great pleasure to stand today and introduce to you and through you to all members of this Assembly a good friend of mine from Taber, Alberta, in the wonderful riding of the Member for Cardston-Taber-Warner. Back in my days in the oil patch I used to work with this gentleman. He has quite a large excavation company in Vauxhall, Alberta, and did hundreds of hours of work on the Academy of Baseball to help get that to fruition in Vauxhall, and everybody knows how successful that's been. After question period I plan on giving him a small tour of the Legislature. I'd ask him to stand and get a welcome from all of us here today. His name is Mr. Bob Miller.

The Speaker: Thank you.

The hon. Member for Calgary-Foothills.

Mr. Webber: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I would like to introduce to you and through you to all members of the Assembly a wonderful family that I met with today in my office. They came up from Calgary to attend the rally at noon hour regarding Bill 2. We've got up in the audience here in the members' gallery Brad Osborne, Linda Osborne, and their son Kieran Osborne. I'd like them, please, to stand, which they're doing, and to accept the warm welcome of the Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Lesser Slave Lake.

Ms Calahasen: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I am pleased to introduce to you and through you to the members of this Assembly the Bergen family. They're home-schoolers from beautiful Kinuso. These family members are strong advocates for home-schooling, and I have appreciated their passion and advice that I've received on Bill 2. They know that they have a lot of life left in them, and I know that they teach their kids really well. We've met many times in the past to discuss this. They drove many miles to be here today. They are seated in the members' gallery, and I'd ask Patricia and Gary Bergen and their three very bright children, Angelina, Luke, and Teneille, to rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of this Assembly.

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

Mr. Elniski: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's a pleasure to rise today to introduce to you and through you to all members of the Assembly a group of people seated in the public gallery: Mr. Ted Boldt from the Kipnes Centre for Veterans; Mr. Emmett and Ms Terri Crossman, his son-in-law and daughter; Joanne Charchuk from the Norwood extended care centre; Pearl Rachinski from the Norwood extended care centre; Linda Ruggles, recreational therapist and bus driver extraordinaire; Elvira Mellott, the licensed practical nurse; and Bernadette DeSantis. I would ask them all to rise and receive the traditional warm greeting of the Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Leduc-Beaumont-Devon.

Mr. Rogers: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'd like to introduce to you and through you to all members of this Assembly a group of constituents of mine that have come to the Legislature today to express their concerns and their interest in the debate on Bill 2, the Education Act. I don't believe they're here as yet, but I would like to acknowledge them for the record and ask that the members acknowledge them. They are Arlene Travnik and her children Joshua and Levi, from Leduc, and Connie Stollery and her children Amy, Derek, and Allyson, from the hamlet of Armenia. I would ask that the members acknowledge their attendance here today.

Thank you.

The Speaker: Are there others? The hon. Member for Edmonton-Manning.

Mr. Sandhu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's a pleasure to introduce to you and through you to all members of the Assembly a group of 32 future leaders in our province from one of my new schools, Dr. Donald Massey, in my constituency of Edmonton-Manning. They all enjoyed their visit here. The students are accompanied by their three teachers and one parent helper. I believe they're all sitting in the public gallery. I would ask them to please rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of this Assembly.

Members' Statements

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

Tribute to Long-term Care Residents

Mr. Elniski: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. They say that adversity is the mother of strength. I'm pleased today to celebrate with you a group of remarkable people who have taken adversity and proven that it can be a strength. Mrs. Pearl Rachinski is a 56-year-old mother of four, a former marathon runner, who suffered a traumatic car accident but who now continues to live her life thanks to the great care she receives at CapitalCare Norwood.

Joanne Charchuk, age 72, is legally blind but participates every year in the five-K walk for the brave by walking behind her wheelchair. She, too, lives at CapitalCare Norwood. She was the inspiration for me to have my business cards printed in Braille.

Ted Boldt is 89 years old. Ted is a veteran of both WWII and the Korean conflict. Ted resides at the Kipnes Centre for Veterans. We know each other quite well as Ted is a leader in the community and very active within the facility.

Each of these people, Mr. Speaker, last week participated in the Rick Hansen relays in Edmonton, Spruce Grove, and Stony Plain. Pearl, Joanne, and Ted are just three examples of people whose circumstances require that they live in long-term care. They live

meaningful, purposeful lives with the support of the many caring and hard-working staff who look after them every day.

It is time, Mr. Speaker, to stop talking about beds when we talk about care. To accuse someone of being a bed blocker is a gross injustice that ignores the reality that life is more than a bed. Too often I have heard members talk of beds much in the same tone as is used to describe storage or parking, and frankly it is time for that to end. It is time to remember that no matter what limitations may be imposed by age, injury, or disease, people need more than beds; they need dignity and self-respect.

My guests today have limitations but none so much that they cannot make the best of what life has given them. As the MLA for both Norwood and Kipnes I want to thank their staff for their tireless efforts in ensuring the care and the utmost quality and promotion of the residents' self-respect that goes so far beyond beds and goes into making a life.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

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

Retrospective by the Member for Calgary-Varsity

Mr. Chase: Thank you. This being my last member's statement, as opposed to my last will and testament, I have a number of individuals I'd like to thank for the support they have given me not only in the last eight years as the elected Member of the Legislative Assembly for Calgary-Varsity but for many years of my life. I want to first acknowledge my father, Bryce Chase, who will turn 89 this year, for his unfaltering support and the service example he sets for me.

I want to thank my incredibly loving and patient wife of 43 years, Heather. Members of this House who have had to put up with me for only the past eight years can certainly empathize with and attest to Heather's fortitude.

I want to recognize the strength and loyalty of our daughter, Christina, who together with my wife, Heather, co-chaired our three campaigns and served as my first constituency executive assistant: boss.

I'm grateful for Vivek, Christina's loving husband and the wonderful father of our two terrific grandsons, Kiran and Rohan Warrior.

I want to recognize the tremendous work ethic and backup provided by my other constituency office boss, Linda Pushor, whose dedication extended well beyond the 9 to 4, Monday through Friday operational hours of our constituency office; and Debbie Puppato, who over the last year diligently supported both Linda's and my efforts.

I want to thank my caucus colleagues.

I want to especially thank the constituents of Calgary-Varsity, who looked beyond the trappings of party politics to choose an individual who they thought would best represent their values. My proudest democratic moment came on election day March 2008 when Calgary-Varsity constituents defied the provincial apathy that saw only 41.6 per cent of eligible Albertans bothering to cast a vote. Calgary-Varsity had the highest voter turnout in the city and among the highest in the province. Apathy is democracy's worst enemy. Hopefully, Calgary-Varsity's exemplary participation will become the provincial norm in the upcoming election.

It has been my honour and privilege to serve Calgary-Varsity.

Oral Question Period

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

Postsecondary Education Costs

Dr. Sherman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Premier, welcome back. Societies that outeducate us today will outperform us tomorrow. The education of Albertans will determine the future prosperity of our province. In Alberta we have Canada's highest high school noncompletion rate and lowest postsecondary participation rate. This is because Alberta has the nation's highest tuition fees, highest noninstructional fees, a form of backdoor tuition that allows institutions to skirt government rules and tuition increases. To the Premier: will you please stop gouging our students and cap tuition and noninstructional fees charged by our institutions?

1:50

Ms Redford: Mr. Speaker, we have a fantastic education system in this province, whether it's infrastructure, whether it's programming, whether it's support for students, and I've very proud of that. It's going to mean the future of our province. Tuition is actually capped.

Dr. Sherman: Mr. Speaker, yes, we have a great education system if you can afford to go there.

Given that the Premier just said that we've capped tuition – Premier, I was referring to noninstructional fees as well – and given that capping these fees would only be a good start, would you follow the Alberta Liberal lead and create a postsecondary endowment fund to reduce and eventually eliminate tuition by 2025, starting with a \$250 reduction in tuition and fees today?

Ms Redford: Mr. Speaker, as the hon. minister of advanced education has said, we have a very good working relationship with a lot of postsecondary students' organizations in this province. One of the things that I know I've certainly heard from them is that while it's important for the provincial government to invest in postsecondary education, which we do to a dramatic extent, it's also important for students to make a commitment to that. So as we manage that and balance which part students need to pay and which part institutions of government need to pay, we'll continue that dialogue with students.

The Speaker: The hon. leader.

Dr. Sherman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. This is why I'm asking these questions, because of our students, who are sitting up above, the young who are going to go to university and the ones who are in university and colleges right now. Given that the extraordinarily high cost of living and of tuition is burdening our students with a crushing debt load in addition to nonrepayable grants, will you follow the Alberta Liberal lead and encourage students to stay and work in Alberta by forgiving 5 per cent of their student loans, or \$1,000 of debt, each year that a student stays and works in Alberta?

Ms Redford: Well, Mr. Speaker, one of the very exciting things about Alberta right now is that not only are students staying in Alberta; there are more people coming to Alberta because of the economy, and that's a very good thing. We believe that one of the ways that it's most possible to attract people to continue to come and to stay is to make sure that we're creating a knowledge-based economy, that we're continuing to invest in postsecondary education, and that we're creating business and opportunities so that people can be gainfully employed.

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

Alleged Intimidation of Physicians

Dr. Sherman: Speaking of knowledge, Mr. Speaker, on Friday five physician representatives of Alberta's 7,200 doctors stood up to this current government and accused them of stonewalling the inconvenient truth of physician intimidation. They also spoke up about the intimidation of nurses, all front-line health care workers, teachers, and municipal officials, that echoed the AMA's demand to hold a public inquiry into physician intimidation. To the Premier: will you stop the slick lawyer talk and do what you promised and do what Albertans and the doctors expect and call a real public inquiry into physician intimidation?

Ms Redford: Mr. Speaker, first of all, I did exactly what I promised. We have an independent judicial inquiry with respect to queue-jumping, and I will say that over and over again.

Secondly, I was disappointed to see the comments by the doctors on Friday. Whether they may speculate on other professions or other career tracks, Mr. Speaker, I think that it's more appropriate for us to keep the conversation with respect to doctors. We've said that we understand and accept the fact that there are issues to deal with in Alberta Health Services with respect to doctor intimidation. We want to work with the college of physicians, with Alberta Health Services, and with the AMA to fix health care so that that doesn't happen.

Dr. Sherman: Mr. Speaker, given that this Premier just delivered us smoke and mirrors – Premier, you promised; Albertans expect it. Will you show the real-life leadership that Albertans deserve and admit that you blundered, you flip-flopped, and you broke your promise by keeping the issue of doctor intimidation out of the public health inquiry?

Ms Redford: Mr. Speaker, I made the commitment on June 13. We introduced the legislation in the fall. We have an independent judicial inquiry. I kept my promise.

The Speaker: The hon. leader.

Dr. Sherman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The Premier made the commitment and broke it the day after she got elected.

Given that the health minister's own Health Quality Council of Alberta's report clearly states that there's "a culture of fear [and] intimidation" and "bureaucratic and political interference" and a "blurring of lines" of authority, Premier, as an educated and intelligent person would you not agree that it would make sense to identify those who created the unjust culture and remove them from the system?

Ms Redford: Mr. Speaker, I think it's quite interesting that the hon. member will selectively quote from the report. There was another reference in that report, and what it said was that while there was doctor intimidation identified, it was not appropriate to have a judicial inquiry, that what we had to do was fix health care. And that is what we are doing.

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

Dr. Sherman: Mr. Speaker, the Premier is ducking and jiving, so let's move on.

AIMCo Investments

Dr. Sherman: Five years ago Leo de Bever, the man entrusted with managing \$70 billion worth of Alberta's heritage, pension,

and other funds, kicked off an investment for his Australian employers and eventually lost them half a billion dollars. A subsequent legal investigation showed that the investment in a discounted life insurance policy, a death fund, was very poorly researched and rushed through without treasury approval. Now Mr. de Bever has quietly asked the Premier to allow AIMCo to start borrowing money in order to raise its rate of return. Why is this man . . .

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Liepert: Mr. Speaker, I happen to have in front of me, I guess, sort of a news release from the hon. Leader of the Opposition making some accusations about the government giving AIMCo the authority to borrow funds. I can't for the life of me figure out where he's getting this information from, but I suspect what he is doing is confusing it with an order in council that we passed which allowed us to increase the cap on the amount of money we borrow for the Alberta Municipal Financing Corporation and the Agriculture Financial Services Corporation. I think he's linking the two together, so I'm not quite sure what information he's referring to.

The Speaker: The hon. leader.

Dr. Sherman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Just so Albertans are sure of what's happening with their hard-earned money and their pension funds, to the Premier: what controls are in place to ensure that Alberta's heritage fund and the pension funds, that thousands of people rely on for stability, will not be invested in schemes like death funds?

Mr. Liepert: Mr. Speaker, the legislation has established that AIMCo clearly answers all of the questions that were just raised. I'm not going to repeat the legislation, but as the hon. member would know, we have a board, that is highly respected, that oversees the operations of AIMCo. We have international management that runs the investment arm of AIMCo. I've got great confidence. All of the investments are vetted through this Legislature, so I don't think there's any reason to be concerned.

The Speaker: The hon. leader.

Dr. Sherman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Given that AIMCo's CEO wants you to let him borrow money to invest in an attempt to increase AIMCo's returns, Premier, will you just admit that this is wrong, irresponsible, and risky and just say no?

Mr. Liepert: Well, Mr. Speaker, this particular member must be having conversations that I'm not aware of because I have a conversation quite regularly with the CEO of AIMCo, and that issue of borrowing money has never come up. So I just have to believe that this is another one of these situations where the member is throwing out an unfounded allegation in this Legislature.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Fish Creek.

Alleged Intimidation of Physicians

(continued)

Mrs. Forsyth: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Over the weekend the medical staff association spoke of the need for an inquiry into physician intimidation. Dr. Maybaum said that this issue has simply been brushed aside as an inconvenient truth on the eve of an election, and he's called for a tsunami of change. How does the

health minister then respond? He follows the Premier's lead and shrugs the issue off as being overly politicized. Is the Premier just going to keep ignoring our doctors and throwing them aside, or is she going to do the right thing and finally call a full, judge-led public inquiry into the bullying of our doctors?

Ms Redford: Mr. Speaker, the Health Quality Council report has been very clear in identifying the fact that we have these issues. That's the reason this hon. member can stand up in the House every day and make these suggestions. We are not denying the fact that we need to do work to resolve issues in the health care system. We think it's important for the government, Alberta Health Services, the college, and the AMA to come together constructively to do just that. [interjections]

Mrs. Forsyth: Premier, what you need to do is step up to the plate and do the right thing.

Given that an extensive culture of fear and intimidation exists throughout this government and given that the AMA, the MSA, and Albertans are screaming for an inquiry into physician intimidation, when is the Premier going to admit that the terms of reference for her inquiry are completely backwards and that it ignores the most important issues impacting our health care system?

2:00

Ms Redford: Mr. Speaker, the day that we announced the judicial inquiry with respect to queue-jumping, the discussion started with respect to why it didn't include doctor intimidation. My first response was because our commitment was to have a judicial inquiry with respect to queue-jumping, and as I have said over and over again in this House, the reason you need to have an inquiry is if you are trying to determine the facts. [interjections] We accept the facts, and we're going to fix health care in partnership with doctors.

Speaker's Ruling Decorum

The Speaker: I heard a number of words that were echoed there during that last exchange, and I would remind members that there is always a place for civility and decorum in the Legislative Assembly of the province of Alberta. This is not a place where we should expect anything less. If an hon. member believes strongly in what he or she is saying, they may always rise on a point of privilege and deal with such a matter.

Alleged Intimidation of Physicians (continued)

Mrs. Forsyth: Premier, the facts are that you're doing what you want to do, not what Albertans want.

Given that Dr. Maybaum said that what physicians and health care workers want is some sort of truth, an acknowledgement of what's happened, and a steadfast desire that we are going to change, how can the Premier possibly think that not calling an inquiry into physician intimidation is moving forward?

Ms Redford: Mr. Speaker, Dr. Maybaum said a number of things that are important in terms of what we need to do in order to fix health care, and we're looking forward to working with physicians to fix the system, but to presume that the only way to fix the system is to call an independent judicial inquiry, which will do nothing more than delay the process and not allow us to get on with fixing health care, doesn't make sense.

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

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. This Premier is the master of delaying tactics.

Electricity Exports

Mr. Mason: Two power companies, Direct Energy and Capital Power from Edmonton, have applied for approval for a massive export of electricity to the United States equivalent to two-thirds of Alberta's total consumption. Most of this electricity would potentially come from Alberta and would tie us into the western U.S. grid and market. To the Premier: does the government of Alberta support this application or not, and if not, will it take measures to prevent the mass export of Alberta power to the United States?

Mr. Liepert: Mr. Speaker, I'll answer that question. You know, we had the same kind of question I think it was a year or two ago by, I think, probably the same member or sidekick over there relative to another company that filed an application with the National Energy Board. This is a process that companies have the right to go through. It has absolutely nothing to do with exporting power. As this hon. member knows, Alberta is a net importer of power, not a net exporter, and it's only going to get worse as we move forward unless we get these transmission lines built.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Given that the minister is completely wrong and that this is specifically an application for a massive export of electricity largely from Alberta to the United States, I will ask the question: has the government done any analysis regarding the export of this power on Alberta electricity prices in the future, and if so, what are the results, and if not, why not?

Mr. Liepert: Well, Mr. Speaker, the analysis that we've done is not this kind of bogeyman analysis but analysis of what are going to be the requirements of Alberta. With this economic growth that we're experiencing and will likely continue to experience over the next decade, it's going to be a question of: where do we get the power to fuel this economic growth? That's why the whole issue around transmission is so critical to us maintaining our industrial base. We will, I am sure, be requiring more power generation in the future, not less.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Well, given that I specifically asked twice about the government's position relative to massive exports of power from Alberta to the United States and that twice the minister has absolutely avoided answering the question, my question to the minister and to the Premier, in fact, is: what is it that you're hiding over there?

Mr. Liepert: Well, Mr. Speaker, we're not hiding anything. That's what I tried to answer in the first couple of questions. Alberta has an economy that is the envy of the world. We also have a situation where much of our generation is threatened because we're heavily coal based. We're going to have to be searching wherever we can for the generation of power in this province. We're going to have to move it around. Whether it's cogeneration at the oil sands or wind in southern Alberta, we have to move it to where it's required, so the least likelihood that there will be any export of power.

Noninstructional Postsecondary Tuition Fees

Dr. Taft: Mr. Speaker, the minister of advanced education has brought in so-called best practices for postsecondary institutions to follow before they charge mandatory noninstructional fees to students, but frankly students are disappointed and angry with these. Since it is students who are forced to pay these fees, why didn't the minister protect the interests of the students and require student approval of mandatory noninstructional fees?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Weadick: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. Yes, mandatory noninstructional fees are an important issue, and we continue to work with our postsecondaries to find a solution. Each of our postsecondaries is a little bit different, and they're looking for policies that would work within their institutions. I have a number of copies of the best practices here. This is what we've suggested that they do.

- All mandatory non-instructional fees need to be clearly identified . . .
- Each institutional mandatory non-instructional fee is to fund specific identifiable services for the students.

Dr. Taft: That was a pretty empty answer, Mr. Speaker, so let's try another one. Given that the so-called best practices accepted by the minister will allow universities to start charging students extra for services that are already provided, why didn't the minister require that these new extra fees cover new extra services?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Weadick: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. What I just read says exactly that, that these fees will cover exactly that, services directly provided to students, clear and open and transparent so that students know what they're going to be paying for, know what the fees are for, have an opportunity for input into those fees as they meet with the boards of governors and are met with to determine what those fees should look like.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Dr. Taft: Well, thanks, Mr. Speaker. Given that the minister in his earlier answer conceded that these best practices are really just suggestions, if he believes that they actually are best practices, then why doesn't he make them mandatory, or is he not interested in his institutions delivering best practices?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Weadick: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'll file the copies of the best practices with the House because I am reading from them. We have actually said that all of our institutions must have these best practices placed into policies by the end of March for our review so that we can ensure that they have these best practices as part of the policy around their institutions and how they'll handle all fees.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Beverly-Clareview, followed by the hon. Member for Calgary-Varsity.

Home-schooling

Mr. Vandermeer: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Many of my constituents are parents who choose to educate their children at home, making a conscious decision to do so. They are making the right choice for their family. My question is to the Minister of

Education. Will this minister and this government uphold the freedoms and liberties of parents who decide to home educate their children?

Mr. Lukaszuk: Well, it's a good question, Mr. Speaker. There is a reason why my family moved to this country and this province, including myself, and it is to enjoy the rights that we get to enjoy in this province. There is also a reason why I feel so strongly about choices in education, because not only am I the Minister of Education, but I'm also a parent of a school-age child. There is nothing more important to me and, I imagine, all members of this House than giving parents the choice and the ability to teach what they want, when they want, and where they want without any interference from government.

Mr. Vandermeer: Mr. Speaker, my second question is to the same minister. Given that parental and family choice on topics such as religion or human sexuality is absolutely fundamental, can this minister assure all parents that in the context of religious or ethical education children are the responsibility of their parents, not the provincial government or you, the Minister of Education?

Mr. Lukaszuk: Mr. Speaker, I have a hard time parenting my own two children; I would not want to parent anybody else's children. The fact is that, yes, parents have the paramount responsibility of teaching religion, of teaching morality, and of teaching cultural values. That has always been the practice in this province and will always continue to be the practice in this province.

2:10

Mr. Vandermeer: Back to the same minister. Allow me to ask this question bluntly and without equivocation. Is there any intention at all to change any aspect of parental choice in this province? Yes or no?

Mr. Lukaszuk: No, not whatsoever.

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

Long-term Care Accommodation Rates

Mr. Chase: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. After finding her sitting soiled, crying out in agony, her family transferred 80-year-old Grace Denyer from a public to a private continuing care facility, Tranquility Care Homes. From there she was evicted on February 21, her family unable to afford the extra \$1,500 a month charged to her care for advanced Alzheimer's. To the Minister of Seniors: how is it that such facilities are able to increase their monthly fees by 43 per cent and without notice?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. VanderBurg: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. All the facilities that we license and that we fund have a cap of \$1,700 maximum. I'm not lifting that cap either.

Mr. Chase: Well, obviously, this organization ignored the cap, and you didn't enforce it.

Why has Tranquility Care Homes, a licensed group home, been allowed to advertise itself as being capable of providing long-term care services? Where is the regulation?

Mr. VanderBurg: Mr. Speaker, I did have a report from my staff that they were advertising – this is a private facility – as a long-

term care facility. They are not, and they shouldn't be allowed to, and we are investigating this.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Chase: Thank you. You might want to check out their advertisements.

How many more seniors must be evicted from the care they need before this government fully commits itself to properly resourcing publicly funded and publicly delivered long-term care?

Mr. VanderBurg: Well, I've made it very clear, Mr. Speaker, that whether it be a community, whether it be a foundation or a private facility, I'm willing to partner with whoever would like to provide the standards and accommodations and facilities for our seniors. I have some very, very clear marching orders from the Premier, and the Premier and all our caucus are adamant that we are going to form a thousand new spaces across this province each and every year over the next five years. I'll partner with the right people.

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

Noninstructional Postsecondary Tuition Fees (continued)

Mr. Bhardwaj: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. The Council of Alberta University Students has recently met with a number of MLAs. One of the topics they have been discussing is noninstructional fees. My fellow MLAs and I have been hearing these concerns from students about this government's approach to managing noninstructional fees for quite some time. My questions are to the Minister of Advanced Education and Technology. Does the government truly intend to keep its promise and make postsecondary a priority, and what action is being taken to address these students' concerns?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Weadick: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. This Premier and our government did promise to make postsecondary education a priority. We have listened to our students, and that's why I have required all of my postsecondary institutions to develop formal policies around noninstructional fees and formal policies around consultation with students. We also require that they present these policies to my department so that we can ensure that students' concerns are being met.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Bhardwaj: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. My next question to the same minister. You had asked postsecondary institutions for their noninstructional fee policies, some of which the students don't fully agree with. Did all postsecondary institutions reply, and if so, what exactly were the responses to address students' specific concerns?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Weadick: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. We did receive policies from all of our public postsecondary institutions, and we found that the policies did vary quite a bit and that they were not good enough. We believe we can do better around these fees, so we've met with the presidents and board chairs of all of our institutions to discuss the best practices. We've compiled a review, and we're

working with our institutions to ensure we have appropriate policies to deal with this issue.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Bhardwaj: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. My final question to the same minister: when do postsecondary institutions intend to implement these policies so that our students can finally see some results?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Weadick: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. We have told our institutions that we expect revised policies from all of our institutions by the end of March so that these policies can be in place before the upcoming school year.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Buffalo, followed by the hon. Member for Calgary-East.

Education Funding

Mr. Hehr: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The Education minister has made much ado about his recent budget, but the facts get in the way of his rhetoric. To the Minister of Education: how is it that there are 480 fewer teachers in Alberta schools right now than there were this time last year?

Mr. Lukaszuk: Mr. Speaker, the member well knows that the day-to-day operations of schools and school boards are done by trustees. I know that we are committed to our classroom sizes. As a matter of fact, we are batting below the recommended classroom size average. I know that there are pressures in some classes that are being addressed. But I also would like to remind this member that recently under the Premier's directive we have reinjected an additional \$107 million, which now is replicated in the next three budgets, for hiring teachers.

Mr. Hehr: Well, given that your new budget reads like an insurance policy in that what the large print giveth, the small print taketh away, are you not well aware that your 1 per cent increase for teachers' salaries and classroom operations will lead to fewer teachers in the classroom next September?

Mr. Lukaszuk: Well, I know, Mr. Speaker, that the Liberal opposition is awaiting a big windfall of taxpayers' dollars because they want to tax some more, but let me tell you about the big print and the small print. This budget is increasing from \$6.8 billion to \$7.1 billion over the next three years, spending on average some \$36 million per school day. If that is small print or blueprint and irrelevant, then I think they will have to tax more. We believe that we fund education very well compared to any other province in this country.

Mr. Hehr: I'd just like to ask the minister again what kind of fantasy world he was in when he crafted the budget, giving a 1 per cent raise to teachers' salaries. In order to make this budget, will the minister admit that either (a) the budget is wrong or that (b) he's going to have to keep teachers out on strike in order to make his budget a reality?

Mr. Lukaszuk: Well, Mr. Speaker, sometimes I do think that I live in a fantasy world when I'm being told by world-renowned organizations that we are in the top four education systems in the world. I also think that I sometimes live in a fantasy when I'm being told by parents that they get to exercise more choice than in

any other province in Canada. I'm also being told that we fund education higher than any other province on a per student basis. This is a great fantasy. It's a fantasy for students. We will continue to be committed to our students and make sure that they get this kind of education.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-East, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona.

Education Property Taxes

Mr. Amery: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Many of my constituents have expressed deep concern about the education property tax requisition for 2012-13. As a matter of fact, the Calgary city council is saying that they are forced to dip into a savings account to offset the province's take. Can the Minister of Municipal Affairs explain why the city of Calgary is required or forced to do that?

Mr. Griffiths: Mr. Speaker, the city is not required to do it, but I applaud them for it. Quite frankly, we lowered the education portion of property tax rates last year in anticipation of leaving \$42 million in the hands of property taxpayers. The city chose not to pass that down and kept it. Now they're accessing the fund that they created with that money and passing it on to taxpayers. I think it's the right thing to do, and I applaud them for it.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Amery: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Can the minister explain to my constituents and to all Calgarians if the city of Calgary taxpayers pay more in education property taxes than the school boards receive?

Mr. Griffiths: No, Mr. Speaker. In fact, all of the education property taxes collected in the province only pay for 30 per cent of our education system. In Calgary, in particular, it's just over \$600 million that's collected in education property taxes, and the two school boards in Calgary alone get close to \$1.4 billion, so it's hardly half of the education system funding that the province provides.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Amery: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Again to the same minister: can the minister inform Albertans if the province is needing and collecting more money this year than last year from Albertans to pay for education?

Mr. Griffiths: Mr. Speaker, I've said many times in this House – and I'll say it again – that the property tax rates remain the same, unchanged from last year. The growth in the value of properties, the growth in the number of properties has generated more revenue, but every single dollar of that revenue goes to support the best education system in the world.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona, followed by the hon. Member for Calgary-Mountain View.

2:20

School Capital Construction

Ms Notley: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. On Thursday the Minister of Education said that small schools will stay open as long as there are enough children to keep the program viable, but the Edmonton public school board has some, quote, tough decisions to make. In Edmonton public there are 76 schools that the province calls small

schools, and of those, the ministry says that only 33 are small schools by necessity. To the minister: based on these numbers, is the minister of the view that 43 of the so-called small schools in Edmonton should be closed?

Mr. Lukaszuk: Mr. Speaker, well, yes, Edmonton public school board does have some difficult decisions to make because they have some 40,000 vacant seats, frankly, enough empty space to accommodate the entire Catholic school system in their empty classrooms. At the same time they have challenges because they have kids where they don't have schools, and they have schools where they don't have kids. But closures should only be considered when there aren't enough students to have a viable educational program. It's all about education. It's all about the kids in the classroom. As long as the program is viable and adequate, schools should remain open.

Ms Notley: Mr. Speaker, given that the Edmonton public school board just approved a capital plan that prioritizes a request for upgrades to six older schools followed by a request for two new schools and given that the minister has been heard to suggest that upgrading old schools is not cost-effective and that new schools are preferred, can the minister tell this House whether he will respect the request made by the local school board or whether he would rather have the older schools close in favour of newer ones?

Mr. Lukaszuk: Mr. Speaker, this is an ongoing dialogue between my office and that of school boards, and as long it focuses on what is best for the children in the classroom – that is the business we're in; we're in the business of educating our children and providing them with the best education possible – this dialogue will continue. If education can be delivered at the high level that we're accustomed to, there is no reason to close schools.

Ms Notley: Mr. Speaker, given that the minister has suggested that the school board would be provided with a new school for every three or four schools closed, is it the minister's intention to hold the children and their families hostage to the province's historical failure to fund school infrastructure by forcing school boards to close schools in the city centre to qualify for the new schools required as a result of predictable population growth?

Mr. Lukaszuk: Mr. Speaker, a needless use of very strong and inappropriate language. The fact is that we will continue collaborating with school boards, with parents, with teachers, making sure that they have the critical mass of students so that they can provide students with proper and adequate education. We will be looking at capacity of schools, we'll be looking at the number of children they have in the schools, and those decisions will be made on a per school basis, only using the criteria of quality of education.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Mountain View, followed by the hon. Member for Calgary-Mackay.

Primary Care Networks

Dr. Swann: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Recently the minister of health unilaterally imposed a one-year payment on the province's doctors, including after nine years of no increase the equivalent of a cost-of-living increase for the primary care networks. On this they're supposed to expand their services to the public. He also talks about restoring a, quote, just culture, end quote, for staff working in the health system. Does the minister not see how hypocritical these sentiments are in light of his arbitrary actions?

Mr. Horne: Mr. Speaker, this is hardly a question of policy, but what I will tell the hon. member is that we have continued our negotiations with the Alberta Medical Association and Alberta Health Services on a new agreement. Those are progressing extremely well. I had the opportunity to speak to the Representative Forum of the AMA last Friday. We discussed many of these issues and others as well, and I'm hopeful that we will have something to further communicate in the near future.

Dr. Swann: Well, I'm surprised at the minister not seeing primary care networks as an issue of policy.

Adding further insult, Alberta Health Services is asking physicians to sign contracts allowing employers the right to dismissal without cause. How does this reflect a move to a more just culture?

Mr. Horne: Mr. Speaker, I have no idea what the hon. member is talking about with respect to his last statement.

If he is interested in our policy regarding primary health care, I can tell him, as I have told him before, that PCNs are a very, very important part of that future. We are in discussions with the AMA about how to further enhance and support the work of primary care networks across Alberta. There are over 40 in place today. There are 2.8 million Albertans who live in communities served by PCNs.

Dr. Swann: Exactly my point, Mr. Speaker. Why not strengthen them instead of giving them a cost-of-living increase?

Will the minister follow the Alberta Liberal policy and strengthen PCNs appropriately and ensure that all Albertans have access to a family doctor?

Mr. Horne: Mr. Speaker, this government will take its suggestions for how to improve primary care networks from our family doctors and the other professionals who work with them in teams on a day-to-day basis. As I think the hon. member well knows, there is much innovation that has been supported by government working in collaboration with our primary care networks, our doctors, the nurse practitioners, and other professionals. We have every intention of continuing to build on that in the future.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Mackay, followed by the hon. Member for Airdrie-Chestermere.

Education Consultation

Ms Woo-Paw: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The delivery of education is top of mind for many Albertans. Parents play a critical role in a child's education. They are their child's first teacher and a key source of information about what is working and what is not working in the child's learning. My first question is to the Minister of Education. We talk a lot about parents as partners in education. How is the government engaging parents?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Lukaszuk: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Actually, it's a good day to ask this question because today I will be having yet another teleconference forum with our parents. Last time we had one, over 1,000 parents called in to this town hall meeting on the telephone.

I also wanted to let you know, Mr. Speaker, that we will be formalizing the partnership between the minister's office and parents so that parents can not only contribute to policy development while the act is being reviewed but will be able to

contribute to policy development on an ongoing basis from now on.

Ms Woo-Paw: My second question is to the same minister. It's great that we're providing passive information, but parents also expect a more active kind of communication with their government. How is the minister ensuring that this is happening?

Mr. Lukaszuk: Mr. Speaker, two things are already happening. One, I have committed to having ongoing town hall meetings via telephone with parents. As I said earlier, over 1,000 parents called in, and we're having great discussions. The benefit is that parents get to hear each other and discuss with me. Also, I have instituted a newsletter right now that reaches every school in every corner of the province, where parents now get to communicate directly with the minister's office. That is something that is unprecedented, and it actually generates very good debate and discussion, and some creative ideas are stemming from that.

Ms Woo-Paw: Given that we already have important organizations like the Alberta School Councils' Association, how does this new council differ?

Mr. Lukaszuk: Well, Mr. Speaker, this new council will have direct input on policy development in the minister's office, and we'll have continuous dialogue. It will be representative of parents from across the province, and it will enhance the dialogue between the parent community from all sectors of schooling in this province and the minister's office.

Alberta Human Rights Act

Mr. Anderson: Mr. Speaker, some of the worst human rights violations of free speech and freedom of religion in Canada over the past decade or so have been at the hands of the Alberta human rights tribunal under section 3 of the Human Rights Act. This Premier during the PC leadership told several media outlets that "section 3 of the Alberta Human Rights Act should be repealed." To the Premier: that's a pretty clear promise. Are you breaking yet another promise that you made in order to get elected PC leader?

Mr. Olson: Mr. Speaker, thank you to the member for the question. I will remind the member that in my mandate letter the Premier asked me to investigate whether we should repeal or amend section 3 of Human Rights Act. I've had responsibility for the Human Rights Act for about four or five months now. Work is under way to review not only section 3, but I want to have an understanding of how the Human Rights Commission is operating. I would just ask the hon. member to stay tuned. I'm working on it.

Mr. Anderson: She said that she would repeal section 3, not review it. It's called telling the truth.

Given the outpouring of opposition to Bill 2 by thousands of parents across this province who are very concerned that parts of Bill 2 trample on the paramount rights of parents over choices involving their children's education, why will you not now get rid of section 3 of the Alberta Human Rights Act and also amend Bill 2 to protect the human rights of Alberta's parents? Why will you not listen to their concerns?

Mr. Olson: Mr. Speaker, I would also point out to the hon. member and to all of my colleagues here that the Alberta Court of Appeal is currently considering section 3. As well, there is a case out of Saskatchewan before the Supreme Court of Canada on virtually the same language as is in section 3, and I would like to

see what the Supreme Court of Canada has to say about this section.

Mr. Anderson: It's called leadership. Just repeal it.

Given that this Premier has broken her promise to call a public inquiry into doctor intimidation and to set a fixed election date and to stop the north-south power lines and to not raise taxes and given that now she is breaking her word on repealing section 3 of the Human Rights Act, is there any reason why any Albertan should trust her to keep her promise to protect free speech or to protect the human rights of parents? Start keeping your promises.

Mr. Horner: Mr. Speaker, it's unfortunate that the hon. member has trouble with the truth himself. This Premier has kept every one of the promises that she had made during the leadership race. This Premier has made an effort on all of those fronts, as we've just heard from the Minister of Justice. It's unfortunate that there would be that kind of misinformation presented in this House.

2:30 High-speed Internet Service for Rural Alberta

Mr. Ouellette: Mr. Speaker, given that the SuperNet has been around for a dozen years or so now, my constituents would like to know why it is taking this government so long to provide access to high-speed Internet service across the province. When will the remaining unserved rural communities finally get this essential service, which many in this province and around the world take for granted? To the Minister of Service Alberta.

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Bhullar: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. We know this member is very passionate about everything high tech. We are delivering on Premier Redford's commitment to ensure that at least 98 per cent of Albertans have access to this vital service. This morning I announced that up to \$900,000 will be made available to provide satellite Internet service to rural Alberta in low-density, remote areas. In addition, \$9.5 million will be available to work with Internet service providers.

The Speaker: The hon. minister knows he made an error in his statement.

The hon. member, please.

Mr. Ouellette: Mr. Speaker, that's pretty good to hear.

I know that people in here are wondering why I don't just lean over my desk and ask the hon. minister the question. I have to tell you that this is very important to our constituents out in rural Alberta, and they need to hear these answers. Will the services delivered by the initiative cover the entire province or only parts of the province?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Bhullar: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'll let the member decide if he wants to try and lean over. I won't go any further with that.

This funding, Mr. Speaker, will cover a vast portion of Alberta. Of course, we'll still have some areas in the province that have issues, like infills where geography is a challenge. We will address those issues as well. We will look at all of that. That's part of the plan. It's been a four-step plan. In the last five months we've made a lot of progress, and we are going to make sure that all of Alberta is connected.

Mr. Ouellette: Well, Mr. Minister, are you going to be able to

justify the cost, given that your program is connecting relatively very few rural households?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Bhullar: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Every single one of our rural households is very important to us. They deserve high-speed Internet access. They deserve access to the world at their fingertips. That's what we are delivering on. We are leveraging and working with our private-sector partners to make sure that we get the best value for our dollars.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-McCall, followed by the hon. Member for Calgary-Nose Hill.

Workforce Employment Services

Mr. Kang: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The government recently announced amendments to the employment agency business licensing regulations, that are to come into effect on September 1. My questions are to the Minister of Service Alberta. Why is the government making it expressly illegal for employment agencies to intimidate or threaten individuals seeking work, but it won't do anything about its own intimidation of health care workers? Why the double standard?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Bhullar: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I didn't know the hon. member across the way had a problem with me protecting people in east Calgary. These are people that deserve our protection. They are families that have put their dollars on the line to sponsor people to come over from places like India, the Philippines, and Vietnam, and we are acting to protect them. The hon. member should be consistent on what he says in this House and what he says back in northeast Calgary.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Kang: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm speaking about all Albertans. I'm not speaking about just a few temporary foreign workers. I'm speaking for all Albertans.

Given that the province's temporary foreign worker advisory office is supposed to advise foreign workers on their rights yet exploitation and misstatements have continued to be a problem, are these amendments an acknowledgement that the temporary foreign worker advisory office either isn't doing its job properly or the government is not doing enough to promote the services provided by that offices? To the minister again.

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Bhullar: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The fact is that Alberta has one of the most robust economies of any jurisdiction in Canada, in North America, and in the world, and we are a destination where people want to be. This is the land of opportunity. With that, we know that there have been some employment agencies that have acted in ways that do not represent the best of us. We're taking action to make sure we are prepared for the next boom, which is right around the corner because of this government's actions, and ensuring that nobody will be taken advantage of.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Kang: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. To the minister again: given

that the government has demonstrated its willingness to license all sorts of businesses, including employment agencies and home inspections for resale properties, why won't it adapt the most basic homeowner protection measure by requiring residential builders to be licensed as well?

Mr. Bhullar: Mr. Speaker, I'm continuously looking for more ways and new ways to protect Albertans. We have a wide variety of initiatives that we're working on today. For example, I'm the first minister in Canada to approach the federal government to say that we need more protection for cellphone consumers in Canada. We're leading the way. We always seek new ways to ensure that we protect Albertans, and I'll look at the member's considerations.

Restorative Justice

Dr. Brown: Mr. Speaker, Alberta remand centres and jails are filled to capacity while there seems to be more and more demand for mandatory minimum sentences. However, for many persons convicted of personal and property crimes, incarceration alone is not effective. It does little to hold offenders accountable for the wrong they're doing, and it does little to help victims heal. My question is for the Solicitor General and Minister of Public Security. What is your department doing to advance and support organizations that can deliver restorative justice and that can have a positive impact both on the victim and on the offender?

The Speaker: The hon. minister

Mr. Denis: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. After the last exchange I'm very happy to talk about restorative justice. Restorative justice is an important program throughout the province. It does provide assistance to victims first of all but also some positive aspects to offenders. Just this last Friday the Minister of Justice and Attorney General and I announced \$351,000 of funding for this program in this province.

Dr. Brown: To the same minister: can he provide some specific instances where restorative justice works in the system?

Mr. Denis: Well, Mr. Speaker, I could talk for half an hour, but I'll do it for 45 seconds. I met with a gentleman named J.J. Beauchamp from the Innisfail Restorative Justice Society, and he informed me of a case where there were 120 graves knocked down in Innisfail. In particular, the offenders had to do research about the people whose names were on these gravestones and actually apologize to their families as a result of this.

Dr. Brown: My second supplemental is for the Minister of Justice and Attorney General. Can the minister advise how restorative justice programs work with the safe communities initiative and the justice system in general?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Olson: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. The safe communities initiative talks a lot about balance. As important as enforcement is, early intervention, prevention, and innovative approaches are also a big part of the safe communities initiative. Restorative justice is very consistent with that kind of an approach, and restorative justice organizations are really crucial in not only assisting victims of crime but also engaging with the perpetrators of those crimes to get them, maybe for the first time, to consider the impact of their actions.

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

Sand and Gravel Extraction Management

Ms Blakeman: Thanks very much, Mr. Speaker. Gravel is big business in Alberta, we think, but it's a bit tricky to know quite how big given this government's continuing failure to track it. The government has no real way to track what is being taken from the ground so has no clue about what kind of revenue is due. As we have seen with the oil and gas infrastructure, this government has no idea how much Albertans will be on the hook for in the reclamation of gravel sites in the future. To the Minister of Sustainable Resource Development: why is this government unwilling to ensure that Albertans are getting their fair share from this resource?

Mr. Oberle: I have to tell you, Mr. Speaker, that I disagree with absolutely everything the member said in her preamble. We are certainly very much interested in making sure that Albertans get their fair share of revenues from resource extraction.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Ms Blakeman: Thanks again. Back to the same minister: when this ministry is allowing access to public lands for extraction of gravel, why does it continue to ignore its responsibility in regard to reclamation? You're not doing inspections, you're not collecting appropriate amounts for security, and you're not checking to see if reclamation is being done.

2:40

Mr. Oberle: Again, Mr. Speaker, I agree with absolutely nothing in that preamble. That's just simply not true.

Ms Blakeman: Well, it's a shame that the Auditor General – well, actually, it's a shame for the government. I'm glad that the Auditor General agrees with me, not the government. He has been raising these concerns for years, not a couple but many years. What steps has this minister taken to ensure that the free-for-all that is happening with gravel development doesn't continue for another day?

Mr. Oberle: Mr. Speaker, if the hon. member could point me to the part of the Auditor General's report that says that the government is not doing any measurement of gravel and no monitoring and has no idea what's happening out there, then I'd be happy to address it. But that's not, in fact, what the report says. We do work with the Auditor General, and there's always room for improvement, but this is a well-managed resource, and the province is looking after the resource.

The Speaker: Hon. members, 19 members today raised 57 questions, which led to 57 responses.

We'll continue with the Routine momentarily.

Members' Statements

(continued)

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-North Hill.

Results-based Budgeting

Mr. Fawcett: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. One of the most important elements of fiscal responsibility is identifying and achieving the outcomes that Albertans expect from their government. It's about ensuring that we're delivering the right programs and services the right way at the right time. That's why the Results-based Budgeting Act was the first piece of legislation

introduced this year under the leadership of this Premier. The Results-based Budgeting Act demonstrates a new approach to governance in this province.

Just because something has always been done, it does not mean that it should continue forever. Results-based budgeting will ensure that the priorities of Albertans, not bureaucrats, will be paramount in determining where tax dollars are allocated, and it gives Albertans a fundamental role in contributing input into the allocation of their tax dollars. Additionally, Mr. Speaker, it reflects a pragmatic approach that today's public governance requires in order to adjust shifting priorities.

In a province where economic growth is double that expected in the entire country and where the employment growth is the highest in Canada, Albertans expect their government to respond to their ever-changing needs. This means examining existing programs to see if they are getting the results Albertans expected. It also means connecting people and their communities to services that they need in the most effective and efficient manner.

Results-based budgeting demonstrates the principled, fiscally conservative approach that Albertans have embraced in over 40 years of Progressive Conservative government, Mr. Speaker. This is a long-standing principle that doesn't change, and this is one that Albertans can count on under the leadership of this Premier.

Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

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

International Adult Learners' Week

Ms Woo-Paw: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise today to tell you about International Adult Learners' Week, which is being celebrated throughout Canada beginning this week, from March 24 to April 1. Adult Learners' Week is an international initiative co-ordinated by the Canadian Commission for UNESCO, the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization. Our common message this year is I'm Still Learning.

During Adult Learners' Week we celebrate the achievements of adult learners and encourage them to continue learning throughout their lives to develop the skills they need to achieve their goals. Mr. Speaker, across Alberta community learning organizations, postsecondary institutions, libraries, and other groups will mark the week by promoting adult learning in all its forms through seminars, workshops, learner readings and stories, and other events. It is clear from their commitment that these groups share this government's recognition of the importance of lifelong learning.

The government of Alberta supports a wide variety of learning opportunities throughout the province. Thanks to this support adult learners are able to learn and grow in their own communities to develop the knowledge and skills they need for success. It also means that these Albertans are able to realize their full potential and contribute to their families, their communities, and to the success of our province.

On behalf of this government and the citizens of Alberta I would like to thank all those volunteers and staff who support and deliver adult learning programs. Thanks to you Albertans across the province are still learning.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Strathmore-Brooks.

Sagewood Seniors' Residence

Mr. Doerksen: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. On March 2 I was extremely pleased to attend the official opening and tour of Sagewood seniors' community with the Minister of Seniors in

Strathmore. Sagewood is a beautiful facility and an example of a new era in accommodations that are being built throughout our province. There are 60 supportive living units and 40 independent living apartments currently filled in this facility, and a further \$7.6 million has also been dedicated to build 70 more supportive living units as well as 30 more long-term care units.

This project and others like it will allow Albertans to stay close to family and friends and to live in a more comfortable, familiar setting. When I was there for the opening and the tour, I saw first-hand the difference that this facility is making and will continue to make in the lives of those who live there. There were many smiling faces, Mr. Speaker, at the grand opening and a lot of pride by residents with regard to the homes that they now live in.

Residents will receive top-quality care at Sagewood, which will enable them to live the fullest possible lives in a community setting. There is no doubt that our Premier and this government are fully committed to helping seniors and persons with disabilities increase and improve their quality of life.

Sagewood is an excellent example of how future long-term care and supportive living places will be built. This facility will serve the people of Strathmore and the county of Wheatland and area and our province for a long time and will make a lasting contribution to our society and our quality of life.

I acknowledge the strong commitment of the community to work together with the province of Alberta and our government to see this facility come to fruition. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

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

Edmonton-McClung

Mr. Xiao: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise this afternoon to speak about the wonderful constituency of Edmonton-McClung, that I have been so fortunate to represent for the last four years. Edmonton-McClung is named after Nellie McClung, one of the Famous Five in Alberta's history. Edmonton-McClung lies along the north and the west bank of the North Saskatchewan River south of Whitemud Drive and all the way to the city boundary in the west.

In 2011 the completed overpasses of Lessard Road, Callingwood Road, and Cameron Heights has made the everyday commute in and around Edmonton safer, more convenient, and more enjoyable.

Mr. Speaker, McClung is the best place to raise a family. It has 15 diverse schools, including two brand new schools, Sister Annata Brockman Catholic school and the Bessie Nichols public school in the Hamptons.

Edmonton-McClung is also home to the beautiful Lois Hole library and the Jamie Platz YMCA. We also include the Callingwood recreation centre, the new water spray park, and the Callingwood skateboard park, our last urban recreational facility in McClung.

Mr. Speaker, through the amount of \$620,000 in community initiatives program funding our diverse grassroots organizations in McClung have become more vibrant than ever before. Our community leagues and other community organizations have received \$1.6 million from the community facility enhancement program to enhance and improve their facilities and playgrounds. Three child care facilities have received a total amount of more than \$100,000 to create new child care spaces. Callingwood district park has received \$1.3 million from the municipal sustainability initiative fund for redevelopment purposes. The safety and the security of our community has been tangibly improved through the work of the neighbourhood empowerment team in the Callingwood area.

The McClung family has a very high graduation rate. In the last four years alone 2,600 students graduated . . .

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Red Deer-North.

2:50 Emergency Preparedness

Mrs. Jablonski: Mr. Speaker, every year we mark Emergency Preparedness Week during the first full week of May, but no matter what time of the year, we never know when a disaster will strike. We all know that Alberta is no stranger to severe weather events like tornadoes, wildfires, and flooding.

While we can't prevent disasters like these, we can prepare for them. In fact, it's a proven fact that the more prepared we are, the safer Albertans and their families are from these tragic events. That's why it's important for Albertans to know the risks in their area and the most appropriate way to respond, to make a family emergency plan, and to create a 72-hour kit filled with nonperishable food items, water, medications, and important documents. Similarly, Albertans should have a ready-to-go kit in case they need to evacuate their home or work on short notice.

However, Mr. Speaker, no matter how prepared people are for a disaster, there will always be times when government will need to help people in their time of need. This has been especially true over the past two years, when we experienced extremely high numbers of disasters.

The Alberta government was and still is helping the people of the Slave Lake region recover from the horrific wildfire last spring. To date \$289 million has been dedicated to the recovery efforts, and temporary housing was provided to all of the 300 displaced families.

We were there to help the people of southern Alberta deal with significant flooding in 2010. More than \$43 million has been paid out to over 3,100 applicants, and 99.8 per cent of the residential claims have either received their first cheque or their files are complete and closed.

In fact, Mr. Speaker, in 2011 there were 13 disaster recovery programs around the province, for a total commitment of up to \$212 million. It's plain to see that the Alberta government is committed to the people who need help while facing disasters. We've done all this while weathering a recession that crippled many economies in North America and around the world.

Tabling Returns and Reports

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre, then Calgary-Varsity, then Edmonton-Calder.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I'm most honoured today to be able to present tablings on behalf of two of my colleagues. The first is a series of letters from Stephanie Parks, Lise Plamondin, Christine Duteau, Gordon Evans, Darlene Bloxham, Sandra Kimball, Betty Evans, Nancy Callihoo, and Brian Fisher. They are asking the government to institute the funding necessary for beds, staffing, and programming until the mentally ill are stable; to build a world-class facility for the severely mentally ill, including transition housing and staffing of occupational therapists and social workers; and to decriminalize the mentally ill and implement a mental health court. That's on behalf of my colleague for Calgary-Mountain View.

On behalf of the Leader of the Official Opposition I have a number of tablings from different media sources which have covered a story regarding AIMCo approaching the government to borrow additional funding. That's three of the tablings.

The final tabling is concerning Bill 203 and the various issues that the leader had raised on March 12, 2012, when, in fact, he was debating second reading of Bill 203. Any references he made are included in those tablings.

Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

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

Mr. Chase: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I have two tablings. The first is an advertisement from Tranquility Care Homes Inc. from the health and fitness magazine, January 2012, where it states "Long Term Care for Seniors in a Residential Home" and "We accept Alzheimer's, Dementia and Wheelchair Patients. Respite and Semi-Palliative Care Available." That's to back up my concerns stated in question period today.

My second, Mr. Speaker, is a further 20 e-mails out of the hundreds I've received from the following individuals who are seeking the preservation of the Castle wilderness, all of whom believe clear-cutting will damage the ecology, watershed, wildlife, and natural species and must be prohibited at all costs: Carri Bedard, Cecily Mills, Hazel Holoboff, Barend Dronkers, David J. Brown, Sandy McAndrews, Ken Wood, Brent Gavay, Dr. Rosalyn McAuley, Stefanie Niawchuk, Eric Willis, Maryann Emery, Kevin and Anita Miller, Paul Falvo, Nancy Ingersoll, Robert and Pamela Porter, M. Judith Stockdale, Brenda Allan, George Payerle, and Jon LeBaron.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Advanced Education and Technology.

Mr. Weadick: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise to table the appropriate number of copies of the Student Consultation on Mandatory Non-instructional Fees Policy – Best Practices, which I referred to earlier in question period.

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

Mr. Elniski: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. I table the appropriate number of copies of a document that I had previously tabled on March 15. I'm a little bit embarrassed because, apparently, I did not provide you with the entire e-mail, sir, and for that I apologize. This document, as you may recall, was an e-mail from the assistant principal at M.E. LaZerte high school, Marion McIlwraith, where she expressed her dismay with respect to the behaviour of three members of the Wildrose opposition.

Thank you.

The Speaker: Hon. Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, you indicated to me that you wanted to raise a point of order.

Point of Order Remarks Off the Record

Mr. Berger: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I wish to raise a point of order today. At estimates for Agriculture and Rural Development on the evening of Monday, March 12, 2012, the hon. Member for Calgary-Glenmore said, and I quote: I did not say repeal. I quote the following exchange between the member and myself. Minister: "So there is that. We also have to be respectful of the fact that the very acts that you've spoken of repealing are what it takes to create water reservoirs . . ." Calgary-Glenmore: "I didn't say repeal." Minister: ". . . because we cannot supply or store that in the ether, or we wouldn't have the need for the other 50 reservoirs. That's one of the things, then, going forward. We have to have the ability to create that."

Mr. Speaker, while I'm glad the hon. member has seen the light and admitted that he would not repeal those acts, I believe that it needs to be corrected in *Hansard*. Although the comment is clear on the audio, *Hansard* left that comment off. Although all of his other interjections were left in *Hansard*, that one is left out.

I'd just like to clarify for the record that the Member for Calgary-Glenmore is in favour of those acts. Assuming that he is the deputy leader, all of the Wildrose also must be in favour.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: Well, that appears to be a point of clarification rather than a point of order. There would have been a more appropriate time for that.

Hon. Member for Fort McMurray-Wood Buffalo, did you have a point of order?

Point of Order Parliamentary Language

Mr. Boutilier: Yes. Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. In the question period exchange this afternoon between the Member for Airdrie-Chestermere and the Deputy Premier in a response from the Deputy Premier I rose on a point of order under 23(h), (i), and (j). In the exchange the question was posed:

Given that this Premier has broken her promise to call a public inquiry into doctor intimidation and to set a fixed election date and to stop the north-south power lines and to not to raise taxes and [also] given now that she is breaking her word on repealing . . . 3 of the Human Rights Act, Premier, is there any reason why . . . Albertan should trust you to keep your promise to protect free speech . . . of parents?

Mr. Speaker, I draw to your attention that the response by the Deputy Premier was: "The hon. member has trouble with the truth . . ."

I only reference for your consideration, Mr. Speaker, finally, that this was personalized to a member of this House, and I draw attention to your ruling of April 27, 2009, when the Speaker ruled that twisting the truth warranted an apology from a member. This afternoon I would ask that the Deputy Premier, in fact, withdraw his comment.

Mr. Horner: Well, Mr. Speaker, it is my opinion that the hon. member has a little trouble with the truth. You know, he's making a lot of claims and accusations in this House on an almost daily basis. He's used a lot of language that many would consider to be unparliamentary throughout the week, and we probably could have called points of order and those sorts of things, but in the interests of ensuring that your Assembly operates in a most efficient manner, we've chosen not to do that.

You know, the hon. member says that we're raising taxes. Mr. Speaker, that's not the truth. So one would argue that even this hon. member is having a little difficulty with the truth. The truth is that there is not a tax increase in this budget.

3:00

Mr. Speaker, the hon. member says that the Premier didn't fulfill her commitment on a health care quality inquiry. In fact, there is a judicial inquiry that has been called based on what the Premier has asked the task force to do or the Health Quality Council to do. So, again, having a little difficulty with the truth.

They talked about the election date, that we would have fixed elections in the province of Alberta. Mr. Speaker, as the hon. member well knows, we are currently within that period of time, and there will be an election. Everybody in this Assembly knows

it. Everyone in the province knows it. So, again, a little issue with the truth.

I find it interesting, Mr. Speaker, that this is almost like they're saying that we're not honouring the democratic traditions or we're not honouring democracy in our province. Our leader actually ran for a seat in this House when their leader had the opportunity to do so in a by-election and did not. I find it rather strange that there are a lot of these kind of hypocritical issues that are floating around from that particular party.

I didn't say that they were lying. I didn't say that they were calling out other members. I simply said, Mr. Speaker, that they had trouble with the truth, and I think I've proven that.

The Speaker: I think I've heard enough, with all honesty, to make a conclusion in this matter. This, obviously, was an opportunity for clarification.

Orders of the Day

Written Questions

[The Clerk read the following written question, which had been accepted]

Registered Apprenticeship Program Participation

Q2. Dr. Taft:
How many high school students per calendar year have participated in the registered apprenticeship program since its implementation?

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

Registered Apprenticeship Program Cost

Q1. Dr. Taft asked that the following question be accepted.
What has been the cost per fiscal year of the registered apprenticeship program since its implementation?

Dr. Taft: Yes. I just need to get a point of clarification here. Written Question 1 has not been accepted or has been accepted? Not accepted. So I would move that Written Question 1 be accepted.

I will leave the response to the minister.

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Weadick: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. We have heard the question. Costs for the RAP, registered apprenticeship program, are aggregated with our other costs for apprenticeship delivery. It simply wouldn't be possible to provide an accurate line item cost for the program. RAP apprentices, for example, register in exactly the same way as regular apprentices, so the costs are simply absorbed into the costs of the thousands of apprenticeship registrations we do each year. There are some promotional costs associated with the program, but again these are simply part of a broader cost of promoting apprenticeships as a first-rate career option for young people. It should be noted that the real promotion of this program takes place in classrooms and among our employer partners, who make this great program possible.

So, Mr. Speaker, I would move that we reject this question. Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview to close the debate.

Dr. Taft: Yes. I was actually surprised and disappointed with the response. It strikes me as surprising and worrying that a government has a program, a well-recognized program, for which it cannot give fiscal accounting. I think that speaks probably to the widespread issues of lax financial or fiscal control of this government.

[The Deputy Speaker in the chair]

I have to question the appropriateness of this, Mr. Speaker, because if we have something as specific as a registered apprenticeship program and the minister cannot give any accounting of what it costs, we should all be worried. Maybe my next written question would be: how many other programs does this minister have for which he cannot give any clear indication of the cost?

Frankly, I'm startled. I don't know how a minister can stand here and just rattle off that excuse. "I have a program, Mr. Speaker," he says, "but I don't know what it costs, and I'm not going to try to find out or tell anybody." Pretty disappointing. I think the Assembly should require this minister to go back and return with an answer. I bet they will, too; I can feel that.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

[Written Question 1 lost]

Motions for Returns

[The Clerk read the following motion for a return, which had been accepted]

Lawsuits against Alberta Health Services

M3. Dr. Swann:

A return showing a list of lawsuits in which Alberta Health Services is, as of March 31, 2011, named as a defendant, indicating the cause of action and amount in damages claimed.

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

Postsecondary Institution Student Fees

M1. Dr. Taft moved that an order of the Assembly do issue for a return showing copies of all correspondence from August 1, 2011, to February 3, 2012, between the Minister of Advanced Education and Technology and the province's postsecondary institutions regarding development of and student input on fee payment policy.

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Having made that motion for a return, I'm sure my friend the minister would agree that it's remarkably timely given that we had a number of representatives of student organizations in the Assembly just minutes ago. They may still be up there; I'm not sure.

Exactly on the issue of postsecondary institution fee payment policies, Mr. Speaker, we would like to have on the public record this correspondence because we think that it's very important. There are many, many, many tens of thousands of postsecondary students in Alberta who are required to pay a whole host of different kinds of fees, some of which are explained and some of which just seem to come out of the blue and may or may not be connected to any particular service.

The minister knows very well that these have been contentious concerns for students and for student organizations and that the student organizations have been working hard on this. Earlier today I met with representatives of, boy, if I did quick math in my head, maybe 77,000 postsecondary students, and believe me they were not happy. They felt they had not been heard.

I think that if we were to approve this motion, we could actually get a sense of what the nature of the discussion was and perhaps help the students or perhaps help the government in explaining its position and definitely help the public in understanding an issue that affects many of us to the tune, in total, of millions upon millions of dollars. It's just a matter of being open for the public record.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. minister of advanced education.

Mr. Weadick: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. We move to reject this motion at this time. We are right now in the middle of working with all of our institutions and our student groups on the area of noninstructional fees. As you're aware, it has come forward over the past few months. It was brought on or instigated by a couple of institutions bringing in some fees that were things that were not typically seen as fees. So we've been having discussions both with our institutions and with our student groups around how we manage this into the future.

Mr. Speaker, today I tabled the outcome of a lot of those discussions around the student consultation on mandatory noninstructional fees policies. We continue to work with our students and our institutions because there are also issues around fees charged by students through student unions. There are all kinds of fees that are both mandatory instructional and noninstructional.

3:10

This province is the final province in Canada that has a tuition fee cap. Mr. Speaker, we want to maintain that tuition fee cap, and we think it's very, very important to keep education cost-effective. We want the students to access the finest programs. Earlier today someone said that we have high fees, but we're in the middle of the pack as Canada goes for fees, and actually we're among the lowest in the country for graduate students, a thousand dollars below most graduate student programs.

We also want to keep the quality in our systems. We want the number one quality programs, Mr. Speaker, as well as being accessible and affordable. Because of that we also provide the most scholarships in the country, in fact, more than all of the provinces combined, to keep our education system affordable.

So, Mr. Speaker, as we move forward and work with our institutions, information will go back and forth as we try to develop these policies. We're in the middle of that. I will commit that when we complete the process with our institutions, we'll then make available information as it's available to all members to review. But as I said, right now we're right in the middle of that. I don't want anyone feeling unduly challenged as they work to negotiate and discuss how these policies may fit.

We think it's important that our students, as they sit on the boards of governors, working with our boards of governors to come through with these policies – Mr. Speaker, if the students want to disclose any of that information that's available that isn't confidential to any members, they are able to do that, but for the moment, as we work through these negotiations and try to come to these policies, we just want to ensure that we can keep them fair and open for the boards of governors and students to work together to find a solution to these noninstructional fees. So at this time releasing all of that information wouldn't be appropriate. We would ask that it not be released at this time, but we'll continue to work with all members in this House, all of our institutions, and all of our students.

Thank you.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview to close.

Dr. Taft: Yes, thank you. I appreciated the comments of the minister, but I obviously take issue with them. Among other things he said two or three times that the government is right in the middle of sorting this policy out, yet he's presented their best practices policy as if it's a done deal. So as far as it looks to anybody in the public, certainly to students or to me, they're not in the middle of anything; they're at the end of it. They've done it. They've issued their statement, and we're looking just for the background on it.

The minister also referred to the quality of postsecondary education in Alberta. I would venture to say that, in general, it's adequate, occasionally it's excellent, but by most measures Alberta's universities barely make the top ranks of Canadian universities. The University of Alberta consistently comes in, depending on your ranking, around number 5; U of C, maybe number 10. The quality of postsecondary education in this province is not what it ought to be. We're just trying to hold the government to account.

One of the issues with quality is accessibility, and we know increasingly that university education in particular is a privilege for higher income Albertans and that participation rates for lower income people or for First Nations or other populations is way too low. And one of the biggest issues, in fact, around accessibility is cost, which includes all these extra fees that are tagged on and can add many hundreds of dollars to tuition fees.

So once again I have to differ with the minister. Thank you.

[Motion for a Return 1 lost]

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

Alberta Innovates and Pfizer Canada MOU

M2. Dr. Taft moved that an order of the Assembly do issue for a return showing a copy of the 2011 memorandum of understanding between Alberta Innovates: Health Solutions and Pfizer Canada Inc.

Dr. Taft: Thanks, Mr. Speaker. The reason I'm making this request is because we have here something that's part of a growing trend, which is a close relationship between drug companies and Alberta Innovates, which is the successor to the old Alberta Research Council, the Alberta Heritage Foundation for Medical Research, and a number of other organizations. The public has a right to know what's in these memoranda of understanding. Public money is at stake. A public institution's role is at stake. There is rapidly increasing concern about the corporatization of public research institutions, about their loss of independence, about the concern that, in fact, public research organizations and universities are increasingly simply the R and D department for drug companies or oil companies or other interests. That's a concern I hear a lot about.

Mr. Speaker, this kind of memorandum of understanding between a publicly funded, publicly administered public body and a drug company should be available to the public. The public has a right to know. If the government is hiding something, then alarm bells go off. There shouldn't be anything to hide in these deals. I can't imagine what legitimate concern the minister would have in hiding this memorandum unless it's, frankly, a tad on the unacceptable side. I would look forward to the minister accepting this motion.

Thank you.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Minister of Advanced Education and Technology.

Mr. Weadick: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. As the member opposite stated, we are seeing more and more interest from corporations working closely in research. As Alberta Innovates and Alberta work to solve the world's problems, we will see more of that as oil companies come to us to try to help them resolve issues in the tailings ponds or as we look to new drugs or new opportunities.

Mr. Speaker, we have a gentleman living in Alberta now, Dr. Michael Houghton, who's working at the University of Alberta. Dr. Houghton is actually the person that discovered hepatitis C and is now working on a vaccine for it. These are wonderful things happening right here in Alberta. They create unique opportunities for health, for a healthier province, for better opportunities for Albertans.

Mr. Speaker, they also create opportunities for commercialization, for those great jobs that we want our young people to have as they come out of university, as they go through their graduate studies. Also, these relationships with some of these companies – Johnson & Johnson, for example, has funded research chairs in universities – allow postsecondaries to bring in some of the brightest and best so that our young people, our graduate students, can work with and study with some of the world's finest researchers. So this is really, really important work, and it is truly a partnership.

Mr. Speaker, I'm here to ask and would like to move that the motion for a return be amended by adding "Advanced Education and Technology," after "memorandum of understanding between." Then it would read:

That an order of the Assembly do issue for a return showing a copy of the 2011 memorandum of understanding between Advanced Education and Technology, Alberta Innovates: Health Solutions, and Pfizer Canada Inc.

With that amendment, I would accept the motion and will supply a copy of the MOU for return. I'm proposing this because this does show that this truly is what the MOU is.

Mr. Speaker, this clearly is a relationship with Alberta Innovates, Alberta advanced education, and with Pfizer, so I wanted to make sure that it reflected the true nature of this MOU. Following discussion with the information and privacy office and legal counsel we concluded that disclosure of this MOU will not breach confidentiality of any of the parties.

As an open and transparent government we want to share these things with Albertans. We want to work with our opposition members, Mr. Speaker. We're happy to work with them and to share these wonderful agreements that provide great opportunities here in Alberta for both employment and jobs. This government has worked very hard over the past number of years in a tough economy to create employment, to keep jobs going, and these kinds of agreements can create those value-added jobs in our economy. We think it's critically important.

With that amendment, I would accept this motion for a return. Thank you.

3:20

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview to close.

Dr. Taft: Yes. Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I appreciate the gesture from the minister, and I think that sounds like a perfectly reasonable amendment. I could certainly live with that.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

[Motion for a Return 2 as amended carried]

Dr. Swann: Mr. Speaker, I wonder if we could revert to introductions.

The Deputy Speaker: I've got a note here from the hon. member. May I have the agreement of the Assembly to revert briefly to Introduction of Guests?

[Unanimous consent granted]

Introduction of Guests (reversion)

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. member.

Dr. Swann: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. A great pleasure for me to introduce some folks in the public gallery who, at least some of them, are here to attend for Bill 203, the private member's bill on smoking in vehicles. They're also very eminent professionals who are working on advancing Alberta as a leader in prevention programs in Canada. They are part of the Alberta Policy Coalition for Chronic Disease Prevention and the Campaign for a Smoke-free Alberta. They include Laura Kemp, Les Hagen, and Shandy Reed. I would ask them all to stand, even if I haven't introduced you, so that we can include all of you. Welcome to the Legislature.

Motions for Returns (continued)

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Mountain View on Motion for a Return 4.

Supportive Living Personal Care Facilities

M4. Dr. Swann moved that an order of the Assembly do issue for a return showing copies of all requests for proposals and all documents relating to requests for proposals issued by Alberta Health Services for supportive living personal care facilities throughout the province.

Dr. Swann: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. These have, obviously, a tremendous relevance today in our health care system, where seniors' care is the issue not only in terms of relieving pressure on emergency departments, relieving the pressure on acute-care hospitals but also in terms of standards and quality and affordability of care in our society.

This is a pretty central issue for all of us in the Legislature as we grapple with ensuring a good planning framework, a long-term commitment to quality, and dignified end-of-life or late-life issues. It relates to not only the numbers of long-term care or assisted living services that we have in the province but increasingly to concerns about how much public money is going into it and how much private money is going into it and to what the accountability is both on the public funds and on the private services in terms of maintaining standards, maintaining affordability, and ensuring that Albertans are served in the best way possible in their latter years.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Minister of Health and Wellness.

Mr. Horne: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Well, I appreciate the request for information from the hon. Member for Calgary-Mountain View. However, I am going to have to ask hon. members to reject the motion for a return. The reason – and I'll preface it with a simple explanation, I guess, of who does what

with respect to requests for proposals for supportive living facilities – is that Alberta Health and Wellness has no requests for proposals or related documents issued by Alberta Health Services for supportive living facilities. Alberta Seniors is, in fact, the ministry responsible for working with AHS to co-ordinate and administrate supportive living capital grant programs. Alberta Health and Wellness is responsible for setting standards for health services provided in publicly funded supportive living facilities, and Alberta Seniors is responsible for accommodation standards for seniors regardless of any health services that may be provided.

Funding for capital to build supportive living accommodation is issued under a request for proposal or a request for grant by Alberta Seniors. Funding for health services from Alberta Health Services is considered part of this process, depending on the level of acuity of the clients that the operator is proposing to serve. Details on the funding provided by Alberta Health Services are provided as part of the request for grant process.

Mr. Speaker, with respect to this particular motion the administration of the request for proposals process for supportive living facilities for seniors is, in fact, a function of the Ministry of Seniors, not Alberta Health Services and not the Ministry of Health and Wellness. Alberta Health Services, with funding provided by the Ministry of Health and Wellness, does in fact negotiate with operators for contracts to provide health services within designated supportive living facilities across the province but, as I stated earlier, does not issue requests for proposals for the construction of those facilities.

Thank you.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Mountain View to close.

Dr. Swann: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Thank you to the minister. An error on our part.

[Motion for a Return 4 lost]

Public Bills and Orders Other than Government Bills and Orders Committee of the Whole

[Mr. Cao in the chair]

The Chair: Hon. members, I would like to call the Committee of the Whole to order.

Bill 203

Tobacco Reduction (Protection of Children in Vehicles) Amendment Act, 2012

The Chair: Are there any comments, questions, amendments to be offered? The hon. Leader of the Official Opposition.

Dr. Sherman: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I'm pleased to open debate in Committee of the Whole on Bill 203, the Tobacco Reduction (Protection of Children in Vehicles) Amendment Act, 2012. We've had very good debate and discussion on this very important bill. As you know, this bill is really about the safety of our children. There's been a lot of good work in the Legislature and in the legislation about making tobacco reduction a priority. In fact, this is the real solution to fixing health care: let's not get sick in the first place. Tobacco use has been on the decrease because of a lot of this legislation.

This piece of legislation is so important because it involves our children. It was brought before the Legislature in 2008 as Bill 215

at the time, a private member's bill. Unfortunately, we ran out of time, and it dropped off the Order Paper before Christmas of 2008. There are municipalities and communities in Alberta that in 2008 took leadership roles in this country to ban tobacco smoking in vehicles when young people are present. Unfortunately, there are only two provinces that haven't passed this kind of bill, Alberta and Quebec.

Mr. Speaker, in light of the fact that we have an election coming very soon and that the bill has come back and that it was unanimously endorsed by all the members in the Legislature on second reading, I would hope and ask all of the hon. members today to unanimously consent to moving this bill into third reading and making it law before we convene for the election season. In light of all of the advocates and champions who have championed this legislation for years, that are present here today, Mr. Chair, I ask all members to unite to get this bill passed today, once and for all.

I thank everyone and thank you for the opportunity. I call the question.

3:30

The Chair: Any other hon. members wishing to speak? The hon. Member for Edmonton-McClung.

Mr. Xiao: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I'm very honoured to stand today to participate in the Committee of the Whole debate on Bill 203, the Tobacco Reduction (Protection of Children in Vehicles) Amendment Act, 2012, proposed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Meadowlark. Before I begin, I would like to thank my hon. colleague for bringing forth this important topic for discussion as it addresses a very important issue, and I would like to express my support for this bill.

Mr. Chairman, the health of our children is very important. Any piece of legislation that deals with this matter requires our full attention. That being said, I would like to dedicate my time here today to discussing specific sections of the bill in question. I will start by mentioning that Bill 203 intends to make it illegal to smoke in a car whenever a minor is present.

Section 3 of the Tobacco Reduction Act, the legislation that Bill 203 intends to amend, states that

no person shall smoke

- (a) in a public place,
- (b) in a workplace,
- (c) in a public vehicle, or
- (d) within a prescribed distance from a doorway, window or air intake of a public place or workplace.

Section 3 of Bill 203 would amend the above portion by adding the following clause: "in a vehicle in which a minor is present." As I'm sure everyone is aware, a minor in this province is anyone under the age of 18.

Now, I completely agree that the government should be proactive and take certain precautions in situations where people cannot protect themselves, but I am sure that many people would also agree that there is a difference between children and teenagers, that are still legally defined as minors. For instance, young children in vehicles do not have the choice of removing themselves from a car and are often unaware of the dangers of second-hand smoke. In these situations the health of young children may be at serious risk, especially if the exposure is long term.

Conversely, some 17-year-olds are enrolled in universities, may be financially independent and live on their own. As such, they may feel they have the prerogative and the maturity to make their own decisions about who they choose to ride in a car with. My point, Mr. Chairman, is that the term "minor" encompasses a wide

range of ages, from the very young to people who may be financially independent. Even in this province jurisdictions that have passed bylaws similar to Bill 203 have different or relevant ages that range from 16 to 18.

Another issue, Mr. Chairman, that I feel should also be addressed in this bill pertains to groups of minors that are smoking while in a car together. What would happen if there was a car full of 17-year-olds, and all of them were smoking? Who, if anyone, would receive the ticket? Moreover, what would happen if there were both adults and minors in the vehicles, and one of the minors was smoking? Who would get the ticket in this situation? There's no mention in the legislation about what would result if these scenarios occurred. This is not to say that I condone smoking in vehicles in any way, but that clarification with respect to the relevant age group may be needed.

The addition of the clause "in a vehicle in which a minor is present" also raises other questions. As I mentioned previously, protecting our children from the harm of second-hand smoke is an important goal and one that should not be taken lightly. However, Mr. Chair, if this legislation intends to protect children, then it should also include other vulnerable populations as well. Certain groups, much like young children, may not have a choice in their exposure to tobacco smoke while riding in cars. For example, those with a cognitive and a physical disability often depend on other people for transportation. Many individuals that suffer from these unfortunate disorders may also be unaware of the dangers of tobacco smoke. Some may also have compromised immune systems, making vehicles filled with tobacco smoke especially harmful.

Our province thus far has addressed this issue of second-hand smoke through programs that promote education and public awareness. Many of these programs fall under the Alberta tobacco reduction strategy and advocate against second-hand smoke around all populations regardless of age or demographic.

Mr. Chairman, section 2(2) of the Tobacco Reduction Act currently states: "this Act does not apply to a building, structure or vehicle, or a part of a building or structure, that is used as a private residence." Section 2 of Bill 203 would amend the above portion by striking out " , structure or vehicle" and substituting "or structure." The amended section would then state the following: "this Act does not apply to a building or structure, or part of a building or structure, that is used as a private residence." What this means is that the Tobacco Reduction Act would apply to all private vehicles, which may include motorhomes that are used as a primary residence. I believe that preventing people from smoking in cars with children present is an honourable goal, but extending this limitation to a primary residence may potentially lead to other issues.

Mr. Chairman, I'm simply concerned about the perception of excessive intrusion into the lives of private citizens. For some a motorhome is a primary residence, so would they still be excluded from the Tobacco Reduction Act if Bill 203 is passed? This is another important question which I believe should be considered before any further action is taken with respect to this bill.

With that, I would like to conclude my statements regarding Bill 203. I would once again like to thank the hon. Member for Edmonton-Meadowlark for bringing this important issue up for debate. Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Are there any others? The hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods and then the hon. Member for Cypress-Medicine Hat.

3:40

Mr. Benito: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. It is an honour for me to

rise today in this Assembly to speak in Committee of the Whole on Bill 203, the Tobacco Reduction (Protection of Children in Vehicles) Amendment Act, 2012, brought forward by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Meadowlark. The hon. member brings a valuable medical perspective on issues of health to this House, and I would like to thank him for bringing this bill forward as it gives us an opportunity to raise awareness of the dangers of tobacco use.

Mr. Chairman, Bill 203 proposes adding a new tool to the tobacco reduction tool kit. Section 1 of Bill 203 states: “The Tobacco Reduction Act is amended by this Act.”

Bill 203 would also alter section 3 of the Tobacco Reduction Act, which lists numerous places where smoking is banned. The first part of section 3 reads: “Subject to section 5, no person shall smoke,” and from there it goes on to list those places where one may not smoke. The rest of section 3 of the act reads:

- (a) in a public place,
- (b) in a workplace,
- (c) in a public vehicle, or
- (d) within a prescribed distance from a doorway, window or air intake of a public place or workplace.

Bill 203 would amend section 3. Section 3 is amended out by striking out “or” at the end of clause (c) and by adding the following after clause (c):

- (c.1) in a vehicle in which a minor is present.

Mr. Chairman, the health effects of smoking have been known for years, and on average smokers tend to have shorter lifespans than nonsmokers. As well, individuals exposed to second-hand smoke are also subject to negative health effects.

It wasn't so long ago that public spaces such as malls and food courts would have had only a handful of nonsmoking tables, but as awareness has grown, our society has changed to reflect our increasing concern about the risks of smoking. The generation of young people in colleges and universities today has seen significant change over their lives with regard to smoking. Most 20-year-olds can likely remember as children going to restaurants with their parents where other patrons could light up relatively freely. Just a few years later smoking is no longer permitted, even in bars and nightclubs. In fact, sometimes it's easy to forget just how much things have changed in a relatively short time. Bill 203 and its provision that bans smoking “in a vehicle in which a minor is present” could be that next step forward.

This overall societal transformation has been possible due to both cultural shifts and government initiatives. Mr. Chairman, from time to time the government leads and public attitudes play catch-up, and at other times it is the government catching up to public opinion. We can see this change over time in the statistics. The Youth Smoking Survey conducted by Health Canada helped us determine whether tobacco reduction efforts are impacting young people's choices. This is important as smoking trends among youth are seen as a leading indicator for adult smoking since many habits formed in youth are carried into adulthood. Among those aged 15 to 19 the percentage of smokers in Alberta was 26 per cent in 1999, well below the national average at the time. By 2010 the percentage of youth aged 15 to 19 in Alberta that smoked fell by one-third compared to 1999, a major decrease.

Additionally, for the population as a whole smoking prevalence has dropped to 19 per cent in 2010 from 26 per cent in 1999 according to Health Canada's Canadian Tobacco Use Monitoring Survey. Through these surveys we can see how changes among youth are leading the way in smoking reduction.

The question that is often asked is: are we doing enough? Before jumping into action, we must ask a second question: what can we do that will be most effective? Bill 203, the Tobacco Reduction Amendment Act, adds the words “in a vehicle in which

a minor is present.” I ask: are these words an effective way forward with respect to protecting our children from the adverse effect of second-hand tobacco smoke? In order to implement a successful tobacco reduction policy, we must look at many factors not only on an individual level but on a policy level as well. We must also be cognizant of developing a suite of policies that work well together.

Other proven effective forms of tobacco control are those that include social pressures to change habits. These include education, advertising such as health warnings, restricting advertising by tobacco companies, and restricting smoking in workplaces, restaurants, bars, and schools. Additionally, higher prices for cigarettes help to deter experimental smoking. These and other actions listed earlier help make up Alberta's tobacco reduction strategy.

Mr. Chairman, the actions that our government has taken have already greatly reduced the exposure children have to second-hand smoke, far below what the level was a generation ago. I'm happy to say that these measures along with enforcement against illegal tobacco sales to minors have led to the reduction of tobacco use among the youth of our province. To continue the downward trend of tobacco use and second-hand smoke exposure in our society, we must continue to continually update our integrated tobacco reduction policy.

Bill 203, which would ban smoking in a vehicle in which a minor is present, could be an effective part of the overall strategy. I would like again to thank the hon. member for bringing it forward.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

The Chair: I have a list of speakers here, so I'll just follow it. The hon. Member for Cypress-Medicine Hat.

Mr. Mitzel: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I'm pleased to rise today in Committee of the Whole and share my comments on Bill 203, the Tobacco Reduction (Protection of Children in Vehicles) Amendment Act, 2012, brought forward by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Meadowlark. Before I begin, I'd like to thank the hon. Member for Edmonton-Meadowlark for all the hard work he has put into the drafting of this piece of legislation. I acknowledge that the protection of children's health is and should be a priority of this government and all MLAs in this House. This is why I believe Bill 203 should be supported.

Mr. Chairman, I believe Bill 203 targets two main issues. First, it focuses on raising awareness of the negative effect of second-hand smoke. Second, it specifically targets adults who smoke in vehicles while minors are present. It is this second point that is subject to debate here today in Committee of the Whole. The amendments to this bill provide an excellent opportunity to rethink attitudes and approaches surrounding a couple of very important issues; that is, the dangers of tobacco use and the safety of Alberta children.

I used to smoke some 25 years ago. I do recall that when I did smoke, I did not and could not smell that tobacco smoke. When I was a child, my mom and dad both smoked, so it seemed natural that I would as well. I did smoke for many years. It got to a point that I guess I kind of disliked that smoker's cough that I had. In fact, Mr. Chair, I think what broke this terrible addiction I had was when I developed a very painful bronchial cough. Without thinking, I finished my normal coughing, lit a smoke, and began coughing all over again, and it hurt. At that moment I told my wife: “That's it. I will never smoke again.” And I haven't. Perhaps I'm lucky to have broken it this way.

Some time later I noticed how bad cigarette smoke smelled. I

could smell it in homes and vehicles. It makes you wonder, when this smoke can permeate upholstery and headliners of vehicles, what it must be doing to children and children's lungs when they're subject to this smoke. I don't believe that any of this is done on purpose. The addiction is so strong that mothers and fathers and families and friends of these children cannot stop. As I said, the addiction may be so strong that they may not want to stop.

With that, Mr. Chairman, I'd like to focus the majority of my comments today on the amendments in Bill 203 and how I think it's a good piece of legislation. For the record section 2(2) is amended by striking out "structure or vehicle" and substituting "or structure." Section 3 is amended by striking out "or" at the end of clause (c) and adding the following after clause (c): "(c.1) in a vehicle in which a minor is present."

3:50

Perhaps most notable, Mr. Chairman, is that the Tobacco Reduction Act itself is amended by this act. I feel that the proposed amendments to the original Tobacco Reduction Act will strengthen the overall intent of Bill 203. It's no secret that our province's Tobacco Reduction Act already ranks among the most comprehensive and protective pieces of legislation in the country, and I feel that Bill 203 only furthers it.

Currently 4 out of 5 Albertans claim to not use any tobacco. There are more ex-smokers than current smokers, but 1 in 5 still does. Mr. Chairman, I believe it's imperative that those Albertans who do still use tobacco do not do so in the presence of children, especially when in a vehicle. Having children exposed to the very real dangers of second-hand smoke is amplified when riding in a vehicle. Quite simply, there's nowhere for the child to hide in a vehicle when an adult is smoking there. Bill 203 in section 3 clearly indicates that smoking in a vehicle in which a minor is present should be illegal. I believe this to be the case as well.

Mr. Chairman, I feel that the goal of Bill 203 is a commendable one. Bill 203 seeks to address the serious matter of smoking in a vehicle with minors present. But it is also important to raise awareness of this issue and to amend the Tobacco Reduction Act itself.

Again I'd like to thank the hon. Member for Edmonton-Meadowlark for the hard work that went into drafting Bill 203. I'd like to inform him that I'm strongly supporting this bill.

Thank you.

The Chair: Hon. Minister of Health and Wellness, do you wish to speak on the bill?

Mr. Horne: Yes. Thank you very much, Mr. Chair. I'm pleased to join others in debate in Committee of the Whole on this bill. As other hon. members have indicated, the issue of exposure of children to second-hand smoke within vehicles is an issue that we take seriously as a government. In fact, it reminds me of the comprehensiveness of the current Alberta tobacco reduction strategy, which is under review at the moment and expected to be announced in a renewed form in the next few months.

We've made significant reductions in tobacco use rates over the last 10 years, but tobacco use rates are still unacceptably high in our province. Our focus and this bill would support that it needs to be on youth, young adults, and at-risk populations to ensure that Albertans receive appropriate protection from the harms of tobacco.

A renewed strategy is being developed in collaboration with government stakeholders, including some of those observing this debate in the House today, Mr. Chair: Alberta Health Services, nongovernmental organizations, and other tobacco control

stakeholders. We hope to have a renewed strategy to guide tobacco reduction efforts for another 10-year period; namely, 2012 to 2022. As with the current strategy the new strategy is evidence-based. It is aligned with components of other strategies and frameworks. One in particular that I would like to draw the committee's attention to is our new addictions and mental health strategy as well as the World Health Organization's framework convention on tobacco control, which I know has been referred to in previous debates in this House with respect to tobacco reduction.

Mr. Chair, I think that while we can certainly and I can certainly support the tenets of the bill that's before us today, I guess the broader question for government is whether we proceed with simply single initiatives aimed at reducing tobacco, in particular tobacco use and exposure to second-hand smoke in a particular area, or whether we continue with the very successful tradition we've seen in the last 10 years of developing a very broad strategy that addresses not only tobacco use among youth and exposure to second-hand smoke among youth but other issues.

As we have seen in previous legislation passed in this Assembly, Alberta has led the country in innovative ways to provide additional incentives for people not to smoke. That includes the banning of the sale of tobacco in pharmacies, that we saw in legislation a few years ago. It includes limiting exposure to second-hand smoke outside public buildings and a number of other strategies that have proven themselves to be quite successful.

In addition, Mr. Chair, I think it's important that any legislation that's passed in this House or any strategy that is considered and brought forward by government be evidence based, contain information from research studies and other documents that need to be referenced in order that these initiatives can be justified to Albertans and in order that we can garner the requisite support from the public for any particular strategy that we might choose to advance.

Mr. Chair, I guess the other thing that I wanted to draw to the attention of the House is the work of a committee – I believe some of the members are represented here today in the gallery – that has worked diligently over the last little while to promote tobacco reduction across Alberta. The provincial advisory committee on tobacco, or PACT, the acronym that is used to refer to the committee, has been providing recommendations to government to update the current tobacco reduction strategy. It includes the issue that is addressed by the bill that's before the committee at the moment, but it also includes many other strategies and many other representatives from different government ministries, professional associations, and not-for-profit groups. Health and Wellness and Alberta Health Services co-chair this committee.

A subcommittee of PACT, with representation from Alberta Finance, Solicitor General and Public Security, the Lung Association, the Canadian Cancer Society, and Alberta Health Services, is also working diligently on the revised and comprehensive strategy. So, Mr. Chair, it's clear that many organizations in the community and many ministries in this government have been involved in trying to address the issue of tobacco use and exposure to second-hand smoke in a comprehensive way.

While I certainly applaud the initiative of the hon. member in bringing this bill forward and while it is certainly an initiative that is actively under consideration as part of our renewed tobacco reduction strategy, it is but one initiative that needs to be considered. So in the context of this debate I would hope that other hon. members would agree with me that, in fact, the comprehensive approach, the long-term approach, the approach

that involves the integration of the efforts of many across government and in the community to address tobacco use in the long term is the direction that we need to pursue if we are truly going to achieve specific outcomes not only for this generation of Albertans but for generations to come.

With that, Mr. Chair, I would again reiterate my appreciation to the hon. member for bringing this forward. I would hope that the debate for the remainder of the afternoon could perhaps reference some of the other strategies that need to be considered as part of a comprehensive approach to this problem. I think that in doing so, we can demonstrate to Albertans that we are taking action not simply with single initiatives at random points in time but that we are in fact offering them a very connected, very integrated approach to this issue, that could well include the initiative that is proposed by the bill this afternoon.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Hon. Member for Grande Prairie-Smoky, do you wish to join the debate?

Mr. Knight: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. Smoking: this is a topic that I actually know a little bit about for a change. My first recollection of smoking goes back some time. My father worked on the Northern Alberta Railways, and in those days, of course, it was the main transportation route from Edmonton up into the Peace Country and ended in Dawson Creek. My dad was a station agent in McLennan. Well, actually, he started in Beaverlodge, one of the stations along the way.

My first recollection of people smoking – and I was quite young at that point in time, probably three or four years old, something like that, five maybe. When you went into the station, there was a lot of activity going on around the station at that point in time. They didn't still burn coal; they burned bunker fuel. It had a particular odour to it, and the odour of the oil and the engines and all of that kind of thing was pretty prevalent around the premises. They had hardwood floors in the stations in those days, and they were oiled. The oil that they used had a particular odour to it, and you could smell it. I can smell it as I'm standing here today. Actually, I think it's George.

4:00

Mr. Groeneveld: It stunk.

Mr. Knight: Yeah.

Anyway, there was a particular odour to the oil. Mixed with that, most of the people that worked in the station smoked, including my father as the agent, the other people that worked there in communications. Of course, the telegraph station and all that was there. The odour of cigarette or tobacco pipe some of them smoked and of the other oil and so on left a lasting impression, and actually, I have to tell you, Mr. Chairman, it was comforting. In those days nobody really realized that tobacco smoke or any of these odours were, you know, particularly harmful to anybody.

The second thing was that we moved. My father took up a job, actually, on the rail. So he was, I think, called an express messenger or something, moved from the station, anyway, onto the rail. I can recall when we would ride in the baggage car, in the express car, on the railroad. This again is pretty clear in my memory. We'd get on there at 4 o'clock in the morning, and the first thing we'd do, Mr. Chairman, is fold down a little cot that was attached to the wall on the side of the car, crawl up on there, and the old man would cover us with an army blanket, one of those wool army blankets.

The train is kind of chugging along – right? – and you know what? The next thing you'd actually remember: wake up about 8 or 9 o'clock, my dad would have a pot of coffee on a little stove that used charcoal briquettes. He'd have his coffee on there. He had cooked a couple slices of bacon and some eggs. You'd wake up to this beautiful smell of toast that's cooked over a fire and coffee, but the old man was having coffee and smoking a cigarette. Again, it was the kind of thing where the world was right as long as this was going along. The train was chugging along, and it clunked along the railroad not very fast. You know, you just felt like there's some comfort to this whole thing, and the world was doing what it was supposed to do as the train kind of trundled along.

Of course, smoking and cigarettes were just around. I had an older brother. He was two years older than me. At about the age of 11 he decided that, you know, if it's good for all the rest of those people, it's probably good for me. So he started smoking but on the sly. Tobacco was not that hard to come by. We got a little bit of an allowance for doing our chores and so on. He would figure out a way to save up a bit and get himself a little Vogue package of tobacco. Well, my dad found out that he was smoking, so he was going to put a stop to this. Kids should not have been exposed to tobacco, but nobody knew about that. But kids should certainly not be smoking at that age.

What he did – and I can recall this, sitting outside on the steps in a little house in McLennan – is he goes downtown and buys a can of Vogue tobacco and half a dozen packs of papers – right? – and he starts rolling cigarettes and making my brother smoke them. I was there while he did the whole can, the whole can of tobacco. The only one that got sick was the old man because it cost him a lot of money. Anyway, that didn't work. Obviously, it didn't work. He tried to stop it, but it didn't work. Then on top of that he thought: okay, I'll fix this. He gets an old King Eddie cigar, and gives him that. That didn't work either.

Then I come to myself and my experience with tobacco, not just smoking but tobacco generally speaking. I started smoking when I was 16. It was just the thing to do. We were all doing it. Everybody that I hung around with smoked, so I took up smoking. I went to work at the age of 19 driving a truck. I actually went to work at 17, but that's another story. I started driving a truck when I was 19 years old, and I can tell you as sure as I'm standing here, Mr. Chairman, that at 19 years old I did not have a pocket in my clothing that didn't have some sort of tobacco stuck in it. I smoked a pipe, Old Port Colts cigars – Colts they were called – and cigarettes all at the same time. I'd drive a truck and have a pipe going. That would go out, so I'd grab a cigarette. It was normal, I have to tell you. Not very brilliant, but normal.

Mr. Groeneveld: Are you sure this was normal?

Mr. Knight: Normal. Absolutely normal, my friend.

At 21 years old I went to work in a gas plant, and you couldn't smoke. Well, you can imagine what kind of situation I was in. It seemed to me like we were living on tobacco and coffee, that was about the size of it. I go to work in a place where I can't smoke, so I thought: "Well, that's okay. I'll quit." You know, we tried smoking at coffee time, but I quit. What I did instead of just quitting, period, is I thought: well, if I can't smoke, the next best thing is why don't we try a little chewing tobacco, right? So I actually chewed tobacco for two years, and my wife didn't even know it. I was that good at it or that bad at it, whatever way. Nobody knew. Anyway, that went on for a while.

Then I went out on my own and started a business. Then when we were working in the field, it also became taboo. People started

to smarten up: this stuff's not good for you. There was no smoking in any of our facilities or around any of the offices or stuff like that. What we did then is that we took a little page out of the professional baseball players' book. You chew a little bit of bubble gum – right? – get a nice little wad of bubble gum going, and then you take your Beech-Nut, or whatever kind of tobacco you like, and you make a bubble out of the bubble gum, put the tobacco inside that, and you chew that. It'll last all afternoon. You know, great fun. We thought we were okay. It wasn't hurting anybody, and what the hell? At the same time I had, you know, the odd cigar.

I've got to tell you that when my grandchildren started to come along, I got to thinking, "You know, there's so much evidence out there now that this is not really the way a person should conduct themselves," so I decided that I would stop. But being a guy that doesn't want his grandchildren to think he's a quitter, I didn't quit. I just still have the odd cigar. I don't want to be a quitter, but I canned the rest of it. I probably never will stop doing that. [interjection] I know the good doctor over there has got something to say about how bad a person I am, but he can say that later.

Anyway, what I learned over that period of time was actually that tobacco probably killed my old man at the ripe old age of 63. You know, there was that and the health effects.

More than that I think, Mr. Chairman, is this business of the damage and danger in second-hand smoke. I have to tell you that none of us in here, including me, would ever expose our loved ones – like your wife, children, in my case grandchildren and now great-grandchildren – to a hazard like that. It's unconscionable that you would do it. So I stopped, and I think that anybody that's, you know, a rational, reasonable thinking person would take the same direction. You can find places to smoke that don't bother people.

Anyway, I think that that's what should happen. However, Mr. Chairman . . .

The Chair: Hon. member, the 10 minutes allocated to you have completed.

Hon. Minister of Culture and Community Services, you wish to join in, right?

Mrs. Klimchuk: Thank you, Chair. It's a privilege today to speak on Bill 203, the Tobacco Reduction (Protection of Children in Vehicles) Amendment Act, 2012. I just want to say that as a parent to me it's very sad that we have to consider passing legislation. Nonetheless, today is a very important conversation.

I also want to acknowledge the role of Les Hagen – he was introduced earlier – for the excellent work he does and continues to do. I met him a few years ago in my constituency office. We had a great conversation about the work that goes on and how much more work we have to do.

We all know that in Alberta, as the Minister of Health and Wellness indicated, we have one of the best tobacco reduction acts in Canada. We also know that the strategy began in 2002 and, as the minister said, it's going to be renewed. We know that the ATRS has made significant progress in addressing tobacco use and second-hand smoke, and it's extremely cost-effective, resulting in a long-term cost avoidance to our economy of about \$465 million in the first three years.

4:10

Four out of five Albertans do not use tobacco, and there are more ex-smokers than current smokers, so that's the good news. The number of nonsmoking Canadians who report being exposed to cigarette smoke in a private vehicle has also fallen about 25 per

cent between 2003 and 2009. We also know that between 2001 and 2006 there was a reduction of more than 50 per cent in the portion of youth exposed to second-hand smoke in their homes. We also know that the incredible mass media campaigns have enhanced public awareness of smoking, especially Barb Tarbox and the campaign that was very effective among youth.

I want to talk about some of the root causes. The sad part is that if children do not know better and they are exposed to smoke in their home, then when they are exposed to smoking in a vehicle it becomes severely normal to them. It's just part of their life, their daily lives. It's everywhere they go. The question is: how do we assist those parents with this terrible addiction, the ones who really want to quit but perhaps need counselling support and other tools to succeed? I've had family members who have successfully quit and others who have not, so I have ultimate respect for those who try to quit.

I know that growing up, some of the travelling in cars to Saskatchewan with my family and being around grandparents that smoked. They smoked in the house, and that's what I grew up with. That's just the way it was. But now as a mother and as a parent I remember making my 80-year-old aunt smoke outside on the back step when I had my first home.

So those are very important to me. I'm also concerned about the prevalence of smoking in our youth and in our junior highs. That's something that I think we need to address as well.

The other thing I want to talk about is enforcement. We all know right now with Bill 26, the distracted driving act that was passed – even when I'm driving right now, I see people on their phones. So we know that distracted driving, people still aren't buying totally into it. When I look at a piece of legislation like this, I worry about enforcement. I worry about the pressure that it puts on our police services, on all the good work they're doing. Also, how do you actually enforce it, and how do you catch someone, say, if an adult is smoking in the car and the child is 17 as well? We know that there are all those questions that need to be asked. Again, having this conversation is really important.

We also know that legislation that we've had banning smoking in certain areas has been very powerful, and that's a good thing. Again, going back to the police monitoring and enforcing such behaviour which may divert their attention away from other areas, we know that Albertans are doing the right thing already by not smoking in their vehicles. That is getting better.

What we also need to know is whether the proposed change is intended to apply to only adults or adults and minors, as I said before. I think the option of prohibiting smoking in a vehicle when minors are present is something that we're already looking at as well. I know that we're certainly not there all the way. As well, we know that this particular bill is consistent with recommendations from health organizations such as the Canadian Cancer Society and the Canadian Medical Association.

I guess, for me, if we can deal with the issue of enforcement, work with the police and work with the people who are doing that, then I think that this would be good. I guess as a parent and as a mother I would support this piece of legislation. I think it's, again, unfortunate that we have to have it, that we have to actually pass a law. When you see people in their cars with young children, you want to do something, but you know you can't.

I appreciate being able to talk on this item. Member, I just want to conclude by saying that there are so many issues out there that government needs to be a leader on. I think we are a leader in many areas on this. Unfortunately, I think this is a conversation we have to have. I will be supporting this bill.

Thank you.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview.

Dr. Taft: Yes. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I'd just like to rise to draw to the attention of the Assembly and our guests that we have a chance here, people, to pass this. If we work together and collaborate, in the next 45 minutes we could actually go through committee, we could give unanimous consent, go through third, have a vote, and pass this. Otherwise, this is going to die on the Order Paper.

I have to be honest, having listened to speech after speech after speech, which I rarely hear from the government side, I suspect that the strategy here actually is to look good while sabotaging the bill. I would challenge you to prove me wrong by calling the vote in committee, giving unanimous consent for third, passing this, and showing the respect that our guests deserve for, as many of you noted, having worked so hard on this.

Those are my comments. Let's get on with this. Thank you.

The Chair: The hon. Minister of Human Services.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I want to start by saying that the concept that's outlined in this bill is entirely consistent, in my view, with the Tobacco Reduction Act that we were fortunate to bring forward when I was minister of health and with the good work that was done by previous ministers of health, the Member for Sherwood Park and the member, I think, then from Nose Creek, Gary Mar.

A lot of very significant work has happened over time on tobacco reduction strategies in the province. This bill would take it one step further. But, Mr. Chairman, I think the important piece about legislation is making sure that legislation works together and comprehensively. I didn't have the privilege of hearing the whole speech from the minister of health, but I know that I've had discussions with him very recently with respect to a tobacco reduction strategy, and I know that there is a comprehensive look at a tobacco reduction strategy to see what we can do next in the area of encouraging young Albertans in particular to not start smoking and encouraging those who have started to stop smoking.

I know that in a tobacco reduction strategy, one of the things that actually does work is making the opportunity to smoke inconvenient. That's a very important piece of a strategy. That's why in many cases not just the protection of people from second-hand smoke but the opportunity for people to take a second thought about whether they actually want to do it anymore is a very important part of any tobacco reduction strategy. That's why 15 metres away from doorways is not just so that people don't have to walk through the smoke; it's to create a modest amount of inconvenience, which will allow people to have that second thought about whether they want to quit or not. Those are important pieces in the equation.

I had the occasion very recently, within the last couple of months, to meet with a group of people in my office about a tobacco reduction strategy. I was quite amazed at the types of products that are now being sold, the design of those products, and, in fact, the question of whether those products are being designed specifically to attract children. Quite frankly, I was appalled at some of the products that were there. I think the concept of having this further tobacco reduction strategy review is an extremely important one.

In bringing forward pieces of legislation, there's a real approach that needs to be taken. The approach needs to be one that's very solid and well thought out because you are interfering with the way people handle themselves and the way people live their lives. If you do things on a one-off basis without thinking about what

effect you're going to have on the public, you can end up with a backlash to it rather than the normal course that Albertans take, which is a respect for the law and following the law, which I think is the truth.

You can see that through time. When seat belt legislation came in, for example, there was an incredible discussion around the province about whether or not people should be forced to wear their seat belts. But once the law was passed, there was quite good adoption of that law. That's because Albertans by and large are law-abiding people. But in order to get people to abide by the law rather than push back on it – we see some of the push-back on the .05 legislation that we debated before Christmas, for example – if you want to actually have not just a comprehensive law but comprehensive public understanding and adoption of the law and a willingness to follow the law, you have to actually do it in an appropriate and cohesive way.

That's why I think that while the concept of this bill is a very important one and one that I endorse and support and would like to see happen, I would like to see it happen in a way that is focused on the protection of children and focused on not just second-hand tobacco smoke in cars but also on the way in which we deal with some of these tobacco products and the sale of tobacco, which appears, at least to me and I think to the people who are talking to me about it with the little can of products that they brought to my office, to be clearly – I mean, flavoured small cigarillos, bubble gum cigarettes. These are products which in my view are tailored to encourage kids to smoke and to start smoking, and I think we need to deal with that.

4:20

There are a number of things. I think that comprehensive strategy is important. I think that we need to deal with this in a comprehensive way. Mr. Chairman, one of the concerns I have and I should mention about private members' bills overall is that often they're drafted with a good concept in mind, but they're not drafted in a way that fits with an overall strategy or fits, in fact, with the language of bills. I always encourage private members on both sides of the House to have bills come into effect on proclamation. This bill, under section 4, comes into force on January 1, 2013. While that is a significant amount of time to put the necessary regulations and enforcement procedures in place, it isn't, in my view, enough time to put the rest of the strategy together and to bring it all into effect at a time when you can have a concerted, focused strategy on a number of issues and really build the public support for this, which is really important for its success.

Mr. Chairman, I would like to move an amendment. I think you have it at the table. I'll wait for it to be distributed.

The Chair: We shall now pause for a moment for the pages to distribute the amendment.

Hon. minister, you may proceed now.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. The amendment that I would move – and I understand you have it at the table. I presume that you will want to label it A1.

The Chair: Yes. It is now known as amendment A1.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you. I'd move that Bill 203 be amended in section 4 by striking out "January 1, 2013" and substituting "Proclamation." Again, a very simple change, but a change which will make it possible, when this bill is passed, to ensure that it aligns with the rest of the work on a tobacco reduction strategy, on the sale of tobacco to young people, and, indeed, in my view, even on location of tobacco sales.

I was absolutely astounded, when I was Minister of Health, when we brought in the tobacco reduction strategy amendment act. I think that's what it was called. I had to meet with a number of groups that were opposed to the bill, retail organizations, an example. Now, some of them I had some sympathy for: you know, pharmacists in rural Alberta who were concerned that they wouldn't be able to sell tobacco in their stores, and if the pharmacy was in a grocery store and they were the only one in the location, they would lose customers, in essence. I took a pretty hard line on that, and many of my colleagues were upset about that hard line. But I did take a hard line on that and said: "No. It's inconsistent for pharmacies, which are health facilities, in essence – they're supposed to be in the promotion of health – to sell products which are detrimental to health."

But we also had representation from small store owners, from the convenience store owners. I was absolutely astounded to discover that there were placement payments being made to convenience store owners to place product. We dealt with some of that when we got rid of the power walls. That was an important piece. I don't have any independent evidence of this, but I was told by people who had been receiving the payments that they got paid more if they were located close to schools than if they were further away from schools. That's the type of thing which really caused me a great deal of concern.

Now, that act, in my view, has been quite successful. Those amendments were successful, and they were successful because they weren't brought in in a one-off piece. In fact, as I said, they had been started by Gary Mar when he was minister of health. The Member for Sherwood Park was minister of health, and she did some work on the tobacco reduction strategy. I happened to be the beneficiary of a lot of that work in being able to bring it forward at a time when we could make it acceptable to a cross-section of the public right across the province. That, as I said earlier in my remarks, is extremely important because a law that doesn't have public acceptance is very difficult to enforce, and you get push-back on it. This is too important to do on an ad hoc basis. This is something that must be done comprehensively.

I move the amendment, Mr. Chairman, because I think it's important that the act come into force on proclamation so that the act can be aligned with the other work that's currently being done on a tobacco reduction strategy. It's not something that needs to be slowed down. It's something that needs to be done, actually, this year, and it needs to be done as soon as it can be done. But it needs to be done in an appropriate way, and that's a way which allows not just the passing of the act but looking at those other pieces that I think are absolutely important to this process and designing an appropriate public relations strategy so that it can be moved quickly into the public and build that confidence level in the public.

The Chair: The hon. Leader of the Official Opposition on amendment A1.

Dr. Sherman: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I appreciate the comments from the hon. Member for Edmonton-Whitemud. In an ideal world we wish this bill was already in place. In the interests of co-operation and compromise I support the amendment so we can pass this bill. I encourage all members to pass this bill today.

Thank you.

The Chair: Any other hon. member on amendment A1?

Seeing none, the chair shall now call the question.

[Motion on amendment A1 carried]

The Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview.

Dr. Taft: Yes. I need a little procedural guidance here. We might want to have a recorded vote on this, but it would be a shame to spend 10 minutes on the division, so could I move a one-minute bell? If it comes to that, we can have a bell that's just for one minute. I make that motion.

Thank you.

The Chair: All right.

Mr. Hancock: I am often a proponent of one-minute bells, but what we normally would try to do is make sure that people were aware of it. So the first bell would normally be 10 minutes and then subsequent bells one minute. It would be difficult to have a one-minute bell when none of our colleagues would be aware of the fact that it had been reduced to one minute.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview has a motion to reduce the first bell to one minute.

Dr. Taft: Yes, that's my desire.

The Chair: The first division is one minute between bells, right?

Dr. Taft: That's what I'm calling for.

The Chair: Okay.

[Unanimous consent denied]

The Chair: We'll get back to the bill. The hon. Member for Strathcona.

Mr. Quest: On the bill. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I'm glad we've had the opportunity to have some good discussion on this. I know there are those who want to rush this through, but I think part of democracy is the importance of participation, the importance of thorough debate. We've seen hours and hours of that in this Chamber from both sides. I think it's important.

It is an honour for me to rise today and participate in Committee of the Whole on Bill 203, the Tobacco Reduction (Protection of Children in Vehicles) Amendment Act, 2012, brought forward by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Meadowlark. Thank you for doing that. I really enjoyed some of the stories here this afternoon.

4:30

I just thought of even my father, who was a doctor of veterinary medicine, who was a smoker in the '60s, when I was a little kid. I remember driving around in the tiny enclosed space of his Corvair, which was probably a second mistake, buying that car. Anyway, it was just normal, like the Member for Grande Prairie-Smoky was saying, in those days. But things have changed, and this is a serious health issue. Bill 203 would amend the Tobacco Reduction Act to make smoking in a vehicle carrying anyone under the age of 18 illegal, and I think that's a pretty good idea. The intent of this legislation is of course to protect children from the health risks associated with second-hand smoke in these enclosed spaces.

Section 2.2 of the Tobacco Reduction Act currently states, "This Act does not apply to a building, structure or vehicle, or a part of a building or structure, that is used as a private residence." Section 2 of Bill 203 would amend the above portion by striking out " , structure or vehicle" and substituting "or structure." This amendment section would then state the following: "This Act does not apply to a building or structure, or a part of a building or structure, that is used as a private residence." Now, what this

means is that the Tobacco Reduction Act would apply to all private vehicles, which, by my logic, may include motorhomes. Sometimes those are used as a primary residence. This is why we need to have some fairly thorough discussion on this because these things often come up after. They need to be caught before we pass legislation, not after.

I believe that preventing people from smoking in cars with children present is an honourable goal, but extending this limitation to a primary residence may create some challenges if, again, that is the interpretation. Mr. Chairman, I'm just concerned about the perception of excessive intrusion into the lives of private citizens. This is always the balance. We often hear criticism about creating nanny states when we get into these. We expect people to be responsible but not in all cases.

Personal vehicles are not the same as public transit, and they're not public places. Nonetheless, this legislation would impose restrictions on the activities that private citizens would engage in in these vehicles. A number of governments have already made it illegal to smoke in a private vehicle when a child is present. That's good. However, they've also understood that it may be inappropriate to insert themselves into the private spaces of a residence, especially a primary residence. As such, this is something that needs to be clarified. Would the bill make it illegal to smoke in a motorhome, and if so, what if that motorhome is a primary residence?

Mr. Chairman, section 3 of the Tobacco Reduction Act, the legislation that Bill 203 intends to amend, states that

no person shall smoke

- (a) in a public place,
- (b) in a workplace,
- (c) in a public vehicle, or
- (d) within a prescribed distance from a doorway, window or air intake of a public place or workplace.

Section 3 of Bill 203 would also amend the above portion by adding the following clause: "in a vehicle in which a minor is present."

The question that should be asked, Mr. Chairman, is whether a motorhome is defined as a structure or a vehicle. This distinction is very important as it determines whether people that own motorhomes and use them as a primary residence can smoke in their motorhome when children are present. I'm not condoning smoking in motorhomes – many studies demonstrate the harmful effects of second-hand smoke in general – but it certainly is a question that should be addressed before any further action takes place with respect to this bill. I find it difficult to believe there would be any contention over limiting a child's exposure to second-hand smoke.

My concern, Mr. Chairman, is with the larger impact this legislation may have on Albertans' individual rights. Again, there is a lot of sensitivity to the personal rights of Albertans. They're very independent people, and we support and understand that, take pride in it, as a matter of fact.

Mr. Chairman, I have a bit of a concern with this bill in that as it's written, it could be – could be – the beginning of a long list of intrusions into the private space of individuals. As I mentioned before, Bill 203 speaks to preventing smoking in private vehicles if people are under the age of 18. This is understandable in many ways. Young children don't have the ability to make a choice to avoid second-hand smoke in vehicles, and many are unaware of the dangers of second-hand smoke.

However, children may not be the only ones that are in need of this protection. As mentioned previously, Bill 203 would add the clause "in a vehicle in which a minor is present" to the Tobacco Reduction Act. Bill 203 intends to protect children from second-

hand smoke in cars because they're vulnerable, but it does lead to the question: do we also need to pass legislation to protect other vulnerable populations as well?

Many of these groups, like children, may not have the ability to avoid situations where the driver is smoking. I hardly consider myself vulnerable, but we've all been stuck in cabs, in foreign countries in some cases, where a driver is smoking. Nobody wants to be in that situation, vulnerable or not. As such, in the future new bills may be introduced to make it illegal to smoke in a vehicle carrying the elderly or the disabled. As a result, we could continue down a long road of inserting ourselves into Albertans' private lives.

Mr. Chairman, this government has established a number of laws and programs to reduce or prohibit smoking in public places. Most of these programs fall under the Alberta tobacco reduction strategy. These comprehensive initiatives work to protect all Albertans from the dangers of second-hand smoke and have also been changing social attitudes around smoking, and I think this continues to happen. It is less and less prevalent as we look around.

In 10 years we've seen a massive decrease in the number of young people picking up smoking, and many long-time smokers have found the strength and support that they need to quit. These initiatives do not require the government to infringe upon an individual's personal rights within their private domain, yet they've had significant results in reducing tobacco use and, thus, overall exposure to second-hand smoke. Legislation may further decrease the amount of second-hand smoke that some children are exposed to, but I think it's important that we discuss all aspects of an issue before this bill is passed.

With that, Mr. Chairman, I'd like to conclude my statements on Bill 203. I really am still undecided. There have been some fabulous arguments made in favour of this bill this afternoon, on the concept and the spirit of the bill, absolutely, but have we really covered off everything and some of the pitfalls and some of the difficulties we may run into, some of the people that aren't included with the passing of this bill? I look forward to hearing from any other hon. colleagues during the rest of this debate so that we can decide where to go with this.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

The Chair: On my list here I have the hon. Member for Calgary-Nose Hill.

Dr. Brown: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I would like to make a few comments of a personal nature as to where I'm coming from on the particular issue. I see this particular measure, this piece of legislation, as being somewhat of a natural progression from where we've been in the social history of tobacco use and how we as a society have influenced attitudes and how we have progressively come up with more and more regulations.

I know that when I was a young boy many years ago, tobacco smoking was seen as somewhat glamorous. It was seen as a way to show that you were mature, that you were an adult, and so on. I know that a lot of my peers at the time took up smoking, and many of them still smoke to this day. Some of them, in fact, are no longer around because of the fact that they smoked.

We all know that tobacco smoking, when you first encounter it, is a rather unpleasant experience. Nobody ever says that they enjoyed their first cigarette or their first few cigarettes because they usually have some nausea or are sick and turn green and maybe even become sick to the stomach. But despite the fact that it's unpleasant at first, there is something that causes people to continue doing it, and I would suggest that a lot of it is peer

pressure. A lot of it is the desire, as I said, to be seen to be part of a group or to be seen to be more mature, more glamorous, or whatever.

4:40

I think that even to this day there are other influences. As we've become more and more knowledgeable about the detrimental effects of smoke and we put these horrible images on tobacco packages which would be enough to scare anybody, from the fact that those things are on there, in fact, maybe those people that are defying the knowledge that it's harmful and defying the fact that these ugly images are on there are showing in some way that they don't care, that they're brave, that they're big, that they're adult. "I don't give a damn about what other people say. I'm my own person." In a way, it may actually have a negative effect on some of those young people.

I just want to relate my own family history with respect to smoking. My father smoked very heavily throughout almost all of his life. From the age of about 15, when he joined the Calgary Highlanders militia regiment, he began to smoke. Everybody did it in the militia, in the army in those days, young or not.

I recall as a young boy my father smoking in the vehicle. When I was as young as five or six or seven years old, we used to go goose hunting. We would leave at 3 o'clock in the morning from our home out in Midnapore, a part of Calgary now, and head out to where we were going. I can always remember my father smoking in the vehicle. To me, it was quite overwhelming. Whenever I would ask my father to roll down the window a little bit, you'd think that I was really putting him out. He could not understand how this boy sitting next to him could be offended or in any way find some distaste in the fact that there was all this smoke inside the vehicle. But I can tell you that I didn't like it then, and I don't like it now.

I remember also those trips into the goose hunting country around Gem, Alberta. I would sleep upstairs in one of these abandoned farmhouses that we used to stay in with the permission of the owners. My father would sleep downstairs. I can tell you that on more than one occasion I would wake up in the middle of the night with the strong smell of smoke drifting up the stairs to the upper chamber of these houses. My father was so addicted to tobacco at that point that he had to wake up in the middle of the night to have a cigarette. He used to smoke those old Export 'A', and then later he switched to Rothmans, both of which were very high in tar and nicotine and all of those bad chemicals, which we know are very detrimental to one's health.

As my father progressed through his years, he began to cough more and more. Then we noticed that my father was having increasing difficulty with respect to climbing up stairs and going up a hill or whatever. My father was always an avid outdoorsman. He was a great fisherman and hunter. He loved camping in the outdoors. All of those pursuits that I learned as a young person were what my father enjoyed. But I can tell you that as he got to middle age, into his 40s and his early 50s, he no longer was able to do those types of things because his lung capacity was slowly being eroded. As his children we used to get on dad's case a lot about stopping smoking because the coughing, we could see, was progressively worsening.

My mother was also a smoker from an early age, but my mother could see what was happening to my father, and she made an example by quitting. She just quit cold turkey. My dad could not quit. My dad was terribly addicted to the tobacco, and the effects of that, we could see, were happening. On many, many occasions he tried to quit with the help of things like Nicorette and everything, but he just couldn't do it.

The hon. Member for Grande Prairie-Smoky had indicated that his father died at the age of 63 years because of smoking. My dad died at the age of 66 years because of smoking.

I believe that what we are proposing in this bill I am fully in favour of. As the hon. Member for Strathcona has mentioned, however, there are some who will say that we are drawing a line here with respect to personal rights, that a man's home is his castle and that, similarly, a car should be a private place, where he can do whatever he wants. But here is how I would rationalize this bill. We draw the line when we talk about minors because the behaviour of parents should not be allowed to cause detriment to minors. We look at other analogous types of legislation, and we can look at the helmet laws, where we are talking about bicycles. We don't force adults to wear helmets but we do children, and that is because children cannot always make rational decisions for themselves.

It's the same thing as when the Wildrose was talking about, you know, the parental rights over education. We have to have the right for children to be educated in the basics, and parents should not have paramount rights over them.

I am very much in favour of the bill that the hon. member has brought before us. I think it's a natural progression in things like hiding tobacco, prohibiting smoking in public places, prohibiting the sale in stores that have pharmacies and so on. It's just one more step, and I think it should proceed.

The Chair: Any other hon. member?

Seeing none, the chair shall now call the questions on the bill.

[The remaining clauses of Bill 203 agreed to]

[Title and preamble agreed to]

The Chair: Shall the bill be reported? Are you agreed?

Hon. Members: Agreed.

The Chair: Opposed? Carried.

The hon. Government House Leader.

Mr. Hancock: I would move that the committee rise and report Bill 203.

[Motion carried]

[The Deputy Speaker in the chair]

Dr. Brown: Mr. Speaker, the Committee of the Whole has had under consideration a certain bill. The committee reports the following bill with some amendments: Bill 203. I wish to table copies of all amendments considered by Committee of the Whole on this date for the official records of the Assembly.

The Deputy Speaker: Having heard the report, does the Assembly concur?

Hon. Members: Concur.

The Deputy Speaker: Opposed? So ordered.

The hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview.

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. That's encouraging. We are down to short moments here. I would ask, as I believe it's necessary, for unanimous consent of the Assembly to move to third reading of the bill under consideration.

Thank you.

[Unanimous consent granted]

4:50 **Public Bills and Orders Other than
Government Bills and Orders
Third Reading**

**Bill 203
Tobacco Reduction (Protection of Children in Vehicles)
Amendment Act, 2012**

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

Dr. Sherman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure to rise today to move third reading of Bill 203, the Tobacco Reduction (Protection of Children in Vehicles) Amendment Act, 2012.

I'd like to thank all the members of the Assembly who have spoken to the bill. I thank everybody for their support.

Mr. Speaker, I ask for the question on the bill.

The Deputy Speaker: Any hon. members wish to speak on the bill at third reading?

Seeing none, the chair shall now put the question.

[Motion carried; Bill 203 read a third time]

**Public Bills and Orders Other than
Government Bills and Orders
Second Reading**

**Bill 205
Scrap Metal Dealers and Recyclers
Identification Act**

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Strathcona.

Mr. Quest: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'll speak, albeit fairly briefly today, to open debate on Bill 205, the Scrap Metal Dealers and Recyclers Identification Act.

We're proposing this bill because we do have a serious problem today in our province, which is the theft of scrap metal just because of its value, and it's becoming all too common. This theft not only deprives the victim of the replacement cost of the metal, but it potentially creates unsafe conditions for the public and workers. Attempts to steal scrap metal can lead to power outages, injury, and death if the thefts are attempted from, say, live electricity infrastructure, and this has happened. Loss of metal on construction sites can seriously delay work, creating costs that outweigh the value of the metal itself.

Mr. Speaker, I believe this bill would help stem the tide of scrap metal theft in our province. It is a serious problem. According to the Edmonton Police Service in the first 11 months of 2011 stolen copper alone accounted for close to \$1 million in theft and about \$100,000 in associated damages. The Calgary Police Service in the first 10 months of 2011 reported \$645,000 worth of copper stolen and \$88,000 in associated damages. It keeps growing, and it keeps growing, again, because of the value of these metals, copper specifically. There are hundreds of thousands of dollars stolen in copper spoils.

The problem, Mr. Speaker, is that today these thieves can take the stolen metal to a scrap metal dealer or recycling-related business and sell it for cash. We need to make it harder for scrap metal thieves to operate in Alberta, and that's the objective of this bill. Without a ready market for illegally obtained scrap metal in Alberta, the ability for many criminals to profit from scrap metal theft would be greatly diminished. Again, with these ever-increasing prices, the profit margin – well, it's all profit – just keeps growing and growing.

The Scrap Metal Dealers and Recyclers Identification Act, if it's

brought into force, would have all scrap metal dealers be required to ensure that the seller of scrap metal provides proof of identity and to record information about the transaction as set out by regulations and keep the records for one year and would inform the seller of scrap metal that the recorded information may be provided to law enforcement. In addition to these basic requirements, for all transactions scrap metal dealers would be required to report purchases above a certain weight to law enforcement agencies.

Now, some have argued that this should be left to municipalities, but it's too much of a patchwork, Mr. Speaker. They have a bylaw in Calgary, but it doesn't apply, of course, once you're outside the municipality of Calgary, so the illegal scrap metal just leaves the jurisdiction. A province-wide system would prevent this.

Bill 205, the Scrap Metal Dealers and Recyclers Identification Act, would also protect scrap metal dealers from legal action due to disclosures of information collected under the act for the purposes of the act, protection that the municipal bylaws don't currently provide.

Mr. Speaker, Bill 205 would be an important tool for fighting this crime and a tool for law enforcement by both reducing the burden on law enforcement and making it harder for sellers of scrap metal to find a ready market.

The requirements for scrap metal dealers and purchasers in this bill are not onerous. As a matter of fact, most large- and medium-sized scrap dealers would not need to change their practices because they do it already.

Among the outcomes of this legislation is that it would crack down on fly-by-night scrap metal businesses that cater to scrap metal thieves. The legislation provides for serious fines both for individuals and the corporations that do not keep records. Individuals could also face jail time.

I'd like my colleagues to note that this bill does have the support of law enforcement. The Alberta Association of Chiefs of Police passed a resolution in support of this bill, and through that, the RCMP has also indicated its support. Also, the Edmonton Police Commission has called for regulations surrounding the presentation of ID by scrap metal sellers and the recording of information of buyers, as is already done in Calgary.

Mr. Speaker, I would ask that all hon. members, as the debate goes on today or in the future, consider supporting what I think is a very important bill leading to, I would think, the significant reduction in the theft of scrap metal in our province.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Mountain View on the bill.

Dr. Swann: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker, and thanks to the member for this opportunity to speak to the Scrap Metal Dealers and Recyclers Identification Act. On the face of it, it looks very sensible to ensure that we understand the source and the validity of individuals and the materials they bring forward. Obviously, it shouldn't be too much to expect in a transaction that we understand the identity of people and information respecting the transaction as a basis for legitimacy, for accountability, and for safety in some cases if damage occurs as a result of a transaction.

I guess the only concern I might raise for the record is that whenever we're talking about gathering data on individuals, one wants to know with some assuredness what's going to happen to that data: how secure it is, who gets access to it, what it can be used for, and who can also have access to that data.

With those reservations I guess I'd like to hear a little bit of clarification around whether that's been thought through and, on one level, that we be assured as legislators that we're not adding to

the burden or to the access to private information that may in fact come back to bite the individuals or us, especially when we're talking about significant fines and penalties under this act.

If the member has anything further to add on that, that would be helpful.

The Deputy Speaker: Any other hon. member? The hon. Member for Edmonton-Decore on the bill.

Mrs. Sarich: Yes. Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased to rise to discuss Bill 205, the Scrap Metal Dealers and Recyclers Identification Act, introduced by the hon. Member for Strathcona. Bill 205 seeks to add a new tool to our arsenal for preventing scrap metal theft, which, with the increasing price of many metals, has become an issue in a number of jurisdictions across the province.

The bill would do so by requiring scrap metal dealers and recyclers to record scrap metal sales and to identify the seller. This information, Mr. Speaker, would then be made available to authorities, who could use the information for investigations.

In addition, Bill 205 would enable peace officers to perform a search or to seize materials held by a scrap metal dealer if it is relevant to a specific investigation, and that would perhaps be helpful.

Mr. Speaker, I know the hon. member has championed this issue for a number of years, and I'm very pleased that he has maintained his particular commitment to this very important area of concern. As legislators it is our responsibility to respond to issues that we have seen within our communities, and this member has been excellent in advocating for his constituents in this regard.

Mr. Speaker, although we know that theft is a criminal offence under the Criminal Code of Canada, because of the rising prices of metals like copper, scrap metal theft has been increasing in jurisdictions across Canada and around the world. Since about 2003 global metal prices have been rising.

I would encourage members to support this direction. Thank you.

5:00 Motions Other than Government Motions

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-McClung on Motion 504. [interjections]

Mr. Xiao: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I was actually sick and took some medicine, so I just had a nap, unfortunately, but I stayed to open the debate on Motion 504.

Fines for Minor Offences

504. Mr. Xiao moved:

Be it resolved that the Legislative Assembly urge the government to explore options for reducing the number of arrest warrants issued and offenders incarcerated for the repeated nonpayment of fines for minor provincial and municipal bylaw offences, with the goal of increasing the efficiency of the criminal justice system and reducing the cost to taxpayers of sanctioning minor offences.

Mr. Xiao: Mr. Speaker, I'm bringing forward this motion because I believe that our government has the ability to come up with creative new ways of reducing warrants and costs by finding additional methods of dealing with minor offences.

I had the opportunity, Mr. Speaker, to visit the Edmonton Remand Centre a few months ago, and I learned about some of the issues that officers face there. One thing that really struck me was the cost of incarceration. To hold an offender in the remand centre costs our government and taxpayers over \$125 per day. And when

a person is arrested, they must be given any necessary medical treatment, including dental treatment, free of charge, which only adds to the cost.

This information surprised me, so I began to do some research about how many outstanding warrants we have in our province. What I found was that in 2007 alone Alberta had 200,000 outstanding warrants. In response to this information our government established the Fugitive Apprehension Sheriff Support Team, also known as FASST. This team tracks, investigates, and arrests criminals who are wanted on outstanding warrants in Alberta and have previously evaded capture. I believe that establishing this team was an important step and one that has kept our streets safer. However, Mr. Speaker, only 8,000 of these outstanding warrants, or 4 per cent, were for serious or violent crimes. What this means is that in 2007 there were approximately 192,000 outstanding arrest warrants for nonserious, nonviolent crimes in Alberta.

While I was at the Edmonton Remand Centre – I think it was with the Solicitor General; you know, we visited that facility together – I learned that some inmates had been arrested on warrants for repeatedly not paying fines for things like jaywalking, littering, and failure to pay transit fees. Although I agree that there need to be consequences for these types of infractions, when approximately 96 per cent of Alberta's outstanding warrants are for nonserious crimes, you can imagine, Mr. Speaker, how these cases might tie up our police resources and make it more difficult to get the serious offenders off the streets. According to the FASST website fugitive apprehension is a specialized investigative skill and capturing these individuals requires a lot of time and police resources.

In addition, Mr. Speaker, for some individuals incarceration does not act as a deterrent. In these cases the costs of housing, feeding, and treating offenders for two or three days in our remand centres may not be money well spent. Motion 504 urges the government to explore other options for penalizing individuals for whom a two- or three-day jail sentence is not a deterrent. In particular, I believe we must focus on finding new ways to penalize offenders who have no means to pay tickets in the first place and to ensure that we are effectively diverting mentally ill offenders away from remand centres and, when necessary, getting them the treatment that they need. While our province already has criminal diversion programs in place to help people suffering from mental illness to avoid the criminal justice system, some homeless and mentally ill Albertans are still making their way into our remand centres.

Mr. Speaker, spending about \$125 a day to hold an offender in custody for not paying their jaywalking or littering ticket is not an efficient use of tax dollars and our resources, particularly when the offender in question has no means of paying their fine, which is the case for many. I believe that there must be a better way and a more cost-effective way to deter criminals and to break cycles of criminality in Alberta, at least for certain offenders.

The Alberta government has a history of demonstrating leadership and innovation in coming up with new policies to save taxpayers' money and improve the efficiency of our programs and services. In fact, Mr. Speaker, the ministries of Justice and Attorney General and the Solicitor General and Public Security have already started doing more work to reduce the number of warrants in Alberta through their joint outstanding warrant review process initiative.

Mr. Speaker, I believe that now is a great time for us to envision new opportunities for our justice system. As such, I strongly urge all my hon. colleagues to stand in support of Motion 504, and I urge our government to continue their important work in reducing outstanding warrants using innovative means. With that, I will conclude my comments. I look forward to listening to the debate.

Thank you.

5:10

The Deputy Speaker: Any other hon. member? The hon. Member for Calgary-Nose Hill.

Dr. Brown: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker, and thanks to my hon. colleague for his motion. I would like to make a few comments on it. I know that the intention of the hon. Member for Edmonton-McClung is to have an exploration of certain avenues that might reduce the number of arrest warrants that are issued. Particularly, I think he's concerned about some of the people that may be in temporary holding facilities like the remand centre when they are awaiting an appearance in court on fairly minor provincial and municipal bylaw offences.

I would certainly see where he's coming from on that issue. It's a laudable objective. Nobody wants to see people spending their weekend behind bars because they've got a couple of outstanding parking tickets or some other minor thing. I would suggest to the hon. member that if he investigates that situation further, he'll find that that is not really something that happens on a regular basis. In fact, I find it very difficult to believe that anybody is spending time in jail if they've only got a couple of outstanding parking tickets or anything of a minor nature.

What I would believe, however, is that people who are repeated scofflaws and maybe have \$10,000 or \$20,000 worth of outstanding fines and have completely thumbed their nose at the justice system might be apprehended as a final resort, as a very last resort, in order to get them to come to accept the consequences of their behaviour, because we can't have people out there that are parking in handicapped stalls or parking in a fire zone or parking willy-nilly on the streets and maybe impeding traffic. They have to come home and pay the piper at some point, and for those people that are refusing to do that, we have to have some ultimate sanction. So I would not say that there has to be a blanket prohibition on putting somebody under arrest because of those circumstances.

I understand where the hon. member is coming from. He wants to increase the efficiency of the criminal justice system, and he wants to perhaps save money. But I wouldn't say that you're saving any money because if somebody's got a whole raft of unpaid fines, it's in the interests of us to collect those fines and to make sure that people know that there are ultimate consequences to their behaviour.

The crux of his motion, as I understand it, is that he wants to tailor it towards different groups of individuals and to expand and strengthen some of the options that we have for various types of offences.

Mr. Speaker, in 2007 the Fugitive Apprehension Sheriff Support Team, or FASST, was established, and it has since that time been the body responsible for handling outstanding arrest warrants. Now, when that body was established, it's worth noting that there were more than 200,000 outstanding warrants. That is a staggering number, and of that number, 8,000 of them were actually for serious or violent crimes. I know that's not the intention. But, still, when you take 8,000 away from 200,000, you've got 192,000 outstanding warrants.

So we need a process, and we need to facilitate handling those warrants. We can't have people out there, as I said, that are just ignoring facing the consequences of the law. I mean, a law is only effective if the sanctions that are imposed by that law can be enforced, and if you have no way to apprehend somebody and make them face the consequences or the sanctions imposed by that law, then law and order breaks down ultimately.

Laws are there for a reason. We try not to impose laws which restrict people's freedoms unless we have a justification for them,

and that's why we have things like laws against speeding. We know that speeding is dangerous. It's possibly even more dangerous than drinking and driving. Those people that are out there speeding are causing major accidents, injuries, and deaths.

That's why we need the laws that allow people to be arrested if they ignore the consequences of being served with summonses and there's no other way to get them involved in the justice system. We've got to have those sanctions. I do have some very serious reservations about where we're going with this. I understand the objective, but I do have some reservations about that.

Going back to the issue of the FASST teams, that I mentioned, and the 200,000 outstanding warrants at the time of the establishment, the bulk of those warrants, Mr. Speaker, were for those very things that the hon. member is talking about. They were for repeated nonpayment of fines for minor provincial offences. Those would be things like road offences and municipal bylaw offences. It would be my contention that the FASST teams that we have in Calgary and Edmonton are doing very good work to keep our communities safe by arresting these offenders who have managed time and again to just flaunt the law and have evaded arrest.

Those teams consist of five sheriffs, and they've undergone very extensive training. They target criminals across the whole breadth of our province. While they have proven effective at reducing the number of serious criminals that are out there on the street, there's a lot of work still to be done. Particularly, what we haven't done yet is have adequate focus on those outstanding warrants that are for minor offences. There are still a whole lot of them out there.

I understand where the hon. member is coming from. I can say without hesitation that there are some good ideas in there and that there are some ideas that we may want to work towards, some innovative solutions to the challenges of those outstanding warrants. Quite frankly, I don't know how we would do it if we didn't just go out there and ultimately arrest people. How else are you going to bring the offenders to justice?

I think, also, there's a scope here to examine potential policy and some legislative changes, and that would minimize the accumulation of outstanding warrants. In other words, we'd get on top of this issue earlier. We don't wait until they have \$10,000 or \$15,000 or \$20,000 in outstanding fines before we go out and try and search for them. This is something that requires resources.

I know, Mr. Speaker, that Alberta Justice has been looking at ways that we might adjust sentencing options so that the sentencing bears a better relationship to the seriousness of the offence. There are, however, a significant number of offences that have the potential to lead to incarceration. Those procedures that govern provincial and municipal offences are set out in the Provincial Offences Procedure Act, and they fall out of parts 2 and 3 of that act.

Part 2 offences are what I think the hon. member is directing his motion at today. Those are the ones that could be penalized by the issuance of a warrant and possible incarceration. Those would include the violation of a number of acts, provincial offences, things like the Blind Persons' Rights Act, the Dangerous Goods Transportation and Handling Act, Forests Act, Fuel Tax Act, Fisheries (Alberta) Act, Gaming and Liquor Act, Insurance Act, and the Livestock Identification and Brand Inspection Act.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

5:20

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Beverly-Clareview.

Mr. Vandermeer: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's a privilege for

me to rise today to speak on Motion 504, brought forward by the hon. Member for Edmonton-McClung. This motion urges the government to explore options for reducing the number of arrest warrants issued and offenders incarcerated in cases of repeated nonpayment of fines for minor provincial or municipal bylaw offences. I would like to thank the hon. member for his interest in this issue.

This motion examines how government resources and manpower are deployed to deal with frequent violators of minor provincial and municipal laws. The expectation with deterrents such as fines is that offenders will pay their fines and be less likely to reoffend in the future. However, there is a segment of frequent repeat offenders that continues to be undeterred by the accumulation of fines, which often results in outstanding arrest warrants, and the justice system spends time and money in attempting to punish that segment of offenders. Mr. Speaker, the intent of this motion would be to encourage a discussion about reducing these costs to taxpayers by exploring other options for deterrence.

It is important to know that the vast majority of arrest warrants issued in any given year are actually for minor offences. In the case of the minor offences an arrest warrant is issued, specifically when the offender has not paid his or her fines. Examples of these minor offences include jaywalking, littering, and not paying for transit fares. A variety of factors contribute to the issue of people not paying their fines. For example, if a person is unemployed, homeless, or struggling with mental illness, they may be less likely to gather the necessary financial resources to pay their fines. As well, these factors could also be contributing to the reason they are committing these offences in the first place.

Mr. Speaker, I'd like to talk about what measures other jurisdictions have taken to combat the same problem. This issue of outstanding warrants is certainly a complex one, which requires more study to determine some potential solutions. In fact, many other jurisdictions have carried out comprehensive reviews of this issue. As it turns out, though, very few of these reviews have suggested ways to reduce the overall numbers of warrants. They have generally focused on the enforcement of the warrant, apprehending the individual, and, hopefully, collecting the fine.

In other jurisdictions like New Zealand the government implemented a tracking system meant to identify serious fine defaulters as they attempt to enter or leave the country. Likewise, many of the solutions proposed by other jurisdictions have not fully addressed and improved the way to deal with repeat offenders. In 2004 Scotland put together a working group on outstanding warrants. At the time over 72 per cent of the country's outstanding warrants were for nonpayment of fines. The working group was given the task of reviewing systems for communication of information related to outstanding warrants with the goal of making improvements to the efficiency of the justice system. In the final report the group noted that an obvious problem was police resources being diverted to deal with outstanding warrants for nonpayment of fines. The committee concluded that fine enforcement procedures should be redesigned in order to free up the police officers for higher priority tasks. As well, the committee recommended improving information-sharing processes to process arrest warrants more quickly.

On that note, Mr. Speaker, Alberta Justice and the Solicitor General are currently leading a working group on an outstanding warrant review process. This group was tasked with recommending solutions for clearing up the current backlog of outstanding warrants and with changing the various systems and processes to prevent so many warrants from being created in the

first place. This is a collaborative effort between the two ministries to address an issue from multiple angles.

Mr. Speaker, it is my belief that the objective of Motion 504 would align with the vital work currently being carried out by the outstanding warrant review process working group. Clearing up the backlog of outstanding warrants is an important step in the right direction. However, in examining the process and systems in place, it might also be useful for the working group to explore other approaches towards reducing warrants for repeat offenders of minor offences.

Mr. Speaker, I know that it is supremely important that we continue to support the justice system in its work of making society safer for all. In the meantime I look forward to hearing what my fellow members have to say.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Deputy Speaker: Any other hon. member?

Seeing none, the chair shall now recognize the hon. Member for Edmonton-McClung to close the debate.

Mr. Xiao: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased to rise once again to offer some closing remarks on Motion 504. The purpose of this motion is to urge the government to explore options for reducing the number of warrants issued and the persons incarcerated for minor offences. It is important that our policies, initiatives, and programs are as effective as possible and that our government makes the best use of taxpayers' dollars.

Alberta is a truly innovative and forward-thinking province, and I believe that it is possible for us to devise new ways of penalizing people who commit minor regulatory and bylaw offences in order to reduce our outstanding warrants. As I said in my opening speech, it is important that the programs are tailored to specific individuals.

Alberta Health Services has a diversion program to help people with mental illness to stay out of the criminal justice system, and the Solicitor General and Public Security also have programs to help youth and first-time offenders avoid criminal records.

Mr. Speaker, this motion urges our government to continue exploring additional options for dealing with offenders who have refused to pay fines for minor offences in order to ensure that our financial, police, and judicial resources are freed up to deal with the more serious offences. Alberta Justice and the Solicitor General and Public Security are already doing important work in reducing warrants in our province, particularly when they are issued for nonserious infractions, but I think more needs to be done. I support these efforts, and I look forward to seeing new initiatives in the future that will increase the efficiency of the judicial system.

Mr. Speaker, I would like to thank hon. members for the thoughtful debate today, and I urge all of my colleagues to vote in support of this motion. Thank you.

[Motion Other than Government Motion 504 lost]

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

Mr. Weadick: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. In view of the great work done earlier on Bill 203, working together with members opposite, and getting some discussion in on Bill 205, and now having Motion 504 completed, I would move that we call it 6 o'clock and that we adjourn until 7:30 tonight.

[Motion carried; the Assembly adjourned at 5:30 p.m.]

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Province of Alberta

The 27th Legislature
Fifth Session

Alberta Hansard

Monday evening, March 19, 2012

Issue 20e

The Honourable Kenneth R. Kowalski, Speaker

Legislative Assembly of Alberta
The 27th Legislature

Fifth Session

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Legislative Assembly of Alberta

7:30 p.m.

Monday, March 19, 2012

[The Deputy Speaker in the chair]

The Deputy Speaker: Please be seated.

Government Bills and Orders Committee of the Whole

[Mr. Cao in the chair]

The Chair: The chair would like to call the committee to order.

Bill 7 Appropriation Act, 2012

The Chair: Any comments or questions? The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. I'm pleased to be able to get an opportunity to speak to the Appropriation Act. The process that we have now for debating in Committee of Supply and in the policy field committees means that I don't get a chance to look at the whole bill very much anymore or to hear about the debate going on in the ministries that I'm not the critic responsible for, so this is really my first opportunity to give some general comments on what I see happening in the province.

You know, I just want to loop back here, Mr. Chairman, and talk a little bit about the process that we have for budget debate overall. I have to say, not to put too fine a point on it, that it sucks. It really is not serving us very well. It's not serving the opposition well, it's certainly not serving the government backbenchers very well, and I hope that following the next election somebody over there will be willing to negotiate with me to make this a more productive, accountable, and transparent process.

In many ways this is the most information that I get. Essentially, it's the listing of every ministry, the expense, which is operating money and any capital money they plan on spending. But, honestly, when you look at the budget books, as I have over the last 16 budgets that I've done, there's less and less and less information available in every single budget, so I spend most of my time going: "Okay. Well, what's under this vote? Can you break it out for me and tell me what programs you're actually funding under this and how many FTEs you've assigned to it? What exactly are you paying for?" You can't tell from the budget documents anymore. There are no descriptors with it.

Really, the worst example of this is that under the Health and Wellness budget there's one line that says: Alberta Health Services. It's whatever it is now, \$19 billion. One line: that's it. There's no descriptor. It doesn't tell us what it breaks down to. It doesn't tell us how much we spend in each hospital or for doctors or anything. Everything that goes to AHS: that's what it is. No sane human being can hold the government accountable when you get a one-line vote and everything that Alberta Health Services does is under that and there's no breakdown. When I started, you used to get a breakdown of four or five or six subvotes under any given vote. Now it's just the vote. You get five votes, and that's it; ferret it out yourself.

Really, I'm not able anymore to try and hold the government accountable on its choices on given things because I spend all of my time just trying to find out what those choices were. I don't think that's productive, and I certainly don't think it's being accountable to the citizens, who, in my opinion, should be able to

pick up a budget document and read it and understand it. That's accountable, and that's not what we've got.

The second part of this is the actual process itself. That is where the government is now choosing certain ministries it debates here in the House, so you can have your assistants on the floor and that sort of thing. Then in the evening you're in a policy field committee in a committee room over in the Annex. It's harder to get the staff around. There's not much room in the back for the public to come in and watch. You're all kind of squished together in this room that just gets hotter and less pleasant as the night goes on.

Frankly, I feel really bad for the government members that are appointed to these policy field committees because they're obliged to sit there and, essentially, twiddle their thumbs for three hours. Honestly, it's about as big a waste of manpower as I've seen for my colleagues in the Legislative Assembly. I don't see how this is moving anything forward. Like, they're obliged to be there. They have to be there to keep the side up or whatever it is they're doing. They get an opportunity to ask questions at the end of the three-hour period if there's enough time, and one of them might get on the list and be able to participate. I'm sorry; why did we have all these people sitting in a room for three hours?

I know that because I'm Official Opposition, we have the first opportunity to ask questions. With respect to some of my colleagues, I'll tell you that if I was a minister who had to answer the same darn question the third time from the third party that appears in front of me, my hair would catch on fire. That's not fair, and it's not a good use of time. The process, not to put too fine a word on it, sucks, and we really need to fix it. It's not a good use of anybody's time. It completely wastes the backbenchers' time.

It doesn't give opposition enough time. I mean, honestly, an hour for the Official Opposition, 60 minutes to share with the minister? If you've got a talkative minister, you're going to get the short end of that 60 minutes, believe me. All you're doing is trying to find out what this actually covers. So not a good use of time. That's part of my observation about the budget process in its entirety, which culminates in the appropriation bill, Bill 7, which we have in front of us.

I think the second thing that I'm interested in is revenue, and you really don't see revenue in the Appropriation Act. It just talks about expenses because it comes through the President of Treasury Board and Enterprise. I mean, it talks about: money will be taken from the general revenue fund. That's in section 1. It will pay for certain things for the Legislative Assembly, and from the general fund it will pay for charges of the public service. It will pay for capital and infrastructure, nonbudgetary, transfers from the lottery fund, et cetera, et cetera, and on it goes.

But we really don't talk about revenue. We try – although, I would argue, we fail – to talk about the expenses, but we really don't discuss government revenue at all, and I think we should. I think we need to have a conversation – and by that I mean a provincial conversation – about where government revenue comes from and about: do we have the appropriate mix of where the government is currently getting its revenue?

My friend here, Mr. Finance, the Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar, has just handed me . . .

Mr. MacDonald: The fiscal plan of this year.

Ms Blakeman: . . . the fiscal plan of this year. Here's how it breaks down. Personal income tax is 53.8 per cent of the money that the government then turns around and spends. Fifty-three point eight per cent. Let's round that up and call it 54 per cent. Other taxes are a little over 3 per cent. Education property taxes are 10 per cent.

Now, let me just go off on a little tangent here because this bugs me. A while back – I think it was actually under Stockwell Day, who was Treasurer at the time – the government took over collecting the education property tax, or, rather, it made the cities, the municipalities collect the tax for them and give it back to them. This was a big change because we used to have school boards requisition how much money they needed. They would have to go out and face their public and say: we need to requisition X number of million dollars.

Mr. MacDonald: How much is corporate tax?

7:40

Ms Blakeman: I'll get there. Be calm. Be calm.

They would face their public. They would argue out why they needed to requisition that amount of money. Well, the province stepped in and said: "It's not fair. We've got some schools that are poorer and some schools that are richer. We're going to collect it all for you, and we're going to redivvy it. We're going to do" – what's that word you guys hate? – "wealth redistribution." That's what they did.

Mr. MacDonald: Reprofiled.

Ms Blakeman: Reprofiled.

People still believe that that education property tax comes in and then is redistributed. It isn't. Look at the chart. For those of you following along at home, this is page 150. It says "Tax Plan," and it's from the fiscal plan for this year. It's 10 per cent, as I said, education property tax. It's collected, goes into general revenue, the big pie here, and they spend it on whatever the heck they want. It doesn't go back out to schools. It's not collected and kept somewhere special. It's right there. It's a big pie.

Corporate income tax, for those that are following along with me over here, is 22 per cent. Less than half of the personal income tax, corporate income tax is at 22.3 per cent. Tobacco tax, everybody's favourite: 5.6 per cent. Well, that hardly seems worth it, does it? Fuel tax, which just burns everybody, is less than the tobacco tax. For those of you that are prone to getting exercised about this, the fuel tax is 4.9 per cent, so almost 5 per cent, but tobacco tax is 5.6 per cent.

That's how taxes we collect breaks down, but that's not where the rest of the revenue comes from. We have income tax. We have corporate tax. We have royalties. But every single day of the government operations, paying for government programs and services, they subsidize – let me put it another way. We are short. In this province of plenty we are short by 23 per cent. Where does that 23 per cent come from? A deafening silence on the other side. It comes from oil and gas that came out of the ground yesterday. Our royalties, that are ours for everybody in this province and everybody that was in this province and everyone to come to this province, are subsidizing what we spent today by 23 per cent. There is something really wrong with that.

Now, whether you want to look at this as that we're going to run out of something – and there are fairly good numbers that you can look up if you want to look them up on how many years' worth of conventional oil we've got and how many years' worth of conventional gas. Then you can work in shale gas. I'm missing something here. There's another word I'm missing, deep gas or something. Then there are the oil sands. But that money that is from selling off our resource: we are spending it every single day. So it's either going to run out, or more likely people are going to stop buying it from us. We're not talking tomorrow. We're not talking 10 or 15 years. We're talking, you know, 25 years.

The pages that are here with us tonight: they're going to notice this one. I will hopefully be happily frolicking away in some seniors' place somewhere. You guys are going to face this one. What are you going to do? We will no longer be the place of plenty. We will have spent all of that stuff, and we will have spent it providing stuff all the way along. How sensible is that?

Honestly, that's like living on the family farm, and when you get a little short on groceries, you open the cupboard – no, not a lot there anymore – and you think: okay; no problem. You put a for-sale sign up, and you sell off another acre in the back 40. Okay. Eventually you have sold off all of those acres to buy groceries, and now you have no farm left except for the home acreage. You're sitting on that, the pantry is bare again, and you've sold off everything else. That's exactly what we're doing in this province. To me, this is not so much a burning issue of expenses. Yes, I'm concerned about that, yes, I think we should be responsible about it, and yes, I think we spend too much in some places and too little in others, but really it's about the revenue for me. It's about the fact that we are saving nothing, a big old fat zero, out of those nonrenewable resources. We're saving none of it for the future. We're spending all of it now.

The heritage fund. Well, people say to me: when the heck is it going to rain? Their lives have already gone through a lot of thunderstorms and ice showers and all kinds of other things. They thought the heritage fund should have been spent long ago to help them with whatever problems they had or to help with our own economy. It's just become a joke.

Then they look at the money that we're not saving from the rest of the stuff. This province has so much potential. It has so much opportunity. This is the richest place on Earth, and we're not respectful of that. We're not respectful of the gift that we've been given, and we don't manage it respectfully. There's so much we could do with it.

We could have a postsecondary fund that we could be adding to and at a certain point turn around and say: we will pay for your first degree or your first college diploma or your first apprenticeship; we will pay for it. If we want to say that this is our gift to the rest of the country, you know, if people move away from Alberta and Saskatchewan gets the benefit of an engineering degree from Alberta: "Great. There you go. We're sharing with you." That's one way to do it. Or we invest in new technology and creativity or we find a cure for cancer or we find a cure for the common cold: share it; there you go. That's what we did with our wealth. We did share it, and everybody had an advantage.

Right now we can't do any of those things. Honestly, we have overcrowded classrooms. Seriously? In this province? You know, we have teachers and health aides that are going on strike for 1 and 2 per cent increases. Seriously? In this province with so much? That's not to say that we should spend every dime we've got. Don't jump up and misunderstand me that way. What I'm saying is that we have so much, yet we are spending it every day and not saving any of it. I think that's irresponsible. I think that if those pages are right PO'd with us, they have every right to be. I know that you guys wouldn't ever crack a smile or do anything that you're not supposed to do. You're very good, excellent pages, very well trained. But, honestly, you should be going after us with something.

I think we need to seriously look at raising taxes, and I will say that out loud. I think we should. I think we should seriously look at rebalancing and reviewing where our revenue comes from. I have talked for some time about having a citizens' initiative where we would have representatives from each riding come together and spend some time with experts and talk about what they think we should do with revenue, where they think it should come from,

how much of it should come from this, how much of it should come from that. Then we'll look at a new scheme for how we collect revenue, and then we can get on to the expenses.

I know this is an ideology, and I know I'm not going to change the ideology of the Conservatives.

Mr. Hinman: Oh, don't give up. Keep going.

Ms Blakeman: I'm being egged on by my colleague from the Wildrose. I'm not going to change his ideology either. But thank you for the encouragement.

I really think we need to look at things more as how we're going to invest in them and less as an expense. We have lots of opportunity for investment. Education is always an investment. It's never a waste of time. Investing in education, investing in postsecondary education, investing in arts and culture: big payback, like \$8 to \$11 for every dollar that you spend, and it makes it more pleasant.

When I've been able to go out and visit other famous cities in the world, you know, there are little pocket parks that are a block big, and every one of them has an amazing piece of art on it that relates to something that happened there at some point. It's commissioned art. It's just amazing to walk through there. Do we have that? Well, we have a 1 per cent rule from the city of Edmonton, God bless them. They put up 1 per cent of every infrastructure project. Then we spend months slugging it in the newspaper, and after a couple of years everyone decides they really love it. I'm waiting for the couple of years when everybody finally loves the Talus. Right now we're just going through the months and months of slugging it: how could we have spent so much money on it? Oh, for heaven's sake. Grow up.

Anyway, my time is running short here, and I'm sure that's cheering many people here.

I was talking about investment in arts and education and creative thinking. You know, even if we want to solve some of the issues that are provoking us and pestering us with the oil sands and with our constant lack of success in balancing oil and gas production and exploration and development with the environment, that takes creative thinking. The more you train people, the more likely you are to have some smart brains out there that are going to solve some of these problems.

7:50

I was door-knocking and talking to a guy that's a biologist, and he's going to graduate and go up to Fort McMurray and work on organisms that eat tailings pond sand or something and algae in lake water that kills fish. You go: "Wow. Cool. Okay. That's what you should be doing." You need that kind of creativity to start to apply things both as cross-disciplinary but also to the world that we live in.

I find the way we approach budgeting very odd, and I would like to see . . . [interjection] Yeah. It's just strange.

I'm going to run out of time here, so I'll say thanks for the opportunity. If I can get up again, maybe I will. You know, I haven't talked about things like municipal partnerships and a lot of things we've been talking about for a long, long time and just never seem to be able to get to resolve when we look at budgets. I really think this budget process just does not work for us any longer. It's certainly not accountable. It's definitely not transparent. It's just a whole bunch of people's waste of time while they sit there and do nothing, and I don't think that's fair to them.

Thanks very much, Mr. Chairman.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Airdrie-Chestermere.

Mr. Anderson: Thank you, Mr. Chair. It's great to be able to rise and speak one last time to the budget. I guess maybe we'll have one more crack at it here in third reading. It is amazing to me. It's like we have to learn lessons the hard way over and over and over again.

You know, we have countries all over the Earth right now struggling, overwhelmingly struggling with massive, crushing debt. If you look at Greece, if you look at Spain, the United Kingdom, France, Italy, Portugal, if you look at all these countries, the biggest example being our neighbours to the south, the United States, of course, if you look at what they're going through right now, certainly in Europe – the devaluation of their currencies, civil unrest, economic upheaval, and so forth – it's like we're watching it on TV, kind of like we watch a movie where it's really interesting and we're aware of it, but it's just on TV, and that couldn't possibly happen here. That's something that happens in other places.

The problem is that all those countries once said the same thing. The United States, certainly, not too many years ago was saying the same thing. This can't happen in the United States; that's stuff that happens in, you know, places like Europe and Africa and the Middle East or Japan with the many years of stagnant growth that they've had now, well over a decade. We never think it's going to come to roost here, but we should know better.

If you look at our history, the history of Alberta is riddled with economic cycles, is riddled with situations where we go from boom to bust almost overnight. In fact, for a very short period of time we saw a very sharp bust, for about three quarters in 2008. It was very short. It was deep, but it was short, and then we were back up. If you look at the 1980s during the national energy program with Mr. Trudeau, if you look at the early '90s, when oil was worth so little and we were having trouble during the Getty years, and then even in the early Ralph Klein years, when we were having trouble making ends meet, things can change so fast when you're so reliant on the price of a commodity.

What we've done in this budget and in previous budgets is that we made our province reliant on about \$110 oil if we want to balance the budget. That's what we've done in this budget. You know, you can't blame it on any one year, and you can't blame it on any one person because it's been going on for so long. In some ways the previous Premier was kind of left holding the bag for some of the excessive spending habits of his predecessor, Ralph Klein, during his last few years in office. Then it went on. Now, of course, the current Premier has ramped that up even more than her predecessor.

It just amazes me that at \$105 a barrel for oil we can sit here and be debating a budget that has us \$3 billion in the hole, roughly an \$800 million accounting deficit and a \$3 billion cash deficit at \$105 a barrel. It's like Russian roulette with our kids' future. What would happen if oil were to go down to, say – oh, I don't know – \$70 or \$75 a barrel, just \$75? That's really low, isn't it? Not really. It would be total chaos. Our budget deficit would be getting close to the \$10 billion mark. We would have to make sacrifices and do things that would not be fun, that would hurt people, that would hurt our kids' education, that would hurt our seniors' health care, that would do very bad things, that would certainly take money out of people's pockets because we would be left with very few choices at that point other than to significantly raise taxes or some combination of significantly raising taxes and slashing programs that people rely on.

At the end of the day there is only so much waste in government. There is a lot to cut, but if you're running a \$10 billion deficit at, say, \$75 a barrel for oil, then you're going to be in a situation where, unfortunately, you're going to need to cut more

than just some wasteful programs. You're going to have to be cutting human resources and things like that and a lot of it. That is not something that Albertans want, and it's not something that they deserve.

How can we live in this province at the kind of levels of oil and gas prices that we've seen, specifically oil prices, over the last little while and have a heritage fund that is now worth less today, when adjusted for inflation, than it was when Peter Lougheed first established it in 1976? How is that possible? How? Where did the money go? Where did it all go?

Ms Blakeman: Good question. That much money; our streets should be paved with gold.

Mr. Anderson: You would think so.

Mr. Hinman: Gold is too expensive now.

Mr. Anderson: That's right.

The point is that there is just no reason for it. There is no reason why we should have a heritage fund that is worth whatever it is today, \$15 billion or thereabouts when adjusted for inflation, which is less than what it was worth when Peter Lougheed established it. There is no reason for that. There is no reason why our sustainability fund, which was once \$16 billion, should now be almost wiped out, going down to roughly \$3 billion or \$4 billion this year, somewhere in there. There's just no reason for it. There's no way that this government in good conscience can justify it without major self-deception.

It's funny. Even in the last two years there was a little bit of a glimmer of hope, I will say, under the prior Premier because he had managed to slow down the rate of spending somewhat on the program spending side. It had slowed down to below the rate of inflation plus population growth. Now, they were still spending like crazy on the infrastructure side. That's fine. We've had debates in this House on whether that's the way to go. That's fine; we can have those debates. But at least on the program side we had slowed it down a little bit. Program spending, as you know, is not something you can just stretch out over an extra year and a half like you can infrastructure spending. Program spending is kind of there to stay with a few exceptions. It's very difficult to slow it down.

8:00

What does this new Premier do, this new Premier who was going to be so much more fiscally responsible than the previous Premier? Oh, we've got to be fiscally responsible, she said during the leadership. This kind of overspending has just gotten out of control, she said. I'm a fiscal conservative, she said. We're going to balance the budget during a debate; she said she would balance the budget in this very next budget. That's what she said in the PC leadership debate. That was her promise. People glaze over that now and say: "Oh, she couldn't have possibly meant that. She obviously meant 2013."

People forget that one of the reasons for certain folks over there bringing down the last Premier was because he was going to break his goal of getting the budget balanced by 2012, and it was going to probably take him an extra year. Oh, my God. It was just chaos. We can't have that, said the Minister of Energy. We can't have that, said the current Premier, former Minister of Justice. "You said 2012. You said we'd balance in 2012. You're taking it out to 2013. That's just awful." So they found a way. They stuck in the knife, got rid of the last Premier in whatever games were played.

Guess what? They did the exact same thing that that previous Premier said he would have to do. Well, I've got to give the

previous Premier credit. At least he was honest about it. At least he wasn't lying to the people of Alberta and saying: "Oh, we've got to change leadership because this Premier has the audacity to say he's going to take it to 2013. Well, we fiscal conservatives could have balanced the budget."

What do they do? Did they balance the budget by 2012? No. In fact, amazingly – amazingly – they found a way to not only not balance, but they increased spending whereas the previous administration had at least gotten that part under control. They decided to greatly increase program spending by well, well over the rate of inflation plus population growth and wipe out a lot of the efficiencies and so forth that were at least slowing down the rate of that very difficult piece, which is very difficult to slow down.

Now, I guess it just amazes me, the hypocrisy of that. I would rather be someone that – you know, for example, the Liberals. They want to have a progressive income tax, and they put that in their platform in plain sight for everyone to see. I don't agree with it. I think it's wrong headed. They know that. We have debates over it. But at least they're truthful. At least they say: this is how we're going to balance the budget; we're going to raise taxes. Of course, we would argue that that's going to bring down revenues over time. They'll say: "No, it won't. There's room. It wouldn't affect economic output. We would just raise more government revenues." Fine. Okay. That's a debate.

But then this government can't be truthful. It's not that they can't be truthful; they're not being truthful. Certainly, this Premier is not being truthful. She said that she'd balance it by 2012. That was the reason to get rid of the last Premier, because he wouldn't do that. Then she says: "Oops. Sorry. I guess we can't do it by 2012. We're going to have to move it to 2013." At \$105 per barrel oil. I'd be willing to bet that possibly the previous Premier may have been able to balance the budget this year because I think he would have found a way to do it with prices going up to \$105 a barrel oil. It's amazing. Here I am extolling, you know, someone who I, obviously, had some severe disagreements with. The fact of the matter is that he was more fiscally responsible by far than this current Premier, by far.

Ms Blakeman: Better the devil you know.

Mr. Anderson: Better the devil you know sometimes, right? Not that he was a devil. Not that he was a devil.

That's the problem here. This budget has absolutely no fiscal responsibility in it. It's an exceptionally irresponsible document, and it's a hypocritical document because it's a document that she campaigned that she would not introduce. Then she got elected and not only did exactly what the previous Premier said he was going to do but actually exceeded him with regard to the fiscal irresponsibility in increasing program spending at 7 per cent this year. Incredible.

So what would the Wildrose do differently? We're going to have an election here pretty quickly. There are a couple of other things, too. Let's talk about taxes in this budget. It's amazing to me that this government can sit there over and over and say: there are no tax increases in this budget. Well, guess what? First of all, that's not true. First of all, there was a tax increase last year under – again I'm defending the previous Premier. They did not allow taxes to go up: the municipal taxes, the education portion of the property taxes. The reason they did that is because they essentially froze or even decreased a little bit their take of overall property taxes taken from the city so that the education portion of the property tax for the provincial government was, actually, essentially frozen. Unfortunately, the municipalities, a lot of them,

decided to take that room anyway and just jacked up their overall tax rate and kept those monies, so it didn't turn into a tax decrease.

This year that's not what they did. They increased by about 7 per cent the total take that they're going to take for property taxes. Because of that, everyone's property taxes in the province are going to be going up substantially more than they were last year. That's what's happening. So there were tax increases absolutely, for sure. They say: oh, well, we're not going to raise taxes this budget. They spent a whole bunch of government money saying this.

Ms Blakeman: That isn't government money.

Mr. Anderson: Sorry. Sorry. Sorry. Taxpayer money. Thank you, hon. member. You're bang on.

... taxpayer money to get out the message that they're not raising taxes in this budget, like that's something that you need to spend government money on doing. They do raise taxes, property taxes, and they don't say anything about the years after this pre-election budget. Well, that's the whole point. That's what people are worried about. Are you going to raise taxes? Well, the Premier says: oh, well, I will commit – I love this – that if we are in surplus, we will not raise taxes for three years. In other words, we won't raise taxes for three years if we're in surplus. We may raise them on the fourth year of a mandate, but certainly not these next three years if we're in surplus.

All right. So what if we're not in surplus? What if oil only gets to 80 bucks a barrel or 85 bucks a barrel? Say there's a major problem economically in the United States – I know it's hard to believe that there would be a major economic problem in the United States and Europe; that sure couldn't happen – and demand goes down. Let's say that things in the Middle East kind of cool off for a little bit. You know, we're feeling okay about things over there, and the price of oil drops another 10 bucks on that. Pretty soon oil is at only \$80, which historically, of course, is a very high price. It's at \$80, and all of a sudden we're not in surplus as projected by this government.

What happens then? Well, I guess, according to the Premier's nonpledge about raising taxes, it's very clear that she has left some wiggle room. If that is the case, they reserve the right, if we're not in surplus, to raise taxes on the people of Alberta. They want to go to an election without saying that. That is untruthful, and that is what is not laid out in this budget although the Minister of Finance in the budget speech did say that we need to have a discussion, and that will include taxes. He didn't say he was going to increase taxes in the budget speech, of course, but he said that we need to review the whole financial fiscal framework, including taxes. So we said: "Okay. Well, that's great. I'm all for that. Let's review the fiscal framework, but can you please commit not to increase taxes while we do that, so we don't use this fiscal framework review as a chance to shaft the people of Alberta?"

Nope. They won't do that. They won't take that pledge. Everything is on the table. Taxes are on the table, as the current Minister of Finance is quoted as saying to Rick Bell at the *Calgary Sun* in several articles. If that's the case, we in the Wildrose would like to know what the plans are for taxation and if a tax increase is still on the table. We'd like them to confirm that for us and for the people of Alberta. The Wildrose Party is very clear. Under no circumstances, barring the end-of-the-world scenario, would we increase taxes on the people of Alberta.

8:10

Ms Blakeman: If the Liberals won, for example.

Mr. Anderson: That would be an end-of-the-world scenario if the Liberals won. Exactly. That would be an end-of-the-world scenario. Then we could talk about raising taxes. We wouldn't have much of a choice, though, at that point.

Anyway, that's where we stand on taxes. No tax hikes, period.

Now, what would the Wildrose do on the spending side? Well, on the program spending side we would continue to do what the former Premier had done and keep program spending increases down to at or below the rate of inflation plus population growth for the foreseeable future until we get back into economic health long term, and we would try to keep it at that cap even going forward, especially on the program spending side, at least until we got kind of back down to the normal Canadian average or at least the average of the other four major provinces. That's a pretty reasonable position to take. That's what we would do, cap at inflation plus population growth, program spending in particular, but overall government spending for sure. That's what we'd do.

On the infrastructure side we would have a robust infrastructure building program, but it would be the same level per capita as B.C.'s, Ontario's, and Quebec's, which means we would have to spread the current infrastructure building program over an additional year, which would bring our overall infrastructure spending to about the average, a little above average, of the other three major Canadian provinces: B.C., Ontario, and Quebec.

That's a very reasonable position to take, in my view. That's the Wildrose plan going forward.

The Chair: Hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar, do you wish to join in?

Mr. MacDonald: Yes, I do. I appreciate the opportunity. I listened with interest to hon. members talk about Bill 7, specifically this government's fiscal management skill or their technique or their lack thereof. I certainly would agree with the hon. members. You know, so many people ask me: "Where did all the money go? We were generating so much resource revenue. Where did it all go?"

Certainly, there was a discussion earlier here this evening regarding Alberta's revenue sources. I would remind all hon. members that we're looking at a revenue of over \$40 billion. Now, 23 per cent of this revenue is surprisingly coming from personal income tax, 11 per cent from corporate income taxes. The hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview certainly has some sound ideas on that. Other tax revenue is 10 per cent. Resource revenue is 29 per cent.

The largest source of revenue for the entire budget is resource revenue, and that's why hon. members are so correct whenever they mention that we have to be careful here. What would happen under a scenario where the price of oil would slip below \$100 a barrel and maybe go down as low as \$70 or maybe even lower? We only have to look at the sensitivities that are built into the budget to realize quite quickly that there wouldn't be enough money to go around.

The next question would be: would there be enough money left in the stability fund to help us work through this difficult time? I would have to say no. The stability fund is being drained quite quickly, and with the election and the promises around the election, it's going to be depleted.

The hon. Member for Calgary-Mountain View, who sits beside me, mentioned to me in question period today that it was only 2 o'clock, yet the government had already made five spending announcements, five. Five spending announcements.

Mr. Hinman: That was all?

Mr. MacDonald: The hon. Member for Calgary-Glenmore says: that was all? Absolutely. This is a government that gets very, very generous with taxpayers' money the closer and closer you get to an election.

Ms Blakeman: Yeah. They do them on big cardboard cheques.

Mr. MacDonald: Now, I haven't seen any cardboard cheques lately, but the Minister of Culture and Community Services was over in the fine constituency of Edmonton-Gold Bar the other day at an event to reopen a community pool that had received substantial amounts of money from the Alberta sustainability initiative. But the local member: I wasn't invited. I had people there, and they were very disappointed that the person that they had chosen democratically to elect them and represent them at such events was not invited. In fact, they brought it to my attention, and again I said: the closer you get to an election, the less likely that you're going to see me on an official invite.

Ms Blakeman: But isn't that disrespectful to those people?

Mr. MacDonald: Well, they thought it was very disrespectful, and I think they brought it up with some of the Progressive Conservative glitterati that were in attendance. But I'm not going to be accused of, you know, digressing from Bill 7 because I do have some things that I would like to say regarding this bill and this government's fiscal record.

Bill 7, if I'm doing my math correctly, indicates and requests certain amounts of money, but we have to also compare Bill 7 to the fiscal plan and what the requests are going to be one, two, and three years into the future. The revenue that I described earlier: it is anticipated by this government that it is to grow by an average of over 8 per cent over the next three fiscal years, and of course this is going to be the result of surging returns in the resource sector and generally buoyant economic activity as a result of this surge.

Ms Blakeman: Did you say boom?

Mr. MacDonald: I don't like the word "boom." I like the words "very busy." Alberta is not booming, but it is very, very busy.

Ms Blakeman: Is that surging?

Mr. MacDonald: You could say that's surging, yes, but we have to be very, very careful, and we have to heed the words of the hon. Member for Airdrie-Chestermere, among others, that things could go wrong quickly, and things could go wrong if the price of oil changes.

Now, when you compare the price of west Texas intermediate in the mid-continent market of America to the price of Brent North Sea crude oil, you see that there is quite a range. Sometimes it can be as high as \$20, or it can settle into the \$15 range, but that's how much more North Sea crude is worth than west Texas intermediate. There is a warning to us there. America is now becoming more and more energy self-sufficient as a result of shale gas, as a result of the Bakken field, that mostly lies under North Dakota, south of the American-Canadian border.

Saskatchewan and Manitoba are also enjoying a piece of the economic action, and that's a good thing to see. However, we have to be careful of economic conditions. We have to consider the premium that's on the barrel of oil right now because of political uncertainty in the Middle East. Things could change quite quickly, so we should be very, very careful of how we spend money.

That gets me, Mr. Chairman, to some of the questions I asked earlier, and I'm still waiting for an answer from the government. I asked these questions on Thursday. I thought I would get an answer. I looked in *Hansard*. If an answer was provided, I haven't seen it. I certainly wanted to know why there were changes in the health budget from the 2010-11 year and the actual numbers that were audited and presented in the annual report and the same actual number that was reflected in the government's estimates. Totally different.

8:20

In one case in one government line item from Alberta Health and Wellness there was a \$100 million difference. No one on that side of the House has provided an answer to me. I think my questions were reasonable, and they were responsible, and that they merit a response, but I haven't heard yet. So I would certainly like the government, before we go too far with this bill, to provide an answer. I know I directed those questions to the President of the Treasury Board in budget estimates, but I really don't think the gentleman understood. I was disappointed, but I don't think he understood, so I gave it another chance here on Thursday afternoon, Mr. Chairman, and I'm still awaiting an answer. I think a formal answer in writing under the Minister of Finance's letterhead would be the proper way to deal with this request. It's a lot of money, and there are other discrepancies or other changes in those line items where I think, respectfully, we should receive an answer.

Now, when you compare not only the annual report and the actuals from the year 2010-11 for each respective ministry and what the comparable is in the budget – and I haven't done advanced education. I think I might, if I have a chance tonight, have a look at advanced education, particularly after what the Auditor General had to say about some of the institutions that are under that ministry in his small but mighty report that was released last week. It was a small but mighty report. I see so many members have forgotten all about it already.

Ms Blakeman: No, no. It's right there.

Mr. MacDonald: Yes, it is.

Not only when you compare those financial documents, the annual reports, to the budget estimates but also when you compare the Appropriation Act, 2012, Bill 7 this year, to the Appropriation Act, 2011, last year, which I believe was called Bill 17 – last year we had an Appropriation Act called Bill 17, and the hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre may remember the name of the bill, or perhaps the hon. Member for Vermilion-Lloydminster would remember the name of it, but I had to go to the library and look it up – there are some interesting changes which, again, are reflective of this government's spending habits.

Now, whenever we look at transfers, whether we're talking about lottery fund transfers – and, hopefully, we're going to see some changes in the AGLC and how that works, how we pull in so much money from VLTs and slot machines and don't tell the players just exactly how much the government is grabbing out of their pockets and purses. Hopefully, after the next election we're going to see some changes, and this government is going to tell the players the truth as to how much they are taking from those pockets and those purses.

Ms Blakeman: We'll call that the MacDonald amendment.

Mr. MacDonald: You can call that whatever you want.

This notion that you're just taking 8 per cent is, to say the least, deceptive. The take, if you do cash-in, cash-out figures, is 30 per

cent for VLTs, and that is unacceptable for the government to have a pamphlet in the VLT parlour or in the casino indicating that the government's take over how many spins is 8 per cent when it is known that it is 30 per cent, and it's known that this government changed the accounting process in the year 2000 to hide that. Why, hon. members, would you hide that? Well, you felt guilty because of the plebiscites that were going on in 36 different communities across this province.

Ms Blakeman: Guilty? They don't feel guilty.

Mr. MacDonald: They feel guilt, and they feel remorse.

Ms Blakeman: No. They were worried about losing their slot machines.

Mr. MacDonald: Well, I know they're worried about losing their slot machines and the revenue.

This gets back to what the hon. Member for Airdrie-Chestermere was talking about, how taxes don't go up. Taxes certainly do, and this is an example of taxes going up because this is no different than a tax, in my view. Slot machine revenue has gone from \$24 million to I think it's over \$800 million anticipated in this fiscal year. I could be wrong. If an hon. member would have a look at that, I would appreciate it, but I think it's around \$800 million.

Now, getting specifically away from the lottery fund transfer in this bill to the general transfers, or the transfers under section 6, it is interesting to note that "the Minister of Infrastructure may, for the purpose described in subsection (4), transfer an amount, not to exceed \$28 500 000, from the Expense vote administered by that Minister." I thought I would look and see. What did the Minister of Infrastructure transfer last year? Last year in Bill 17, when the hon. Member for Vermilion-Lloydminster was in charge, there was \$65 million transferred in the Appropriation Act. My question to the government would be this. If it was \$65 million last year, why is it in this department that the transfer is \$36.5 million less?

Now, Mr. Chairman, also under this transfer "the Minister of Transportation may, for the purpose described in subsection (6), transfer an amount, not to exceed \$58 000 000, from the Capital Investment vote administered by that Minister," and it goes on. Last year the Minister of Transportation had \$75 million to transfer, so I think the question that we should ask is: has there been a transfer of political power? We're talking about a transfer of money, a transfer of political power as we get closer and closer to the election, and where did that transfer go?

Well, oddly enough, if we read on in the transfers,

6(9) The President of the Treasury Board and Enterprise may . . .

We had a discussion in budget estimates about this, and the President of the Treasury Board and Enterprise was irritable, to say the least, I thought.

. . . for the purpose described in subsection (10), transfer an amount, not to exceed \$100 000 000, from the Expense vote administered by the President of the Treasury Board and Enterprise

- (a) to the Expense vote administered by any other Minister, or
- (b) to the Capital Investment vote administered by any Minister.

So the Treasury Board president has got \$100 million. Last year the former President of the Treasury Board, who is currently sitting in the Assembly, had \$19 million, so there is an increase here of \$81 million.

There is an election looming. Some say tomorrow. Some say Wednesday. Some say next Monday. Who knows? There were five announcements in the forenoon today. How many good-news announcements will we see in the next few days, and where will that money come from? The Deputy Premier through the office of the Treasury Board and Enterprise is the minister sitting on the cash. There is an \$81 million difference between last year and this year.

So I don't know how this would work. I asked for a detailed list of these projects and where they would be, and I was given, not even politely, Mr. Chairman, the political brush-off. I don't think taxpayers would appreciate that, particularly whenever they stop and they think and they look at the fiscal record of this government, this Progressive Conservative government: \$11 billion racked up in deficits over a four-year period.

Ms Blakeman: Sorry. Was that a Liberal government that did that?

Mr. MacDonald: No. No, it certainly wasn't.

I would encourage people to have a look at the *Globe and Mail* over the weekend. They had a really nice article in the op-ed page talking about the myth of Conservative governments and fiscal management. [interjection] Yes, they did.

Ms Blakeman: In print.

8:30

Mr. MacDonald: In print. It was there. I don't know how many people are going to have an opportunity to read it, but I certainly hope they do before they cast their ballots in the next election.

As you can see, Mr. Chairman, when we look at Bill 7 and we compare the amount of money that is in the till, in the office of the President of the Treasury Board, to what was there last year, we've got to make sure that that money is spent wisely and that it's not spent specifically just on the re-election schemes and promises of this government.

Now, in the time that I have left, I would like to mention that in 2008, when there was an election, there was no discussion whatsoever of firing the nine regional health boards and creating the one superboard. There was no discussion of that. But immediately after the election what happened? We created this bureaucratic monster that has driven up health care costs by at least \$4 billion. Have we seen an improvement in service? No, we have not.

We have every right to question the expenditures of this government as we are on the eve of an election. What they say and promise during an election campaign certainly is not true once the election is over and the ballots are counted and people take their seats in this Assembly.

Thank you.

Mr. Weadick: I would move that we adjourn debate on Bill 7.

[Motion to adjourn debate carried]

Bill 4

St. Albert and Sturgeon Valley School Districts Establishment Act

The Chair: Any members wish to comment or question? The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

Ms Blakeman: Thanks very much, Mr. Chairman. I've been thinking about this bill a lot. You know that I walk mostly. Actually, I've currently got a bad knee, which is why I sort of wince every time I stand up here.

Mr. MacDonald: Was that a hockey injury?

Ms Blakeman: No, it wasn't. So I'm trying to walk slowly and carefully these days.

You know, I come from the theatre. It strikes me that we've got a bit of a three-act play happening with what's going on with the St. Albert and Sturgeon Valley School Districts Establishment Act.

Let me go back a bit. In reference to Bill 2, the Education Act, I've been talking about the Constitution a lot, and I've actually got copies of it with me. In the Constitution they're very careful to outline that there are a couple of things that are guaranteed, that are rights under the Constitution. One of them is the right to be educated, that you've got a right to education in one of these two religions, Catholic and Protestant. Then it says that whichever one is the minority, you've got a right to be educated in that minority religion. It's very clear that you're going to get either/or. One is going to be the majority; one is going to be the minority. You are guaranteed the protection and the right to get your education under those two.

The Constitution is very flexible and a living document in some ways, unfortunately not around this, and it's causing us some problems. For example, when they talk about the division of powers between the federal government and the provinces, they divvy that up. They list everything: mines and minerals and blah, blah, blah. There's a great long list of who gets what. Then at the end they were smart enough that there's a catch phrase that says: and anything we haven't thought of or that comes up in the future will be federal responsibility.

Good thinking because, in fact, that's what has happened. In case any of you have ever wondered why the CRTC is federal, that's why. All of the telecommunication was something that they had not thought of. It's basically an expansion of the old telegraph, but it was new. It was something that they hadn't thought of. It wasn't specifically divvied up between the province and the federal government, and therefore it defaults to the federal government, and that's why they're in charge of it. So there's a really good example of building flexibility and future knowledge into the Constitution. Unfortunately, they didn't do it with religious instruction.

So we're back to having Protestant or Catholic. One of them is going to be the public school board, and one of them is going to be the separate school board. Now, we have a really interesting situation, and we've always been kind of proud of it. You know, it's a bit of a Trivial Pursuit question. What is the only minority school board in the province? That would surprise you. Of course, it's that in St. Albert the public school board is the Catholic school board, and everywhere else the Catholic school division is the separate school board.

Just let me underline here that it's all public education. It's all funded through taxes. It's public education. When I talk about separate, it doesn't mean private; it's all public. It's just the language that they used.

So that's just gone along for years and years with – there's actually an official name for it now – the Greater St. Albert Catholic regional division. Okay. That's the public school board. As I talked about, there's a majority and a minority, and there is an expectation that everyone will be accommodated given reasonable numbers.

Now, I don't know what the heck was going on in this minister's brain when he came up with this, but honestly he has created a Jacobean tragedy.

Mr. MacDonald: Jacobean?

Ms Blakeman: Oh, yeah. Jacobean tragedy is just amazing. Really, a lot of them are sort of revenge tragedies, which I hope does not happen to this. I really don't. I'm not saying that I wish it would happen in any way shape or form, but, you know, there is always something that happens in the first act, and somebody is terribly wronged, probably killed, probably with buckets of blood and downstage. These guys really went for big blood and eye gouging and all kinds of stuff.

The first act is the Greater St. Albert public school board, which is the Catholic school, not accommodating the secular students in Morinville. Greater St. Albert Catholic does cover that area. It wouldn't accommodate the secular students in Morinville. Okay. Not fair game there, but they stuck to their guns. No, they absolutely wouldn't. It's a Catholic school. It permeates everything they do. They're not going to give over classrooms and take the crosses off. No way.

Okay. In the second act you get Sturgeon, which is a neighbouring school and has nothing to do with either of these. Sturgeon, being a good neighbour – and we're in the second act of the play now – offers a solution to the conflict that developed in the first act. This gets a bit tricky because Sturgeon doesn't have any jurisdiction. They don't own any schools. They don't really have any way to do what they said that they wanted to do here. They were just trying to be helpful. They're kind of the Good Samaritan here. They did offer to do all this stuff, but they can't, really, because they can't actually accommodate those students.

Then in the third act we get into what we have here, which is truly a tragedy in that now we have the minority division – I've got to get all the names of everybody right because I'm afraid I'm going to insult someone if I somehow don't get it right – which is the minority school board, which would be the Protestant school board in St. Albert. But they do not encompass Morinville, which is part of the problem here, because it's where everybody is situated and what kind of religion they're teaching.

8:40

How do I describe this? There are the three acts for you. We've had the conflict develop in the first act. In the second act the neighbour tries to help, doesn't really help the situation. In the third act the minister pops up with a brilliant idea. Now, if this was a Jacobean tragedy, they would have some wonderful new poison, and they were going to kill this guy to hurt this guy, who would then kill somebody else. It all gets very involved and convoluted, which is why, of course, it made me think of a Jacobean tragedy when I looked at what the heck was happening in Morinville and the poor people out in Morinville trying to get their choice of secular instruction.

So now we have a situation where you have a minority school board who has offered to help – and now we're talking about the St. Albert one – and they've now been sort of arbitrarily changed in their status, but they've lost the protected status that they really wanted to hang on to. I think they came into the negotiations saying, "We want to help, but the one thing we don't want to lose is our protected status as a minority religious school board in this area," and anybody would say that.

We're very good in Canada about writing constitutional and Charter protection to say: the majority cannot stomp on the minorities. We will always write something in so the minorities have a way of protecting themselves, whether that gives them access to a voice to be able to say that something is wrong or it protects their right to study in a given religion or in one of two languages, English and French. It's always in there, and there are certain rights that are given to the minorities, and those are precious, let me tell you. I've done a lot of work on minority rights, and you don't want

to lose those because that is what gives you some power to be able to look after yourself and look after your people.

Now we're in the third act. We've got this minority school board. It's agreed to help, but it doesn't want to lose its protected status, and what does the minister do? Takes away the protected status, makes them do something they weren't formulated to do. I'm just thinking: how on earth did we get here? That's how you feel when you've watched one of these tragedies, trust me. Anybody up there ever watched one of these? Somebody is laughing and smiling. They're just incredibly convoluted. Every single person gets killed, and there are buckets of blood, and you can't figure out what the problem was.

Well, the problem is much more obvious here. I'm not picking on the Catholic school board in this case because I have a very good relationship with the Edmonton Catholic school board, and frankly I have a lot of admiration for the work that they've done. They have managed not to close their inner-city schools, that serve my constituents so well. I've always felt that in many ways they were able to deal with diversity better than our public system has. I love going into my Catholic schools, and I really think they are very child centred. I always go to their awards, and I really have a lot of respect for what they do.

Having said that, what is going on in St. Albert is wrong. The Greater St. Albert Catholic public school board should have been able to do something for those students in Morinville, and they just flat out wouldn't. I don't know why the minister has protected them and didn't turn around and say: yes, you will, and we will work this out this way. I have no idea why he didn't, but frankly, by caving for the second time in a short period of time – he also caved on the School Act – he's created this huge problem. Frankly, I think it will be a constitutional problem. I believe that somewhere down the road if the separate school board in St. Albert, which is the Protestant school board, wants to, they have a dandy constitutional fight, and they will win it. Meanwhile they will all have to spend taxpayer dollars – your dollars, my dollars – to be able to take this to court and fight it. But in many ways they should because they're right. What the government has done is wrong and bad and has created a three-act tragedy.

You know, when my caucus first looked at this, they said: "Yeah, no problem. Let's go for this. We're going to support this bill." But the more I look at this, the more I look at the constitutional stuff that is being tromped on here and misunderstood and not applied, the angrier I get. There is a reason why those rules are in place and why they've lasted for us so long. You can't just stand up and go: "Well, look at me. Aren't I special? I'm the new Minister of Education, and I have the power to change all of this." No, you don't. Well, you do, but you're going to make everything such a mess, and it'll all end up being undone by the courts, so how did that move us any further forward?

We've spent a lot of money, and in the meantime there are still children who are not going to be educated in their choice of religion or nonreligion in that area. That's what's really wrong. Those kids won't be able to do grade 6 again. Yes, you can not – what's it called when you move them up? They go on to the next grade?

Mr. Anderson: Accelerate.

Ms Blakeman: No. When they . . .

Mr. MacDonald: Graduate.

Ms Blakeman: Graduate. They won't graduate.

Of course, I'm not talking about that. I'm talking about the fact that, you know, there are no do overs. They're going to graduate out of grade 6 or grade 4 or grade 10, and they're going to move

on. They don't get to come back here by the time we solve this problem 10 years from now and do over in the choice of religion or nonreligion that they wanted. That always bugs me. It's really unfair to those kids, and it's sloppy legislation, which, as you know, really bugs me.

You know, we've got lots of brainpower in here. We've got a tremendous amount of brainpower behind the various closed doors here of good people that are working for us. There is a way to do this right, and that is not what we have in Bill 4.

So I'll wait and see if there can be some kind of stupendous amendment to this bill that would make it right, and then I would be able to support it. But the way it's sitting right now, it's wrong. It's wrong on a constitutional basis. It's going to be wrong on a legal basis in the courts. You know, it's very clear both in the Constitution and the Alberta School Act that you've got a minority Protestant or a Catholic opportunity or choice here.

What has been created is some sort of – oh, I was trying to keep my analogies in the same ballpark, but I don't think I'm going to manage that – three-headed Hydra, and it's just a mess. It could be much better. It just looked like such an innocuous little bill, didn't it? I mean, it's a tiny little bill. Look. That's it. It's six pages long, a teeny little thing. You'd think: "Oh, well, there's nothing. It can't be anything." Oh, seven pages; I'm sorry. "Nothing bad in that." I mean, look at it, a teeny bit. Yeah. Well, there it is. All the disaster, all the three-act opera, aria, Jacobean tragedy that I talked about is in this act. You know, you can't fool Mother Nature, and you can't fool around with the Constitution, and that's what's happening here.

Thanks.

The Chair: Any other hon. member? The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona.

Ms Notley: This is on Bill 2?

Ms Blakeman: Bill 4.

Ms Notley: Oh, I'm sorry.

The Chair: So you are not speaking on Bill 4, right?
Any other hon. member?

Seeing none, the chair shall now call the question.

[The clauses of Bill 4 agreed to]

[Title and preamble agreed to]

The Chair: Shall the bill be reported? Are you agreed?

Hon. Members: Agreed.

The Chair: Opposed? Carried.

8:50

Bill 5

Seniors' Property Tax Deferral Act

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

Ms Blakeman: Thanks very much, Mr. Chairman. This bill, Bill 5, the Seniors' Property Tax Deferral Act, you know, is a great idea. My thanks to the – actually, I think this was a private member's bill that was brought forward by the now Minister of Seniors, previously a private member, and it passed. No. Not by you? It's got your name on it. You're shaking your head. Okay. It's now being brought forward by the Member for Red Deer-North.

Okay. I represent a downtown area, but I still have a lot of seniors that still own their own homes. I'll tell you, when I was door-knocking yesterday, three women over 90 were still in their own homes, vigorous as all get-out. Man, oh man, you wouldn't want to cross them. So there are lots of seniors that are still living in their own homes.

I have to say that I'm always really frustrated with the market value assessment method or protocol for municipalities to assess the value of the homes, and then the mill rate is applied against that value. It was supposed to be based on a market assessment, so whatever has sold recently in your area that's more or less the same as your house, that's how everybody is going to get pegged. In my district, which has had property values that have just gone way up, like even more than an oil boom, and then a little bit down and a little bit up, everybody is praying for a house to sell for a bad price so that their market value assessment will come down, and they'll end up paying less tax.

Where we have seen market value assessments really, really not work, be very bad, is with seniors. The three women that I door-knocked on the other day, all in their 90s, have all lived in the same homes since they were built in the Hudson Bay Reserve in the 1950s. You can imagine that, you know, they had a mortgage on that house. They've long since paid the mortgage off, but those gals are now paying a tax base that is developed on a house that is being valued at – I'm going to guess wildly here, so don't hold me to this – probably in the \$750,000 range, which is meaningless to the lady who lives there because she's not going to sell it. She's not going to take that money and put it somewhere. She's going to live there. Boy, those three are going to live there – they are not going into long-term care, I can promise you that – but they are paying taxes on a house that's now been valued at \$750,000.

The ones that really get jammed up by the market value assessment are seniors that have lived in the same home for a very long period of time, and there's no way to help them. There's no way to adjust that system. There's no flexibility in it to adjust it for seniors. It's very frustrating.

This bill actually does do something for that, thank you very much, because it allows seniors to defer the property tax assessed against their home until the home is sold. Now, that may be sold by them if they do end up going into care, or it may be sold as part of their estate, and it would come out of the estate before the estate was divvied up with whomever. That completely alleviates the problem I just described, where seniors were being stuck with a fairly modest income.

These widows, you know, are not living in a grand place. As grand as the fabulous constituency of Edmonton-Centre is, these are not river-view lots. They're not next door to Daryl Katz. They're in Queen Mary Park, which is a very nice neighbourhood: old trees, very well cared for, some beautiful lawns. These houses are not spectacularly placed, but you do end up with these seniors paying some spectacular property taxes just because their homes have increased so much in value. This bill would actually work for them. Thank you to whoever thought it up and actually carried through the implementation of it because I know you guys have good ideas sometimes, but you don't always get them onto the floor. One, thank you for the good idea. Two, thank you for getting it onto the floor. I will definitely support this bill.

Interestingly enough, I mentioned this bill to every senior that I spoke to, and none of them are going to take you up on the offer because – I know – they felt they were okay. They were grateful that it was going to be there if they really needed it, but as long as they were okay, they wouldn't draw upon it. But it was there if they were going to need it. Fair enough. It's not saying you have

to take advantage of this, but it's there, and if you want to do that, okay, go ahead and do it.

You know, I give you guys a hard time a lot, but frankly you deserve it. I am fair. I am fair to you, and when you really, really deserve it, I really, really give it to you. But this is good stuff, and you have, you know, clearly gone over it and thought your way through it. Maybe you based it on some other legislation you'd already seen working in another province. You've done a really nice job on drafting this. I'm very happy to support it. I'm very happy to give you a pat on your little heads when you do something right. Good on you. Thank you very much. I appreciate that. That's good work.

Mr. Snelgrove: I want to take a completely different tack on this bill because it used to be quite clear over there that if the Liberals and the NDP liked it, we knew you were on the wrong track, and that still stands true to this day.

You know, Abraham Lincoln once said that you should do for no man what they can do for themselves. It's a little interesting when the government says that they're trying to be financially responsible rather than fix a problem. If the problem is that we don't have it right in our support for our seniors, fix that. There are probably a dozen programs right now, Mr. Chairman, to support seniors.

There's nobody in here that thinks that we should look after them any more than me, but building a bigger bureaucracy to spend money to solve a problem that isn't dealing with the problem at all isn't the right answer. The seniors in many cases are our strongest allies when we push back against municipal tax increases, so let's take that out of the picture and let the municipal people do what they want.

Without fail over the 11 years I have not had a senior come in and ask for this. I've had hundreds in the last month come in and say: we can't pay our power bill. What's the government response to that? Go get a contract. Suck it up, Princess. It's not our fault. Well, yeah, it is. If you're going to look at supports, don't cherry-pick an opportunistic: well, we'll help them out with municipal taxes.

Let's fix the problem. Let's look at the programs we have now. We'll put in a furnace, we'll put shingles on. We've got hundreds and hundreds of people all over Alberta now looking at ways to support the seniors. Clean it up. Fix it up. If it's a guaranteed minimum wage for our seniors, do it.

I read these bills that say: "Guess what? We'll put these regulations out, and we're sure you people will just jump up and take it." Well, the seniors I know aren't going to sign anything until they see the fine print. The simple fact is that if you want to, right now you can go to a bank, you can take a reverse mortgage, and you can do whatever you darn well please. You can do that, and it doesn't cost the taxpayers a darn cent.

Now, you own your own bank. You have the Treasury Branches. If you wanted to run a program through them, you could. Oh, wait. They do. So you're either going to subsidize it with administrative dollars, or you're going to pay them less interest or charge them more interest than they can do in the marketplace right now. We've got, I would guess, probably a dozen financial institutions in Alberta that are willing to run a reverse mortgage program right now. They're market competitive, they're tested, and the people that want to use them can use them.

9:00

You know, one of the benefits of not running again is that you can actually tell people the truth. You don't have to worry about it. Do you think anybody believes that the government can run this

cheaper than the banks? No, they can't. Because we are risk adverse, and we also have to follow the letter of the law, the Auditor General, with all due respect to my friend from Edmonton-Gold Bar. So every one of these loans in that department is going to be on our books. You're going to have caveats or references against the title for everyone who wants to do this.

You know, down the road, when mom or dad pass away and the kids are all sitting and waiting for the money from the house and they find out that the good old government came in a few years ago and loaned mom and dad money and they're taking theirs first, oh, they're going to be mad. And you know who they're going to blame? You. And that's fine.

The other part is that I don't question the motive one bit. We've had this discussion for years over there about how nice that would be. But we're living on borrowed money. We can't even run what we have now very well. So we're going to create another one? If this was so good, take two out and put one in.

It isn't and shouldn't be taken as: oh, you're not concerned about seniors. I am concerned. I think that seniors are a lot smarter than we want to give them credit for. They know that there's no such thing as a free meal. They know that you pay for everything you get or somebody pays. While they appreciate the help that they get – I go back to the old saying: I'm from the government, and I'm here to help. That doesn't go over that well with them.

A huge majority have an independence that they've worked hard for. The simple fact is that while there are a lot of seniors in financial difficulty, there are a great number of seniors who are going to be part of the biggest wealth transfer in our country's history. Here we are, trying to suggest that: well, if we just give them a little help with their municipal taxes, they can stay in their homes longer.

I can tell you that if you took the money this program is going to cost and co-ordinated home care and aids to daily living with the whole gamut of services that we provide for seniors, you would get a lot more seniors living in their houses. If you took the money that you're going to spend administering this program and put it into improvements in their homes to make their bedrooms comfortable and able for them to grow old and actually pass away in, you would get a lot more bang for your buck. And you would be treating people with respect, and you'd let them make choices. It's that simple.

I'm not going to belabour this. I didn't support this when it was brought up three years ago. I don't support it now. I think you have to respect people more than: let's go out and out-goody them at election time. Put numbers on it – I know you haven't – and then let people decide: would that be better spent actually helping, doing something that other businesses don't do, doing something that the banks or finance companies can't do?

End of story.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Lethbridge-East.

Ms Pastoor: Yes. Thank you, Mr. Chair. I really, really could not let that go by.

Mr. Hinman: Which side are you speaking from right now?

Ms Pastoor: It doesn't matter what side I'm on. I speak the same.

Mr. Hinman: I'll know in a minute.

Ms Pastoor: You will know in a minute.

The Chair: The hon. member has the floor. Speak through the chair.

Ms Pastoor: My mother was a senior. Along came the NDP government in Manitoba, and they offered to fix her roof. She could do it on her own, so she said no. The people that had come through the war and the Depression were used to standing on their own two feet and didn't know how to accept help. And she didn't need it. My mother owned the company that my father ran, and she was fairly well off.

I'm not talking about seniors like my mother. I am talking about the seniors that were immigrants after the war, that came over here and worked three jobs to put their kids through university, and now they're in these little tiny homes. They're women. The majority are over 85. They're all living in their own homes, and they live from bill to bill. They don't live; they exist. This little extra bit of money might give them that little bit of being able to go out.

Now, for a lot of these women – mainly they're women although there are some men – often their families are not in the same city. The widows or the men that are lucky enough to have their families in the same city: if they're good families, they'll look after their parents.

Because of my experience in long-term care I know what elder abuse looks like. I know what the breed looks like, when somebody might come and say: "Sonny, I'm going to take some of the money that I can get by doing this program that the government is offering, and I'll be able to have something extra. I will be able to pay. Home care is only going to go so far. Household help is only going to go so far. This little bit of extra money may give me the chance to have that extra help that I need."

Or, in fact, when they're that age, it takes forever to do the laundry and all those sorts of things, and as long as they can, they will do it. Who's going to pay for the handibus? Who's going to pay for the taxi? They don't have those kinds of dollars. They're undereducated. They've worked their tails off to pay off their house. They worked their tails off to get their kids through university. Should the kids help them? Absolutely. Of course, they should. But there are a lot of kids that don't live near and actually see how their parents are struggling along.

I think this is a fabulous bill. It's the people who really need it, the people who will be able to live instead of just exist. As I say, I am not worried about the seniors who are lucky enough to be like my mother. Years ahead of when my mother knew that she was going to have to move into a nursing home, she had already made her personal directive long before it was ever called that. I'm the oldest of six, and only two of us lived with her in Winnipeg.

What she had on that contract with her lawyer was that my brother and my sister were her guardians and also power of attorney. What she had written in there was that every single cent would be accounted for, and every six months the rest of us did receive an accounting, almost down to the penny, of what they had spent on my mother because my mother knew that eventually that money would go to us. She was a woman far ahead of her time. But then the other question is: why did we as six kids not even question it? I'm not sure whether my mother put the fear of God in us as kids, but we didn't even question it. This is what she wanted; that's what she got.

But there are many, many seniors who are persuaded to sell their house because they can't afford electricity, which is a very, very good example of what seniors are facing. They're persuaded to sell their house. "Oh, you'll be fine, Ma. We're going to put you in this great big, beautiful place. They're going to take you out. They're going to give you dinner. Oh, my, everything is going to be wonderful." Well, you know what? They end up there, and

even then they don't have enough money for all the little extras, and heaven knows where the kids have gone. It happens a lot.

One of the things that I think is very important – I'm going a bit off on a tangent here, but it is about the seniors that I try to protect – is that they have to feel that they still have their independence, that they sort of don't know they're being looked after. It's no different than letting a three-year-old run loose. You know exactly what they're doing, but the three-year-old thinks they've got all the freedom in the world. It's those kinds of things that add to the respect of allowing someone to live with dignity and, certainly, die with dignity. Not all seniors are lucky enough to pass away from old age, where they just sort of fade away. More often than not, people will die of cancer or some other ailment where, in fact, they do need medical care.

9:10

So this isn't about the ones that can look after themselves. These are the ones that have paid the price after the war to build this country up, who worked hard to make sure that their kids did well. If they can get an extra buck or two so that they can hire the handibus and go out with a few of the gals, even if they're 90, for a cup of tea or whatever they'd like to do, then so be it. I think it's wonderful. And you know what? If the kids don't get the money at the end of it, too bad. That's when I would say: suck it up, Princess.

Thank you.

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

Ms Notley: Well, thank you, Mr. Chair. It's a pleasure to be able to rise and speak on this bill. I certainly found the points made by the Member for Vermilion-Lloydminster very compelling and interesting. I hadn't considered all of the points that he'd raised.

He raised some very good points. One of them, of course, was the question of what actual budgeting has been done in association with this act. What is the cost that is attached to this initiative? I think that's something that the government does owe members of this House some explanation of so that we can evaluate the general cost-effectiveness of it.

I mean, this bill came forward with a lot of fanfare. When we first looked at it in our caucus, we thought: "Well, you know, it can't hurt. It's not really the best way forward. It doesn't really deal with the most important issues that are out there, and it probably doesn't do it in the best way, but it doesn't seem to be sort of a negative thing. So, you know, we're not going to make a big deal out of it." But there are some interesting points that have been raised, and since then I've also had a few questions of my own.

When you take this bill and this process and you accompany it with what is a very possible outcome 12 months from now, where the government restructures how it deals with long-term care and it takes the cap off long-term care and it says to families, "You need to pay what the market will bear for long-term care; we'll subsidize you if you don't have enough; you'll get the benefit of the cap if you are truly a low-income senior in need, but otherwise you need to pay what the market will bear," then the question becomes, "Well, okay; is it going to work the same way as it works with income support programs right now?" which, of course, require you to exhaust most of your assets before you become eligible for the subsidy in question.

Then we have a situation where we have seniors who need long-term care and the market is telling them that it's going to cost them \$4,000 a month to get that long-term care and the government is saying: well, we'll subsidize \$2,300 of that if you

are without assets. Meanwhile these people have signed over their house on the assumption that the government's going to get it back at a certain point. Do we now get into a situation where they have to pay back the government first? Do they sell their house? Are they not allowed to sell their house? Do they become eligible for this so-called subsidy that the government says is going to save seniors from what is otherwise a great deal of exploitation under the expected new long-term care regime, where the cap is eliminated?

I'm trying to figure out how this will work in conjunction with that because I think that's really an important question. I mean, I think probably the best answer is that the government says and makes a commitment: we will not remove the cap on long-term care fees. But the government has been very, very clear that it's not going to make that commitment. It's been very, very clear that it's putting that difficult discussion off until after the election. And it's been very, very clear that seniors are not entitled to an answer on that very important question before the election. But this bill has implications for that, and we should get some answers from the government about how they see this initiative linking up with that initiative should it go ahead, which I have to assume the odds are in favour of since these folks are prepared to pay the political cost of being unable to assure seniors that they can count on an affordable future in long-term care in this province.

The other thing about this bill that, you know, is a bit frustrating from our perspective is that it is one of those kinds of bills that gets a lot of fanfare and a lot of self-congratulatory back-patting. It is – and I don't know if the Member for Vermilion-Lloydminster actually said this, but this is what I took from what he said – very nicely timed in relation to the election. It creates an impression of offering something up, offering up a goody to people who might be looking out for that. It does do that, but really, although it looks good, the question is: well, what are the alternatives?

There have been some good points made about what the alternatives are. The alternatives would be actually funding the kind of retrofits to homes that would allow people to receive increasing levels of care in their home as they need it. That actually expands the life of the home as the place for the senior to live. This doesn't do anything to expand the life of the home as the place for the senior to live. It enhances the affordability ever so slightly, but it doesn't actually expand the life of the home in terms of, you know, whether the doors are wide enough and whether you can get in and out of the home and whether there's room for someone to assist you in the bathroom and all those kinds of things that you need to actually do to expand the life of the home. That, to me, would be a better approach to assisting our seniors.

I think it's helpful as well to look a little bit at the history of this. You know, seniors used to receive financial support to pay property taxes. Beginning in the 1960s the provincial government covered the education portion of seniors' property taxes. In 1972 seniors received additional support from the property tax reduction program, which provided a maximum rebate of a thousand dollars on the portion of property taxes not related to education. We had that, too. Then before 1994 the province also provided rental support for seniors who were paying rent. Renters over 65 could receive up to \$1,200 a year regardless of income, and those living in subsidized accommodations could qualify for up to \$600. These were all ways that were being used before the arrival of then Premier Klein into the Legislature. These were all being used as ways to keep seniors in their homes.

Then along came Premier Klein, and he argued that all Albertans had to make sacrifices to help pay off the deficit. Then

they were told: well, you know, we'll come back to you; once we've all worked together on this issue, we'll give you back what we've taken away. Of course, they never really did do that. Instead, we've seen corporate taxes cut several percentage points since that time. We've seen a flat tax put in place, and we've seen incredible giveaways to the oil and gas industry, but we've never actually gone back to seniors to give them back what they gave up, in many cases willingly, for the objective of getting rid of the deficit in the mid-90s.

So then we have this. What this really is is just asking seniors to pay later. Really, in some respects we're taking this issue off the table so that this hardship is not so obvious. In many cases we're asking families, really, to pay for it. We're saying that if we can get the seniors to stop having this overt hardship that they have to deal with, that they come to us about repeatedly and that's reported in the media, and if we can find a way for them to pay for it in the future – really, it's their families, who would otherwise have been receiving that property in the future, who are actually paying the cost that the seniors can't afford.

Given that this is being done in a context where the government is expecting families to take a greater role in caring for their aging parents and grandparents and aunts and uncles and given that the seniors plan by this government envisions a greater role being played by families, greater caregiving being provided by families, and a sort of downloading of that responsibility from government to families, this really is just another piece in that puzzle if you look at it in the larger context of asking families to have less of those sets of assets that their parents would otherwise have passed on to them available. They are paying that now to make sure that their parents can afford to stay in their houses. Maybe that's a fair wealth transfer between parents and children, but we do need to see it for what it is, and it's a continuation of asking citizens to pay more for receiving less after having taken some very major programs away from them in the 1990s.

9:20

In that context, you know, it's not quite as much good news as the government there would want us to believe. In that context we're kind of throwing them a bone in a public, identifiable way and hoping that people sort of pick it up that way. But in the larger context of where this government's programs are going for seniors and how they anticipate shifting the wealth and how they anticipate having seniors pay more for their services and having families pay more for services and having families do more in lieu of services, this is just really not a surprising continuation of the same trend.

I'm also, as I said, rather interested in the arguments offered by the Member for Vermilion-Lloydminster. In fact, I'd like someone from that side to tell me what this program offers that can't be gotten for the same price within the current system, you know, outside of government.

Let me just say that I'm all for government. I'm a New Democrat, right? We just always want to build government. Quite honestly, from a practical point of view are there already programs out there that can be accessed that ultimately would be as affordable or even more affordable than this one? Are we just buying this so that government can say that they're doing something for seniors?

I want to make sure that we're buying something that's of value to seniors. I don't want to be buying something that's just giving the government a press release opportunity and a self-congratulatory opportunity. So I really need to hear more about what this program offers that isn't available in the private sector at this point. Then I also need to know why we're not hearing instead

about the kinds of grants to, as I said, change the life of a senior's home rather than simply this small section of affordability of a senior's home.

So those are my comments at this point. I'm still deliberating on what we'll actually do with this bill, whether we'll vote for or against it. I think it's not quite as simple as it seems, and I think we have a reasonable expectation of getting some answers to some of these questions. I would hope that we would receive those before the members opposite expect us to make a decision on whether or not to support it.

Thank you.

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

Ms Blakeman: Thanks very much, Mr. Chairman. Every now and then in this Assembly something magical happens; it's called debate and engagement of members. It's really an amazing thing when it does happen. Well, it's magical because it happens so infrequently, but really it's just intelligent debate.

There have been a couple of things put on the table that have made me think of some other things that I know are happening right now, so I'm going to join this debate, this exchange of ideas that is currently going on. I really encourage members of the government opposite to engage in this as well.

One of the points that I've raised – it was pooh-pooed pretty quickly by the Minister of Municipal Affairs, but it's important – is that I started to get a flurry of letters and phone calls in my constituency from both low-income seniors, low-income Albertans, and a few small businesses that two federal programs had been handed over to the province. The province took them, shook the hand, took the money, said that they would continue these programs, and then didn't. One is a subsection of the other: the RRAP program, which is the residential rehabilitation assistance program, and HASI, which is the handicapped accessible something something.

They were two grant programs which allowed low-income individuals – so they were income tested, in one case seniors only, the HASI one; in the RRAP program it was everybody – to apply for funds to be able to modify their home. The HASI program was to modify their home very specifically for mobility barriers, so to take away those mobility barriers, which would be things like installing grab bars beside the toilet and in the bathtub and maybe in the hallways, possibly that hanging triangle thing that you use to get out of bed if you need that kind of thing, modified showers and tubs so that you don't have to step over that high tub siding. You know, it wasn't a huge amount of money; it wasn't spectacular. It wouldn't jump out with bells and whistles attached to it, but it was certainly meaningful to the low-income seniors and individuals who were able to apply for it.

The RRAP program was more about making sure you could stay in your house because you kept up the maintenance on your house: new furnaces, especially energy-efficient ones, eaves-troughing so you weren't leaking all the rain down and eroding your foundation, maybe new roofing, that kind of thing. You know, it wasn't about painting the house. It was about structural protection.

Both of these programs no longer exist. The feds handed them over to the province just recently. It was last fall. The province took the money and, as we now know from the Minister of Municipal Affairs, has not put any money into either of these programs, RRAP or HASI.

They have instead transferred the money to affordable housing. That's when I went: huh? You took money that was specifically to keep people in their homes, to let them adapt their homes so that

they could stay in them, and gave it to an entirely different group of people? What? I could understand if you took money from one section and gave it to another section and it was still assisting the same people. But to take it away from people that are trying to adapt their homes to stay in them, which the government tells me repeatedly is their goal and is a money saver, to take that money completely out of that sector, leave all of those low-income people to fend for themselves in their falling-down houses and give the money to build affordable housing, which is also necessary – I'm not going to say it isn't. But – huh? – how does that work?

So, you know, I'm listening to how we are spending money on seniors and what is the most efficient way to spend money on seniors to help them. The Member for Vermilion-Lloydminster is right. We end up making a lot of decisions in here without all the facts, and all the time we're talking about evidence-based decision-making. Oh, I can hear my own voice: evidence-based decision-making and scientifically based blah, blah, blah. We didn't ask for results-based budgeting.

Here we're doing it again. I have no idea whether this is actually a reasonable program. It wasn't budgeted. Nobody talked about it during the budget debate. Nobody gave us numbers attached to how much it would take to administer this. Having just read through it while the others were talking, I've gone through it again.

Mr. MacDonald: You should stand corrected. I think there's \$1.6 million there in the estimates.

Ms Blakeman: Oh, my God. I might have to stand corrected twice in the same night. I hate that. Okay. So where is it?

Mr. MacDonald: In estimates.

Ms Blakeman: Yes. Department of Seniors estimates.

Mr. MacDonald: Go down there.

Ms Blakeman: Seniors benefits, tax deferral, aids to daily living, community supports, public guardian . . .

Mr. MacDonald: No.

Ms Blakeman: Put your finger on it or mark it or something.

Mr. MacDonald: This one.

Ms Blakeman: Okay. He's going to hand it back to me, and I can tell you what budget line it actually comes out of. He tells me I'm wrong twice. Oh, I am wrong.

Seniors' property tax deferral: \$1,623,000 for the 2012-13 year. Can that program be done for that kind of money? I looked at that and went: "Huh? One point six million dollars?" I hate to be at the point where I'm actually going, "That's pocket fluff," but I'm at the point where I'm going: that's pocket fluff. When you're dealing with – what are we at now? – a \$37 billion dollar budget, \$1.6 million to administer this program? Now, clearly, they're not expecting a lot of loans to come in, but the administration alone has got to be that much money.

9:30

All right. We got a bit more information than we did before.

The estimate. Oh, here we go, \$35.8 billion. You know, you guys, when I started, the budget we passed in 1997 was \$17 billion. It's double that now. Wow. Yikes.

There's \$1.6 million in here for that, and that just strikes me as not enough money to actually run this. Now I want to hear from

people that can actually defend this amount of money. What's it supposed to cover? When I do look at things like seniors' lodge assistance and supportive living, that's \$41.7 million. The affordable supportive living initiative is \$25 million. Support for seniors is \$4 million. This just doesn't jive anymore.

Member for Red Deer-North, maybe you can get up and give us a bit more information because now I really don't know which way I'm going to vote. It's not as though my one little vote is going to pass or not pass this bill, but there have been a number of really interesting questions raised recently. Now my question is: how much of that \$1.6 million is going to administration, will that be the standard administration amount, and how much of it is actually the deferral? Where do we actually find the deferral, the loans that are going to be taken out by the government and given to – however it's phrased in this bill. They actually do transfer it.

(3) The amount of qualifying property taxes paid under subsection (2) constitutes a property tax deferral loan made by the Crown in right of Alberta to the eligible property owner.

(4) The amount of the property tax deferral loan under subsection (3), together with interest, is a debt owing by the eligible property owner.

Okay. Where is it actually telling us where that money is?

Mr. Kang: Laurie, is it going to take \$1.5 million just to set up?

Ms Blakeman: Oh, the \$1.5 million is what it sets – oh, my Lord.

Mr. MacDonald: That's just administration.

Ms Blakeman: Okay. Now I really do want to know. How much is it actually going to cost on an annual basis to administer this program? If it's \$1.6 million to set it up, how much is the annual administration of it, and how much do they actually expect to see in, one presumes here, forgone revenue? And let me remind you all that forgone revenue is the same as an expense because it's money that you would have had in and you would have spent on stuff, but you don't have it because you've essentially given it to this other program. I want to know the money that goes with this now.

I still don't like the market value assessment. I'd still like to see that fixed. I still think it impacts seniors that are living in older homes much more than those that are in newer homes. I'm really wondering if this program is really as viable as I first thought, so I'm looking forward to having the member – she must be on her computer. She's nodding at me, so she's likely been on her e-mail and gotten some kinds of answers back. I'm looking forward to her engagement in this debate, which is an exchange of ideas and opinions. I'm so excited at 25 to 10.

Thanks. I look forward to this.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar. Oh, sorry; I didn't see on this side. The hon. Member for Red Deer-North.

Mrs. Jablonski: Mr. Chair, I'll wait for the Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar, and then I'll answer his questions at the same time if he'd like to speak.

Mr. MacDonald: No. She can go ahead.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Red Deer-North, then.

Mrs. Jablonski: Thank you, Mr. Chair. Bill 5, the Seniors' Property Tax Deferral Act, is a very exciting bill. We've been asked some questions about the costs, and we've been asked some questions about: why is it different from other programs that are already on the free-market system?

This is an important bill because we know that the one thing seniors want more than anything else in the world as they grow older is to be able to remain in their homes for as long as possible. We have a number of really good programs already that help our seniors out with that. We have the education property tax credit for one thing, that freezes the education portion of their property tax. We also have aids to daily living. If they need to have ramps or supports in their home as they grow older and are a little more frail, they can apply to our aids to daily living program.

With the number of seniors' programs we have, we try as much as possible to make it easier for a senior to stay in their own home. The reason why this program is so good is because it's another option for our seniors who might want to stay in their own home but might just be a little short of some money come the end of the month. I don't know what the taxes are for different areas and whatnot, but let's say that the average municipal property tax in Red Deer was \$3,600 or something like that. If a senior deferred that, they'd have an extra \$300 a month to go towards whatever it is that they might want that to go towards. This program is going to be designed so that there is a low interest rate. Seniors will not be discouraged by that interest rate, that's for sure. It will be available to all seniors.

A lot of the seniors have told me that with some of our seniors' benefits they have a threshold that seniors must meet. This program doesn't have a threshold, but you must have 25 per cent equity in your home. The regulations have not been put into place yet, but these are the thoughts going towards this.

In the end, we believe that after this program is set up and is running, the interest rate itself will help recoup the cost of the administration so that it won't cost us a whole lot of money for this program. There will be no expectation as in a home equity line of credit, for example. With a home equity line of credit a lot of people are expected to pay at least the monthly interest rate on it in most cases. There will be no payments expected on this program except for when the ownership of the home or the property changes hands. That can happen when the senior is frail and needs to go into assisted living. If they sell their home, then they have to pay the deferral, the program that they used from the provincial government, or if they pass away, then, of course, as the Member for Edmonton-Centre said, it would come from the estate. So we would recoup our costs in those ways.

It would be a good program for seniors who just want to bridge that gap and different in that they won't have to pay a monthly payment of just the interest, for example.

There will not be an income test, I believe, on this. You just have to meet the requirements, which is a certain amount of equity in your home.

For those reasons, Mr. Chair, I believe that this is an excellent program for our seniors. We know that this program is already running in a couple of other provinces; in B.C., for example. Not every senior will choose to use this program, but it will be a good tool for the seniors that just need that little bit extra each month to bridge the gap so that they can live a better life.

For these reasons I think this is an excellent program, and I hope that people would see fit to support this bill.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Mr. MacDonald: Yes. Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. Certainly, this is an interesting legislative initiative, the Seniors' Property Tax Deferral Act. It has been suggested and discussed in the past. There are many different ways of looking at this. We look at the education property tax, and we look at perhaps also what British Columbia has done there in exempting seniors from

the education portion of their property taxes so that they can live independently in their own homes for as long as possible and have a few dollars in their pockets.

9:40

We all know costs are going up for everything from insurance to utility costs, certainly power bills – and I'm going to get to that in a minute – but this legislative idea certainly would help seniors who own their own homes pay their property taxes through a home equity loan. The program would be available from the 2013 tax year, helping seniors free up funds by deferring all or part of their property tax until they sell their home. It really sounds like a very good idea, but I think we need to pay heed to the advice we had during the course of this evening's debate from the hon. Member for Vermilion-Lloydminster.

We look at the budget estimates. There is a long list of programs available through the Department of Seniors. There are many, many that are noteworthy, and we should be appreciative of the programs that are listed here. We've got the Alberta seniors' benefit. We've got seniors' dental and optical assistance, special-needs assistance, the school property tax deferral, which is estimated to be \$1.6 million. I was astonished that there are no real numbers affixed to this, and you would think there would be. I know that whenever we were costing out prior to the last election what it would mean, exactly, to the bottom line of this province if we were to eliminate the portion of the education property tax paid by seniors, we did the math on that. In hindsight it certainly would have worked, particularly whenever we see the dramatic increase in power bills which has occurred. So there are a lot of good programs already available for seniors.

Certainly, we need to build more affordable, accessible, and safe housing. The public sector can do that. There were musings going on here over the weekend from the Minister of Education, who seems to wander from issue to issue. The minister was talking about, potentially, the borrowing of money. In the past this government used to borrow money from within the heritage savings trust fund and build accessible, affordable, safe seniors' housing in the public interest. Now, of course, we see that with this current regime there is a tendency to just grant the money to the private sector and have them build such a facility, but we know that many, many seniors can't afford to live in those facilities. They have limited income, and of course in some cases the rents in these places are substantial.

The first thing I think we need to do to help our seniors out, particularly those who are living independently in their own homes, is to make sure their utilities are affordable. I'm meeting with a lot of seniors, and the first thing that they bring up after this government's less than stellar record on administering health care is their power bill. A senior the other night showed me the power bill for her well-kept two-bedroom house. The sidewalks were free of any ice. It was a nice, comfortable home, very well kept. Her power bill for the last month was \$220. She said: "How could this be? I wasn't anticipating that my power bill would be this high." Then she reminded me of a town hall meeting I had hosted 10 years ago – 10 years ago – warning about electricity deregulation and the consequences of it.

Now, the hon. Member for Vermilion-Lloydminster is absolutely right. Perhaps this is where we should go. I'm not saying that this bill is something that should be rejected. What I'm saying is: let's fix one of the major problems not only for seniors but for other residential customers or consumers of electricity, businesses as well. Let's fix the power system so that once again we have affordable electricity.

The first thing we have to do is get this idea out of the government's head that electricity is a commodity. It's not; it's an essential service. I've said it many times in this House, and for the benefit of the members who are listening I will say this: wheat is a commodity, gold is a commodity, sugar is a commodity, gasoline is a commodity, oil is a commodity because you can produce it and store it, but you can't store electricity in large amounts. You can certainly store a modest amount in a battery, for instance, but you can't generate 400 megawatts of electricity and store it somewhere until it's needed at peak time, at 5 o'clock in the evening. You just can't do that. It's an essential service, so the system has to be in a constant state of supply and demand.

Now, what has happened to this system, this system where there is supposedly so much competition, that's never been subsidized? Well, I sit here and I hear repeatedly from the Minister of Energy that the system has never been subsidized, but when the assets were sold off in 2000, hundreds of millions of dollars were used to subsidize the price of power. That fact is conveniently omitted from the talking points of the Minister of Energy whenever he stands up to try to defend this in this House. Totally false. Hundreds of millions of dollars in subsidies.

While we're talking about subsidies, when we look at the development that has occurred in our power system in the north, there has been, certainly, a lot of development. A lot of industrial cogeneration facilities have been built. They've been built in Fort McMurray, where the consumers of electricity are subsidizing those enterprises by paying all of the costs, the complete costs, of the transmission expansion or the transmission upgrades.

Now, my research indicates that in January 2003 – and this is why seniors are so upset with this government, because they have figured it out – in Fort McMurray there was less than 1,000 megawatts of electricity being shifted onto the provincial grid. Since that time there has been a 500-kV line from Wabamun to northeast Fort McMurray requested. The cost estimate of this line is \$1.6 billion. If this was to be shared equally between generators and the homeowner in Ottewell, that means they would each pay 50 per cent, but that's not the case. It's all been shifted onto the homeowners, the commercial consumers of electricity, and other industrial users. That is a subsidy. That's a subsidy for the big generators.

Now, when we look at what has happened in Fort McMurray since 2003, we see that the megawatt capacity has gone from less than a thousand megawatts to over 1,600 megawatts. That construction has been subsidized through the royalty structure because the powerhouse that's located in the bitumen production facility can be built over capacity and those construction costs can be deducted from the royalties. That's a subsidy.

We also have generous fuel gas subsidies in the Fort McMurray region.

Those are two reasons why this minister is not accurate, is completely offside regarding this suggestion that there's no subsidization of electricity generation in this province. Just completely offside.

9:50

Now, when we look at what's happened and why seniors are so upset when they see their power bill going so high, Mr. Chairman, we only have to look at one of the government's own reports to see what a folly – what a folly – this is. I had to show this to a senior the other day. This is a document prepared for the Alberta Market Surveillance Administrator. There are those people on this side of the House that think that the Market Surveillance Administrator has to have some teeth, some very sharp teeth. We've been saying this for a number of years. This document

warns us that there is a substantial concentration in offer control by Alberta suppliers for electricity.

This is why the hon. member is absolutely correct. The first thing we should do for seniors is lower their power bills, and this is a government that refuses to do it, that tries to get by on some false ideology.

The concentration in offer control by Alberta power suppliers. We have six of the largest suppliers accounting for 76 per cent of the electricity that's offered into the system for sale and the top four suppliers accounting for almost 60 per cent of that control. The top four. Oddly enough, TransCanada has 19 per cent of the offer control. That was last year. TransAlta has 16 per cent of the offer control. I think TransAlta is the organization that gave five of the six Tory leadership candidates a reported \$50,000 in donations. TransAlta is followed by Enmax, with 14 per cent of the offer control, and then we have Capital Power, which nudges out ATCO with 10.6 per cent of the offer control.

Again, we should be very careful when we say that electricity deregulation has been a success because 12 years into this experiment we find that essentially the same suppliers are doing the same thing, but they're making a lot more money. In fact, I was reading in the newspaper, and it was brought up by this constituent, about the profits they were making. How can they not make a profit with the so-called market that's been set up? That's the first thing that we need to do.

Now, when we look at the generation mix and how much it's changed in this province, we can see that right now 45 per cent of electricity is generated by coal, 41 per cent by natural gas, 7 per cent by hydro, 5 per cent by wind, and the remaining 2 per cent from other sources. Maybe we're going to go to an increase . . .

An Hon. Member: What per cent was gas?

Mr. MacDonald: Natural gas is at 41 per cent, and if the price of natural gas stays at the price it is right now, I think you're going to find more baseload generation stations being built to run on natural gas.

However, should we separate the industrial load from the commercial and residential load, that would be one thing we could do to go back to a sensible sort of system for providing electricity to seniors and to commercial users. The behind-the-fence generators like the ones in Fort McMurray where we have subsidized the construction of their facilities: leave them alone.

The Chair: Hon. member, this is about seniors' property tax.

Mr. MacDonald: Yes. It is about seniors' property taxes. You bet it is, Mr. Chairman. That's why the first thing we should do if we're going to look after the financial interests of seniors before we defer their property taxes is to reduce their power bills. That's essentially what I'm saying.

Now, there are those that would say: oh, no; seniors can pay these costs. They can't. Electricity costs in this province, because of this government's policy, have become unaffordable. Now, do we have to defer property taxes so that people can pay their power bills? Unfortunately, it's getting to that, Mr. Chairman. If we were to have a public policy that would avoid that situation, then let's reduce electricity costs. I'm giving another good idea to this government, and I think they should consider this first before this seniors' property tax deferral idea.

Let's separate it. I think 79 per cent, hon. members, of power consumed here in the province is for industrial purposes, and 21 per cent is used by either residential users or shopping centres or small businesses. They're the ones that are complaining, not only the seniors. The senior that I had the discussion with was quite

aware of what happened in the middle of January, that whenever we had a cold snap, the price of power spiked. It went right up to the maximum allowed, the cap, which is \$999. I asked a question about this in the Assembly the other day, and I was left with the impression, unfortunately, that the minister didn't even know what the cap was. I'm not sure. I couldn't really tell, Mr. Chairman, but the seniors watching on the cable network could tell, and they could tell that this is a government that's not interested in reducing their power bills.

This bill may be a very good public relations exercise leading into the election, but until we get the financial details on what precisely this is going to cost, I would heed hon. members about this legislative initiative. It's an important one, it may be a very good one, but let's get all the details on the floor of the Assembly before we make the decision.

In conclusion, certainly, Mr. Chairman, I would urge this government to come up with a sensible plan, and if they want to borrow the one that we have been proposing, be our guests. We need a sensible plan to reduce electricity costs not only for seniors but for residential users of electricity in this province and small businesses. Please don't forget that \$220 a month for someone living independently in their own home is a power bill that is far too high, and the idea, as the hon. member said earlier, that "Oh, just sign a contract; lock yourself in over a long period of time at a high price; that's the solution," is not the solution. The solution is to reduce our power bills. Make it so that seniors living in their own homes have a higher disposable income at the end of the month after they pay their necessary bills and their costs.

Thank you.

The Chair: Are there any other hon. members wishing to speak on the bill?

Seeing none, the chair shall now put the question.

[The clauses of Bill 5 agreed to]

[Title and preamble agreed to]

The Chair: Shall the bill be reported?

Hon. Members: Agreed.

The Chair: Opposed? Carried.

Our committee will continue on.

10:00

Bill 6 Property Rights Advocate Act

The Chair: Does any hon. member have comments or questions on the bill? The hon. Member for Calgary-Glenmore on the bill.

Mr. Hinman: Yes. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. It's a privilege to stand up and debate Bill 6, the property rights bill. I've spoken at length to this. Again, this is one of the problems that we're facing with this government. When it comes to constitutional law and the laws they want to pass, they seem to miss the foundational properties and the foundation of law that actually entrenches the rights.

One of the things that has been a major dilemma for many people is the constitutional rights protecting the life, the freedoms, and the property of the individual. This government has spoken at length, saying, "Don't worry, you can trust us; we'll never take your property without proper consultation; we'll never take your property without proper compensation; and we'll always give you access to the courts," and it just isn't so.

What they're saying in the amendment that they're looking at here is on actual property rights, but when it comes to licences and mineral leases and other areas, those aren't covered in this bill. It's a concern for all of those, especially for those people that are investing and bidding, whether it's a grazing lease, a water licence, or a mineral lease. These are all areas that this government is failing to protect. To tell the entrepreneur and the businessman, "Oh, no; we're going to put it in law" – well, write it down.

Today in the rally out on the legislative steps we had a lawyer that, again, spoke of the importance not of the intent but of what's actually in the legislation. So if we look at Bill 6 – and, again, I wasn't as prepared as quickly as I wanted to be; I didn't realize that we were jumping to that one at this point – where it's talking about the Property Rights Advocate Act, it is not going to cover those areas that are essential to so much of the business that goes on in our province, and those areas are of concern.

I remember having one young geologist in my office late last fall, and he said: Paul, I put two years of sweat equity into my mineral lease. He went to SRD – he's up in northeastern Alberta – and said, you know: am I going to have this lease? At that point there were lots of discussions about the lower Athabasca regional plan and what area it was going to encompass and lots of denial by this government, saying that they were not going to extinguish any rights or leases. "No, no, no. You have nothing to fear. Nothing to fear. We're going to respect the rule of law here. We'll respect your leases."

But when it came out, there were 22 oil and gas leases that got extinguished. I don't know. I haven't heard to date what the compensation is on those 22 leases. Last fall we asked the minister many times: "What is it going to cost? Tell us what the dealings are that you're doing with these companies. What's the actual cost of extinguishing these leases?" To date, as is par for the course, we haven't heard a word, and I doubt very much that we will hear anything.

This one young individual, who had spent two summers up there and had done a lot of sweat equity and a lot of research – and, again, we don't have a lot of mining in the province in Alberta – went out and he actually staked out his lease. It was only \$600 for his lease but two years' worth of work. So this government comes in and says, "We're going to extinguish this lease; oh, we see that it was \$600," and they compensate him. How do you call that fair compensation? How do you call that access to the courts?

This isn't property according to this government and according to Bill 6, the Property Rights Advocate Act. But the advocate – what? – he's going to go and charm this individual and tell him: "Well, it's okay. You know, you're young. You can start over again. Don't feel too bad. It's for the better. It's for the big picture. It's nothing personal."

[Mr. Zwodzesky in the chair]

Mr. Chair, the problem with this government and the legislation that it continues to pass is that it doesn't actually protect the citizens. It doesn't actually protect business. It just seems to protect their ideas, that they know best and that nobody should stand in their way. This is wrong. This bill shouldn't pass. We're going to have one more bill to add on that we're going to have to repeal, in my opinion. All we need to do is entrench property rights.

To talk on the other side of that, what is an advocate, and why do we need an advocate? An advocate, in my opinion, is usually someone that you need to employ because you can't advocate for

yourself. We have a children's advocate. A child cannot advocate for itself. It doesn't have legal status. So we need the Child and Youth Advocate to advocate for these individuals.

We have a Farmers' Advocate, that has been kind of silent. I haven't heard a lot of controversial problems with the Farmers' Advocate.

But why do we need an advocate in a free and democratic society?

Mr. MacDonald: You need one for children.

Mr. Hinman: But those are people who can't speak for themselves.

Perhaps for the disabled or for other ones that need to be protected, that's where you have an advocate. The whole idea of a Property Rights Advocate Act is insulting to those people who actually own property because it's not protected. They're saying: well, you know, the government is going to hire this individual, who's going to – I don't know – make you feel good after they've taken away your property, confiscated the lease, or extinguished the lease.

We have here again from the Random House dictionary – oh, my goodness; I have to get my glasses on for this one – to plead in favour of or urge publicity; a person who espouses a cause by argument; a person who pleads for or on behalf of another. I think I was fairly accurate. You know, an advocate is looking out for someone who needs help. Are we living in a province where we actually need an advocate for property owners? I personally find that offensive.

Because of what we were just talking about earlier on the previous bills, how much is it going to cost us? Is that cost in the budget? I can't say that I remember that line item as to what it's going to cost for the Property Rights Advocate Act. Once again here's a government that seems to continue to have one more program, one more idea that can expand government, and they can say: oh, this is going to solve the problems that we're facing with all of the other bills that we've passed that don't protect those rights.

Mr. Chairman, I cannot understand why this government would bring in such a Band-Aid piece of legislation when, in fact, I brought one forward earlier this year, Bill 201, the Alberta Bill of Rights (Property Rights Protection) Amendment Act, 2012. This, I would say, is the antibiotic to cure the deficit, the problem, the attack on property rights. It was a very simple bill that I brought forward as a private member. The government members seemed to say: oh, we don't need to do that; property rights are protected. Well, if they're protected, why did you bring forward Bill 6, then, and say, "We're going to get an advocate in place to help you"?

To go back to Bill 201, the Alberta Bill of Rights (Property Rights Protection) Amendment Act, 2012:

Her Majesty, by and with the advice and consent of the Legislative Assembly of Alberta, enacts as follows . . .

- 1 The Alberta Bill of Rights is amended by this Act.
- 2 The following is added after section 1:
Protection of property rights
 - 1.1 For greater certainty, the right to enjoyment of property and the right not to be deprived thereof except by due process of law under this Act shall be construed such that where a law of Alberta authorizes the Crown to acquire property owned by a person other than the Crown, that person is entitled to the following:
 - (a) full, fair and timely compensation; and
 - (b) right of recourse to the courts to determine the compensation payable.

Very simple. Very concise. Very easy to follow and realize that all we need to do is respect property rights.

10:10

Because we have a problem with bills 19, 24, 36, and 50, that have offended property owners here in the province, this government says that we're going to get an advocate? What we need is law. We need legislation that actually . . .

Mr. MacDonald: A new government is what you need.

Mr. Hinman: The Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar: I am going to truly miss the wisdom, the knowledge, and the experience that he has after this next election because he's not running again, so we know he will not be in here. His experience is phenomenal, and he hit the nail on the head. What we need is a new government. We need a new government that actually respects the property that people in Alberta own.

We want to continue attracting investment here so that we can continue to prosper, so that jobs are able to do it. You know, it's interesting as a segue, I guess, talking about the rule of law and dealing in good faith. I'm very, very disappointed again with this government not answering questions about the Alberta First Nations Energy Centre and what has gone on there. Here they are dealing in good faith for two years, as one of the parameters for us to bring in investment here, and there were 13 conditions that they were given. They've met all of those conditions, yet this government all of a sudden jerks this off the table and says: "You know what? We're not going to deal."

What this has to do with is the fact that they don't respect the rule of law. What are we going to have, a business advocate for businesses that try to go into negotiations with this government only to have the rug pulled out from under them and hear, "Well, it's too much of a risk for Alberta taxpayers"? These are the types of shenanigans that are going on, Mr. Chair, that cause real concern for investment here in the province.

I can't help but keep going back to this young geologist who was putting in his life, sweat, and equity for two years up in northeastern Alberta only to have LARP come out and say: "We're taking away your mineral leases. Here's your \$600 back." He says: "Whoa, whoa, whoa. I've put all this work into there." They say: "Oh, no. That doesn't matter." That's the type of individual that needs recourse to the courts. He can come forward. He can show his hours. He can show the drilling. He can show all the work that he did and say: "No. You're going to extinguish my lease right here? This is what it's going to cost you, then." The government and the minister can say: "No. We're not going to do that."

Currently, right now, with what we've got, he has no other recourse. The minister is not going to say: well, you know, you should actually go to the courts. The minister could say that, but he's not going to because that's going to cost the government more money. The minister is looking out for the government and all the other taxpayers. They don't want to look bad and say: oh, we shouldn't have extinguished these rights; we've got \$45,000 worth of costs that we're going to have to pay back to this individual if we go to the courts.

Again, why won't this government come clean and tell us what they negotiated for those 22 oil and gas leases that they extinguished with the lower Athabasca regional plan? It's a real concern, Mr. Chair, that we don't have the answers to these things. We need to know what it's costing. This government seems to be notorious, in my opinion, for bulldozing ahead, not thinking of what will and won't happen. I believe it was – gosh, I've forgotten now which lake it was where they allowed the leases to be purchased, and then they stopped those individuals.

If this government doesn't do its due diligence on its mineral leases, on water licences, on grazing leases, whatever it is, it comes back to haunt the taxpayers. Worse, it's tough on those individuals who put faith in this government, who believe in the rule of law, and it's going to be wiped out from underneath them. It's just wrong. You need to have the recourse to the courts. You need to have full compensation. You need to have a timely process where these individuals can't be strung out. I know of people that have been waiting for 10 or 15 years, where their land has been frozen in what I would call an unethical way and they're left hanging there.

Mr. Chair, this bill is wrong. It shouldn't be passed. There's no value here other than the fact of this government desiring to grow the size of government and saying: "Oh, don't worry. We'll get an advocate here to look after you so that we can explain to you why you have to eat your profits or eat what you have put into this business, because we're looking out for the general best interests of Albertans."

With that, I'll let someone else discuss Bill 6. Thank you very much.

The Deputy Chair: Thank you very much.

Bill 7
Appropriation Act, 2012
(continued)

The Deputy Chair: Before I recognize the hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre, I regret that I must first abide by Standing Order 64(4), and I must put the question. Does the committee approve the following bill, Bill 7, Appropriation Act, 2012?

[Motion carried]

The Deputy Chair: Hon. members, pursuant to Standing Order 64(4) the committee must now immediately rise and report.

[Mr. Zwozdesky in the chair]

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Member for Dunvegan-Central Peace.

Mr. Goudreau: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The Committee of the Whole has had under consideration certain bills. The committee reports the following bills: Bill 4, Bill 5, Bill 7. The committee reports progress on the following bill: Bill 6.

Thank you.

The Acting Speaker: Thank you.

Hon. members, does the Assembly concur in the report? If it does, please say aye.

Hon. Members: Aye.

The Acting Speaker: Any opposed, please say no. So ordered.

Government Bills and Orders
Committee of the Whole

[Mr. Zwozdesky in the chair]

Bill 6
Property Rights Advocate Act
(continued)

The Deputy Chair: Hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre, please proceed.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you very much. I actually wasn't going to comment on Bill 6, but you know how fussy I get about people throwing around the word "rights." I have the right to do this; I have the right to do that. Tell me where in the Constitution there is a property right.

Mr. Hinman: There isn't.

Ms Blakeman: Right. Correct. There is no property right in the Constitution. And one of the wonderful things about Canadians is that we do not see the owning and enjoyment of property as a right, unlike our . . .

Mr. Anderson: Heart attack. Heart attack. I'm sorry.

Ms Blakeman: Okay. The Member for Airdrie-Chestermere is having a heart attack, with a great deal of passion in his portrayal. I appreciate that.

But you did know that, right? You did know that there is no property right in the Constitution? Please tell me. [interjection]

The Deputy Chair: Hon. members, through the chair, please. I'm interested to hear what you have to say. Truly.

Mr. Anderson: Trudeau wasn't big into property rights.

Ms Blakeman: And this gets blamed on Trudeau? Oh, my God.

I mean, one of the wonderful differences between Canadians and Americans is that we do not have a right to own and enjoy property. You wonder why they are so – and this is not personal; trust me – nutty about litigation, and they are constantly suing each other, and everybody is suing everybody else. It's around 9 times out of 10 that somebody grew a tree, and now they can't enjoy the sun shining through their window; therefore, they can't enjoy their property anymore. It's ridiculous.

We have certain rights and freedoms. You in the gallery are going to get it from me again. Here we go. You have fundamental freedoms, right? You all have fundamental freedoms. What are those fundamental freedoms? They are as follows.

Mr. Hinman: Conscience and religion.

Ms Blakeman: Very good.

(a) freedom of conscience and religion;
Anybody else?

(b) freedom of thought, belief, opinion and expression, including freedom of the press and other media of communication;

(c) freedom of peaceful assembly; and

(d) freedom of association.

That, my friends, is it. Those are your freedoms. That's in the Constitution. Those are it.

Mr. Anderson: Who wrote that Charter of Rights and Freedoms?

Ms Blakeman: Canadians did.

Mr. Anderson: Was he named Pierre Trudeau?

Ms Blakeman: They were Canadian.

10:20

The Deputy Chair: Hon. members, please. Let's not engage in that informal debate. Let's keep it through the chair in respect of the fine tradition that we have. Thank you very much.

Ms Blakeman: You can talk right underneath me, and *Hansard* will still get my comments.

Now we're going to talk about rights, which are so important to everybody. What are the rights that we have under the Constitution? One more time. We have democratic rights.

3. Every citizen . . .

Not every person but every citizen.

. . . of Canada has the right to vote in an election of members of the House of Commons or of a legislative assembly and to be qualified for membership therein.

That would be us here at 19 minutes after 10. That is a democratic right.

It goes on about democratic rights, that they can't continue for longer than five years from when they come in and that if there's a war, they can go for longer and that Parliament and Legislature have to meet once every 12 months. I know you guys really love Texas and that you'd like to meet once every two years, whether you needed it or not, but our Constitution says that you have a right, the citizens have a right, for us to sit once every 12 months.

Now, we have mobility rights, which is also a wonderful thing about the Canadian Constitution. We have a mobility right, which essentially says that you can move around Canada and will receive the same treatment. Every citizen, not everybody.

(1) Every citizen of Canada has the right to enter, remain in and leave Canada.

These are not rights that are shared by some of our fellow human beings in Africa and some other places currently.

(2) Every citizen of Canada and every person who has the status of a permanent resident of Canada has the right

What's a citizen? What's a person? You need to know those things because that's how the right is being assigned here.

(a) to move to and take up residence in any province; and So you're allowed to cross the border and live anywhere you want.

(b) to pursue the gaining of a livelihood in any province.

To pursue the gaining of a livelihood in any province. It doesn't guarantee you a job; it just says that you can pursue it.

(3) The rights specified in subsection (2) are subject to

(a) any laws or practices . . . in force in a province other than those that discriminate among persons primarily on the basis of province of present or previous residence; and

That applies to what came before.

(b) any laws providing for reasonable residency requirements as a qualification for the receipt of publicly provided . . . services.

So welfare, AISH, seniors' benefits, et cetera. The previous two subsections

do not preclude any law, program or activity that has as its object the amelioration in a province of conditions of individuals in that province who are socially or economically disadvantaged . . .

Et cetera, et cetera. Those are the mobility rights.

Now we have – anybody? – legal rights. Everyone has the right to three: life, liberty, and security of the person. Good. No property. Life, liberty, and security of the person. Person. Not citizen, person. Everybody who's here gets that.

7. Everyone has the right to life, liberty and security of the person and the right not to be deprived [of that] except in accordance with the principles of fundamental justice.

You talk about a different kind of justice. I can never remember what it's called. Natural law. There we go.

8. Everyone has the right to be secure against unreasonable search or seizure.

Very important for young people. Please know that one. Please know your laws when you go out on a date at night. You have the right to be secure against unreasonable search and seizure. Aha. I

can see you thinking about that one. You're going to tuck that one away, aren't you? Okay.

9. Everyone has the right not to be arbitrarily detained or imprisoned.

Right? That's important. You guys need to know that when you go out. Please read your Constitution. It's not hard. It's not very long. The language is really easy.

10. Everyone has the right on arrest or detention

(a) to be informed promptly of the reasons . . .

So they can't just pick you up and then wait a couple of days until they tell you why. They're supposed to tell you why right away, and you have a right to say to them: "Why are you picking me up? What am I being charged with?" If you're not being charged with anything, you guys need to know this stuff. So you have a right to be promptly informed.

(b) to retain and instruct counsel without delay . . .

(c) to have the validity of the detention determined by way of a habeas corpus . . .

And then any person charged with an offence, and it goes through a long list of things. I hope you guys are never charged with an offence, but you should know the section anyway. Read it on your own.

12. Everyone has the right not to be subjected to any cruel or unusual treatment or punishment.

Stephen Harper should read that one more often.

13. A witness who testifies in any proceedings has the right not to have any incriminating evidence so given used to incriminate that witness . . .

Et cetera, et cetera. Then there are language protections.

Then we have equality rights. Very important.

15(1) Every individual is equal before and under the law and has the right to the equal protection and equal benefit of the law without discrimination and, in particular, without discrimination based on race, national or ethnic origin, colour, religion, sex, age or mental or physical disability.

And now read in: sexual orientation. This doesn't preclude the right to ameliorate any of the conditions of disadvantage.

Last one: official languages of Canada. That is the whole thing about being educated and being able to get services in either of those languages.

Then the minority language education rights. That would be the francophone stuff, right? Are you guys francophone students? No? Yes, we are. There we go. That's where it comes from.

Mr. Hinman: What about political rights?

Ms Blakeman: That was in the beginning. Freedom of thought, belief, opinion, and expression.

Mr. Hinman: What about section 21?

Ms Blakeman: That is:

21. Nothing in sections 16 to 20 abrogates or derogates from any right, privilege or obligation with respect to the English and French languages, or either of them, that exists or is continued by virtue of any other provision of the Constitution of Canada.

Is that the one you were thinking of?

Mr. Hinman: Twenty-one and 22.

Ms Blakeman: I just read 21.

22. Nothing in section 16 to 20 abrogates or derogates from any legal or customary right or privilege acquired or enjoyed either before or after the coming into force of this Charter with respect to any language that is not English or French.

You don't like that one either? Okay.

Minority language educational rights. We just talked about that.

Enforcement and general and application of the Charter, and then you're pretty much at the end of it. So those are the rights. Nowhere in here did you hear me read "property."

My hon. colleagues beside me would like to change the Constitution, and I invite them to do that. It requires two-thirds of the provinces at the time and a certain percentage – oh, this would actually be in here if I went to look for it – of the population, but it can't include Ontario and Quebec together. It means that you can't have the two big provinces gang up and change everything across the country. You can have one of them onboard but not two of them onboard, okay? I welcome you to go ahead and cut loose, and while you're at it, we'd like to try and fix the Senate.

Mr. Hinman: One step at a time. First we fix the property rights.

Ms Blakeman: Don't talk to me about property rights.

If the government feels that they need to get into the middle of this one – and, frankly, this bill is one of those annoying little things that this government does to me every now and then, because we would not be here if this government hadn't gone through misguided, missing, stupid, and a number of other adjectives for that long trailing of bills that included 19, 36, 24, 50. What a mess. I mean, honestly.

Now we have to come back and try and give people this weak protection – not a right, not a freedom, but this weak protection – because the government passed all of these other bills that were incredibly misguided in order to serve who, the people? No. In order to serve – who the heck was it? – TransAlta. It was the big electrical companies, ultimately, who were going to gain from all of this, not the people. AltaLink and ATCO. Oh, blessed ATCO, right? AltaLink and ATCO. I mean, truly, those are companies; they're not people.

Now we get thrown a bone, the Property Rights Advocate Act. I wasn't even going to get into this because, frankly, it's not worth the time, but you make me crazy. You say "rights," and it's not a right. You're going to get that lecture, which you just got.

Mr. Hinman: I got that as a lecture?

Ms Blakeman: Yes. You got it as a lecture.

Thank you very much, everybody, for hanging in there with me. I appreciate it. I hope the rest of you learned something. Property is not a right in Canada.

Thank you.

10:30

The Deputy Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Anderson: Sadly, the hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre is technically correct.

Ms Blakeman: She is one hundred per cent right.

Mr. Anderson: No, no, not one hundred per cent right. Technically correct.

For any free and open society to have any kind of long-term viability, there has to be protection of property rights. There has to be respect for property rights. Now, they may not be enshrined in the Charter at this time. However, through our laws we do protect property rights. It's not in the Charter, but we do create property rights. There are fascinating courses of law on property rights throughout the Commonwealth. They are established in common law. They are established all throughout jurisprudence. Property rights do exist. They are not in the Charter of Rights and Freedoms yet, but they do exist, absolutely.

Ms Blakeman: As part of the Constitution?

Mr. Anderson: As part of the Constitution – you're right – they are not there. However, property rights do absolutely exist, and they exist by law at a more basic level, at common law. They're so fundamental. They're so woven throughout our history and throughout the history of free societies that the common law is full of different definitions: how they're arrived at, how they're extinguished, how they are transferred, how people infringe on people's property rights or take them away without permission and so forth. It's everywhere. So to say that there are no property rights – I'm just not there yet, but maybe with some convincing I could be brought there.

I will say this, though. There is a universal declaration of human rights, put together by the United Nations, and under article 17(1) of that universal declaration of human rights it says, "Everyone has the right to own property alone as well as in association with others." Subsection (2) says, "No one shall be arbitrarily deprived of his property." That is certainly not the genesis of property rights, certainly not the origin of property rights, but even the United Nations saw fit to include property rights in their universal declaration.

There is quite an interesting history lesson about property rights. Now, I was referring to Pierre Trudeau earlier, and I was giving him a hard time. Really, he's not entirely to blame for the fact that property rights aren't in the Charter. Actually, he advocated quite strongly for property rights to be in the Constitution of Canada for years. Unfortunately, there were some provinces, Alberta not being one of them, that were very worried about including property rights in the Charter. If you go through the history of how the Charter came into being, actually, Trudeau was not the villain. Now, I would say that he should have stood up and said, "No, damn it, we've got to get property rights in there," but he didn't. That said, he was never really opposed to the idea at all.

There's a great history on this. I'll recite – I'm going back to law school days on this – a great note by David Johansen, law and government division, October 1991, called Property Rights and the Constitution, and it's a very, very good history. I urge everyone to read it. It's very sad because, really, property rights should be part of our Constitution and would have been if we had listened to – even Pierre Trudeau understood the absolute necessity of property rights for a free and functioning democracy to exist.

If you do not have property rights, if you can have your property rights arbitrarily taken away – what separates democracy and freedom and free peoples from tyranny and socialism, totalitarianism, essentially is the fact that you can have a dictator in totalitarian dictatorships. They can come. They can take those property rights with no compensation. They just take them. They are theirs. It's their divine right to take it. They can have what they want. They take what they want.

Then there are those societies which say no to property rights, in fact starting with the Magna Carta, starting way back then, even those nobles back then. I mean, wars have been fought over this stuff, early, going back, back, even before there were democratic rights. Even before there were any kind of real civil liberties, certainly before any civil liberties that the common man could enjoy, property rights were kind of the first rights to show themselves and to be respected. The king actually had to respect certain property rights in order to maintain his position, or else he would have been removed by some of the noblemen in his kingdom.

I think it's a very important thing. We've got to find ways to protect property rights even further than we do now. They are rights. What the Wildrose proposes that we do – and I know our leader, Danielle Smith, is very committed to property rights; she's been a property rights advocate for several years – is pass an amendment to the Bill of Rights to enshrine property rights in the Bill of Rights, to strengthen the property rights further that are already in the Alberta Bill of Rights, and also to start a national movement, a national campaign to fulfill Pierre Trudeau's dream and finally enshrine property rights in the Constitution of Canada, almost certainly in the Charter of Rights and Freedoms. You know what? I think that getting to where we need to accomplish that is very, very doable.

Honestly, who cannot agree with the fact that somebody has a right to his or her property and should not be denied that right arbitrarily without due compensation or access to the courts, just arbitrarily have the property taken away? I don't think any of my friends – I'm not going to speak for the NDP and the Liberals. I'm sure they agree with that. I'm sure they do. I'm going to give them the benefit of the doubt.

When people get passionate about property rights, it's very simply because it is such a foundational tenet. I mean, could you imagine trying to run any kind of a free-market system without property rights, without respect for property rights and rule of law? It would be impossible. You couldn't do it. How could you do it? How could you transfer property? How could you sell? How could you buy? How could you do any of that? Property rights and the enforcement of property rights are absolutely essential to any free and functioning society and any democratic society.

This is why the people of Alberta over the last several years, especially in rural Alberta, have been so concerned about this government's consistent, steady erosion of property rights. They never mean to; I always find it fascinating. They say: we're not taking anyone's property away. Well, great, but why would you put laws in place that would allow future governments to trample on people's property rights, to seize licences arbitrarily without guarantee of proper compensation and without guarantee of access to the courts? Why? Why do that? It's just not worth it.

People were angry, and they voiced their opinions and attended town halls. Thousands of Albertans across the province did this. They're still angry about it. The government responded. After calling us all liars and calling us all fearmongers and all that stuff, which is kind of standard operating procedure for this group, after calling us all these names and calling Keith Wilson all these names and so forth, then they decided they were going to make some amendments. They said: "Well, even though they're full of garbage, those barbarian, wild-eyed Alliance guys, although they're just barbarians and this Keith Wilson is just a lying lawyer, we're going to change the bills anyway. We're going to alter Bill 36 to take away some of the most draconian provisions in there like the ability to essentially extinguish land titles," which, technically, was in the bill if you read it. That's been taken out, thank goodness. It's been specifically exempted under the Land Titles Act. It's been specifically exempted from the provisions of Bill 36 that allow for the extinguishment of property rights. However, that's after calling us liars and fearmongers for a while.

10:40

That's where they did make those changes to improve the bill. It's still not perfect. They can still extinguish mineral leases without recourse to the courts and without guaranteed fair compensation, and there are others.

In Bill 19 they did get a little less intrusive than it was before, added some more recourse to the courts, provisions and so forth.

Bill 50 they did nothing on. Bill 50 is just an absolute joke of a bill. I can't wait to be in a position where we're able to shine some light on how that bill came into being and why we are still going forward with this unnecessary overbuild. Maybe one day we'll be in a position where we can find that out through a proper inquiry into it. So there's Bill 50.

Then Bill 24: what a random bill that was. The government just decides: oh, we're going to own everyone's pore space, starting now. Yippee. As any first-year law student knows, you know, basic property: when you own title, you own everything to the centre of the Earth and as far as the eye can see going up unless there's something else on the title that takes that away like a mineral lease or a mineral right or something like that.

To just take people's property rights, even though it seems: "Oh, it's pore space. Why is pore space important? No one cares about their pore space." That's not the point. The point is that it's their property. That's what they own. They own it. It's a property right. Why would you just arbitrarily take it away? It doesn't matter what it is. If it's pore space today, maybe it's the dirt next. Maybe it's the bedrock next. Who knows what it is? You just don't take people's property rights away arbitrarily. That's the problem with Bill 24. It's just totally arbitrary and a slippery slope. You start with that, and who knows what it is after that? You've created a precedent.

This is exactly why we need a constitutional amendment, probably put into the Charter of Rights and Freedoms, to entrench property rights and make sure that the government cannot pass bills like Bill 24. I'm sure that if we did have that in the Charter, somebody would challenge Bill 24 as completely unconstitutional, and frankly I believe they would easily win that argument because what went on there was completely arbitrary.

That's why I'm passionate about property rights. I think it is important. You know, you learn things at this job. I think we all do, of course, as we study things and as we get to know different issues. Property rights are certainly something that I think – starting out in this Legislature a few years ago, although I had the basic idea of what property rights were and why they were important and had studied them and all that sort of thing, I was quite naive. Let's just say that I used to believe the just-trust-me line a lot more than I do now.

You know, you learn about it, and I think we have to do a much better job of making sure that when we pass anything to do with property rights, when we pass bills regarding property rights, regardless of whether it's matrimonial property rights, whether it's physical property rights, whatever the property rights are, we do due diligence, that we're not just trusting the government lawyers or the government civil servants, that we're actually putting those bills out there, that we're having a robust discussion, a long discussion about it, that we're getting into the nooks and crannies, making sure that when we pass any property rights bill, it's a bill that Albertans can be proud of and can be comfortable with because it respects their fundamental rights to their property and not to be deprived thereof without just compensation and recourse to the courts.

Do I support this bill? Yes, I do. I know the Member for Calgary-Glenmore disagrees. He doesn't want to support it. That's fine. I understand his reasoning; it's very compelling. I can see his point, but I would rather have a property rights advocate than not.

I think that, unfortunately, the current government, certainly, and possibly future governments have a tendency sometimes to act in a way like we've seen with this government over the last several years, where they've in some cases extinguished mineral

leases arbitrarily to put in place their lower Athabasca regional plan and so forth, and I'm sure that they will continue to do so. We're worried about water rights; that's another one we worry about. It's just hard to imagine that every government from here on out is going to just have clean hands on respect for property rights.

So I think it's a good thing to have a property rights advocate that can at least sound the alarm, certainly help individuals who feel that they've had their property rights infringed upon, but also be in a position to possibly put up the red flags where maybe there's something we're not seeing as politicians in this House. They can bring that to our attention through their different reports and raising the alarm on a few things. I think it's worth while because so many of these things seem to go undetected until they're already passed. We won't always have the Member for Calgary-Glenmore. He might not always be in the Legislature for all time immemorial to raise the red flag and warn us of possible infringements to our property rights.

I support this, and I support a constitutional amendment to add property rights because, to me, property rights are as fundamental as any right protected under the Charter of Rights and Freedoms. I'm not saying more important, but I'm saying as important as all of those other rights. It's the only one that I can think of that is missing.

Remember, we talked about parental rights last time and how important those are. Now, of course, to me, the Supreme Court has already said that that is included in the Charter. It's just not specifically stated. Parental rights to decide what's in the best interest of their child, certainly with regard to their education and in other matters, health matters and so forth, are actually a part of the Charter as it exists today. I forget which right it's put under, but I read the decision the other day, and it's already considered part of the Charter of Rights.

Property rights, however, are not, as the Member for Edmonton-Centre said. We need to put it in there, and I know that a Wildrose government led by Danielle Smith would certainly be willing to do so.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Deputy Chair: Thank you, hon. member.

The chair has the Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar, followed by the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development.

Mr. MacDonald: Yes. Thank you very much. The Property Rights Advocate Act is . . .

Mr. Campbell: We're not talking about a little lot in Gold-Bar.

Mr. MacDonald: Hon. member, there are lots of big properties there; yes, there are. You're welcome to buy one if you'd like.

Bill 6, Mr. Chairman, is a bill that supposedly creates an advocate's office to assist Albertans who have concerns regarding impacts to their property rights, specifically expropriation or some form of compensation. Now, we all heard through the fall of the MLA task force that was around quietly meeting with supposed stakeholders to see if there could be a political solution to the problem that this government had particularly in rural areas and particularly with people who pay power bills. A political solution was needed.

Of course, we had legislation, which was discussed at length in this term of the Assembly. We had Bill 36, the Alberta Land Stewardship Act; Bill 50, the Electric Statutes Amendment Act, 2009; and Bill 19, the Land Assembly Project Area Act. We had the Carbon Capture and Storage Statutes Amendment Act, 2010, Bill 24, which was certainly, in my view, a property grab. I

certainly had a different view than many others regarding Bill 24. Certainly, the other three pieces of legislation I had my suspicions right from the start about. Others thought: well, maybe the government is right.

10:50

When we look at this bill to create a Property Rights Advocate Act, this bill is a direct result of the political problems the government has encountered. It's almost a year to the day – and some hon. members to my left were present in the Eckville Community Centre. That was quite an evening in the history of this province. I was pleased that I had an opportunity to be a witness to history, Mr. Chairman.

There were 600 or 700 people in attendance. There was no real count taken. If you had told them at the meeting, when you were going back for a black coffee or a doughnut, that a year later the government would be introducing a Property Rights Advocate Act, that we would be creating an advocate's office to assist Albertans who have concerns regarding impacts on their property rights, the citizens in the Eckville hall would have just turned to you and suggested: well, maybe we should repeal the bills; maybe we don't need these bills.

Mr. Chairman, I think you had to be there. There were certainly some government members there. There was the member who is now the Minister of Human Services. There was the hon. Member for St. Albert. There was the hon. Minister of Municipal Affairs. The former Transportation minister was certainly there. Of course, in the debate was the current Minister of Agriculture, who is the Member for – I can never remember; it's in the southwest.

An Hon. Member: Livingstone-Macleod.

Mr. MacDonald: Livingstone-Macleod, yes.

The hon. Member for Livingstone-Macleod was part of the panel, as was the current Minister of Energy. They were gamely trying to defend this legislative proposal, if I could call it that, Mr. Chairman, but the citizens in attendance were not buying it, and they were not buying it for good reason. It is unnecessary; it is needless.

What did this government do? It went ahead anyway. After it had a political problem, how are we going to fix this? "We're going to strike a committee. We're going to meet, and we're going to supposedly meet with stakeholders." But it's all controlled, it's all filtered, and we get a bill like this.

I was watching with interest the newspaper reports of this Property Rights Task Force. There wasn't that much I could find written about it. The final report is an interesting read, but again – and I can't stress this enough, Mr. Chairman – if you were to tell the citizens in the Eckville hall that they needed an advocate, well, I think they've got one in Keith Wilson, and I don't think he's going to cost as much as this. In fact, I've been at a couple of Mr. Wilson's meetings, and they're self funded.

Mr. Anderson: He should be the advocate.

Mr. MacDonald: Well, I believe the gentleman did work for the Farmers' Advocate, and he may have been in charge of it at one time. He may have put the odd nickel in the jukebox, and his efforts weren't appreciated, so he wasn't invited back. Certainly, this is a government that would need to take his advice.

I don't want to go through the public accounts and see all the legal firms that have been hired and at what cost to consult them on these legal matters. They could just look at Mr. Wilson's website and get a lot of legal advice for a modest amount of time and very, very little money.

Now, we're looking at the office. [interjection] There's a fiscal conservative in the back row muttering something, and I'm afraid I couldn't hear it.

Mr. Hinman: Then why did you call him fiscal?

Mr. MacDonald: That was a joke.

Now, this office will help not only individuals determine the appropriate resolution mechanisms through which they can have their property rights issues resolved but will also assist expropriating authorities, or persons, or entities. We're going to have a review of complaints. The advocate will provide a report on complaints. The report shall be considered by the board or court when determining any costs payable in cases where the advocate determines the expropriation or compensation was inconsistent with legislation.

This bill, as I understand it, will not expand the scope of who is able to access the courts or independent tribunals to determine fair and full compensation. In section 2, I note, Mr. Chairman, where a person has the right to compensation as a result of an expropriation or compensable taking, will they also have recourse to courts or independent tribunals? I would think that this is a mechanism outside, for instance, if a property owner has two or three electrical transmission towers on their property, the fees around that.

Now, I don't think I can support this bill because this bill is just another way to allow this very, very tired government another way to put off fixing the problem that they've created. We have gone through in detail earlier this evening the problem that they created with four pieces of legislation earlier in this term.

If we look at this, right off the bat, of course, this bill is designed to signal – it's a public relations exercise, and public relations are so important to this government, Mr. Chairman. When you look at the government's website, the ministries are listed. But what's listed above the ministries? The Public Affairs Bureau. The ministries are listed A through T for Treasury Board. Of course, above that is the Public Affairs Bureau, and whenever you look at the government's website, that is a clear indication where this government's priorities lie. It's with public relations. It's with spin. This bill is simply about spin because of past problems. Now, whenever we look at the masters of public relations on the other side, we have to recognize that this bill is not going to fix the previous problems, that have been outlined by Mr. Wilson in his dozens of town hall meetings. Citizens are not sure that this government is interested in defending their property rights.

Hon. members, you only had to come to Eckville hall. People came from as far away as Vauxhall in the south. They came from Athabasca in the north. They came from over by Lloydminster. They drove all the way down on Easter Thursday night to Eckville to hear this debate. If anyone ever thought that democracy was dead in Alberta, they should have been at that meeting. Democracy is vital in this province. People care about what goes on in this Assembly, and they're willing to stand up and object whenever they think that what this government does is wrong. They certainly did about a year ago tonight.

I can understand where the hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre is coming from. Property rights – who has them, who doesn't, and what the government does – is an important issue. But if we vote against this bill or we vote for this bill, it is still the government's decisions that have been made in the past that we must consider.

11:00

Earlier this evening in the Legislative Offices Committee we looked at creating a budget for a children's advocate. After

hearing year after year, session after session about problems with children in the care of this government, the children's advocate is welcome. It's needed. It's been called for by many people across the province.

But this advocate's office, I really feel, is not necessary. I believe that in the agriculture estimates we have a requisition for the Farmers' Advocate office. I'm just going to look it up for those who are interested. Perhaps we could look at expanding that office. There are a number of things that we could do. Perhaps there are staff that are still there that are very diligent like Mr. Keith Wilson. They could defend the interests of property owners, particularly rural property owners, who feel offended that this government is so cavalier. This is a government that can shift authority or shift discretion away from the public to the cabinet. The cabinet will have authority to make decisions, and the cabinet will be benevolent. It'll be like some sort of Chinese committee in the Communist government that you dare not question because they, of course, have the values of the people first and foremost in their minds. But we know that that will not be true.

Now, Mr. Chairman, I know the Farmers' Advocate office is in here somewhere, and I know it's funded. I'm going to have to do my research on my own time.

As a result of the four bills that we passed earlier in this term, the government's public relations have taken a major hit. This bill is simply a fix before the election so that all the government members across the way can say: we listened, we heard from you, and we have fixed the problem. But this is another issue which this government has dealt with so poorly that the public, the voters no longer trust you. They do not believe you when you say that you will defend their property rights.

The biggest issue that people had with the other four pieces of legislation that I talked about is, again, the immense power that has been placed in the hands of the cabinet. The cabinet can make decisions regarding people's land, their property, and these decisions, of course, are made behind closed doors without any public input or without the public even being aware of what's going on.

Now, the Expropriation Act and its powers are certainly not new – we know that – but this government's arrogance led us to believe that it was acceptable to make decisions regarding people's property rights behind closed doors. I think you have broken a trust that you had for a number of years with the fine citizens of this province. This idea that you're going to listen and that this bill is the solution: I don't believe that. Many other people do not believe that either.

Now, we've had this Property Rights Task Force, that I talked about, led by, ironically, the hon. Member for Drayton Valley-Calmor. I would say that at the Eckville hall 20 per cent of the people in attendance were from that neighbourhood, and they were not very happy. So what does this government do? "We'll get the hon. member to lead this task force, and perhaps we can quiet down the citizens who are asking valid questions because they have outstanding concerns from past practices of this government." Now, three major themes originated from this task force listening finally, or pretending to listen, because the election was getting real close.

The initial consultations on Bill 19, Bill 36, Bill 50, Bill 10, which I forgot – it was, I believe, the repair bill, the first repair bill – and then Bill 24 were inadequate. I think this whole thing should be scrapped, and it should be an election issue. Run on your record. I think that if you went to a public forum, people would dig into their pockets and get a few dollars and perhaps pool that money so that you could all get hearing aids on that side of the

House because you certainly haven't been in these last four years listening to the citizens.

Now, there's an imbalance of power, in my view. Property owners and users do not have the resources to ensure that their rights are not infringed upon by government or industry. AltaLink has pretty deep pockets. EPCOR has deep pockets. TransAlta has deep pockets. The resource sector has very, very deep pockets. Of course, the government has lawyers employed in the Justice department, and then you can farm out or contract out the best legal talent in the province at the taxpayers' expense. But with property rights? No. They go to a public forum, and they get sound legal advice from Keith Wilson. But that's not enough. They sometimes have to hire some people to defend their property rights.

Now, compensation for intrusions on land or property rights, which, Albertans acknowledge, may be inevitable in some instances: it's inadequate. The formulas are outdated. We all know that, but what does this government do? Nothing. Absolutely nothing. The government's response to the report included the following commitments moving forward, of which one is this bill that we're dealing with here and the office of the advocate.

Thank you.

The Deputy Chair: Thank you very much, hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

We'll proceed now to the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, followed by the hon. Member for Calgary-Glenmore. Hon. minister, please proceed.

Mr. Berger: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. It's a pleasure to rise this evening and speak to Bill 6, the Property Rights Advocate Act. I went throughout the province on the Property Rights Task Force, and there was one thing that was common. There was a need for planning. Everyone recognized that. There were an assortment of different comments. There were the repeal-the-bills comments. There were comments around: what is a property right, and how do you define it? Lots of people asked: "How do we define it? Who can define it exactly?"

That was an interesting comment. It came from a rancher who is fourth generation, and he was asking how that could be. He also realized there were public goods that had taken place on his property and some that he was in benefit of as an irrigation farmer. So as we moved through there, we looked at it. The comments were consistent along with the need for someone to help them through a process if there were issues coming forward. Of course, it centred around the three Cs – consultation, compensation, and access to the courts – and the ability for someone to help them navigate through that. That's where the property rights advocate was born. There is the ideal office for that operation to take place.

I was happy to hear the Member for Airdrie-Chestermere get up and speak in support of that although I do question how much that may be thought out from the fact that on May 13, 2009, he spoke in great support of the Alberta Land Stewardship Act and had many good comments.

Mr. MacDonald: I didn't.

11:10

Mr. Berger: Excuse me, hon. member. I was speaking to the chair. Thank you for the interjection.

This is directly from that speech.

Land-use planning in the form of municipal zoning has always existed for subdividing land, and this will not be affected either by this legislation.

It speaks to planning. The member understands planning, and he understands the need for it.

It goes on to say:

Municipalities will retain their authority for municipal development plans, area structure plans, land-use bylaws, and making decisions on subdivisions and development standards.

All very good comments, Mr. Chair.

The lawyer that they keep speaking of, strangely enough, put out a paper a few years back. I was on municipal council at the time, and quite often there would be cases where this gentleman would be representing an operator, quite often to the extent of maybe tramping on the next-door neighbour's property rights. He wrote a paper, *The Impact of AOPA (Agricultural Operation Practices Act) on Dairy Farm Expansion*. A lot of good comments in there. But we've heard quite often through hon. members about how we're going to step on municipal planning. Mr. Chair, as the Member for Airdrie-Chestermere said in that very eloquent speech on May 13, 2009, that isn't the intent.

But I'll read something out of *The Impact of AOPA on Dairy Farm Expansion*. This was something that that lawyer spoken of earlier not only worked on; he produced this paper. He said in there:

The provincial government has encouraged municipalities to designate areas where the municipality does not want CFO developments or expansions to occur. However, the government was mindful that depending on the composition of a municipal council, some municipalities may go too far and try to block large regions from having further CFO development. In order to address this, AOPA gives the NRCB the legal authority to override a municipal exclusion zone.

This means that if you find yourself in an area of your municipality that has been designated as a CFO exclusion zone, it does not mean that there can be no CFOs. There may be an opportunity to persuade the Board that your location is a proper and safe location for a CFO. Of course, these are delicate and sensitive matters. Proper advice and assistance should be sought in order to increase your chances of success.

When I read through that from a municipal councillor perspective, Mr. Chair, I'd look at it and I'd say: well, what he's saying there is that we'll go over the will of the municipal council. They may have identified an area that slopes down towards a river or maybe for one reason or another is protected, maybe because of the next-door neighbour. A perfect example is that someone may have an export permit for purebred animals and not need runoff from something else that may ruin their chances or actually cause them to lose their export permit. So there may have been zones in municipalities where it was looked as that it wasn't fit for that. Maybe it drained into a water basin. All of those different things tell me that not every piece of property is fit for every use.

There are further comments in there.

- If there is media attention and misinformation in the media about your project, communicate with the media to get your side of the story and the correct information into the media.

Maybe that's something that we have missed as a government on these different acts because we're not talking about bills; we're talking about land use. We're talking about the ability to continue to move forward in this province and make sure everyone is treated fairly in doing that while we progress.

I'd like to get back for a second, though, to the comment of the hon. Member for Airdrie-Chestermere.

At first glance much of this legislation may be interpreted as a regression on property rights, but it would be a very large mistake to think so as this bill, in my view, does the exact opposite. It strengthens landowner rights.

I think that not only is that a good comment, but further to that, with the ability through the property rights advocate's office, we can make this even better.

I would like to go back to comments that the hon. Member for Calgary-Glenmore has made. Last fall when we were in here speaking about I think it was something in SRD, the Member for Calgary-Glenmore made the comment – and he was right – that we do it better in Alberta than anywhere else. I think he was speaking on water and that type of thing. He supported the need for a plan and then went on to question why we're not storing more water rather than letting it flow through.

Those are great questions. He asked that same question just recently at the estimates for Alberta Agriculture. Mr. Chair, to do that and store more water – and Alberta can store more water. We have the ability to allow 50 per cent of the water to flow through to Saskatchewan and keep 50 per cent. Currently we're allowing 70 per cent to flow through. But you need the acts in place to allow for the purchase of that land to build those reservoirs.

Mr. Chair, southern Alberta is very dependent upon water storage. There are two natural lakes south, basically, of Calgary or on that line, those being Pakowki Lake and Waterton Lakes. The other 50 water bodies in southern Alberta are man-made, and I would submit that most of them were built on private land. There has to be a way, there has to be an act to allow for that purchase, for that agreement to be reached between those. Currently we have one that's under an EIA in eastern Alberta. That specific one would be 60 per cent built on public land, and 40 per cent of it would be on private land, but it benefits all those landowners as well as those people downstream in the towns and villages that would be able to access water from that.

Obviously, between these different acts there are abilities to deal with landowners, leaseholders and acquire this through fair compensation and make sure that we have the consultation in place. That was a big part of the land area assembly act, the consultation process that it needed to go through. But somehow there has to be the ability to continue to move this province forward.

As the member has said, we should be storing more of that water. Mr. Chair, we will at some point be able to sit down and have that discussion. If there are questions, the property rights advocate could be utilized by the party who is looking at selling their land or being affected by that project and say: "Okay. We're willing to do that, but here is what we're looking at. How do we walk through the process?"

Land, of course, is unlike any other property in many different ways. Real estate is unlike any other asset on a number of grounds: "Every parcel is unique; it is fixed in place; it is finite in quantity; it will outlast any of its possessors; and it is necessary for virtually every human activity." That's pretty profound. We all know that we are here for a time frame, but we don't outlive our property.

Mr. Hinman: Where's the quote from?

Mr. Berger: That's from Donovan Rypkema.

Mr. Hinman: Thank you.

Mr. Berger: You're welcome. You should read the whole thing. I can give you a copy of it if you'd be interested.

As was said earlier, to go back to that *Hansard* of May 13, 2009, and the comments from the Member for Airdrie-Chestermere, this combined with those other acts. He was speaking on the Land Stewardship Act. "The act protects property rights. Landowners will be compensated for any loss in market

value based on principles under the Expropriation Act." That was always there. We've put even more strength into it, as the member said, through Bill 10 and the amendments that were in there.

You know, there was another comment further in there. "If the only way to protect the land is to impose a conservation directive, then the value of the land will be appraised, any impact assessed, and landowners will be compensated for any loss in market value." The member understood that, but the property rights advocate will even go further. There is the opportunity to have that discussion, be sure that it's being well addressed. If not, the property rights advocate will walk the landowner through the whole process.

11:20

Another question that I had was around the comment: you own from the centre of the Earth to the heavens above. I'm a third generation farmer, rancher, and I hope the next generation will continue, one of them at least. Mr. Chair, I have yet to get a payment from an airplane flying above because, obviously, I don't think they realize where my property line is. If this was to be taken seriously, what is being said over there, how do we collect from that? Are we going to add it onto airfares?

Mr. Chair, the carbon capture that they were speaking of, Bill 24. The regulations state: anything that's deeper than one kilometre. In my 30-some years of being an agriculture producer, I have never farmed that deep. I've never utilized anything that deep. I would assume that I would break all my machinery. When you look at this and you talk about rescinding and extinguishing and all these pieces of the puzzle that were mentioned, I'd like someone to name those, first off.

I'd also like to give an example of competing statutory consents. Mr. Chair, at the bottom of that statutory consent stack are your carbon-based fuels, in the middle range may be known aquifers, and up above that may be a portion of leased land. Let's take, for example, speaking of this, the Alberta Land Stewardship Act enacting a regional plan. I'll use the South Saskatchewan regional plan because at Stavely we have a huge aquifer that in 2005 or '06 was drilled through and lost to the top side. That aquifer puts out 300 gallons a minute, 15 feet through a three-inch pipe with no pump, a phenomenal water source. The regional advisory council came back with the comments in their advice that no known aquifers shall be drilled directly through for any carbon-based recovery below that aquifer. Once we know it's there, don't drill through it.

In that example I was talking about, I was on municipal council at the time, and all the locals were saying: where they're clearing an area there, they're going to drill right through the Stavely aquifer; don't let them do that. Well, Mr. Chair, the ERCB was above the local municipality and, as was stated by the legal comments that I was speaking of earlier, the NRCB was above the municipality. All the old boys in the coffee shop would say: you drill through there, you're going to lose it to the top side. Well, there wasn't much we could do, but the South Saskatchewan Regional Advisory Council points out: don't ever drill through those and risk them.

On that Stavely aquifer are multitudes of statutory consents for water use for farms, for feedlots. You name it, they're there. Now we've got these three competing uses: the top, the middle, and the bottom. Company X comes to drill now under the Land Stewardship Act, and that's a known aquifer. Under section 11 you have the ability to amend. "Company X, move over there 200 yards and drill down. We will not risk that water supply. We want to amend your statutory consent. Move over, drill down, go under it, but don't touch the water." Company X says: "Great. Well, we're on

our way.” If company X says no, we have the availability of negotiation. “Company X, we’ll give you X amount of dollars. You go over there, drill down, come under without threatening that water supply.”

This whole thing goes on to say: what happens if you drill through that and lose it to the bottom side? It took seven tankers pumping steadily and three Cats pushing up dirt and cement trucks to fill it when it blew off to the top side. But that was locatable, so they won that battle.

The last step in that process would be: “Company X, you don’t want to negotiate this. You don’t want to move over here. I’m sorry. We’ll have to rescind that permit because you cannot drill directly through that and put all those other statutory consents at risk.”

Mr. Chair, I believe that’s the common-sense approach that Albertans want to see. That’s exactly why we’re looking at planning. I think the future depends on this planning. In the next 15 years six countries will produce more food than they consume. In the last 40 years 50 per cent of the arable land per capita in Canada has been lost. Canada is third in the world for arable land per capita, and Alberta sits very well within Canada on that arable land.

Land-use planning is not something to be taken lightly. It’s not something to be spreading malicious rumours and all sorts of innuendo about. It’s something that we need to look at in a grown-up way, have the discussion with Albertans, with landowners, and plan for the future of this province to make it even bigger, better, and more profitable.

Thank you very much for your time, Mr. Chair.

The Deputy Chair: Thank you, hon. member.

The hon. Member for Calgary-Glenmore is next.

Mr. Hinman: Well, thank you, Mr. Chair. We’ve had some interesting discussion going back and forth, and I guess I’d like to comment a little bit on the hon. minister of agriculture from Livingstone-Macleod. I guess my first comment would have to be on when he talks about these 50 wonderful water bodies that we’ve created in southern Alberta. Obviously, they must have just been created in the last two years because before that we didn’t have any bills to expropriate land the way he’s discussing this. All of these actually happened long before any of these bills came forward, and now one’s in the perplexing situation: “How could that have possibly been? These bills are vital. Otherwise, we’re not going to be able to expropriate any land for the public good in order to create another water reservoir.”

The arguments, to me, are extremely shallow and not well thought out. I can’t help but think that some of the members on that side have actually taken a leap of faith off the Niagara Falls, but I don’t know of anybody who’s survived that yet. I don’t think this government is going to survive the public outrage that has been continuing for two years when they go to the polls in rural Alberta if they continue and pass these bills. Why won’t they just listen, repeal the bills, and go from there?

I remember – I think it was in the fall of 2008 – when the hon. member was down in Aden, way down in southern Alberta, a long ways from anywhere. The ranchers there were as enraged as they were in Eckville two and a half, three years later. This government continues to go around, continues to tell Albertans, continues to tell landowners: don’t worry; trust us.

I remember two years ago, I think it was, when our past Premier was talking to the AAMD and C, talking passionately about his history, where he came from, proud of it and rightfully so. His final words to the people in rural Alberta were: as long as I’m the

Premier, you have nothing to fear. He’s no longer the Premier, so now the question is: how much do we have to fear? We have a lot, in my opinion. The reason why that’s real is that if there was no fear, why would we have Bill 6? We’re going to give you a property rights advocate because there’s fear out there.

It’s really interesting, Mr. Chair. If we look at this wonderful report, the Report of the Property Rights Task Force, Engagement with Albertans, then you start to read what came back, and I just shake my head. After all they heard, the number of times that they’ve just been pelted for bringing this stuff forward, they say: well, no problem; we’ll give you the three Cs – consultation, compensation, and the courts – but now we’re also going to give you an advocate, with an A.

I just want to read some of the comments in the government’s own report from their property rights task force. On page 14: “What are your issues or concerns with respect to property rights in Alberta?” That’s what they’re asking. “Theme: Failure of the Consultation Process” and then a quote. They don’t ever say who spoke at these meetings, but there are some jewels of quotes in this book that they’ve published.

Mr. MacDonald: Let’s hear some.

Mr. Hinman: Well, here’s the first one. “We thought we knew what we owned . . . Now it’s all in doubt.”

Again, they’re referring to Bill 36. “Planning needs to happen” – we heard the hon. minister talk about that – “but the approach has been totally wrong.” Okay. They did say that planning needs to happen, but was the approach right? No. This individual says that it’s totally wrong. Not partially, not a little bit, but totally wrong.

Mr. Anderson: They didn’t communicate well enough. That was the problem.

Mr. Hinman: I think communication is always a two-way process.

Here is the next question: “Did the MLA’s even read this legislation?” Mr. Chair, these are right out of the government’s published Property Rights Task Force report on what they had to say.

11:30

Here’s a great one. I use this one all the time, so I have to do it. “Central planning hasn’t worked for other countries and it won’t work here.” Hmm. “You’re ramming through these power lines,” again, the subject of Bill 50. “The property rights of freehold mineral owners are completely ignored.” I just talked about that in my previous discussion that I had here. [interjection] Oh, yes, farmmongering.

I mean, it’s just disappointing to hear the stories of the individuals who have been impacted by this, and they can say: oh, it’s not a big deal. Well, I tell you that if you’re that individual that’s put two years of sweat equity into something and then they say that it’s not a big deal – give me a break.

“This whole regional planning thing seems rushed.” Again, we hear that we can’t do anything. I just find it amazing with the stats we just heard, and I always enjoy learning those things – only two natural lakes. I must say that I’ve been down to Waterton Lake. It’s a wonderful place, often a little bit windy but a wonderful place, and I do like the coolness there. It’s nice to climb up on the Bear’s Hump. It’s a quick little 20-minute romp, and you look down there and just think, “Wow, this is gorgeous; this is beautiful,” and it’s great that it’s a park, an international park that’s been protected for a long time. “This whole regional planning thing seems rushed.”

Ms Blakeman: So the government can't expropriate it?

Mr. Hinman: They already own it. Who are they going to expropriate it from? The Americans?

"It feels like our way of life is under attack." That is not a good quote to be able to report back on. "We've been stewards of the land for decades – don't ignore that." Again, you'd think that they were – I don't know – someone landing from outer space and not having any respect for our land. The minister just mentioned that he's the third generation. I think they have a little bit of integrity and ability to look after their property. We've been stewards of this land for decades. Don't ignore it.

Government needs to get serious with industry.

Serious concerns were raised about the ways industrial practices are impacting Albertans' property rights. The strongest comments were made in relation to abandoned energy infrastructure, such as wellheads and pipelines.

Many people expressed the opinion that industry and government have grown "too close." The Government of Alberta seems unwilling to enforce higher expectations on industry.

Then we get to the next theme, compensation, another one of their big Cs. I must say, Mr. Chair, that if we're talking education, you as an educator know that a C grade isn't very good, but this government is fixated on Cs, three Cs. Great. Barely a pass. I don't know if that would get you into a lot of the university courses now. Because it's so hard time to get in there, if you have a C, you're out. I would say that with this government it's being generous to give them a C on this. "Compensation is inadequate."

"Compensation was already unfair, and we believe this legislation has made it worse." That is not a good report to the government. "To me, the way government took the pore space amounts to theft." I think this is unparliamentary: theft. Wow. Bill 24. "To me, the way the government took pore space amounts to theft." "We feel like serfs on the land," again an individual referring to Bill 19, the Land Assembly Project Area Act, which the minister was just commenting on.

Land is being abused.

As people expressed frustration that energy companies do not fully remove equipment when an energy site is no longer in use. Many well heads remain standing on the land. Even in cases where a well head has been removed, other parts of the well will remain in the ground.

I think this is an area that they are addressing, and kudos to them for that.

The next theme: imbalance of power, access to redress and recourse. "Access to the courts is a fundamental right . . ."

Hon. member, is that proper?

Ms Blakeman: Yes.

Mr. Hinman: Good. We've got agreement.

" . . . and it can't be taken away." It's in our Constitution. It's a fundamental right, access to the courts. This is why we've gone through so many amendments and new bills and Bill 10. Why? Because they denied access to the courts. Yes, now they've put it for property. Again, the hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre is going to say that property shouldn't be a right.

That's the one thing that they've done in their Bill 10. For property rights they've given back that access to the courts. But when it comes to leases, when it comes to minerals, when it comes to water licences, those are all still decisions of the minister to say: "Well, you're right. I'm not treating you fairly. Why don't you go to the courts?" Well, if he knows that he's wrong or she knows

that she's wrong, why would you have them go through all that expense?

The member also talked about how down in the States they're somewhat litigious. I don't think it's because they have property rights. I think it's their spirit. They have a higher spirit of competition, and they sometimes raise things to a new level. We certainly see that when it comes to spending. They know how to spend like nobody else.

Ms Blakeman: And you want that here?

Mr. Hinman: No, I don't.

I actually think it reduces some of that. What good law does is provide clarity, and then we can say that there's nothing to argue over. Again, if we're talking property rights, how many times do we have fights because the fence isn't in the right place? Not very often. They go out and survey and put it in the right spot, and everybody agrees. We know where the line in the sand is, where the fence is. We can differentiate that. So it's important.

To get back to the report here, "We need proper, independent regulatory bodies." The Energy Resources Conservation Board "has lost credibility in the eyes of landowners and Albertans. Many commented that the ERCB stopped being an independent regulatory body a long time ago, and that it is now regarded as a promoter and facilitator of industry." That's very, very sad. Again, they've done a lot of great work in the past. I have to ask the question – this seems like health care – how much political meddling has been going on that they've lost their credibility? A true, true concern. We need to improve that going forward. "There's a real imbalance of power."

We'll go to the next theme.

What ideas or advice would you like to share with the Task Force as it develops recommendations for the Government of Alberta?

Theme: Fix the consultation. Work with Albertans.

"There should be meaningful consultation before [any underlying] decisions get made.

This government is notorious for somehow coming up with a hare-brained idea. Or, worse, they have a problem, and rather than fixing it, "Let's ram through some legislation, and we'll be saved."

Again, the Member for Edmonton-Centre talked about Bill 4 today and the conundrum. I mean, she understands the technicality of legislation. She's been doing this for years. She goes through it. She looks at the minutia, and she looks at the big picture, and she says: you're creating a bigger problem. I love it when she says: don't make me have to say I told you so again. She points it out. So what? That's a real problem when you have somebody point things out and you still see them do it. To me, that's a two-year-old. For a two-year-old you point out: don't put your hand on the stove; you'll get burned. Fortunately, as parents and as adults we can grab them and stop them from doing it. But here, when she points something out, they just roll their eyes. They say: oh, the painfulness of listening to this. After we've been exhausted through the time, they vote it through.

Twice today, Mr. Chair, she had to be corrected. I would love to see the stats on how many times she's come back and said, "I told you so," when the bills have come back.

I want to think of one myself that I argued on, the new royalty framework. It's not a problem. I spoke about it, spoke on it, rallied against it. There were – what? – six amendments that they put through the new royalty framework before they finally threw up their hands in exhaustion and said: we'd better go back to where we were.

11:40

Again, as the member was talking about earlier – I can't remember; she said it a little bit differently than I do. I like quoting Bastiat on what is seen and what is not seen. That means that we see what we spend money on, but then we can never see what we could have spent it on after it's been spent and it's gone. You lose that whole perspective in that, "Well, no; we see what we spent the money on." I can't remember how you eloquently mentioned it earlier today.

This is a problem. What is not seen with Bill 6 is the fact that we just need property rights. Why do we see this advocacy coming forward, saying that this is going to solve all of the problems? This solves nothing. This is going to cost us more money. It's going to cause us more frustration, and for what? It's just one of those gimmicks that they're putting out there, saying: trust us and re-elect us. I have to say, Mr. Chair, that sometimes I sit here and I think that maybe we shouldn't even bother debating these bills. We should put in three or four minutes and say that this is wrong, say why it's wrong, sit down, and let the government pass these bills. The problem is that when we pass bills that are wrong and aren't in the public's interest and aren't actually protecting society and all of these things, it's very hard to come back. Often we continue to live in this situation, and it just hampers us going forward.

I've never been one to tie myself to a tree, but I've admired those people that have gone out and have camped in a tree or tied themselves to a tree to protect it. They know that if this is a 200-year old tree and it's cut down, it doesn't matter how much debate you have afterwards. It's gone. It's gone, not to be brought back. I kind of feel like I need to tie myself to two bills here as we come to these dying days of this legislation.

The biggest one, no question in my mind, is Bill 2, the fact that this government wants to ram that through and say that parents don't have the right to make the final decision, that the government knows best. This bill, the advocacy one: it's just to stop them from putting a Band-Aid on. We've already lost that property right, and they're just trying to reinforce it and tell everybody: "Don't worry. We'll hold your hand and walk you through this to explain why this has happened to you."

I've talked to people that have actually lost their land for a reservoir that's being built, and they understand. It's an emotional thing, especially when you've got someone who has been there for five generations and we decide to build a dam. I don't know how many people remember the debates and all of the protests that went on for the Oldman River dam. I believe the hon. chair was around and participated in that. We saw the fighting that went on over that, saying that we can't allow this to be built, that it's going to destroy southern Alberta, that it's going to ruin the fishing, all of those things that that debate went forward on. But we finally built it.

Mr. Chair, that was a long, long time before Bill 19, Bill 24, Bill 36, Bill 50, Bill 10, and this Bill 6, and somehow we were able to build it. All of the discussion on the Oldman River dam was in 1992, 1993, long before any of these bills, and government has always understood that.

Let's just quickly summarize the Expropriation Act because that is what we've dealt with since Canada was first formed in 1867. We understand that there's public good. Unfortunately, people are hurt by that. In my area, Calgary-Glenmore, 17 homes were expropriated in order to widen Glenmore Trail. Those families lost their homes. They went through a process. They were fairly compensated. Those who didn't feel they were could go to the courts. It's paramount that we have those things entrenched in there.

I can't remember which group it is. I'm going to say the World Bank. They rate countries on how they respect the rule of law and property rights. They say that those who adhere to the rule of law and property rights are the most prosperous, the most peaceful, and the most beneficial for the people. Why do we want to go backwards, to a third-world country, and say: "You know what? Government, the Premier, and cabinet are good enough. They're going to protect our property for us. They're going to protect the future. They're going to do central planning. They're going to tell us what's best in southern Alberta, northern Alberta, or central Alberta." It's bogus. It's wrong. This bill shouldn't be passed, and I'm going to keep speaking against it even though the government probably isn't going to do anything about it. I can't let it pass in its current state. It's nothing but a Band-Aid, and Band-Aids fall off. We haven't fixed anything.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Deputy Chair: Thank you.

The hon. minister of agriculture, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Mr. Berger: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I would just like to clarify a couple of points that were made. The member made some good points. In some cases it reminded me of watching a hockey game with a soccer game on the radio. I didn't know quite where we were at times, but there were some good, valid points in between. He spoke extensively about the Oldman dam. [interjection] Thank you for the courtesy that I gave you.

Anyway, he spoke of the Oldman dam and of the building of that. The requirement for land to do that would be a place where with Bill 6, the Property Rights Advocate Act, we'd be able to walk through that whole process with people. He's right. There were hurt feelings. There were people that were upset. But, Mr. Chairman, if we go back to his comments around, "How did we do these water projects?" he also said the other night that we haven't done a water project since the Oldman dam. I would correct him on that. We've done the Pine Coulee reservoir and the Twin Valley reservoir since then, so we have built two.

But in 2002 there was a court case settled between the province and the Nilssons. It was a case that had been brewing since I think 1974 – you can get the exact facts on that – where the restricted development act was ruled not to be usable for these projects. There had to be another act developed, so there was reason.

With that, I will cede to the hon. member that between 2002 and now there haven't been any of those projects done or taken up because there wasn't an act. It was ruled against utilizing that act. So that paints the need for that, and maybe that was missing. Once again, a property rights advocate could walk people through that whole process if that was needed.

Mr. Chair, I want to go back to irrigation for a moment. Irrigation on 5 per cent of the land base in Alberta produces 20 per cent of the product. It's an incredible, incredible asset. But I would ask anyone in this House to find me an irrigation canal that follows a road allowance. They don't. They split up quarters and they split up landscapes because they follow topography. They follow geography; they follow elevation. As was mentioned, the property rights advocate would help if there was an irrigation canal needed. The property rights advocate would be the guy working on behalf of the landowner if they couldn't reach a settlement. I'd say that when we work on a storage facility, it's a large tract of land taken out, but I'll also say that there is a lot of land that's needed when you build a canal. Canals, highways, and public good are what bring us our industry and make us profitable and make us a great place to live.

Further on there was discussion around water rights and this type of thing. Mr. Chair, between Alberta Agriculture and Alberta Environment we invest heavily every year in continuing to rehabilitate our irrigation systems in southern Alberta to advance our technologies, to continue to make sure that we have that ability for those operators. There is no intent of changing anything in that regard whatsoever, and I know this hon. member knows that himself. There are no water rights being changed. If anything, we've increased irrigable acres by the very frugal use of water and new technologies for application. I think we've gone up – I can't remember the exact numbers – about 20 to 25 per cent on the same amount of water, so we've granted that many more licences. It's going in the opposite direction as was mentioned.

If we look again at the Alberta Land Stewardship Act and at the operation of the property rights advocate – and I'm thinking that this would be one that he'd be thrilled with – the South Saskatchewan Regional Advisory Council, aside from saying to everyone that in the plan of the South Saskatchewan there should be no drilling through known aquifers and no chance of losing water, also looked at the seven major areas that are recharge areas for our aquifers in southern Alberta.

11:50

They go on to mention that they're not only the areas that supply the water to the aquifers; they also speak to the point that the majority of those areas are lease lands, public lands operated by private individuals. They go on to say that it's a marvellous carbon sink, it's a water recharge area, and the best use for that land is the use that it has had for over a hundred years. They say that that should be extended. Extend the tenures on this because that's exactly what we need.

Well, Mr. Chair, that's the opposite of what we've been hearing from these people all along. "Well, they're going to take this back." No, sir, the property rights advocate would jump up and say: "This is the best thing that ever happened to you. They want to extend your tenure." Wow. What enforces that? That same act that says: this plan shall overrule the ERCB. If they say we can drill through here, the ERCB has to look at the plan. The plan says: no, you can't drill through a known aquifer. The plan says: no, you can't tear up this grassland because the best use for it is what it's doing right now. It's protecting a water supply. It's a carbon sink, and it's providing pasture and wildlife habitat. Wow. It's public land, and that's the way it should be looked after, the way it has been looked after. Let's extend the tenure, and let's keep that going.

Let's talk about one other comment that was made there. I'll just go back to the comment around property rights and logging. I love this one. This one is great because we're on both sides of the issue again. Mr. Chair, in my area, where the Oldman reservoir exists, where the Castle logging exists, where there's plenty of opposition and comments around it quite often, back in 1878 a fellow by the name of Senator McLaren was granted the logging rights to that area. He logged and he logged and he logged: Beaver Mines, Pincher Creek, Twin Butte, probably Lundbreck, not over to Coleman because they had their own, Cowley, many of those areas. The houses and the buildings were built from what was cut right there locally. So that right was out there at that time.

At the same time Canada was looking at western Canada as a coal bank. There were many subsurface rights given out that were actually stronger than the surface rights. If you look into the old mines and minerals act of 1878 or 1879, if your house happened to be on top of where a coal mine was, they had the ability to knock your house down to get to their coal. The west was looked at as a resource bank, a coal bank.

Let's go back to the logging. In 1966 a company called Revelstoke Lumber got the rights to log in that area, got the rights, bought the rights. I think it was 1980 when Revelstoke Lumber went under, and those rights were purchased by a company called Atlas Lumber. Atlas Lumber would have loved the property rights advocate because he'd have protected them by saying: you have a right here to cut a tree because you purchased that.

By what we're being told over here, section 11, where you have to actually rescind or negotiate that, shouldn't be there, so we're just going to tell these guys – Atlas went broke after the Lost Creek fire of 2003; 22,000 hectares were burned in that fire. Now we're talking about over three years and logging a mere 800 hectares. This is a big crime. Nobody has everybody looked at the Crowsnest Pass since the Lost Creek fire. Wrong, my friends. Everybody has driven through there and looked at it.

Well, we've got this small logging area, and now we can sit over here and we can go, "I'll just take that away." They shouldn't be. I'd hang on a tree so they couldn't do that. Well, that's a right. Do you want the ability to negotiate it? The property rights advocate should be stepping in to say: "Well, you know what? We have the ability under the Land Stewardship Act, section 11, to amend. We'll give you a different area, negotiate. If you don't want the different area, we'll pay you to go to a different area or to rescind."

This member said: "Take it back. Take it away from them." Well, Mr. Chair, there has to be proper legal process. I would say that this member is looking at that as going: "Well, it's laissez-faire. Do what you want. Get it done, but don't step on a property right. Or do you even have a property right?"

Mr. Chair, highest and best use does not mean the most profitable use imaginable. Think about that for a while because it says it all. Just because you own it – and I think this member would agree – doesn't mean you can do anything with it. You would have hog slaughter plants right next door to your house in Calgary-Glenmore because it might be a great place to set it down because there's water access. There are all these things. There is land use. There is zoning. There are reasons for all these things because value of property is not borne completely within the property; it's borne by the surroundings as well. It's location, location, location. It's not kitchen, kitchen, kitchen.

We have to remember that we are all affected by land use, and we have to look at someone like the property rights advocate. If someone wants to say, "No, that area for logging is now off limits," great. How do we deal with that? Let's deal with it in a manner that's fair to all. We have the property rights advocate. We have the acts on the floor that would say: here's a process to follow.

Mr. Chair, like I said earlier, you can't just throw these things out as if they're split second, that they're going to fix everything, and we'll just do it like this. Well, what are the ramifications of like this? That hasn't been thought through. It's just a comment. It's just a quick fix. Albertans expect and want more, and that's what we're giving them: a property rights advocate that can walk through the process, whether you're in gas and oil. That member spoke about that pipes and this and that were left. Okay. The property rights advocate can work through that as well. Everything that we're speaking of can be addressed by having an advocate.

Many, many people in the comments that he's not reading said: "How do we walk through the process? We don't have a lawyer. We don't have this. We want access to someone who can help us." The property rights advocate fits that bill.

You know, we're looking at it as: well, we don't need this. Don't we? Do you want to go back? We don't want any planning? I don't think Albertans expect that. I think the balances that he spoke of we need to respect, and we need to have the ability to work through those.

Mr. Chair, with that, I hope I answered his original question. Thank you for your time this evening.

The Deputy Chair: Thank you.

Hon. members, I have the Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar next if he wishes to proceed. Are there any other speakers? Followed by Calgary-Glenmore. Please, the hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Mr. MacDonald: Yes. Thank you very much. I listened with interest to the last couple of speakers, and that gave me an opportunity to look through the Agriculture and Rural Development budget estimates. I see where last year – and I checked it on the Internet, and it's an accurate number from 2010-11 – the Farmers' Advocate actually spent \$860,000. Now, that's a lot more than was forecast, and the estimate for this year, I'm pleased to report to the Assembly, Mr. Chairman, is close to \$1 million. It's \$993,000. That's an increase. There seems to be a lot of activity at the office of the Farmers' Advocate.

When we have this office already up and running, the annual report for that office, just to see precisely what is going on there, seems to be difficult for this hon. member to find.

It's also difficult to find, oddly enough, the financial statements for each ministry on the government website. I don't know what they're trying to hide. I don't know why they don't want citizens to see them, but they make them really hard to find.

When we compare this bill and the need for the property rights advocate and the office of the Farmers' Advocate, I don't understand why they couldn't be one and the same.

Mr. Anderson: Oh, come on. Give me a break.

Mr. MacDonald: Oh, come on. Now, give me a break.

Well, the Alberta Surface Rights Group. I wonder who they are, and I wonder if they have any members down around High River. I'd bet there's the odd member of this group in High River. [interjection] And you think they're all voting for Danielle Smith? Well, I could see why, with the skepticism that's displayed from hon. members across the way.

Now, I'm looking, Mr. Chairman, at the Alberta Surface Rights Group. [interjections]

12:00

The Deputy Chair: The chair wishes to remind everyone that it's Edmonton-Gold Bar who has the floor at the moment.

Mr. MacDonald: They ask the question, "Do we need a property rights advocate?" [interjections]

Chair's Ruling Decorum

The Deputy Chair: Perhaps some people didn't hear. I said that the hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar has the floor. As much as I appreciate the levity at midnight, let's observe the parliamentary procedures here.

Please proceed.

Mr. MacDonald: And if they continue, you're going to have to blow your whistle really hard and put them in the penalty box.

The Deputy Chair: I might have to do that.

Debate Continued

Mr. MacDonald: Now, the question is asked by the Alberta Surface Rights Group: do we need a property rights advocate, a

property rights advocate office? This is a question that was asked by them hardly a month ago.

They go on to say, correctly, that

last week the Alberta government announced it was going to establish a "Property Rights Advocate Office". The purpose of this office was very vague, citing a one stop shop for information on property rights and advice on how to best deal with violations to your property rights! Not much other information . . .

They go on to say,

. . . just this meaningless drivel.

Those are their words, Mr. Chairman.

Whenever we look at the set-up we already have and what is going on in the office of the Farmers' Advocate, there are a lot of things, but we have no way of checking up other than following some of the links to seismic water-well testing guidelines, the Energy Resources Conservation Board, the Alberta Utilities Commission, Sustainable Resource Development, the Surface Rights Board, Alberta Environment, Synergy Alberta, Alberta Rural Crime Watch, the Freehold Owners Association, surface rights groups, and the Agricultural Operation Practices Act. These are some of the links from the office of the Farmers' Advocate. But, again, you click on their annual report, the 37th one, and it doesn't come up.

Now, the Alberta Surface Rights Group, when they're discussing this bill, propose the following questions to the hon. Premier. "How much is this office going to cost the taxpayer?" That is one of their questions. Will it be in the millions or tens of millions of dollars? I don't think it would be – at least, I hope not – but with the past history of spending by this government, maybe it will be a \$10 million office. There's no shortage of money for public relations to try to solve a political problem, and this is what this bill is trying to do.

"How many lawyers need to be hired?" Again – and we talked about this earlier, Mr. Chairman – "will it be farmed out to the government's favourite crony law firms?" I don't know who they are, but whenever the hon. member gets to speak, I may look and see which law firms donated to which candidates in the recently concluded Progressive Conservative leadership campaign.

"How plush of an office" will be needed? How many people will work in here? I know how many people work in the Farmers' Advocate office. They seem to be listed here, and there are at least six or seven, maybe more. The Alberta Surface Rights Group is asking for the total price tag of this bill and what this office will cost, and I think that's a valid, valid question.

[Dr. Brown in the chair]

Now, they go on to say: "Apparently the Justice department will be running the show." That's very interesting because we know that the Justice department – and we know who used to be the previous Justice minister, Mr. Chairman – is responsible for the drafting of the legislation, all the legislation that's now going to be sort of promoted through this office.

Now, the Surface Rights Group also questions, "Will the actual people who own the property have any say in who is appointed" property rights advocate? That's interesting. That's another very valid question. I've been proposing in this Assembly that there be in the library the list of agencies, boards, and commissions where people are appointed to them by the government. Included in that list would be the following: how long the appointment lasts; if it is vacant or, if not vacant, when it will become vacant; and the compensation level. So any interested person who is perhaps not a glitterati PC Party member could maybe make an application and

hope that they would be appointed to that agency, board, or commission.

The federal government. You can go to the library at the House of Commons. There's a book there, and you can check out all the appointments to the agencies, boards, and commissions, what they're paid, when the term expires, and if you're interested, you can apply. The same should apply in this province. If it applied in this province and it was not done in secret, then the Alberta Surface Rights Group perhaps wouldn't have a point when they ask the question, "Will the actual people who own the property have any say in who is appointed?" They go on to suggest here that this will be a patronage appointment to reward some glitterati PC Party member. I hope it would never get to that, but I don't have any confidence that it would not.

They go on to suggest that we could have someone like the former Premier, the hon. Member for Fort Saskatchewan-Vegreville, or the current Member for Calgary-West, who is retiring. Calgary-West: that would be an interesting gentleman to have, if this bill is to become law, as the first property rights advocate. I would like to go to a meeting that he would be chairing as property rights advocate. It certainly would be interesting, and I think the hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre would agree with me. If the sheriffs were there in large numbers, there would be probably a good reason for their presence.

This is another good question from the Alberta Surface Rights Group. "How is this new office any different than the Farmers' Advocate Office, which already supposedly gives out information on property rights and advice on how to deal with violations to your property rights?" I would like an explanation from the hon. members across the way regarding this because, again, I think we're duplicating efforts here. We're creating an office needlessly when there's one already in existence. We may have to tweak the budget, hire a few more people, but I think it would be cheaper in the long run, and it would work out just as well.

I can understand why people say this, particularly if you go to a surface rights meeting or you meet with a group of freeholders. We have to restore confidence in the Farmers' Advocate office. I can see why some people, particularly in rural Alberta, view it as nothing more than an oil company cheerleader office, as it's been described.

Again, the Alberta Surface Rights Group questions: why would the property rights advocate office be any different than what they have labelled the Farmers' Advocate office?

There's a duplication here, but I'm not going to bore the Assembly with a reminder of what I said previously on this, Mr. Chairman.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you.

Mr. MacDonald: You're welcome. You're very welcome.

But be mindful that this is a public relations bill to try to get this government through a very difficult time in the lead-up to the provincial election, which is coming up. All the PC candidates across the province can say: "We listened to you. We had this commission. We listened, and this is the result. We're going to set up a property rights advocate office."

Ms Blakeman: Do you think people actually asked for that?

12:10

Mr. MacDonald: I can't find anywhere where this property rights advocate office was requested.

Ms Blakeman: But how did they listen to people if no one asked for it?

Mr. MacDonald: Well, they have selective hearing, and they have vivid imaginations. The vivid imagination can be very useful at times.

Now, the Property Rights Task Force claims that there was a great groundswell of people asking for the property rights advocate at recent open-house meetings. Some people claim that they attended more than one meeting, and they never heard a word uttered about anyone requesting a property rights advocate.

I said earlier that in a lot of the meetings I attended, a lot of people stood up and admired Keith Wilson for his grasp of the issue and for his legal interpretations of some of the stunts that this government has attempted in the last couple of years. But no one has said that we need to spend a couple of million dollars creating an office and have a political appointee chair this office and quietly promote Bill 19, Bill 36, Bill 50, and Bill 10, carbon capture and storage, and the property rights changes that were made in that bill.

Now, the Alberta Surface Rights Group, many of whom attended these meetings: what they did here and what I heard in Eckville about a year ago was a call to repeal the land theft bills, as they call them, and to a lesser extent the call for a property rights protection act. That would be interesting, and I would suggest the government get the hon. Member for Calgary-Glenmore's view and the hon. Member for Airdrie-Chestermere's view on the drafting of a property rights protection act. That would be an interesting dialogue to listen to, Mr. Chairman.

The Alberta Surface Rights Group suggests that the bill that we're discussing here this evening "is little more than pre-election window dressing, designed to confuse the more gullible among us." That's a direct quote, Mr. Chairman, and I'm going to repeat it because it certainly is, in my view, true. "This announcement of a Property Rights Advocate is little more than pre-election window dressing, designed to confuse the more gullible among us." They go on to say and to warn that this is a lot of money that is being spent in the creation of "a phony bureaucracy that will in fact be totally useless!"

Now, the last question that they ask is this, Mr. Chairman. "When will [the hon. Premier] stop spending money on foolish deals like this, in an attempt to divert and deceive, rather than actually try to solve the problems her government has created?"

Of course, we all know that the Justice department and the Justice minister review each and every piece of legislation, so the current Premier would have been involved in the drafting of Bill 19, Bill 36, Bill 50, and the repair bill, which was Bill 10, and the property rights which were removed whenever we changed it with the carbon capture and storage bill. Someone described that bill as the largest property theft in the history of this province. It was a lawyer who described it to me in those terms.

Certainly, Mr. Chairman, Bill 6, the Property Rights Advocate Act, in my view, is not needed. It is totally unnecessary. I realize, as do Albertans, why the government is attempting this at this time.

I'm going to be busy during the election, and I'm not going to get an opportunity, I'm disappointed to say, to travel through much of the province, but I can be confident that many government members are going to stand up and claim that this bill is an answer to all the problems that they have created through flawed legislation in this term. This idea that this government is finally engaging with Albertans and listening and that this bill is a result of that is a work of fiction. There's no doubt about that.

I can just see from the list of committee members that the current Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development was vice-chair. Other members included the Minister of Justice and Attorney General; the Minister of Infrastructure; the Minister of

Intergovernmental, International and Aboriginal Relations; the Minister of Sustainable Resource Development, from up in Peace River; the MLA for Lacombe-Ponoka – I wonder if he got paid to sit on this committee – the hon. Member for Edmonton-Calder; and the hon. Member for Strathmore-Brooks. That was a sizable task force.

They claim they met with 1,100 Albertans in 10 communities and heard from more than 300 others online. They heard from people by telephone and by e-mail. They conclude by saying that this was a listening exercise. This task force had over 1,400 Albertans participating in this listening exercise. That about sums it up. It was an exercise, just like the bill that has resulted from this listening exercise is a public relations exercise with no consequence to the taxpayers.

Mr. Hinman: Exercise is supposed to be good for you.

Mr. MacDonald: Exercise is supposed to be good for you, hon. member, yes.

Mr. Chairman, certainly, I don't think we need this property rights advocate. I agree with the authors of this letter. It's a creation of the government to get rid of a political problem.

The Acting Chair: The hon. Member for Calgary-Glenmore.

Mr. Hinman: Thank you, Mr. Chair. It's always interesting in these debates to go through some of the points that are brought up, and I guess I want to refer to a couple from the ag minister. He made a few comments. I have to say that he started off by talking about canals and that these canals don't have rights-of-way, which they absolutely don't. But these canals already exist.

I don't think there'd be anything more exciting than if the minister of agriculture knows of a new major reservoir. I know there have been a couple of smaller ones – he's talked about Pine Coulee – but those aren't major reservoirs like the Oldman River dam and the one that we need up at, I guess, the start, at the tributaries of the Belly and the Milk rivers in that area, that would actually back up into the U.S.

For most farmers that I know of, if the government were to start a new irrigation project and say, "We're going to put a canal through here to deliver water to your land," I'd be very interested to see how many of those individuals are fighting. When water is delivered, I think, the average price quadruples. I'd have to verify that. It's been a few years, but it seems like it goes up quite a bit. I think they'd be quite excited to be able to have a canal come through.

What's even more interesting is that the minister talked about all the rehabilitation that the irrigation districts are going through in southern Alberta and the precision. I wouldn't say that they're being frugal with their water. I would actually say that the precision in delivering that water is phenomenal, with drip irrigation and whatnot, so that we reduce the evaporation and the problems associated with that. Along with that, though, a lot of the rehabilitation that has been going on there, Mr. Chair, has been to go to pipelines, and canals are not the preferred way to go. But it is kind of interesting because when Alberta agriculture funded a rehabilitation project – and we've funded many, many canal rehabilitations – all of a sudden it's taken out of the cycle.

12:20

I think it's a 20-year life span. They may have upgraded a canal 15 years ago, and now with the new technology and the price and the things they're doing with pipelines, they can't actually move forward with some great water conservation without the minister or the government actually saying: "You know what? We're going

to allow this rehabilitation to come forward early" because, again, of the rules and regulations that they've set up there.

[Mr. Zwodzesky in the chair]

His comments about Revelstoke and Atlas and that group were interesting, but again I wasn't quite sure. I guess it goes two ways because you lost me on what you're trying to discuss on those leases and those rights. I think it's critical that those people who own a lease or, you know, have that right to harvest those trees are protected. Like you say, in the past, to my experience, they've always been able to negotiate and to do, whether it's land swaps, whether it's acreage swaps for forestry and logging. I think that those industries are always amiable. The fear, though, is that if they don't have access to the courts, the government can actually come in and take these leases or logging rights and not necessarily compensate them fairly. That, Mr. Chair, is where the fear is.

That's the problem, that this is subject to the minister, not subject to the rule of law. Sorry for the pun here, but it just doesn't hold water to say: don't worry about it. They want to be able to hold the water. They want to have some security. Again, as I was speaking about earlier this evening, that security by the World Bank is really: how well do we respect the rule of law? When I say that, I don't mean: what kind of draconian laws can the government pass, and therefore we have to follow them. We're talking about the rule of law, which protects the life, the liberty, and the property of those individuals.

I guess I want to go back to respecting contracts. I talked a little bit earlier, you know, about Alberta First Nations Energy Centre and how they've got partners that have come in. They've spent the equivalent of probably \$20 million on a class 3 engineering report to show the viability of their project. They had two ministers come in and talk to them. The first one said that it's not economically viable. Then the next minister comes in and says: "Well, you know what? You didn't get a good enough deal for your people, so we're not going to allow this to go forward." So there was total discord on those two fronts in not knowing what's going to happen there.

It goes back to when you have a contract, when you have, you know, 13 conditions to that contract that you need to fulfill, yet when you do that, then the government or the minister or the Premier all of a sudden seems to think they have a new idea, and that's pulled out from under them. That's a real concern.

What I'm trying to get back to here, in relating to this Bill 6, is that it just isn't good enough to have an advocate to be able to go for industry or for property owners or for a farmer and say: well, we've got an advocate that we'll send down to you, and he'll hold your hand and walk you through to explain why we're doing what we're doing to you and why you might not be getting full compensation or why you can't go to the courts. It's just wrong, Mr. Chair, that we've brought forward this property rights advocate in response to the report of the Property Rights Task Force.

The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar has gone through his letter there and the numerous problems that exist in looking for an advocacy. Again, when you look at the fact that we're running – and again, I'm very disappointed I wasn't able to debate the appropriation this evening. Again, closure came in at the appointed hour. It's always nice how the government can move from one bill, when you think you're going to be able to speak to it, pull it off the table. The time allotted runs out, and then they bring back something else.

The problem that we have here that Albertans are facing is that we don't have rule of law. What we have are arbitrary decisions

that can be made at the ministerial or cabinet level, and we're told that that's where it's at.

It's also interesting that the agriculture minister talked about central planning. That's one of the problems with all of this. I was kind of amazed that he would even go that route because I would have thought that as a former reeve of that area he and his elected people would know far better what's really needed in that area. He gave some good examples of how the ERCB was wanting to drill through water aquifers and that they couldn't stop it. Now he's saying: well, with the land use we can actually legislate that. I don't understand why we couldn't legislate and protect aquifers and just have a water protection act, which I know this government is working hard on in looking at how we're going to protect watersheds and waterways and all of those things. Yet we get this omnibus bill, almost, to say: well, an advocate is going to cover this.

Again, they scoffed over there when the hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar said: well, you know, couldn't it be part of the Farmers' Advocate? There was an uproar. "Oh, no, no, no." Well, I think there's going to be a bigger uproar on whether or not we even need an advocate. Why do we need an advocate? Because they're not protected by the rule of law. For the life of me I don't understand why they won't back up and listen to Albertans. They've been going around for three years. I don't know of a single meeting where they could have left feeling good and saying: I think we've got it right. I mean, there was just fury in the room. "Why are you doing this to us?"

To go to Bill 6 and talk about the property rights advocate, in the theme he was saying that we need to have central planning. I just don't know of anywhere in the world where central planning has worked and why we'd want to bring it here to Alberta and all of a sudden think that for some reason elected people in Alberta . . .

Mr. Berger: Point of order.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development is rising on a point of order.

Point of Order Relevance

Mr. Berger: Yeah. First off, relevance.

The Deputy Chair: Which citation are you citing? From *Beauchesne*?

Mr. Berger: Okay. I'll accept that. Is there any relevance we're going to get to? The comment is, though, that I never did say anything about central planning.

Ms Blakeman: Citation?

Mr. Berger: Well, I'll have to dig one out.

The Deputy Chair: The citation number, hon. member?

Mr. Berger: Go on. My comment is on the record.

The Deputy Chair: Standing Order 23(h), (i), (j)?

Mr. Berger: Standing Order 23(h), (i), (j) will work.

The Deputy Chair: I'm sorry. I hear somebody shouting *Beauchesne* 459. Would that be the one?

Ms Blakeman: If you want to use the rules, get to know them.

Mr. Berger: I was in a hurry.

The Deputy Chair: Hon. member, 459 *Beauchesne* for relevance?

Mr. Berger: Yes, 459.

The Deputy Chair: Okay. Proceed.

Mr. Berger: My comment is that I never mentioned central planning whatsoever in anything I said, so I'd just like to correct that for the record. That was never a comment I made.

Mr. Hinman: I will be more than thrilled to show him in *Hansard* that he did use the words "central planning" earlier this evening. *Hansard* will verify that tomorrow for him. I understand that often we get up and we start talking, and we use words that aren't quite articulated in the way we want.

The Deputy Chair: This is a point of clarification, then. We'll await that clarification. Thank you.

Hon. member, proceed, then.

Debate Continued

Mr. Hinman: Thank you. Perhaps even the chair could have verified it. I know he's listening intently. The one person that I'm always impressed with is watching that.

To go back to central planning and the dilemma that it causes, you have the government, which are just elected representatives, which are usually disconnected from another area, yet they have some passionate, burning desire in their heart, whether it's to build a trail or to build a waterway or to build a park or to protect a lake. Who knows what their passion is and why they're there? But he has absolutely no connection to the people in that area and what they might want to do.

12:30

You know, we had some problems with our regional planning going back, but we shouldn't have thrown the baby out with the bathwater. We needed to do some tweaking. Down in southern Alberta the Oldman River planning commission did a pretty good job. People would go there. They had the different counties, the different MDs that went, and they brought their debates. They were local, and their local people talked to them, and when they passed something, it changed.

It's kind of interesting. In Springbank, just west of Calgary, back in the '90s the people that were elected on the board there put a moratorium on and said: "There are not going to be any more acreages that are coming out in this area. We're going to have a moratorium. We're going to protect our land." I was kind of naive then, thinking: "Oh, gosh. A moratorium is in place. That'll never change."

It's funny. As different individuals started to retire, they realized: oh, I've got to sell this for farmland when I could, in fact, sell it fivefold for a development or acreage? Lo and behold, the next time an election came along, there was a new group of local people on there, and they're allowing development again. Those landowners made a lot of money because once again acreages were allowed and the moratorium was lifted. We can argue from central government, saying: "Oh my goodness. They had no right to do that. We need to protect that." Again, there are lots of interesting things that are coming forward on how to compensate different areas from development and to hopefully be able to keep it in that area.

The point that I want to make, Mr. Chair, is that central government just doesn't work. Everything that this government has been passing, whether it's for health care and the superboard, whether it's for the education portion on the taxes, whether it's for ambulance service around the province, whether it's for land use: they're centralizing. They're saying: "You know what? If we just bring it in closer into the government, into cabinet, into the Premier's office, we'll be able to solve all of our problems." In fact, we're just exacerbating those problems, the contentions and the fighting and the worry that's going on.

Don't fall off your chair there, hon. member for High River. You won't be there much longer, so you can enjoy. High-five. Keep it up. You're doing great there. Enjoy your retirement.

It's interesting to watch, Mr. Chair, the reaction from this government as they go headlong into an election with such bogus bandages as Bill 6, saying: "Oh, we listened. We've got an advocate for you now. You can count on us. You can trust us. This guy is awesome." As the hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar brought up, how much does it cost us? What's going to be the cost and the size of this?

My goodness, when you look at how many cabinet tours have gone around in the last two and a half years since Bill 19 first came out, boy, oh boy, that was a lot of advocacy work that's gone on. How many dollars have been spent?

The bottom line is, I was saying, that I don't know of a single meeting where these guys could have walked away and said: "Wow, we finally got it right. Everybody here was encouraged that we got it right, and they're supporting us. Now we can go back with this amendment, and rural Albertans that have been coming out in droves will be pleased and say: 'The government is listening. They finally see the light, and they're going to protect us.' We're going to go back to the rule of law, where we understand the Expropriation Act and what we can and cannot do." [interjections]

There are too many people wanting to throw a few questions at me. I apologize, Mr. Chair. They often have good ones, and sometimes it actually – what would I say? – speeds up the process, but we're not looking for speed this evening. We're looking for content, and we're looking for clarity, and we're looking for an A-plus, not three Cs. An A-plus would be for this government to say: "You know what? I think we've debated this enough tonight. Let's all go home and think about it." What they need to do is to protect Albertans and adjourn debate and move on.

Instead, what they want to do is that they want this to pass. In good conscience, I can't allow that to happen. If we're going to keep going on here, I'll keep on going because I think that there are some fundamental freedoms and rights that need to be fought for and some that should be fundamental freedoms and rights that aren't fought for.

I'm going to give a little lesson that I received some years ago. Here in Alberta, Fortis et Liber, strong and free . . .

An Hon. Member: Leeber.

Mr. Hinman: Some people like to say leeber, but I like to go back to the old Latin term, liber. I think that I'd even sit down if the hon. members over there could tell me what liber means in Latin and go with that, especially the Education minister. Maybe if he listens, he might get educated a little bit here tonight on what liber is.

In Latin liber is actually the inner bark of the tree. Then you say: what does that have to do with anything? Actually, the inner bark of the tree is what the first people creating law and ownership used to write down their titles on. So liber, as in do you have any

liber to show me that, means: where is your paper to show me that you own that? They owned property. They owned slaves. It was a liber. That was the root word for library, libro in Spanish, and all of that. It was the paper, the ownership, that you owned it on. It was critical for whether or not you could establish in law and have it written on that inner bark of the tree. It became a book.

If you go down to land titles, they have all of the papers there. That's the purpose. The bottom line is that this government is jeopardizing the strong and free society that we have. Why? Because they don't have respect for rule of law. They don't want to have a book, a book of rules, a book of property that they have to respect.

What they want to be able to do is to say: hey, we've got this new fabulous idea. Good heavens. It could be here in the fabulous constituency of Edmonton-Centre, in which our committee works tonight, that we were once again welcomed to. I always appreciate the warm welcome. She always welcomes everybody here in the Legislature.

It's rule of law. That's what it is. It's about what's written down there. Again, with the rule of law the most important thing is that when the rule of law is clear, people can predict and know what they need to do. When it comes to property rights, the rule of law and, again, our surveying, we actually know. We can go out there, and we can find the survey pegs for – gosh, what was that? – the old Dominion surveyors. They came across Canada. I mean, those guys were remarkable. There's nothing neater than being out on your horse on the prairie and you come along to a place where they've dug four holes a hundred years ago, and you know that in the middle of that, if you dig down a foot, you'll find the steel peg that they put in there a hundred years ago.

The other interesting thing about that is that they did that because they wanted to make road allowances. One of the things that's a primary concern of government is to have your transportation and utility corridors scoped out, placed out so that people can do that. This government has failed dramatically when it comes to transportation and utility corridors. They want to bulldoze ahead and not worry about boxing themselves in.

In southern Alberta, in Calgary, we still don't have a ring road because this government has failed to see the importance of respecting the rule of law, respecting those people who have that property, going through a proper and fair and equitable way of obtaining that. They keep forgetting that we need to do this, and then we get caught on the short side and say: oh, what are we going to do for a ring road? Then we look at some ridiculous solutions that this government has come up with on going under, going over, going around rather than doing the right thing of planning a little bit ahead of time.

12:40

The Deputy Chair: Thank you, hon. member.

I don't believe there are any other speakers. Is the committee ready for the question?

Hon. Members: Question.

[The clauses of Bill 6 agreed to]

[Title and preamble agreed to]

The Deputy Chair: Shall the bill be reported? Are you agreed?

Hon. Members: Agreed.

The Deputy Chair: Those opposed? That, too, is carried.

The hon. Deputy Government House Leader.

Mr. Weadick: I'd move that we now rise and report progress on Bill 6.

[Motion carried]

[Mr. Zwozdesky in the chair]

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Member for Strathcona.

Mr. Quest: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The Committee of the Whole has had under consideration a certain bill. The committee reports the following bill: Bill 6.

The Acting Speaker: Does the Assembly concur in the report?

Hon. Members: Concur.

The Acting Speaker: Are there some opposed? No. So ordered, then.

Mr. Weadick: In light of the hour and the work that we've gotten done tonight, I would move that we adjourn until today at 1:30.

[Motion carried; the Assembly adjourned at 12:42 a.m. on Tuesday to 1:30 p.m.]

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Province of Alberta

The 27th Legislature
Fifth Session

Alberta Hansard

Tuesday afternoon, March 20, 2012

Issue 20a

The Honourable Kenneth R. Kowalski, Speaker

Legislative Assembly of Alberta

The 27th Legislature

Fifth Session

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Woo-Paw

Legislative Assembly of Alberta

1:30 p.m.

Tuesday, March 20, 2012

[The Deputy Speaker in the chair]

Prayers

The Deputy Speaker: Hon. members, we have a prayer to say today.

Let us pray. Guide us so that we may use the privilege given us as elected Members of the Legislative Assembly. Give us the strength to labour diligently, the courage to think and to speak with clarity and conviction and without prejudice or pride. Amen. Please be seated.

Introduction of Guests

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Creek.

Mr. Zwozdesky: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It's a great pleasure for me today to introduce to you and through you to all members here some very outstanding students and teachers from a school in my riding of Mill Creek called Blessed Kateri. We have 41 visitors in total. They are joined by their teachers and group leaders Mr. Dan Meunier and Mrs. Anna Primiani. I would ask them all to now rise and receive the wonderful ovation of welcome from our House and all its members. Thank you for coming.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Minister of Education.

Mr. Lukaszuk: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. In view of the fact that a rather historic agreement was signed today between First Nations and Northland school division relevant to bringing education to our aboriginal children at the level that we want all of our children to receive, there are a number of leaders who have actually worked really hard for the last few months to allow this to happen. I would like to introduce them. With us today are Chief James Alook from Peerless Trout First Nation, Chief Eddie Tallman from Whitefish Lake First Nation, and Chief William Whitehead from Woodland Cree First Nation. These three chiefs definitely have made children their priority, and I know we will see the fruit of this partnership very soon.

With them today are a dedicated group of individuals who also have been involved in this agreement: Colin Kelly, the official trustee of the Northland school division; Al Rollins, CEO; Billy Joe Laboucan, education director; Donna Barrett, superintendent; and Linda Pelly, director of FNMI services branch.

I would like them all to rise today and accept the warm welcome of this Assembly. Thank you.

The Deputy Speaker: Do you have a second one, hon. minister?

Mr. Lukaszuk: Mr. Speaker, yes. I also have a group of parents who are administering home-schooling programming to their children. They're with the Home School Christian Fellowship. With us today we have a number of parents with their children representing the Home School Christian Fellowship. I would like them all to rise and identify themselves and receive the warm welcome of this Assembly. If they're not here, they're probably touring this magnificent building, and they will be with us a little bit later on today.

The Deputy Speaker: Hon. Minister of Service Alberta, do you have an introduction?

Mr. Bhullar: Yes, Mr. Speaker, I do. You look very fine overseeing question period. Thank you, sir.

Mr. Speaker, it's my privilege to introduce some members of the hard-working team at Service Alberta. I have Summer Ammar, Dee Carrier, Yvette Chau, Darrelle Cabinet, Margo Meyers, and Sheri Simmonds here in the gallery today. I would ask that they rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of this Assembly. It's a privilege for me to serve as their minister. I'm very proud to work with these fine individuals. Thank you for being here. I ask that all members give them the warm welcome of our Assembly.

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

Mr. Elniski: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure to introduce to you and through you today a group of 35 visitors from the Yellowhead Tribal College who are seated in the members' gallery. Yellowhead Tribal College is a fixture in the constituency of Edmonton-Calder, and you will unlikely ever find a group of people with a stronger desire to succeed. With the group today is their group leader, Linda Anderson. I would ask them all to rise and receive the traditional warm greeting of the Assembly. There they are.

Members' Statements

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

International Marketing

Mr. Xiao: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Access to international markets is essential to increasing the competitiveness of our agriculture industry. Alberta's agriculture and agrifood sector depends on exports, which were worth about \$7 billion in 2010. We are working closely with the federal government, industry leaders, and other provinces to ensure that Alberta's producers and exporters have access to markets to trade their products around the world.

Mr. Speaker, India, China, and Japan are all priority markets for our province, and we have made significant progress in negotiations with all of these countries. India represents a market of more than 1 billion people, and it's one of the world's fastest growing and most important economies.

We also made a breakthrough in market access for beef this year. In January South Korea was the last major market to open its doors to Canadian beef. Before the market closed in 2003, South Korea was our fourth-largest export market, and as of February for the first time since 2003 Canadian processors are able to resume exporting beef tallow to China, a market worth approximately \$50 million per year. As we move forward, Mr. Speaker, we must ensure that Alberta's agriculture and agrifood products maintain a competitive edge over countries such as the United States, New Zealand, Australia, and Brazil.

Mr. Speaker, within the next 10 to 15 years Canada will be one of only a handful of countries producing more food than they consume. Our goal is to make Alberta the preferred agricultural supplier throughout the world.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Airdrie-Chestermere, followed by the hon. Member for Medicine Hat.

Integrity in Government

Mr. Anderson: Mr. Speaker, last night the Minister of Education held a telephone town hall with parents and school board trustees across the province. At one point a constituent of mine asked a question concerning why Airdrie hadn't received the two portables our local school board had asked for to cope with the immense overcrowding in our city schools. The Education minister answered as follows: "You know what? I'm really itching to say it, so I will, even though I know I shouldn't, but the first thing you can do is, actually, in Airdrie call your MLA and ask him not to oppose me in the Legislature" on alternative infrastructure funding methods, meaning debt.

Mr. Speaker, this minister is an embarrassment to the office that he holds. How dare you tell my constituents, parents in my community, in the city that I love and have lived in and called home for 20 years, that they can get the school spaces that we desperately need only when their MLA stops advocating for them in the House?

Mr. Speaker, new evidence of the PC culture of corruption are discovered almost every day now, whether it's the Premier's broken promise and cover-up in health care, the Gary Mar fundraiser, the dozens of investigations by Elections Alberta into illegal donations to the PC Party, billions in unneeded power lines with no competitive bidding, the Member for Dunvegan-Central Peace's threatening letter to his school board, the fact that no PC MLAs will return money earned on their no-meet committees, and now this, the Education minister threatening parents that they won't get the school spaces they need unless their democratically elected MLAs shut up in question period.

Now the minister laughs. He laughed.

Well, guess what? I won't be shutting up anytime soon. I'll be advocating for the people of Airdrie loudly as long as they have me as their representative.

Bad news for you, Minister. You and your party will not be able to bully and intimidate Albertans when they are in the ballot booth in about a month. This will stop, and it's Albertans who will stop it. The time of this PC government is thankfully about to come to a merciful end.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Medicine Hat, followed by the hon. Member for Calgary-Nose Hill.

1:40 Retrospective by the Member for Medicine Hat

Mr. Renner: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. Today I'm rising to address this Assembly for what could be my last time. Like you, Mr. Speaker, I will not be seeking re-election this spring. The decision not to seek a sixth term was almost as difficult as the one I made over 19 years ago to seek a first term. I can only hope that this second decision will provide a fraction of the opportunities for personal growth and learning that I have experienced as a Member of the Legislative Assembly of Alberta.

When I entered public life, I committed to honour and respect the people of Medicine Hat, my family, and my colleagues. But, Mr. Speaker, respect is something that must apply equally to our supporters and critics alike. As I prepare to leave this place, I do so knowing that I have kept that commitment. I have learned that every story has two sides and that every decision has consequences and that sometimes the right decision is not necessarily the most popular decision.

I will have fond memories of the time I spent in this place. I truly believe that members of this Assembly have collectively made Alberta a better place. I'm proud of the role that I was able to play along the way.

Mr. Speaker, I want to thank the people of Medicine Hat for having the confidence in me over five elections, elections that could not have been successful without great campaign managers, financial supporters, and amazing volunteers. I want to thank the dozens of people who supported me between elections at fundraising and party events; in particular, the members of my constituency board, who year in and year out have been my strongest supporters and, when necessary, some of my most vocal critics.

Finally, Mr. Speaker, I want to thank my family. They have been there for me whenever I needed them to share my successes, to cheer me up when I was down, and occasionally to give me a much-needed reality check.

Mr. Speaker, I extend to you and members of the House my very best wishes in wherever your future leads you.

Thank you very much.

The Deputy Speaker: Well, the chair also wants to wish you all the best. For the years that I've known you as a member of the Assembly, you are a great MLA.

State of the Health Care System

Dr. Brown: Mr. Speaker, Alberta has an excellent health care system, one of the finest in North America or the world. However, there is no health care system in existence that does not face significant challenges. Several factors contribute to these challenges. Our population has grown by roughly 700,000 people since 2001, an increase of over 22 per cent. Albertans are living longer and requiring more health care as they age. The costs of technology, health procedures, and drugs have also escalated rapidly. Our challenges include wait times for emergency care and some types of surgeries that are too long. We need more access to long-term care in order to free up acute-care beds. We need more home care to help elderly people stay in their homes longer.

These issues are not going to be solved overnight; however, we are making steady progress. Our province dedicated \$3,860 per person to health care in 2011-12, the highest amount of any Canadian province. Funding for health care is increasing by 7.9 per cent this year. We're making major investments in new acute-care beds. We're investing in primary care networks, urgent care centres, family care clinics, mental health services, and enhanced rehabilitation programs.

Alberta continues to support internationally recognized health research, which is bringing leading-edge clinical treatment to Albertans and to others around the world. We have the best outcomes in the country for treating patients with heart attack and stroke. We have world-class programs in diabetes, cancer treatment, colitis, epilepsy, neonatal intensive care, and many other specialties.

Our government is investing \$25 million in home-care initiatives to keep Albertans in their homes longer. The role of pharmacists is being expanded to allow Albertans another way of obtaining the care they need.

Mr. Speaker, our government will continue working to keep Alberta's health care system among the finest in the world.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Red Deer-North, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview.

Armenian Genocide

Mrs. Jablonski: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. On April 24 of every year Armenians all over the world commemorate the great tragedy of the Armenian genocide because it was on that day in 1915 when 300 Armenian leaders, writers, thinkers, and professionals in

present-day Constantinople were rounded up, deported, and killed.

I commemorate this day each year in memory of my grandparents, who went through this horror in their young lives. I also commemorate the day in honour of all the people – men, women, and children – who have been tortured, who have suffered, and who have died in the massacres of people in the past during the Jewish Holocaust and the Ukrainian Holodomor and people that continue to be tortured around the world in Syria, Rwanda, Sarajevo, Herzegovina.

Mr. Speaker, my question to this Assembly and to the world is: when will this stop? When will we stand up and put a stop to the massacre of people around the world? You know, the only reason that my grandparents survived and the reason I'm here today is because they were loved by the very people that were killing the other Armenians. They were taken into a home, and they were protected and raised so that they could come to America and raise their family. My grandmother and my grandfather survived this genocide because of a Turkish family that raised them with love.

Mr. Speaker, I would say to you that the answer to my question is love and that it has to be great love from the people of the world. Our world can only survive these periods of terror because of just and kind people who have a great capacity to love one another.

My point today to this Assembly is that we must always remember. We must always remember what we talk about in this Assembly all of the time, which is the Jewish Holocaust and the Ukrainian Holodomor, and I raise the Armenian genocide as well. These kinds of torture go on today. We must stand and say: we remember, and no more.

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

Right to Vote

Dr. Taft: Thanks, Mr. Speaker. As Alberta will soon be in an election, it's worth reflecting on how important voting is. Even in Canada voting as we know it is surprisingly recent. Obtaining the vote took centuries of struggle in courts, streets, markets, and meeting halls. At least 20 people were killed in election-related violence in the first half of the 19th century in this country. Among those prohibited from voting have been women, men without land, the poor, Jews, Catholics, Sikhs, Hindus, Chinese, and Canada's aboriginal people.

Earning the right to vote has taken such a long fight because at every step of the way there are those who are opposed to democracy. They felt they knew better than the people or were superior or entitled or that democracy threatened them. The recent robocall scandal suggests those forces have not been vanquished and perhaps never will be.

Canada's courts have often been called on to defend the right to vote. One ruling said:

All forms of democratic government are founded upon the right to vote. Without that right, democracy cannot exist. The marking of a ballot is the mark of distinction of citizens of a democracy. It is a proud badge of freedom . . . every care should be taken to guard against disenfranchisement.

Elsewhere, J.P. Boyer wrote:

Drawing two short lines to form an "X" is the simplest act imaginable. Yet the right to so mark a ballot is as profound as [it] is simple. Such marks, systematically compiled, are transformed by our beliefs and our laws into the most eloquent voice the people have.

Mr. Speaker, may every campaign genuinely respect the right to vote so that the eloquent voice of the people will be heard.

Thank you.

1:50

Oral Question Period

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Official Opposition. First question.

Health Care System

Dr. Sherman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. What good is universal health care if it's universally inaccessible? It's a well-known fact that agonizingly long waits for essential surgeries, emergency care, and 911 calls are due in large part to our seniors being warehoused in acute-care beds because of grossly underfunded and understaffed publicly delivered home care and long-term care. To the Premier. Your plan includes a paltry \$25 million for home care, 30 long-term care beds, and 500 private beds. Why do you persist in supporting a failed seniors' policy which continues to leave our health care system in crisis?

Ms Redford: Mr. Speaker, we've had a record of expanding the number of long-term care beds in this province over the past four years, and that's something that matters because we have to ensure that seniors have choice with respect to continuing care in facilities where they can choose to live and receive publicly funded health care.

Dr. Sherman: Mr. Speaker, given that I'd like to correct the Premier – we actually have fewer long-term care beds today than we had four years ago – and given that the biggest problem is that too many Albertans don't have a family doctor and that only 30 per cent of our medical school graduates are choosing to become one because of this PC government's focus on intimidating doctors, fiddling about with pilot projects, and throwing a few measly bucks at primary care networks on the eve of an election, to the Premier: will you finally admit you don't understand health care? If you don't understand it, you don't know how to fix it.

Ms Redford: Mr. Speaker, we have right now in this province a tremendous partnership with health care professionals in building a model called family care clinics. Family care clinics are what Albertans want, Mr. Speaker, because what they're doing is that they're providing access for families to people who can be health practitioners and provide them with the access and the information that they need and the health care that they need. Family care clinics will include doctors, licensed practical nurses, and other health practitioners who can provide support to moms and dads who want to make sure that they can get access for their kids not in an emergency room at 11 o'clock at night but in their own community.

Dr. Sherman: Mr. Speaker, I'm not sure which planet this Premier has been flying to lately.

Given that we've had wildcat strikes and we've had health professionals running ads in the newspapers about the intimidation of leaders and given that you always talk about publicly funded health care but you never talk about publicly delivered health care, Premier, will you please follow the Alberta Liberal lead and commit to investing \$500 million to delivering world-class home care, long-term care, and primary care led by family doctors?

Ms Redford: These suggestions are not new ideas. This is what we are doing in the government of Alberta today, Mr. Speaker. We are investing in home care. The budget, that is before this House to be passed this week, has increased the number of continuing care spaces, it's increased family care clinic funding, and it's ensured that there are additional resources for home care.

Everything must be about access, and we will continue to work with health care professionals across this province on improving the health care system for everyone.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Official Opposition. Second main question.

Dr. Sherman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. An inadequate answer to a serious problem.

Education Funding

Dr. Sherman: A well-funded education system is the foundation and backbone of our society. In Alberta we have a baby boom and high immigration, which will result in 100,000 more kids in 10 years. We need more teachers and more support for those teachers, and the schools in which they work need to be adequately maintained. Today we have 600 fewer teachers than two years ago. To the Premier. You talk about sustainable, predictable funding, but your three-year plan of 1 per cent/2 per cent/2 per cent fails to keep up with inflation and population growth. Why won't you provide sustainable and adequate funding for public education?

Ms Redford: Mr. Speaker, this government is proud of what we've done to support public education in this province, and I'll start by talking about the \$107 million that went back into classrooms in October, when I became the Premier of this province. Our future is public education, and as opposed to the hon. member, who seems to think this is a great problem that we're going to have another hundred thousand students in the schools, I see it as an opportunity. We'll invest in teachers, we'll invest in infrastructure, and we'll continue to grow this province.

Dr. Sherman: Mr. Speaker, not only has the Premier been skipping out on the Legislature; she skipped out on the last two debates.

To the Premier: given that choice within the publicly delivered education system is a good thing, yet the PCs are funding private schools on a level never seen before, even following the Wildrose's lead in enshrining the word "choice," code for privatization, into legislation, why are you bent on starving our public school system in favour of private, American-style education?

Ms Redford: Mr. Speaker, the great thing about Alberta – and it's what we respect – is parents' right to choose how to educate their children. We have a wide range of opportunities, from home-schooling to charter schools to private schools to public schools to separate schools in this province. We support all of them. It's entirely possible to do that, and we'll continue to do that.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. member.

Dr. Sherman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Given that the Premier is following the Wildrose's lead on privatizing education and given that you've starved the public education system to such an extent that working families are getting nickelled and dimed with school fees and that parents who can't afford these fees are being hounded by collection agencies, to the Premier: will you stop this despicable practice and follow the Alberta Liberal lead by providing public schools with adequate funding and cancel school fees altogether?

Ms Redford: Mr. Speaker, what we have in this province are options for parents to decide how to educate their children. We

have a strong public school system that we as a government are committed to because we believe that it's the future of this province. We also believe it's important for parents to have choice with respect to which schools their children are going to, which programs they might be a part of. Certainly, some of them do involve fees, but those are partly the parents' choices in terms of how we do this. That is key to what happens to the future of education in this province, and that is to give parents the option with respect to how to educate their children.

The Deputy Speaker: Hon. member, you still have your third Official Opposition question.

Dr. Sherman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Madam Premier, thank you for being honest about wanting to privatize education.

Provincial Budget

Dr. Sherman: Mr. Speaker, oil is at a hundred bucks a barrel and Albertans are working harder than ever, yet working families are getting nickelled and dimed to pay school fees, our postsecondary students are getting nickelled and dimed for tuition and fees, and seniors are getting nickelled and dimed for home care and long-term care. Not only do we have a social deficit; we also have a fiscal deficit. The real elephant in the room is that on top of wasteful government spending, we have a revenue problem. Why does the Premier refuse to show courage and admit that we need to bring in a fair tax that would see the richest Albertans and large corporations bear their fair share?

Ms Redford: Mr. Speaker, we're going to pass a budget this week that has no tax increases and no new taxes. We've continued to invest in public education, in public health care, in infrastructure. We've taken care of the most vulnerable people in this province, and we've done it well within a responsible fiscal framework. We are proud of that, and we will proudly not follow the lead of the hon. member's party.

Dr. Sherman: Mr. Speaker, many of the vulnerable are kids and their families and postsecondary students.

Given that a former Canadian Prime Minister once said that an election campaign is a terrible time to talk about policy and it appears that this Premier is following that Prime Minister's lead, to the Premier: why don't you trust Albertans enough to actually engage them in an honest and meaningful conversation instead of trying to spin out of every important issue?

Ms Redford: Mr. Speaker, I'll tell you that I think that when we get into this election, one of the best things we're going to do is talk about policy because this is a government that has put a plan on the table with respect to a throne speech, a budget, and legislation that's going to allow us to set a path for the future of the province. I'm looking forward to any other political party that might actually want to talk about policy in this election.

The Deputy Speaker: Question 3. Go ahead, hon. member.

Dr. Sherman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Premier, really simple: given that oil is at a hundred bucks a barrel and you're not getting our young people the education that they deserve and Albertans the health care that they deserve, when are you going to get it to them, and when are you going to balance the budget? Premier, when are you going to balance the budget and get the public services we need?

Ms Redford: Mr. Speaker, I am really looking forward to what

we're going to be able to talk about in the next couple of months in this province. There's a budget that we've put forward, that we're proud of in this House, that's allowed us to do everything the hon. member has just asked us to do with respect to education, with respect to health care, with respect to infrastructure. We're balancing the budget next year, and that's in our budget.

2:00 School Council Teleconference Remarks

Mr. Anderson: Mr. Speaker, last night, when asked by a constituent of mine why Airdrie hadn't received desperately needed portables, the Education minister answered, "You know what? I'm really itching to say it, so I will, even though I shouldn't, but the first thing you can do, actually, in Airdrie is to call your MLA and ask him not to oppose me in the Legislature" on infrastructure funding. I've got to say, Premier, that the arrogance and stupidity of this minister's comment are breathtaking. Will you immediately fire this minister for his inappropriate and bullying comments? Or is this kind of conduct in line with your Alberta values?

Ms Redford: Mr. Speaker, I understand that it was a very good discussion last night with respect to infrastructure. That's an important discussion for us to be having right now in this province because when this hon. member's party suggested a \$2 billion cut to infrastructure, you've got to know that that's going to impact schools and that's going to impact hospitals. I think what the Minister of Education said was entirely appropriate. We've got to have discussions with respect to infrastructure. If you cut the infrastructure budget, you are going to cut schools, and we won't do that.

Mr. Anderson: What a spineless answer, Premier.

Premier, you happily accepted the resignation from your former chair of the Cabinet Policy Committee on Community Development, the Member for Dunvegan-Central Peace, who implied that one of his school boards would be wise to stop publicly advocating for school improvement so vocally. So why will you now not fire your Education minister for blatantly threatening Alberta parents that they won't get the portables they need until their MLA stops opposing him in question period? Why the obvious double standard? Fire this minister. Show some leadership.

Ms Redford: Mr. Speaker, what I understand my minister said was that it was important for us to talk about alternative financing models and it was important for us to invest in infrastructure. If we do those things, we will be able to build those schools. That's an important policy discussion. It's certainly within his purview to make those comments. That's exactly the choice that Albertans are going to have to make in the next couple of months.

Mr. Anderson: Somebody should introduce this Premier to the truth because she can't seem to find it anywhere.

Premier, I'm going to ask you this one more time, and if you say no, this is all that Albertans need to know about your commitment to change and transparency. Will you commit today that you will immediately direct the Education ministry to publicly publish a full list of all requested new schools and upgrades from school boards across Alberta, starting in order from highest provincial priority to lowest priority, as well as the objective criteria used to arrive at that order of priority so that all Albertans can be confident that you are not handing out new schools and upgrades based on politics.

Ms Redford: Mr. Speaker, what we have in this province is a capital plan that sets priorities for communities and schools across this province. Those are based on the best interests of children.

There is absolutely no reason that any MLA in this House cannot advocate on behalf of the communities that they represent. Part of that advocacy is to decide how we're going to pay for these. I know that this hon. member comes from a party that is always concerned about fiscal responsibility. I would say that what our minister did last night is that he introduced some very important issues with respect to reductions in infrastructure spending that would actually impact the construction of new schools. We don't agree with them.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands-Norwood, followed by the hon. Member for Vermilion-Lloydminster.

Pre-election Commitments

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. The Premier has arranged the timing of the review of MLA salaries so that no decision will be made until after the election. How typical. She's become a master at delay and diversion, the pinnacle of procrastination for political purposes. From health care inquiries to power rates this Premier's stall tactics are becoming a cliché. My question is to the Premier. Why has the Premier engineered this scheme to make sure that voters won't know what compensation their MLAs are going to get until after the election?

Ms Redford: Mr. Speaker, this very Legislative Assembly has requested, because we urged them to do it, an independent report with respect to MLA salary. I emphasize the word "independent." I'll tell you that it's an appropriate method to determine what the compensation should be for all MLAs in this House. We stand behind that.

I took action on that on November 30, within 60 days of becoming the leader of our party and the Premier of this province. I would suggest that any report that is going to be prepared independently by someone as eminent as a retired judge of the Supreme Court of Canada will be released when that person believes that it should be.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Given that this Premier in yet another attempt to divert attention from a difficult issue has asked for an ethics review of Gary Mar's fundraising activities, yet it appears that little progress has been made, will the Premier commit to making a decision on Mr. Mar's future before the election?

Ms Redford: Mr. Speaker, these questions are quite interesting because what I'm hearing from the opposition, whether we're talking about MLA pay or this issue, what he is urging me to do is to step into the middle of a process that is independently regulated at the moment. We know that right now there is a review going on that is independent with respect to an employment contract in relation to that person. Once that review is completed, we will have the results, and proper steps will be taken. But until that is done, we will respect due process, and we will respect the independence of the process.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Given that this Premier set up those processes with the explicit purpose of

delaying issues until after the election, I find that very hard to take.

Given that the Premier has promised her developer friends that the cap on long-term care will be lifted so that they can make a bigger profit from seniors and their families and given that the Minister of Seniors now says that a decision on the fees will not be announced until after the election, will the Premier come clean with Alberta seniors and their families and tell them before the election just how much they can expect to be hosed by our private health care partners?

Ms Redford: Mr. Speaker, this hon. member has suggested something that is absolutely not the case. There has been no discussion or commitment of any kind with respect to removing the cap on seniors' accommodation. Our minister has made that clear. We are going to do what we need to do to ensure that we have a viable and transparent and real dialogue with Albertans about what the future of continuing care will be. What this hon. member has said is absolutely not the case.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Vermilion-Lloydminster, followed by the hon. Member for Calgary-Mountain View.

Century Farm and Ranch Award

Mr. Snelgrove: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Many years ago the Alberta government introduced a program to recognize our centennial farm families, families that had stayed on their homestead for over a hundred years. It's an incredibly important program, and it's very much appreciated by those pioneers. There are other institutions in Alberta that have contributed a great deal to the farm industry in Alberta. Several of them are reaching or going to attain their hundred-year status also, those being Olds, Fairview, and Lakeland College in Vermilion-Lloydminster. So my question today will be to the minister of agriculture. Would he consider adjusting or maybe amending the program so that these institutions who don't quite qualify under the current criteria would be eligible to receive the same recognition from the province as our farm families?

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development.

Mr. Berger: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'd like to thank that hon. member not only for his question but for his years of service to his constituency and to our province.

Mr. Speaker, I'm pleased to say that that hon. member brought this forward to me as a question, and I've been working on that. I'd like to announce here today that we have instituted a program similar to the Century farm award, and as they hit their 100th anniversary, we will be awarding those three agricultural colleges bronze plaques commemorating that event.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Snelgrove: Thank you. Thank you, Mr. Minister. The Lakeland College demonstration farm actually achieved its hundred years last year.

From the sound in here today I think you would appreciate that there may be an election called soon, so my question to the minister would be: how soon can we proceed with the paperwork and the process required to purchase and present these plaques?

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Berger: Thank you again, Mr. Speaker. We have instituted the program, so this year we will present the plaque to Lakeland College. Next year the Olds College will celebrate its 100th anniversary.

I want to congratulate all of these colleges for their production of thousands of good agricultural producers across our province. These are the people that provide the food for Albertans and millions of other people around the world on a daily basis.

2:10

Mr. Snelgrove: Mr. Speaker, as we had the opportunity and the privilege to present these plaques, we heard some incredible stories from these pioneers. My next supplemental to the minister would be: would he consider making available to MLAs or people in his department the opportunity to film and record some of these stories so they can take their rightful place in the archives of Alberta?

Mr. Berger: Mr. Speaker, that's a wonderful suggestion. I think it's something that we need to do, and I would make that part of the presentation, that we have those stories put on the record and kept in archives as well.

Thank you to the member.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Mountain View, followed by the hon. Member for Bonnyville-Cold Lake.

Edith Cavell Continuing Care Centre Collective Bargaining

Dr. Swann: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My questions are for the Human Services minister. For the third time in a year this government has flexed its muscles and intervened in a legitimate bargaining process between workers who feed and care for our seniors and a private seniors' care operator, the Lethbridge Edith Cavell Care Centre. Despite these centres receiving public dollars to allow staff salaries equal to those at Alberta Health, the employer has refused to give salaries equal to those in Alberta Health Services. Surely dissatisfied staff and frequent turnovers do not serve seniors' interests. Why is the minister repeatedly disrespecting the bargaining process and the nursing and support staff?

Mr. Hancock: Mr. Speaker, always in life there are value choices that people have to make. In this particular circumstance I choose to stand on the side of the people who will be harmed by labour action. The evidence is clear that moving frail seniors is not in their best interests, and if there's not a good plan in place to take care of those seniors in the event of strike action, that's exactly what a dispute inquiry board is intended for.

Dr. Swann: Well, Mr. Speaker, is the minister aware of such a wage disparity between employees in this institution and Alberta Health Services?

Mr. Hancock: Mr. Speaker, it's neither appropriate nor my role to interfere with the collective bargaining process in terms of how they come to their wages, only to ensure that third parties are not inappropriately affected. By putting in place a dispute inquiry board, the parties get to continue to discuss the wage levels and then reach a contract. That process will continue and, hopefully, will reach an appropriate conclusion negotiated between the two parties. In the meantime I refuse to allow frail and elderly seniors to be affected by the labour dispute.

Dr. Swann: New workers come in during strikes, Mr. Speaker.

Coming just before an election call, this clearly shows that this government will do anything to hide uncomfortable issues. How many more can we expect of these ham-fisted interventions in established labour processes?

Mr. Hancock: The hon. member can expect no ham-fisted interventions because there haven't been and there will not be ham-fisted interventions. The type of intervention we have is looking very carefully at the situation to determine whether third parties will be inappropriately affected, where their lives would be at risk, where their health would be at risk. That's what we do, and that's why there are appropriate processes like dispute inquiry boards to be put in place. I'm not aware at the moment of any other circumstances where a strike vote is imminent or has been taken, but one has to look at each situation on its own merits to determine whether innocent third parties will be harmed or affected before a decision of that nature can be made.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Bonnyville-Cold Lake, followed by the hon. Member for Calgary-Buffalo.

Productivity Alberta

Mrs. Leskiw: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Alberta businesses are an important part of the continued growth of our economy. My first question is to the President of Treasury Board and Enterprise. What is the government doing to help our businesses become more competitive and efficient?

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Horner: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. Yesterday morning I was involved in a joint federal-provincial announcement at Tyco Thermal Controls regarding Productivity Alberta. Productivity Alberta is a not-for-profit corporation that works closely with businesses to help them increase efficiency and to help promote investment and attraction and best practices in our province.

In response to the recommendations that were made by the Alberta Competitiveness Council, the government of Alberta – I announced this yesterday – is providing \$7.3 million to support the work of Productivity Alberta over the next three years. As well, our federal colleagues contributed \$3 million through Western Economic Diversification because they believe in it, too.

Mrs. Leskiw: Mr. Speaker, my next question is to the same minister. Can you elaborate on the work that Productivity Alberta does? [interjections]

Mr. Horner: Mr. Speaker, I know the hon. members from the Wildrose Alliance don't like productivity, but we're going to work on it.

Mr. Speaker, Productivity Alberta's board includes senior leaders from Alberta's most innovative production companies such as Tyco. They work with industries throughout Alberta to assess their business practices, to explore ways that they can become more effective and efficient and profitable and productive. Those advisers work one-on-one with the companies to see where they might be able to add some value into what they're doing and help link businesspeople with the information and the resources. That's improving energy efficiency. That's improving a number of areas in their business.

Mrs. Leskiw: My last question is to the same minister. Funding is one thing, but concrete results are another. You say that they are

making a difference. Can you give specific examples of Productivity Alberta's success?

Mr. Horner: Well, Mr. Speaker, let me tell you about McLevin Industries. McLevin is based in Red Deer. It's a family-run steel fabrication business, and many of their business practices were done manually and were very time consuming. After working with Productivity Alberta, what they've been able to achieve is a new software system. They've been able to improve their inventory tracking, their production on the floor.

Mr. Speaker, when you have productive small enterprises, you're going to attract more investment. You're going to build more economy. You're going to create a bigger pie. That's how this province is going to grow, by us helping small businesses be profitable.

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

Home-schooling

Mr. Hehr: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Nothing a society does is more important than educating its children, but this government is caving in to a very noisy minority who would like to see Alberta's education system fragmented into tiny bits and have the taxpayer cover the costs. To the Minister of Education: given the direction the government is going with public education, what is to prevent the public funding of a school of Scientology or Druids or a school for witches and Wiccans?

Mr. Lukaszuk: Well, Mr. Speaker, I won't engage in that kind of dialogue because people in Alberta, Albertans, make choices on the education of their children, and I would never compare any parent who is choosing to home-school their child to being involved in witchcraft or whatever the member may be suggesting. Let me tell you one thing that is important. We have a piece of legislation on this floor that will be amazing for more than 600,000 children in this province, that will unleash 21st century education, that will curb bullying, and the list goes on and on. It would be a shame to not pass this legislation for the benefit of our kids.

Mr. Hehr: Given that yesterday the minister stated that there is nothing more important to him than giving parents "choice and the ability to teach what they want, when they want, and where they want without any interference from government," is the minister comfortable with parents teaching that homosexuality is a sin or that evolution is not real?

Mr. Lukaszuk: Mr. Speaker, I do find it somewhat troubling that the member would actually go on record and suggest that parents are into witchcraft at home or teaching kids some horrible things. As a matter of fact, as a parent I'll tell you that when I come home . . . [interjections] Mr. Speaker, I would appreciate the courtesy of being able to answer the question.

The Deputy Speaker: The minister has the floor.

The hon. member.

Mr. Hehr: I'd like to ask the minister directly about his apparent lapses or his delving into teachings at home. Is the minister comfortable with parents teaching at home, when they're teaching the education curriculum, teaching things like homosexuality being a sin or that evolution is not real?

Mr. Lukaszuk: Please, listen to the answer. I am comfortable with the fact that parents have the right of teaching their children and passing on their family values, their religious beliefs, and their morality. This is what we do as parents. Whether my daughter comes from a public school or whether she stays at home all day long, I still take responsibility for teaching her what is right and what is wrong, so that aspect has nothing to do with home-schooling. That is what we all as parents have the primary right to do, and we continue doing that.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

2:20 Provincial Tax Policy

Mr. Bhardwaj: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. My questions are to the Minister of Finance. Albertans enjoy the lowest overall tax regime among all provinces. However, my constituents are concerned whether the upcoming fiscal framework review will include an increase in taxes.

Mr. Liepert: Well, Mr. Speaker, I think it's understandable why this hon. member's constituents might be a little confused because we do have a party out there that's advocating for higher taxes, and they advocate in this House on a regular basis. We also have another group of individuals that sort of masquerades as a party that is spreading rumours out there that there's going to be a tax increase. So I'm not surprised that his constituents are confused. But Budget 2012 clearly states that there are no new taxes this year, next year, or the year after.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Bhardwaj: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. My next question is to the same minister. Some are arguing that raising taxes would be a quick way to produce additional revenues for the province. Is the minister considering raising taxes in some areas to increase government revenue?

Mr. Liepert: Mr. Speaker, as I said earlier, I know that there is one party – and then, of course, there's another party way over there with a couple of members – that advocated that we increase royalties a few years ago. A number of Albertans were also asking that. We did that, and it didn't work very well, so what we need to do is focus on creating a bigger economic pie instead of trying to find different ways to carve up the existing pie.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Bhardwaj: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My final supplemental is regarding taxation on Alberta businesses. To the same minister. Other provinces are lowering their tax regime for businesses so that their rate is below Alberta's. What is Alberta's response to their efforts?

Mr. Liepert: Mr. Speaker, this is not a race to the bottom to see who can have the lowest tax regime. What it is, really, is to ensure that there's a fair tax regime that . . . [interjections]

The Deputy Speaker: The minister has the floor.

Mr. Liepert: You're darn right I do, Mr. Speaker.

This is ensuring that we have a fair tax system that encourages investment. Let me give you a figure that just happened to be released today by the Royal Bank of Canada. This shows that we have the right taxation system, Mr. Speaker, because last year,

2011, 99,000 jobs were created in Alberta, more than half – more than half – of what was created in all of Canada.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre, followed by the hon. Member for Lesser Slave Lake.

Caribou Habitat Protection

Ms Blakeman: Thanks very much, Mr. Speaker. Recently I asked why this government took first place as the single biggest killer of bears in the province. Now I have to ask why it is fighting for the title of the single biggest killer of wolves. Instead of doing what every expert knows needs to be done to save the caribou, which is to protect its habitat, this government employs the antiquated policy of murdering wolves to slow the caribou population decline. To the Minister of SRD: why does the minister consider the slaughter of wolves and bears an acceptable option when it is clear that habitat destruction is the problem?

Mr. Oberle: Mr. Speaker, first of all, we've spoken about the very unfortunate killing of bears, and I want to make sure that Albertans understand that that has absolutely nothing whatsoever to do with caribou. The unfortunate interaction of bears and humans and the interests of protecting public safety is what caused the unfortunate shooting of bears last year. As the hon. member knows, I've already asked for a review of the policy governing camp allocation and how much my department monitors camps to make sure it can't happen again.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. member.

Ms Blakeman: Thanks very much. Well, the minister knows that culls are a short-term Band-Aid solution which doesn't address the fact that the caribou have nowhere to go and nowhere to live. How is this government going to address the real problem, that the caribou are being pushed out by development?

Mr. Oberle: Mr. Speaker, actually, I would agree with the hon. member that the culling, or the control, of wolves is a short-term solution and not likely to be successful in the long term. But given the current circumstance of my being unable to plunk new habitat on the landscape, the wolf program will be an effective short-term solution, and it will only be used as a short-term solution.

Ms Blakeman: Well, back to the same minister. I'm not hearing a long-term solution, which has to be working with the oil and gas sector to make sure that there are corridors to allow the caribou to move about and find a new habitat. All I hear is that you won't use the cull unless you have to. What are you actually doing to fix this problem long term, Mr. Minister?

Mr. Oberle: Mr. Speaker, the member hasn't been around for the last few years, apparently, to listen to things like the land-use strategy, which sets aside new protected areas for caribou, talks about connectivity on the landscape. More to come.

I don't know why that member insists on this American style of questioning, but it's not fruitful.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Lesser Slave Lake, followed by the hon. Member for Calgary-Glenmore.

First Nations Education

Ms Calahasen: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. One of the components of the Minister of Education's 10-point plan includes supporting First Nations education. More often than not, First Nations schools

operate in isolation without the necessary educational supports that are available to provincially funded schools. This has affected the learning environment and ultimately the achievement of First Nations students. First Nations students are Albertans, and they should receive the same top-notch education as other Albertans. My question is to the Minister of Education. What in the world are you doing to change this situation to ensure that First Nations students get a top-notch education?

Mr. Lukaszuk: Mr. Speaker, the hon. member is definitely right, frankly. Not only in Alberta but throughout our entire dominion what has been done in however good faith for the last 150 years simply has not worked. Our aboriginal population deserves the education that we all expect our children to receive in Canada and particularly in Alberta. That is why today in the gallery we have a group of leaders, education leaders, both chiefs of local First Nations and educators who are willing to look outside the proverbial box and start delivering education to aboriginal kids in a way that is collaborative and will yield results.

Ms Calahasen: To the same minister, then: how soon will these supports become available to the First Nations schools in that area, especially in the constituency of Lesser Slave Lake?

Mr. Lukaszuk: Mr. Speaker, starting now. These leaders that I referred to have signed an agreement right now. As a matter of fact, our federal minister of aboriginal affairs, Minister Duncan, and I are willing and are interested in assisting in making sure that this collaboration and this agreement is a successful one. We will be lending our educational resources; the federal government will be lending their federal aboriginal relations resources. We know we have a group of aboriginal and education leaders who are all in collaboration and will make sure that we turn this agreement into a success.

Ms Calahasen: Mr. Speaker, given the fact that agreements like this are so important, no matter what happens, to ensure that aboriginal students get the same kind of education as other Albertans, to the minister again: with this type of agreement how is it going to impact other First Nations communities in this province?

Mr. Lukaszuk: I certainly hope that First Nations and other colleagues in provincial governments and elsewhere are looking at this model. This is, indeed, innovative, and it shows that when you have three orders of government together with a school board working together and making children, and children only, their priority, good things can happen. There is no reason why aboriginal children cannot benefit from the same educational and economic benefit that we expect the rest of our children in Canada to benefit from.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Glenmore, followed by the hon. Member for Calgary McCall.

School Council Teleconference Remarks (continued)

Mr. Hinman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The bullying, the intimidation, the cover-ups, and the culture of corruption continues to expose itself every day. Billions handed out for untendered power lines experts say we don't need. Doctors have been bullied and intimidated. Grimshaw was told to keep quiet if they wanted school repairs. Now, today, we have a Minister of Education who has been really itching to tell the parents in Airdrie

that the best way to get the desperately needed school portables is to have an MLA who doesn't oppose him. Really. This culture of corruption continues day in and day out. Now, when will this Premier show some real-life leadership and ask this minister to retire?

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. President of Treasury Board.

Mr. Horner: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The Premier has answered this question already in the House. I would just add that the MLA in question has obviously been very opposed to us looking at alternative financing for things like schools and like hospitals and other things. Their party has already said that they're going to take \$2 billion out of their phantom budget. That would mean that there would be no schools, no hospitals built in some areas around the province.

Mr. Hinman: That's absolutely offensive. This is about school portables, not on running government debt.

Is the Minister of Education going to hide behind the complicit Premier, who continues to deny to Albertans that a rampant culture of bullying and economic intimidation exists, or is he actually going to do the honourable thing and follow the example of the hon. Member for Dunvegan-Central Peace and hand in his resignation today? Now. Stand up, and hand it in now.

2:30

Mr. Lukaszuk: Mr. Speaker, I can assure you of one thing that I will do. I will stop telling the truth about them if they stop telling the lies about me.

Mr. Hinman: And this guy talks about bullying. He's an embarrassment to the whole school system.

Given the importance of leading by example for our children, especially when it comes to bullying, and given that this minister accepted the broadened definition of bullying to not just students but to everyone included in the school system and given that this minister refuses to do the honourable thing and hand in his resignation for his disgusting and unacceptable comments, Madam Premier, fire this bullying minister today.

Mr. Lukaszuk: Mr. Speaker, just listen to the language and look at the demeanour, and that tells you everything. It is unfortunate that an elected member of this Legislature cannot talk with parents or Albertans, actually musing about different ways of building schools and delivering schools today for kids that actually need them today and not later. Look at how upset it makes them. Look at what foul language we have to listen to simply by introducing an innovative idea.

Mr. Speaker, I won't stop doing that. I will continue doing that, and I will make sure that it comes to fruition so that our kids get the schools today that they need today.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-McCall, followed by the hon. Member for Calgary-North Hill.

Trucking Safety Regulations

Mr. Kang: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Last year Alberta Transportation introduced a commercial driver's abstract to include information on drivers' nonmoving safety violations like badly secured loads and mechanical problems. Now I'm hearing complaints from truck drivers that the system is unfair because it punishes the drivers for the owners' mistakes. To the Minister of Transportation: why do safety violations that are not the drivers'

fault, such as broken safety belts, show up on the drivers' commercial abstracts and not on the company's record?

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Minister of Transportation.

Mr. Danyluk: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I think I need to make it very clear that the safety of our highways is the primary focus and direction of our ministry, whether it's building roads, whether it's looking at the traffic counts and seeing how much traffic is on the highways, whether it's distracted driving, whether it's impaired driving, or whether it's the safety of the vehicles or trucks that individuals drive. It is about the safety of our roads, and it is about the safety of the equipment that is on our roads. We will continue to do that. We have looked at many different, innovative ways of how we can work with companies to ensure that companies self-police the fleets that they have. It is working very well.

Mr. Kang: Well, Mr. Speaker, if it's working very well, then drivers would not be complaining to us here.

To the minister again: given that a U.S. investigation recently found that thousands of freighting companies were breaking the rules by forcing drivers to be on the road for longer hours, what is your department doing to make sure that companies are following safe practices?

Mr. Danyluk: Mr. Speaker, the hon. member does make a point. When we look at the length of time that drivers are allowed to be on the road in Alberta and on a national basis, the national basis allows drivers to be on the road for an accumulated amount of 13 hours. In Alberta we have 14 hours. We try to accommodate the oil patch, and we try to accommodate the individuals that are driving in our area, but at the same time we very much have to look at the safety for the rest of the people that are on the roads.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Kang: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. To the same minister again: given that Albertans travelling on highways want to know trucking companies' safety records, will your department consider posting company safety records online like AHS posts restaurant health inspections?

Mr. Danyluk: You know, Mr. Speaker, I'm not exactly sure of the extent of the comments of the hon. member, but he definitely got my attention, and I'd be willing to talk to him about it because I'm not exactly sure where he's going.

Mr. Speaker, I do want to say to you that the trucking industry and the Alberta Motor Transport Association work very hard to ensure the safety of other people on the roads and the safety of their drivers. Anything that we can do to encourage that safety, anything that we can do to enhance safety inspections for vehicles, that would address problems before they happen, and to do testing, we're going to do. So I would very gladly meet with the hon. member.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-North Hill, followed by the hon. Member for Calgary-Varsity.

Student Finance System

Mr. Fawcett: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. We all know that when you have a prosperous and booming economy like we do here in this province, there are a number of challenges that go with it. Certainly, meeting our skilled labour shortages is one of them. My questions are to the Minister of Advanced Education

and Technology. We put a lot of effort into getting students into our universities, making sure that they can afford them, building the appropriate spaces, but what are we doing to make sure that when they've completed, they stay and work here in Alberta?

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Minister of Advanced Education and Technology.

Mr. Weadick: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. That is a good question. It is a challenge as we see that we're going to have some labour shortages across the province, so keeping our brightest and best here is so critically important. First off, to attract students here, we have one of the finest postsecondary systems and great student supports and also consistent three-year funding for our postsecondaries, which provides the kind of stabilities that students want to see. The other thing is that we have some of the best communities to live in and some of the best workplaces to work in in the country, so this attracts and keeps students in the province. We're also working to ensure that students have the specific kind of training that they need.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. member

Mr. Fawcett: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I've heard a number of students indicate over the last little bit that a number of students are leaving because other jurisdictions are providing attractive incentive programs. My first supplemental to the same minister: what is he doing about this? You know, grants are fine, but what else can be done to make sure that they stay here?

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Weadick: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. We have made some significant changes to our student finance programs. We've made it easier for students to get involved by removing parental requirements. We've created a flat contribution of \$1,500 in lieu of earnings. No longer do students have to spend their RRSPs prior to getting an education. We've created a new and unique program, which is our retention grants, which will allow us to give students that stay in this province in selected fields grants for staying here that will help pay off their loans.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Fawcett: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. My final supplemental is to the same minister. We know that the future of our economy is a knowledge-based economy, so what is the minister doing to attract more graduate students here to this province?

Mr. Weadick: Well, Mr. Speaker, actually, attracting the brightest and best graduate students is one of those challenges that we do face, and we're working very closely with all of our universities to try to attract the brightest and best grad students. You may not know it, but Alberta has some of the lowest graduate student tuitions in this country. They are significantly lower than other provinces. We just recently changed our student finance so that graduate students that are studying part-time can access student finance so that they can gain the necessary funding they need to be able to come here and work. We also are looking at jobs and opportunities for graduate students to work and gain experience while they're here.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Varsity, followed by the hon. Member for Strathcona.

Water Management

Mr. Chase: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. For years this sorry government has rejected the scientific, evidence-based, peer-reviewed research of Alberta's leading water quality expert, Dr. David Schindler. Schindler, who has chastised the province over its water mismanagement from the Athabasca in the north to the Oldman in the south has recently been exonerated and embraced in the hypocritical hope that his credibility would make up for this government's lack thereof. To the Premier: having finally recognized Schindler's credentials, why aren't you immediately implementing his water protection strategies?

Dr. Morton: Mr. Speaker, the Minister of Environment and Water has met with Dr. Schindler and is discussing the best way to proceed to respond to the comments he's made and, in fact, does have a monitoring program under review.

Mr. Chase: It's actually time to stop monitoring and to start fixing.

Why, despite Schindler's warnings, are you allowing over half of the Castle's meagre forest to be uprooted, damaging the watershed on which all downstream users from Beaver Mines to Lethbridge and all the way to Medicine Hat are dependent?

2:40

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Minister of Sustainable Resource Development.

Mr. Oberle: Mr. Speaker, thank you. The situation in the Castle is, in fact, that we not only incorporated the watersheds in the planning of the harvest there, but we've been monitoring, and they show that the watersheds are, in fact, extremely healthy. The modelling that we've done, projecting harvesting forward, by an independent body at the University of Alberta has actually predicted that there will be absolutely no measurable effect on the watershed.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Chase: Thank you. Again to the Minister of SRD: given the moratorium on issuing water licences in our southern watershed, will you table the studies which indicate that clear-cutting in the Castle and Bragg Creek areas is economically and environmentally sustainable with negligible negative impact on the rapidly approaching 2 million adversely affected southern citizens of this province? Show us the evidence. Table it.

Mr. Oberle: Mr. Speaker, that hon. member clearly wants to revisit the land-use question in this province. At the moment the Castle harvesting and, in fact, all of our forest harvesting is the result of a decision taken by previous governments. We have the land-use decision open right now in the South Saskatchewan, and then there will be the North Saskatchewan, and then there will be the upper Athabasca, and then there will be the upper Peace. All of those land-use decisions are open for revisiting, so I invite those hon. members to participate.

I would point out that if they wish to indulge in their dastardly plan to tax corporations, first you have to have corporations.

The Deputy Speaker: Hon. members, before we go further, I just want to recognize some news here. The hon. Member for Rocky Mountain House and the hon. Member for Lesser Slave Lake are celebrating their 23rd year in the Assembly today.

There were two points of order raised during question period, so I will deal with those after.

Notices of Motions

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Airdrie-Chestermere.

Mr. Anderson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Pursuant to Standing Order 15 I would like to circulate a copy of a motion for a point of privilege at this time. I'll let it circulate first, and then I'll read it into the record.

Tabling Returns and Reports

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Minister of Culture and Community Services.

Mrs. Klimchuk: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Today I'm tabling five copies of correspondence to the MLAs for Edmonton-Centre, Edmonton-Strathcona, and Calgary-Fish Creek as well as the written responses to questions from consideration of the main estimates for the Ministry of Culture and Community Services that took place on the evening of February 22, 2012.

The Deputy Speaker: Hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona, do you have some tablings?

Ms. Notley: Yes. Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I have several tablings, actually. I have the appropriate number of copies of a letter from Wanda Ziober of Sherwood Park. She writes: "Thank you for your concern in our energy bills. Please find mine as it has doubled." Her February 2012 bill for electricity was \$503.50.

I also have the appropriate number of copies of a bill and an e-mail from Cindy and Gilles Sergerie of Okotoks. They said that they have "hopes that something can be done about this burden placed on the residents of Alberta." Their January 2012 bill was \$593.47.

I have a note from Corey Myer of Chestermere, who sent us an e-mail where he said, "Pretty soon we might as well get out the candles and sit in the dark." His bill for January 2012 was \$505.14.

I have the appropriate number of copies of an e-mail and a power bill from Jim and Sharon Bleaney of Calgary. Jim wrote: "I . . . truly believe deregulation has done nothing for the majority of us . . . it was designed for 20% of the customers who purchase 80% of the power." Their electricity charges for February 2012 were \$206.42.

Ben Biro of Athabasca sent his EPCOR bill for January 2012 in the amount of \$446.41, and I'm tabling the appropriate number of copies of his letter, which says: "I feel sorry for those on fixed incomes. This for me has been devastating."

Mike Shkrobot's bill for February 2012 was \$1,066.87. I have the appropriate number of copies of that.

I have the appropriate number of copies of a bill from Andrew Spisak of Edmonton. He had an EPCOR bill for January 2012 in the amount of \$439.80.

I have a bill and a note from Walter Kostyniuk of Wabamun, who's a senior citizen who's unable to pay his power bills in full now. His electricity charges for January 2012 were \$199.30.

Reuben Coleman of Athabasca sent us a bill from February 2012 in the amount of \$178.55.

Marvin Serediak of Edmonton sent us his EPCOR bill for February 2012. His electricity alone in that month cost him \$160.72.

Leighton Thompson of Calgary sent us his bill for January 2012 where his electricity charges were \$206.59.

Edwin Matthews of Forty Mile county sent us his February 2012 bill in the amount of \$924.12.

We also received an EPCOR bill from S. Erhardt of Edmonton, whose electricity energy costs for February 2012 were \$173.54.

Lawrence Berland of Lac La Biche sent us his North Parkland Power bill from January 2012, and the total was \$342.81.

Kevin Nutt of Pickardville sent us his January 2012 bill in the amount of \$662.95.

I'll leave it at that for the moment, Mr. Speaker.

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

Dr. Swann: Thanks, Mr. Speaker. I'm going to table from 10 individuals, with the appropriate number of copies, who are very concerned about the lack of treatment, lack of resources for those with mental illness due to cutbacks in beds, staffing, funding, and resources for appropriate programming and community housing, placing everyone at risk, from front-end workers such as police and mental health workers to the community at large, and, more importantly, violating the Charter of Rights for the mentally ill by warehousing them in prison systems without proper treatment.

The Deputy Speaker: Hon. member, please, briefly with the tabling.

Dr. Swann: Thank you.

The Deputy Speaker: Hon. Member for Fort McMurray-Wood Buffalo, you wish to table?

Mr. Boutilier: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I have a letter from an Albertan from Daysland, Deb Kirk. Deb is with the Concerned Neighbours in Partnership. Of course, they are very concerned relative to the issue of property landowner rights and democratic rights that they believe have clearly not been represented by this government. They're asking for the repeal of Bill 19; as well as Bill 23, the amending portion; the Alberta Land Stewardship Act; and its amending Bill 10; as well as the Electric Statutes Amendment Act, Bill 50; and also the carbon capture and storage bill, Bill 24. She is submitting these names – and I might add that there are 387 – for restoring property and democratic rights of Alberta landowners.

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

Mr. Chase: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I am tabling a further 20 letters, out of the hundreds I've received, from the following individuals who are concerned about the proposed logging in the west Bragg Creek area. They are requesting a complete, facilitated, and accessible public consultation: Sol Castro, Peter Baltais, Dr. David Rival, Scott Diehl and family, Cody Mitchell, Raemie Brown, Nancy Brophy, Colette Novicki, Kevin Griffiths, Mike McKinney, Daryl Ann Dorosz, Sarah Robison, Carole Richards, Peta Stuart, Kendall Selk, Craig Adolph, Trace Dyfolt, Sherman Mah, Jackie Boyd, and Steven John Dueck.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Tablings to the Clerk

The Clerk: I wish to advise the House that the following documents were deposited with the office of the Clerk. On behalf of the hon. Mr. Liepert, Minister of Finance, pursuant to the provincial judges and masters in chambers registered and unregistered pension plans regulation Provincial Judges and Masters in Chambers Registered and Unregistered Pension Plans annual report for the year ended March 31, 2011.

Pursuant to the Members of the Legislative Assembly Pension

Plan Act the Members of the Legislative Assembly Pension Plan annual report for the year ended March 31, 2011.

The Deputy Speaker: Hon. members, may we revert briefly to Introduction of Guests?

[Unanimous consent granted]

2:50

Introduction of Guests

(continued)

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Minister of Health and Wellness.

Mr. Horne: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker, and thank you to my colleagues. I'm very pleased and very proud to introduce to you and through you today to all members six individuals who work in the health policy and service standards division of Alberta Health and Wellness. This group plays a very important role in all areas of planning for our health care system, and their skills and leadership and expertise contribute significantly to strengthening policy capacity within my ministry. Here with us today are Afiba Aku, Shaughnessy Fulawka, Tamara Kulyk, Claire Neeland, Chrissy Searle, and Richard Thorne. I'd ask them to please rise and receive a very warm welcome from the Assembly.

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

Dr. Sherman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I have two introductions. One is a group of three truly amazing women: one who gave birth to me, one who puts up with me, and one who gave birth to the woman who puts up with me. Santosh Sherman is my mother of 46 years. She came to this country as a young immigrant woman with three children. She was pregnant. She has worked hard, tirelessly, to feed me and my brothers, to give us hope, to encourage us when our spirits were dashed. Interestingly enough, she actually sewed the uniforms for the Edmonton Oilers when we were the city of champions. I'd like my mother to rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of the Assembly. This is also the first anniversary of our father's passing, when God took our father. Thank you, Mom.

I would also like to introduce you to Sharon McCrary, who is my life partner, who has helped me go through the past few years. You know, we've had good times and bad times here in the Legislature. At the end of the day she is the rock and the foundation of my life to help me serve Albertans. Sharon, thank you so much for everything that you do for me so that I can serve Albertans. Another truly amazing woman is Rita McCrary. Rita is Sharon's mother. Rita, I thank you so much for raising such a wonderful daughter. I couldn't do what I do without her. Thank you to all three of these fabulous woman. Please give them the traditional warm welcome of the Assembly.

Mr. Speaker, I also met a wonderful woman in the lobby of the Legislature. Her name is Margaret Saunter. Margaret is an advocate for seniors, and she's been fighting for better care for our seniors. Please give Margaret the traditional warm welcome of the Assembly as well.

Thank you.

The Deputy Speaker: We have two points of order raised by the Government House Leader. Point of order number one.

Point of Order

Referring to the Absence of Members

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. During question period today – I think it was in the second set of questions, if I remember

correctly – the Leader of the Opposition referred in his question to the absence of the Premier, basically a process that has been ongoing over the last few days. I think it appropriate under *Beauchesne's* 481(c) to remind the hon. member that referring to the presence or absence of a member in this House is not parliamentary.

There's a reason for that. It's not simply that we don't want to tell on each other. It's because we acknowledge the fact that as MLAs, as cabinet ministers, as the Premier we work very hard and we have lots of different duties. We engage in committee work, we travel the province, we meet with people, and it's not always possible for everybody to be in their chair at every moment of the day.

The Premier has acquitted herself remarkably since her election as leader of our party and since she was sworn in as Premier of this province, and it's entirely unseemly for these continuing references to absence. I would ask you to remind hon. members that under 481(c) of *Beauchesne's* referring to the presence or absence of a member is inappropriate.

Now, there are appropriate times when you can refer to the absence of a member, Mr. Speaker. The leader of the Wildrose Alliance had an opportunity to run for election, chose not to, and is therefore not in this House. That's an appropriate time to refer to absence.

But with respect to members of the House we are elected to serve in this House. We're called to be here when the Legislature is in session, but it's also understood that there are times when members are absent, and it's unparliamentary to refer to their absence.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre on the point of order.

Ms Blakeman: Yes, Mr. Speaker, on the point of order. Thank you very much to the Government House Leader. Yes, indeed, he has given the correct citation under 481(c) referring to the presence or absence of specific members. But as I go through a number of other citations, the *House of Commons*, page 614, for starters, it is intended to be the observation of the presence or absence of members currently, not whether they were here last week or three months ago. It's meant to be the current absence because, as the Government House Leader has said, they could be out of the room at this moment for any given reason, including some rather embarrassing personal ones, and that's just not fair. We don't know why they're not here.

More to the point here, Mr. Speaker, is that the leader was extemporizing off of the questions that he had in front of him and was referring specifically to the absence of the leader of the government in education debates, which took place in Calgary in the middle of February and in Edmonton on March 17 and 12. She, in fact, ended up being the only leader of a political party that did not participate in those educational forums, and that is what he was referring to.

We do not have the benefit of the Blues – I don't; I don't think the Government House Leader does either – but if it sounded like he was referring to a current presence or absence, then I would respectfully withdraw those comments. Clearly, that's not what he intended. He wanted to specifically address the absence of the Premier at the debates, of which there have now been three opportunities for her to appear and to debate the education policy, which is of such interest to everyone in Alberta right now and, as the Premier says, of such interest to her. It was very puzzling as to why she forewent any opportunity to have attended these three different debates. She was in fact invited to participate in them.

Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

The Deputy Speaker: On the point of order, the hon. Member for Calgary-Glenmore.

Mr. Hinman: I have to stand up because generally this House leader tries to articulate, and I don't know whether it was because I was engaged in two conversations, but if I heard him correctly, he was trying to say, you know, where we can and can't talk about someone missing.

To bring up the leader of the Wildrose and say that she failed to run to be in this House is ridiculous. Maybe the Blues will later show, but that's what I thought he said. It's just remarkable how he's complaining about someone else talking about his leader, and then he turns around and, with hypocrisy, starts talking about other ones. I'm just amazed.

The Deputy Speaker: Any others?

The chair shall now make a ruling here. It's a relevant citation from the House leader, *House of Commons Procedure and Practice*, page 614: "Allusions to the presence or absence of a Member . . . are unacceptable." The same principle is stated in *Beauchesne* 481(c).

I heard the House leader of the Official Opposition mention something like: withdraw the comment if that's the case. I think that it has been clarified that we should never ever in this House call a member by name or allude to the member's absence.

Hon. member, let's do the second point of order.

3:00

Point of Order Parliamentary Language

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Again, earlier today in question period, this time during questions being raised by the Member for Airdrie-Chestermere, he used the language, if I caught it correctly – and I believe I'm quoting him – "introduce this Premier to the truth." Increasingly we have had a deterioration of the language of the House. We've started spiralling down in this House. I've been reluctant to raise points of order because it really just gives people another opportunity to vent themselves and doesn't have much of a useful purpose, but there are times when you actually have to intercede. The citation that I'd be referring to would start with 485(1) of *Beauchesne's*, and I also would refer to the Speaker's memo to us of January 27, 2012.

We have a fairly high calling here. Eighty-three members are elected to represent and serve the people of Alberta at any given time. That number will be increasing to 87, but it's still a very modest number of Albertans who have the privilege of serving this House. Part of the privilege of serving this House is the responsibility that goes with it to encourage public discourse, to bring people into the debate on public policy, to raise the level of discussion about what kind of a province we want to have, where we want to go, what kind of a place we want to leave for our children and grandchildren.

One of the things that has been one of the pieces that I have desperately wanted to achieve while I'm here is the raising, not the lowering but the raising, of the public appreciation for the role of elected representatives.

Mr. Hehr: You talked about Danielle Smith not running for election, and now you go on that rant.

Mr. Hancock: The hon. member says that I talked about Danielle Smith not running for election and that then I go on that rant. There is nothing wrong with pointing out . . . [interjections]

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. member has the floor.

Mr. Hancock: Mr. Speaker, there is nothing wrong with having a public debate and pointing out salient truths. One doesn't have to do it in a mean-spirited, nasty way. One doesn't have to profess to be Christian and then be un-Christian in their actions. One should carry their deportment in an appropriate way at all times. If we want the public to respect the work that we do as legislators, then we should be standing up for what we do as legislators, and we should be using parliamentary language.

Now, to get to the point, Mr. Speaker, "introduce this Premier to the truth" is no different than suggesting that she's lying. It's no different than using any one of these terms that have been ruled unparliamentary in the past – "it's the Premier that is not telling us the truth," "never tell the truth" – all of that twisting of language around truth and lies.

Mr. Speaker, we can do better than this. We can have honest discourse and disagreement. We can have fulsome disagreement on public policy without degrading the debate to the level where we're calling each other liars, using terms like "corruption," and bringing the level of discourse down to where nobody will want to participate.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Airdrie-Chestermere on the point of order.

Mr. Anderson: Well, that was a stirring, stirring speech by the House leader. Unfortunately, as he correctly pointed out, what I said is that I would like to introduce the Premier to the truth on a matter. Now, I would like to introduce the Premier to the truth on what I think should be done in education. I should like to introduce her to the truth on what I think we should be doing with democracy. To somehow say that introducing the Premier to the truth is using unparliamentary language is absurd. What are we doing in here if it's not to introduce each other to each other's viewpoints on things and our different solutions for problems and so forth?

In the current situation we had some horrible remarks given by this Minister of Education to parents in Airdrie, threatening them – that's what it was, threatening them – specifically saying that if you want your two portables a little quicker, you go talk to your MLA and tell him not to give me any pressure in the House over different infrastructure funding models. This person here, who's the minister, has the audacity to say that, to threaten parents in my constituency and then turn it around . . .

The Deputy Speaker: Hon. member, on the point of order.

Mr. Anderson: Oh, absolutely.

I'm asking the Premier here to – I'm trying to introduce her to that truth. I'm not even talking about the Premier; I'm talking about this minister. I'm trying to introduce to her the truth about this minister, who has been threatening parents in my constituency. If that's not the point of question period, to ask her for her comments and her answers to what her minister and what members of her government are doing, then why do we even have question period? Obviously, I can introduce this Premier to the truth on this matter if I feel it's appropriate. It's within my right as an elected member of this Assembly.

Obviously, we would all like to raise the level of discourse. We would like over here, for example, Mr. Speaker, to actually get answers to the questions that we ask. We would actually like some answers. I asked three direct questions today of the Premier and got exactly zero answers, not the answers I wanted. I just didn't get an answer. She didn't even answer the question.

Again, I'm trying to introduce the Premier to the truth about this minister. How that can be spun to say that I was calling her a liar or something like that is a figment of this House leader's imagination.

The Deputy Speaker: Well, the chair heard both sides of the argument. There is a lot of clarification in there. I would just want to make all members aware that it is inappropriate to accuse another member of falsehoods, and that interpretation or hinting or whatever, directly or indirectly, should not be. It is inappropriate. Probably you well know, relevant to the citation, Standing Order 23(h), (i), and (j), unparliamentary language; *House of Commons Procedure and Practice*, pages 618 to 620; and *Beauchesne's*, paragraphs 485 to 492.

Now, as I heard all of that debate on the point of order, I just want to emphasize again that all of our members should be reminded that their language should be temperate, should be consistent with the long-standing tradition of respecting the House and the integrity of all of us. So tone down the wordings. Thank you.

The other matter that we have to deal with is a Standing Order 15 motion. The hon. Member for Airdrie-Chestermere.

Privilege Obstructing a Member in Performance of Duty

Mr. Anderson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The motion in question is that

pursuant to Standing Order 15 be it resolved that the ordinary business of the Legislative Assembly be adjourned to discuss a point of privilege; namely, that [the Minister of Education's] comments last night, March 19, on a conference call to educators to the effect that if the people of Airdrie want the school space they need, they should get their MLA to quit opposing the Education minister on the question of infrastructure in the House constitute a breach of privilege.

First, I'd like to lay out the facts, most of which are not in dispute because there is an audioclip, located on the Ministry of Education's website, where you can clearly hear what the Minister of Education said on the conference call – so this is not in dispute – in an answer to a question.

The minister was having a telephone conference call with educators, school board trustees, parent council members, and, I'm assuming, others across the province of Alberta last night. During the course of this call, after the minister's remarks, apparently there was an opportunity for some questions and answers from the audience listening. In Airdrie they were at a building, and around a telephone there were the following people. There was the president of the Airdrie Council of School Councils, Mr. Steve Goodall. There was the chair of the Nose Creek elementary school parent council, Mr. Gerry Pappararo, and there were many others. There were several of our school trustees from Rocky View school division there and so forth.

Mr. Pappararo, who, again, is the Nose Creek elementary parent council chair, asked a question into the conference call. It was simply this. He asked: Minister, we've had roughly 30 – he gave a number, whatever it was – portables announced by the Ministry of Education to be sent out to different areas of the province to deal with school overcrowding; in Airdrie the Rocky View school board requested two for Airdrie.

3:10

The Deputy Speaker: Hon. member, let's go back to the motion that constitutes the breach of privilege that you brought up.

Mr. Anderson: With due respect, I have to give this background

or else you can't explain what happened, so I will do so. I will hasten my explanation, but you have to understand what happened in order to understand what the motion is about and how it interfered with me in the House, with my work as a member in this House.

He asked the question to the minister, saying: why did Airdrie not get these two portables that we asked for for our well-documented overcrowding of schools; because we didn't get these, is there anything we can do in order to speed up the process of getting these portables or getting these portables at all and, of course, getting our new schools? That is the question that Mr. Papararo asked, essentially. The exact quote can be taken from the minister's audio on the website.

Now, in response – and this is the exact quote – the Minister of Education said:

You know what? I'm really itching to say it, so I will, even though I know I shouldn't, but the first thing you can do is, actually, in Airdrie . . .

The first thing you can do in Airdrie in order to get your portables, in order to get your schools, because that's what the question was about.

. . . call your MLA and ask him not to oppose me in the Legislature every day on considering new ways for funding infrastructure.

Now, he went on after that. There were more questions from other people, and he answered them, apparently. About an hour later Mr. Papararo asked again: did you mean, when you said earlier – were you actually saying that if our MLA continues to speak out about this, we're not going to get our schools?

Mr. Lukaszuk: Read what he said.

Mr. Anderson: He wanted to clarify the comments. Let's put it that way. He wanted to clarify the comments.

Mr. Lukaszuk: Why don't you read the transcripts?

Mr. Anderson: I did read them. You know what? You should be so embarrassed at yourself right now; you should just shut your yap.

The Deputy Speaker: You have the floor. Speak through the chair. You have the floor. Explain through the chair.

Mr. Anderson: Incredible. Just absolutely unbelievable. This guy is just unbelievable.

The Deputy Speaker: Explain through the chair.

Mr. Anderson: Anyway, he can table the transcripts himself. You know, he's gotten so wound up here.

The Deputy Speaker: Explain through the chair.

Mr. Anderson: Okay.

Mr. Speaker, what happened is that after this occurred, he clarified and backtracked and tried to explain his comments: no, that's not at all what I meant; I hold Airdrie up as an example, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera. He backtracked about an hour later when asked again about it. Okay? We will give him that, that he did backtrack.

Mr. Hinman: His preamble said that he shouldn't say it.

Mr. Anderson: That's right.

As to the motion, in section 69 of *Beauchesne's* it says the following:

It is very important . . . to indicate that something can be inflammatory, can be disagreeable, can even be offensive, but it may not be a question of privilege unless the comment actually impinges upon the ability of Members of Parliament to do their job properly.

Now, it is very clear that this minister said in his comments – or it's certainly an interpretation of what he said by the person asking the question. Certainly, to that person it is very clear that one interpretation, a very clear interpretation of what he said, is that because I have been advocating in this House about the need for additional schools in Airdrie and because I have been constantly going at this . . . [interjection]

The Deputy Speaker: Hon. member, address the chair.

Mr. Anderson: How about the hon. member over there? Could I continue on? The House leader, the former Education minister, seems to want to get in on this, so I'm just checking.

Mr. Speaker, the fact of the matter is that it's a very clear interpretation of that, and you can see it from all of the different – just look at the e-mails, the Twitter comments, the blog comments. Just go through it all. Many people have interpreted that comment to mean that one of the reasons Airdrie did not receive those portables is because their MLA is in this House advocating very strongly for new schools and is opposed to going into debt in order to finance new schools – okay? – is because of my political position, because I'm arguing that, no, we shouldn't go into debt to fund new schools, we should pay as we go, we should pay for what we can afford, we should pay for only what we need and, you know, not for just politics and throwing money around like drunken sailors, only build what we need, because that's my position, because that's what my position is.

And I agree. You can have a different position. That's all right. That's okay. But the implication of that statement was that because I have that position and I've been speaking in this House about that position, the people of Airdrie are being penalized with a lack of portables and schools.

That's what the implication clearly, clearly was. And it was made very clear by the fact that he said, "You know what? I'm . . . itching to say it." He's itching to say it, itching to say it. "So I will, even though I know I shouldn't." He shouldn't do this. So he knew full well what he was saying. He knew full well what he was saying. He had a lapse. He forgot. He's, like: darn. Maybe he wasn't thinking the call was recorded. Maybe he was trying to be extra smart or something or clever.

The Education minister is laughing as he usually does. Minister, it's incredible. It's okay. He'll be very lonely over here in a couple of months.

The fact of the matter is that this individual said these things and has caused major feelings of intimidation in these members, who contacted me subsequent and who couldn't believe what they had heard. They thought that they were being threatened, saying: if your MLA continues to advocate, you're not getting your schools or your portables. That was the implication.

If you go to *House of Commons Procedure and Practice*, page 108, under Freedom from Obstruction, Interference, Intimidation and Molestation, it says, "Speakers have consistently upheld the right of the House to the services of its Members free from intimidation, obstruction and interference." It's a pretty basic principle.

Section 75 of *Beauchesne's* concerns the freedom of speech, that I believe is so important to members in this Chamber, which I would think surely includes, above all, the freedom to speak up for your constituents, the freedom to advocate for them and the needs

of their children. That's important, that freedom of speech that we all enjoy here. It states in section 75, "The privilege of freedom of speech is both the least questioned and the most fundamental right of the Member of Parliament on the floor of the House and in committee." "The most fundamental right" is what it says. Well, I feel, clearly, like I am no longer free to speak on these matters because it may affect my community's ability to obtain the schools and the portables they need.

The Education minister is still laughing, by the way.

Section 92 of *Beauchesne's* states, "A valid claim of privilege in respect to interference with a Member must relate to the Member's parliamentary duties and not to the work the Member does in relation to that Member's constituency." Let's read: "A valid claim of privilege in respect to interference with a Member must relate to the Member's parliamentary duties" – okay? – "and not to the work the Member does in relation to that Member's constituency." One of the parliamentary duties that we have certainly of the opposition members, is to come into this House and to ask questions of the government. That is one of our duties. That is a duty that we have. And if we are being punished or if the communities we represent are being punished because of questions we are asking in this House, that is a clear breach of privilege.

Section 99 of *Beauchesne's* elaborates on this issue of threats, saying that "direct threats which attempt to influence Members' actions in this House are undoubtedly breaches of privilege." Section 99. I'll say it again. "Direct threats which attempt to influence Members' actions in the House are undoubtedly breaches of privilege."

3:20

I'm asking you, Mr. Speaker, if that's the case – I'll tell you right now: I do feel threatened. Now, how I choose to respond to that threat and that intimidation is certainly up to me, and I will do so in a way that I feel is best, and this is one of the ways I'm doing that. But make no mistake about it. I do feel threatened. I do feel that my constituency right now – because, clearly, you can't trust this minister. If this is what he's saying on a conference call, can you imagine what he's saying behind closed doors? Can you imagine? Well, we have an idea because in a moment of weakness when he kind of . . .

Mr. Hinman: No. Arrogance.

Mr. Anderson: Arrogance or whatever you want to say.

He said, I know this is wrong. I know I shouldn't be saying this. But if you want schools, you'd better tell your MLA to shut up. Okay?

Mr. Hinman: Just like Grimshaw.

Mr. Anderson: Just like Grimshaw except – you know what? – no, it's worse. This is the Minister of Education. The language used by the Member for Dunvegan-Central Peace was not as harsh as the language used by that minister, not even close.

The Education minister is laughing still.

Section 93 of *Beauchesne's* goes on further. It's very unambiguous. Section 93, page 25, of *Beauchesne's*.

Mrs. Forsyth: This is when you zip it.

Mr. Anderson: He doesn't understand that. He's embarrassed, and he'll be paying a political price soon, I'm sure.

It states that "it is generally accepted that any threat, or attempt to influence the vote of, or actions of a Member, is breach of

privilege." It is generally accepted that any threat or attempt to influence the vote of or actions of a member is a breach of privilege. Mr. Speaker, this is an attempt. He was, essentially, telling . . . Look, this is a breach of privilege. I need to finish. I'm almost done, but I need to get through this, Mr. Speaker, so I ask for your patience.

In that comment it is very clear if you look at the actual transcript. "You know what? I'm really itching to say it, so I will, even though I know I shouldn't, but the first thing you can do is, actually, in Airdrie call your MLA and ask him not to oppose me in the Legislature."

The Deputy Speaker: Hon. member . . .

Mr. Anderson: Now, Mr. Speaker, telling me that I cannot speak in the Legislature is appalling. It is interfering with my rights of free speech. So in conclusion – okay?

An Hon. Member: He's got to be timed out here.

Mr. Anderson: That's good. You'll be leaving soon, hon. member, and we'll all be better for it.

The Deputy Speaker: Hon. member, address the chair.

Mr. Anderson: Pending the finding of the Speaker that this is a prima facie case of privilege, I seek to move that the matter of privilege concerning the Minister of Education's comments about the advocacy for myself be referred to the Standing Committee on Privileges and Elections, Standing Orders and Printing. This committee in question could use a little bit of work, so why don't we refer this matter to that committee . . .

The Deputy Speaker: Hon. member, you have used . . .

Mr. Anderson: . . . and actually get a fair hearing about this matter so that I don't feel interfered with?

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Deputy Speaker: I just want to remind the hon. member that I think you have used over 10 minutes on the point. Have you concluded, hon. Member for Airdrie-Chestermere?

Mr. Anderson: Yes, I have.

The Deputy Speaker: You have. Okay.

The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre on this point.

Ms Blakeman: Yes. Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. A point of privilege is a serious moment for this House as we consider whether behaviors that have been taken or chosen somehow impede the ability of any member to fulfill their duties in this House is serious.

My observations on what is before us is that there are three parts of it: intimidation, freedom of speech, and coaching constituents to be angry with their elected official because they are doing their job. They all culminate, in my belief, in a serious breach of privilege.

I just want to check a few things for you, I hope as assistance, Mr. Speaker. In looking at the definition of intimidate, we have: to force into or deter from some action by inducing fear. The comments from the Minister of Education in a broadcast, I believe, were meant to direct constituents, to influence the behaviour, and it was based on fear. They are trying to get something. They are told they can't get it unless they make their member stop a certain course of action.

There are a number of places where that is brought up and spoken very harshly of. In *Maingot* he directly talks about that. Any form of intimidation or act of violence of a person for or on account of his behaviour could amount to contempt. It is intended that none of us be threatened in trying to go about our duties. For opposition members – and this is my interest in this case – part of our job is to oppose the government, to criticize them, to bring things up, to advocate on behalf of our constituents. To have any member exposed to intimidation or threats, especially by a cabinet minister, is very serious.

When I look at the ability and how important freedom of speech is – and in this case, Mr. Speaker, it is the freedom of the Member for Airdrie-Chestermere to advocate on behalf of his constituents, to bring up in this House, hopefully with tempered language, his desire to have certain things done for his constituents. That's his job. His ability to have that freedom of speech is very critical, and to have it blunted or dimmed or for him to have to feel that he needs to take a step back in his pursuit of that because his constituents or himself have been intimidated or threatened is unacceptable to any of us in this House, I would hope, particularly to members of the opposition.

The freedom of speech is written a number of times. It's in the *House of Commons 2009* edition:

... a fundamental right without which they would be hampered in the performance of their duties. It permits them to speak in the House without inhibition, to refer to any matter or express any opinion as they see fit, to say what they feel needs to be said in the furtherance of the national interest and the aspirations of their constituents.

That is right on point, Mr. Speaker, and for anyone to attempt to influence through threat or intimidation the constituents to then threaten or intimate the member directly or indirectly or to do it directly or indirectly to the member should be unacceptable to this House. I ask that, in fact, the member do find that there is a prima facie case of privilege here.

Thank you.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Minister of Education.

Mr. Lukaszuk: I'll let the opposition member speak first.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona, then.

Ms Notley: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and thank you to the member for allowing me to rise on this issue. I will be brief. I simply as House leader for the NDP caucus would like to rise and provide my support to the submissions that have been made by the Member for Airdrie-Chestermere as well as the Member for Edmonton-Centre. Simply put, the ability of members to advocate within the rules of parliamentary conduct for their constituents is a fundamental component to the work that we do within this Legislature. Any efforts to interfere with that, any effort that is attached to the influence of government, in particular, is a threat to that privilege, which is profound and meaningful.

In this particular case the member in question actually utilized the resources of government in order to deliver a message to citizens of the province, who would then presumably interfere with the Member for Airdrie-Chestermere's ability to communicate and express himself in the way he felt best within this Assembly. The fact that government resources were used in delivering that message, that that message was delivered in a telephone town hall funded by the Ministry of Education that included the constituents of the Member for Airdrie-Chestermere, is disturbing to me, Mr. Speaker, and I think that it leads us to a

very slippery slope that will significantly undermine the work of MLAs, all elected members in this Assembly, and the independence with which we do that work.

So I would ask you to consider that there is a prima facie case here and that the matter be referred to the appropriate privileges and other things committee for further consideration. Thank you.

3:30

The Deputy Speaker: Hon. minister, do you wish to respond?

Mr. Lukaszuk: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. Indeed, not only do I want to, but I feel compelled to speak to this matter.

I would agree with the members of the Liberal and NDP opposition that no member at any point in time should ever feel inhibited from being able to carry out his or her duties in this House. That is the fundamental principle of this House.

However, Mr. Speaker, if one was to hear only what the Member for Airdrie-Chestermere had to say and assume that that was all that was said and take this in exclusion, perhaps – perhaps – one would even agree with the Member for Airdrie-Chestermere. But I have to tell you, Mr. Speaker, that this member this time around is taking a great deal of poetic licence with what he is presenting to this House. As a matter of fact, I don't know if one could rise on a point of order on a point of privilege, but he's been attributing a lot of things to me that simply haven't happened.

Let's put this all in context and see what happened. Then we'll allow the Members of this Legislature to decide what happened. This goes a little bit further back because as you know, Mr. Speaker, just a couple of weeks ago I was on behalf of the Department of Education defending estimates, the budget, for the Alberta Legislature while the member was asking for portables and mentioning infrastructure. We went back and forth, back and forth, on infrastructure. I will quote from *Alberta Hansard* of that debate on March 6, 2012, roughly at around 5:45 p.m. I said to the member:

I will ask this member, referring to the Member for Airdrie-Chestermere,

and actually his entire party to be a little bit more open minded and co-operative on the issue of how we fund schools because there's a great deal of opposition coming from that corner of the Chamber on anything that resembles debt or debt financing.

The fact, Mr. Chairman, is that we need to look collaboratively at new ways of funding schools.

So, I actually said that on the record, that I'm looking forward to him being more open minded and more collaborative with myself and my ministry so that we can look at ways of building more schools for areas that require schools. To which the member responded:

Well, I'm always looking for innovative ways to build new schools, but I'll tell you that I do not feel that debt is innovative. There are lots of ways to do things without mortgaging people's futures, and it's called reprioritizing. How many schools would that new MLA office across the way build, for example?

Then he goes on, saying:

Anyway, I'm glad that he's passionate about building new schools. That's good. But we should never sacrifice the needs of the here and now on the backs of future taxpayers. I just disagree fundamentally with that. I think you prioritize.

Then he goes on to say in the next paragraph:

I have to explain this all the time to the House leader, referring to the Solicitor General.

He never understands,

clearly saying that he does this all the time, and he argues with the minister all the time.

He says: do I have a mortgage? The difference is that after I pay the mortgage, I have a house that's worth something, that I can sell on the market if I need to. You can't sell a bridge, can you? Can you sell a bridge? No, you can't. So it's a big difference, a huge difference from a mortgage. It's just debt. In fact, the bridge actually costs more money to maintain as we go forward. Anyway, we're getting off track. I have this discussion with the House leader all the time. It's totally different.

As you know, Mr. Speaker, there is a history of this member standing up in the House and objecting to this government looking at any possible way of financing schools – and it also is relevant to portables – other than paying cash up front.

Well, let me take you, Mr. Speaker, to the telephone conversation in question. I should maybe give you a little bit of background. I have these conversations every month and a half or so with parents from across the province. Anybody can dial in; anybody can say whatever they want. They all hear each other. It's free of charge, and it's open to all parents. Frankly, media call in, and I'm sure – maybe MLAs do. I don't know if they do. Only parents ask questions, and I try to answer as many as I can. We have a frank discussion on the telephone.

So yesterday at 4:38 p.m. a parent – I'm not sure what the parent's name was because I don't remember. We have all the conversations, by the way, recorded. It is me who records those conversations, and then I post them on the Alberta Education website for everyone to hear. If any member would like to hear the audio, it's there right now. Transcripts are also available so everybody can read them.

A parent says, "We're just curious about . . ." Sorry. I will be tabling, Mr. Speaker, all these relevant comments. Just bear with me for a second if you will. A parent said that a

school division [in] Airdrie asked for eight portables, which we really needed to get us through to 2014, and they were denied . . . we know 40 new portables were approved but none for RVS. How do we go about getting the infrastructure and the capacity, interim or permanent, for our constantly growing community?

Then I said to that:

You know what? I'm really itching to say it, so I will, even though I know I shouldn't.

The reason I said "even though I shouldn't" is because I usually like to keep my answers – and you look at all the tapes – to factual questions and answers. But this was asking for advice, so I'm giving him advice.

The first thing you can do is, actually, in Airdrie call your MLA and ask him not to oppose me in the Legislature every day on considering new ways for funding infrastructure.

That is exactly what I have been referring to earlier.

That really is the problem.

In this province and in every province in Canada we are building schools up front, cash. And it doesn't matter how rich your provincial government may be; there are only so many schools that you can build using this cash up front model. And, frankly, I see nothing wrong with looking at alternative models, where you amortize the cost of new schools over 20, 30 years [and you can build] for kids right now.

I know in Airdrie you probably need five . . . schools to accommodate your current population and growth . . . [for] the next few years. But the way to achieve that: we will have to look at alternative financial models and not be bound by ideology.

But . . . in Airdrie-Chestermere . . . the Rocky View school division is receiving two portables for Prince of Peace Lutheran school, Muriel Clayton middle school is receiving two, George McDougall high school is receiving two, and Rainbow Creek

elementary school is receiving two . . . So you are receiving eight portables in total for your catchment area.

Then the conversation went on, and the parent went back online as well, and nota bene, Mr. Chairman, no parent has been offended by the comments, and the conversation carried on for about an hour. Later the parent says:

We're just curious about the comments you made earlier regarding Rob Anderson and the constant bantering back and forth. We're curious: how does that affect parents in our community and our needs for extra schools?

To which I responded:

You know what? Not at all. I'm actually using your city and your area as a flagship. Every time I get asked a question about needing schools I always mention Airdrie, Fort McMurray, and Grande Prairie. Those three [areas] are prime examples of where schools are badly needed. You know, we are all grown up, and yes we [are] politicians [and we] pick on each other from time to time and we have definite differences, in this case ideological differences on how schools should be built, but at the end of the day as a minister and as a parent I can never lose focus of the fact that this is all about kids and kids only, and kids need schools.

Sorry, but I have to use the member's name.

I know that Mr. Anderson also believes that kids need schools, but we just have a different view on how those schools should be built. I know for a fact that paying for schools cash up front has proven itself to be a failed model. That is why we are where we are. It simply doesn't allow any province to build enough schools.

Mr. Speaker, as a matter of fact, I gave credit to the Member for Airdrie-Chestermere, saying that he agrees with me that we need to build more schools. I'm the first one to acknowledge that Airdrie and, actually, another Wildrose riding, Fort McMurray, and the third one, Grande Prairie, are the three flagships that need schools. Frankly, Airdrie probably needs about five schools right now, and the Member for Airdrie-Chestermere agrees on that. I agree on that.

3:40

The last time I was there, I had a gym full of parents and almost got a standing ovation from parents when saying, "We need to look at any way possible to get you schools right now." That member's constituents actually are attending school right now in Legion halls and in church basements and the list goes on and on, which to me is unacceptable and, I imagine, to every member of this Legislature is unacceptable.

So all I was saying is that we agree on that, but where we differ is on the ideology. I believe we need to amortize the cost of schools over a period of time; he believes we have to pay for schools cash up front. I believe that the only way to build a lot of schools is to do it my way, and I believe that if we were to do it his way, we would be digging ourselves deeper and deeper into the backlog of infrastructure. That's so the parents know.

What I told the parents is: maybe you should be calling your MLA and have him change his mind so he works collaboratively with us and the Chamber on finding new, innovative ways for funding schools. If that in any way impedes this member's performance in the Chamber, I find it unusual. If having to dialogue with his own constituents or having his constituents call him at his office impedes his ability to perform in this Chamber, I find that unacceptable.

Frankly, you know, it's quite interesting because that particular political party has been asking not only my constituents but individuals from all over Alberta and the United States to call my office and twitter my accounts on issues relevant to the Education

Act, and I don't feel that my performance is impeded. As a matter of fact, it informs me further.

So, Mr. Speaker, this is a silly season. It's pre-election time. I realize that any angle is a good angle at this point in time. I have never heard more vile verbiage in this Chamber.

I suggest to you that this was a very appropriate comment to make, and I have said that comment on the record many times before, and I didn't see anything inappropriate before. As a matter of fact, I complimented the member for being a good advocate for his constituents because he's asking for additional schools.

I'll end with that.

The Deputy Speaker: All right. Hon. Government House Leader, do you wish to join in?

Mr. Hancock: Very briefly, Mr. Speaker. The question before us is whether what we've heard in detail from both sides of the House now is a question of privilege. A question of privilege, as the hon. House leader of the Official Opposition indicated, has to be something which impedes a member's ability to do his or her job.

In fact, what we've heard from both sides of the House, essentially, is somebody suggesting to a constituent that they should talk to their member. There is no way that one can characterize asking a constituent to talk to their member, even if you're asking them to talk to their member to change their mind about something, as impeding that member's ability to do their job. In fact, it's enhancing the member's ability to do his job. It's saying: "Look. We need to find new ways to do things. Your member is talking about cutting the budget, and the Wildrose has talked incessantly about how we should spend less on capital. Well, the problem and the discussion that we've had back and forth over time, over the last two years, is that if you do that, it's going to take longer to get things built if we do it the traditional way."

The member very clearly is talking to Albertans, as is our job, to encourage Albertans to talk with their members, which is what we do every day, and encourage those members to think about the impact of the positions they're taking. That's political discourse. We need to have more of it, not less of it.

The Deputy Speaker: Hon. members, the chair has heard elaboration on the matter. We have spent close to an hour on this, and there is the business of the day to deal with. So the chair will consider the matter and rule at a later date.

Orders of the Day

Government Bills and Orders

Third Reading

Bill 7

Appropriation Act, 2012

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Minister of Finance.

Mr. Liepert: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. On behalf of the Deputy Premier and the President of Treasury Board and Enterprise it is my privilege to rise today and move third reading of Bill 7, the Appropriation Act, 2012.

Over the course of the past few weeks both inside this Assembly and outside the Assembly there has been credible discussion about Budget 2012. It has gone through thorough debate in this House, and I would say some less than truthful statements have been made outside this House. There have been allegations leading up to this particular budget that it would

include tax increases. Of course, that was proven to be wrong. The same group of individuals who said that tax increases were going to be coming in the budget but were proven wrong are now trying to allege that there are tax increases in this budget. Of course, anyone who reads this budget and can understand any sort of financial accounting can read that there are no tax increases in this particular budget. So again there is wrong information being spread out there. I'm glad that we've had the opportunity to fully debate this particular document in this House.

[Mr. Zwozdesky in the chair]

This budget, by the final passing of third reading, will ensure that we meet those commitments that the Premier has made. We are also ensuring that we're going to have a health care system that is appropriately funded, and we'll continue to deliver a health care system that, despite the protestations of some of the members of the opposition, is highly respected in this province, Mr. Speaker. Yes, we have some people who may have certain agendas that they are pursuing out there in the public. That's fine; we'll deal with that. But we have committed funding to Alberta Health Services as part of our five-year funding agreement, a 6 per cent increase in funding this year. In addition to that, the overall budget of Alberta Health and the minister of health is 7.9 per cent. That goes a long way to ensuring that we're going to be able to start to finally move to family care clinics.

I know the minister of health has talked a lot about this. A period of time ago this government attempted to have the primary care networks deliver team-based care in this province, and it hasn't worked as well as it should. There continues to be resistance by certain health professionals to ensuring that the patient comes first despite a lot of rhetoric that we might hear out there, and what we're going to do with the family care clinics, Mr. Speaker, is ensure that the patient comes first. This budget will allow the funding for I think it's three pilot projects in this budget year, and then, hopefully, we're into a number of permanent family care clinics as we move on.

Of course, we've just had a lengthy debate under this so-called point of privilege, which I know that the Speaker will consider very carefully, but we've also more than adequately funded the Education budget for this province. In addition to that, we've got a significant capital program, which is going to be seeing not only more roads but more schools and health care facilities built under budget 2012-13.

Probably core to this particular budget, Mr. Speaker, is the fact that it's entitled Investing in People. If you look at what this budget does in the way of increasing the funding for AISH recipients, that's going to kick in fully at \$400 a month on April 1, so it's important that we get this budget passed through this Assembly today. That will make a huge difference in the lives of many Albertans. I think I heard the Minister of Seniors talking this morning about some 46,000 Albertans who rely on payments from the assured income for the handicapped program. This is going to make a huge difference for them.

In addition that, Mr. Speaker, we have addressed a number of the areas that low-income seniors consistently are struggling with. There are enhancements there. There are also enhancements for young families whose children are in daycare, where both parents are working. Those are going to be increased significantly.

This really is a budget, Mr. Speaker, that does deal with the human issues. I'm confident that it's a budget that reflects what the President of Treasury Board and myself in our travels across the province last fall heard from Albertans, where they want us to focus on health and education, and they want to ensure that our

critical infrastructure is maintained and improved. Despite what you may hear from some of the individuals who masquerade as a party over there, Mr. Speaker, they do not want us to cut back on our critical infrastructure spending.

3:50

You know, it's one thing to stand up and play politics with numbers, Mr. Speaker, but when you play politics with numbers, sooner or later you actually have to delve into what is the impact of those numbers. It's just wonderful for certain people to stand up both inside this House and outside the House and talk about cutting \$2 billion out of the infrastructure program and then, on the other hand, turn around and have a point of privilege in this House and say, "Well, that didn't mean me and my constituency; I should have the ability to advocate for my constituents," and when speaking in front of another audience will stand up there and say, "This government spends too much on infrastructure." Well, Mr. Speaker, you can't have it both ways. This budget lays out a fair plan. It's a responsible budget.

I guess the final point that I would like to make in asking for the support of the House on third reading of this bill is the fact that we've managed to not only deliver a budget this year that has a small deficit, which is covered off, we need to point out, by the sustainability fund, but we've also introduced a budget that has a three-year business plan that shows our budget being more than balanced next year. In fact, it's projecting a budgetary surplus of about a billion dollars.

You know, if we continue to see the strong economic performance of our province, if we continue to see oil prices in the range of where they are today, I think we're going to see much better results, and it could be even in this current fiscal year. It could definitely be in the fiscal year that this budget covers and probably even in years out.

For individuals in the opposition to go out there and use terms like that we're using fantasy numbers for our budget is irresponsible, Mr. Speaker. This budget is based on firm data. It's not our data. It's the data of international forecasters when it comes to the price of oil. It's the data directly from industry when it comes to the production levels of their oil sands plants. It's firm data from the Finance department, who are now seeing that because of the high oil prices many of these projects that have chosen to invest in Alberta are now going to be reaching the postpayout, where the royalty scheme will now kick in much earlier than we had anticipated.

This is an incredibly good-news budget, Mr. Speaker. It's one that I was proud to introduce. It's one that I know all members have supported and I believe a large majority of Albertans have supported. I would ask that we pass third reading of this particular budget so we can get on to implementing the various measures that are contained within this budget.

With that, Mr. Speaker, I move third reading.

The Acting Speaker: Thank you.

The hon. Member for Airdrie-Chestermere will postpone, so we'll go ahead with the hon. Member for Calgary-Varsity, then.

Mr. Chase: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. There are three problems with this budget: what is contained within it, what isn't contained, and then the process through which the budget was built and debated.

For the past seven budgets that I have been a representative of Calgary-Varsity, the problem has been that the average amount of time the Official Opposition gets to debate a particular budget is in the area of three sets of 10 minutes, which they can take or share

in a 20-minute session with the hon. government ministers. If there is an opportunity towards the end of the three-hour session, during which millions of dollars are being discussed every minute, then there's the possibility of a portion of another 10 minutes. So the maximum amount of time an Official Opposition member gets to debate the budget, all being well, is 40 minutes. When we're discussing multibillion-dollar budgets such as Education, such as health care, that amount of time is not sufficient.

With the rushed session that we're experiencing, the answers to the questions that were not able to be answered on the spot during those evenings will not be provided to the members prior to an election and, therefore, will not be available to the public to judge the value of the budget or the debate on the budget. That's been disconcerting for me, Mr. Speaker, for the last seven years. We are asked to debate budgets of, I believe, over \$30 billion this time around, and each successive budget has actually increased. We're into our fifth deficit budget over a five-year period.

What the Liberal Party has been saying is that at some point with our budgeting we have to be more realistic and not rely on projections, no matter how detailed they are, from industry. What this province has continued to do is rely on nonrenewable resource revenue, revenue that, once spent, is never returned, instead of having a progressive tax system, that is embraced by all other provinces.

Now, the business of nonrenewable oil and gas counts as a major factor in our budget decisions, but this government's dependency on that sole source of revenue, seconded only by what we get from slots, VLTs, and lotteries, puts the whole sustainability of any kind of future projecting and planning in a very roller coaster circumstance.

The Liberal opposition has said that we need sustainability. We need a long-term commitment, and that's why we've proposed – I won't go through the various parts of the Liberal proposal. We've said that 10 per cent of Albertans are not contributing their fair share and that, in addition, large corporations should be paying an extra 2 per cent for the privilege of making such profits in this province.

The hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview in his book *Follow the Money*, which is still number one on the bestseller nonfiction list, detailed the amount of money that this government fails to collect. At no point in this government's existence – and the Auditor General has pointed it out – has this government, regardless of what the royalty rate was, ever collected that entire amount, and this continues to be a problem.

Now, the hon. Minister of Finance is correct in terms of a number of the oil sands companies finally coming to the point where they have to pay the full royalty. A number of the organizations have been very creative, for example with the Firebag project, when they tried to suggest this was just a continuation of an old project as opposed to a brand new project and, therefore, should not be subject to higher royalty rates. Well, at some point and very soon – historically, it's there – we will be receiving more money from those projects, but we haven't got it yet. So what we do in the meantime is extremely important in our budget planning.

Now, I want to look at a couple of budgets, in particular health. It's not a matter so much of the amount of the money; it's the way that money is directed. In the Liberal caucus we believe we can get a better bang for our buck by addressing more appropriate seniors' care. That's, for example, publicly funded, publicly delivered long-term care as opposed to assisted living, where studies from epidemiologists of the U of A and the U of C have indicated that there is twice the likelihood of individuals in assisted living ending up in acute-care hospital beds, which does

not make sense because the level of care in assisted living is inappropriate. But this budget does not deal with that inappropriate level of funding.

The Premier has not committed, since making the statement in her leadership campaign, that she would not remove the cap on long-term care. Now, as reassuring as it is for the hon. Minister of Seniors to say that he has no such plans or no such, put it in quotations, immediate plans, the Premier not clarifying as to at what point that cap might be lifted provides no assurance for seniors or their families that they're not going to be further gouged in their long-term care settings.

4:00

In terms of looking after seniors: a very small amount, 30 beds, I believe, in Strathmore for long-term care as opposed to numerous beds in assisted living, that does not deliver the depth and quality of care that is required.

Another concern is the very small amount of budget being spent on home care. Home care, keeping a person at home, is about one-tenth or less than the cost of them taking up space in an acute-care bed and then backing up the whole emergency system.

We've talked about the importance of primary care networks, which, contrary to the Minister of Finance's statements, have been embraced not only by Albertans but by front-line physicians and do a very good job of delivering 24-hour care. Now, the Premier came up with this community care clinic, which basically conflicts with the primary care network, and it hasn't been clearly defined how these community care clinics would be different than primary clinics. Primary clinics offer a wide variety of services, not just simply a doctor or a nurse within those facilities.

The fact that we have approximately 60 less beds and an increase in our population of close to a million is very troublesome because this government has continued to talk about providing sufficient long-term care beds to release the pressure on the acute-care bed system.

In education and in health care this government has not bargained in good faith with the front-line service providers, whether they're the doctors, the nurses, the orderlies, or whether they're the teachers, the support staff, the caretakers. This government in its budget imposed a settlement, which – you will see when it comes due at the end of August – will be opposed across this province by teachers who have not yet been forced under the thumb of this government to be called an essential service and, therefore, denied the right to strike. But I'm assuming that that is probably in the works because that's the threat that has been used before.

This budget, again on the theme of education, has not dealt with the \$3 billion plus infrastructure repair backlog in schools, the average age of which is now 50 years. There's nothing in this budget that deals with that infrastructure backlog. The minister has talked about creative financing. He's put out on the eve of an election the idea that we need 400 new schools. Mr. Speaker, the reason we need 400 new schools is because we haven't maintained the old ones. This government has been in power for the last 41 years and has not provided that maintenance in its series of budgets.

Also in education, the unfunded liability, that is controversial depending on which party you belong to, has not been addressed. If it isn't addressed in a progressive manner, that unfunded liability will rise to \$40 billion. The government is very loose with what it considers to be debt and deficit. It doesn't take into account the school infrastructure deficit as a liability. It doesn't take into account the unfunded liability. It talks about potentially putting us further in debt, but good debt, through AIMCo

borrowing to finance these much-needed and touted on the eve of an election 400 new schools that we require.

Now, Mr. Speaker, for a budget to be believable, it also, as I began, has to be sustainable. Clearly, everything in this world from a financial standpoint would have to come together. The government, instead of relying on the information from oil sands companies, would have to do its own calculations of flow rates to get the money that's actually owed to them. That has yet to be achieved, and the Auditor General has pointed out that major failure.

Mr. Speaker, I and the members of my caucus cannot support a budget that is not sustainable, that relies on rosy nonrenewable projections. When we have a glut right now of gas and we have a glut of conventional oil, which lowers our price below that of the world per barrel price or the gas measurement price, instead of doing things in a sustainable fashion, we're getting it out of the ground so fast that we're not getting the best price for it, and we're doing a lot of damage to the environment by doing it.

As for bitumen this government's plan, if the Obama administration can work through it, is to send it down the Keystone in its raw state to be refined, and then we'll buy it back at a much more expensive price. The hon. individuals from the Wildrose have clearly pointed out alternatives such as having it processed east of us in a Canadian circumstance and then supplying our own eastern markets. This is something the Liberals have agreed with; it's something the NDP have agreed on: keeping our jobs here in Canada, keeping our jobs in Alberta.

There is no balance in this budget. It's a wing-and-a-prayer budget. Mr. Speaker, we'll have an opportunity to talk about some of the fallacies of the funding associated with the passing of this Education Act and the cost that may spring into effect with regard to the human rights tribunal. That's a whole other topic which I'll save for the debate on Bill 2.

This is one of the most unrealistic budgets to be produced so far. [interjection] If anything goes wrong whatsoever in the financing, the government has no fallback position, at least not one that has been clarified. If the hon. Member for Calgary-Nose Hill has the backup plan, I would be glad to hear it from him or any other astute members who I respect in this Assembly.

Thank you, hon. Speaker, for allowing me to point out just a few of the shortcomings of this rose-coloured-glasses budget.

The Acting Speaker: Thank you very much.

The next speaker is Calgary-Glenmore, followed by Fort McMurray-Wood Buffalo, followed by Calgary-Buffalo, followed by Edmonton-Strathcona. Did I see Calgary-Currie rise, wanting to get on the list as well?

Standing Order 29(2)(a) will be available after this speaker and for subsequent speakers thereafter.

Please proceed.

Mr. Hinman: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. It is an honour and a privilege to rise today to speak about the most important bill here, the appropriation bill, and the billions of dollars that this government is spending for this next year in the province. When it comes to budgets and decisions on budgets, there are not too many people that I know who don't struggle on a monthly basis on how they're going to spend their money and where they're going to spend their money. There are those who are lucky enough that they actually try to put a plan in place where maybe they can go on a holiday, and they save, you know, for a year to get money in place to do that.

Mr. Speaker, I have to say that I'm concerned with having to continue hearing the rhetoric that has come from the government

side towards the Wildrose, saying: “Oh, we’re going to stop everything. We’re going to cancel schools. We’re going to shut hospitals.” They go on and on. They don’t seem to realize that their budget is more than just health care or just education or the fact that their infrastructure budget – they’ve hit this idea that they need to do it all now.

4:10

I’m most astounded with the Education minister who now says that we need 400 new schools. In the point of privilege earlier today he brought this forward. He made the comments – where did I put that? – that we need to go ahead with these. He said that we used these three communities for his flagship discussion, and that Grande Prairie, Fort McMurray, and Airdrie need these schools badly. But they put out 40 of these add-ons, and not one of them went to Airdrie this year. Yet he says that these are our flagship areas.

This is exactly, Mr. Speaker, what I’m talking about in prioritizing. If they actually had some integrity and showed the people of Alberta a full list, “Here are our top three,” I would assume with what the Minister of Education said today that his three flagship cities that need it the most are Fort McMurray, Grande Prairie, and Airdrie. We’d have that list, and here they would be: one, two, three. How many schools? He said five are needed for Airdrie. He didn’t say how many for Fort McMurray or Grande Prairie. It only makes sense that they would be at the top of the list after what he said. Yet they don’t do it.

This is the problem. This government has failed – and they’ve failed miserably on it – when it comes to prioritizing their spending. We have spoken out against a new federal building upgrade that sat dormant for 20 years. It isn’t a panic that we need to have that now, ahead of schools or ahead of a ring road or ahead of a hospital that needs to be opened or that needs to be manned with people to work.

Yet this government continues to say: “Oh, if we’re going to have any cuts, it’s going to be on schools. It’s going to be, you know, on workers and front-line teachers.” This government is the one, Mr. Speaker, that has prioritized and always politicized these things. They go for where there’s the most – what would I say? – acute pain and fear amongst the people, and say, “If we’re going to cut \$200 million out of our budget, that means it would have to be our schools,” when, in fact, that would be one of the last things that needs to be cut in the budget.

This is the problem with this government in the last four budgets. Even today they’re talking about the need to come up with new, innovative ways of financing. Well, they’ve been pretty innovative in sucking \$16 billion out of our sustainability fund, saying that we need to build these things. How do they say that we’ve been balancing the budget but that now we need to be innovative and start to borrow? What they’re saying is that we’ve spent all of our savings – they’ve been sucked dry – so now we need to be innovative on how we go into debt because we have no more savings to pull out, you know, between \$3 billion to \$5 billion a year. So it’s very concerning, Mr. Speaker, that this government would go and make these fearmongering noises to the public, that: oh, if the Wildrose got in, we wouldn’t have any of these things.

It’s also interesting today. I wanted to stand and do a point of order, and I don’t take them lightly, either. The Premier got up today in question period – and it’s always nice when once in a while she’ll pop up to answer rather than deferring them. It’s very disappointing that she won’t answer them often, and she defers them off to ministers instead. But she got up and said that there are, I believe – I should have gotten the Blues on it – no tax

increases. There are no new taxes. I think she made two statements on that. Well, tax increases. If you’re the one who is having to pay and if your home tax last year was \$2,200 and this year it’s \$2,350, how can you possibly say that there are no more taxes, that there is no increase in taxes? There is.

Seniors on fixed incomes are having a major hit on them because of what this government does. They froze the mill rate – I think it was on page 100 or page 98 – at 2.7 per cent per thousand dollars. Municipal governments: when they go in to balance the books and there is no tax increase, if they have re-evaluated and reassessed the houses and, say, a \$400,000 house is now \$412,000 or \$410,000, they actually readjust the mill rate now. Instead of maybe 2.7 per cent, it’s 2.5 per cent so that it’s balanced out.

Then from that balanced position, they’ll actually say, “You know, we have a shortfall of \$100 million in our budget, so we’re going to have to increase the mill rate 3 per cent,” and then they’re going to grab that money because there’s an increase. The municipal governments have said across this province what their increase is in taxes. It’s going to go up 3 and a half per cent, 6 per cent, depending on which community they come from. Yet this government, who’s supposed to be overseeing, and the minister of urban and municipal affairs, who’s overseeing all of that, have the audacity to tell those individuals that are running balanced budgets or showing an increase in their taxes: “Oh, we’re not increasing the taxes. We’re just increasing what’s coming in.” Then they tried to use this idea that: “Oh, it’s just the new homes that are coming online. Oh, it’s just the growth.” No. That isn’t where it is.

Again, then they’ll refer back to corporate tax and personal tax and say: oh, it’s going up, too. Yes, but if you’re making \$50,000 a year and you get a raise and now you’re making \$55,000 a year, of course personal tax is going to go up, but the income to those individuals also went up. You can’t go back and re-evaluate and say: oh, they’re still getting \$50,000, but we’re going to take another 3 per cent out of these individuals. This is the type of slick talk that comes from this Premier and this Minister of Finance to tell Albertans that, “Oh, no, no, no, there are no increases in taxes; everything is frozen; you don’t need to worry,” when, in fact, they do.

What we’ve been trying to say is that there are some things that you need to do. There is a principled way of going forward. You would think that we had just formed a new province here and that we’re going to have to go out and borrow money to build a new corporation. We’re not a new province. We’re over a hundred years old. We have some incredible buildings like this one. I don’t know what the maintenance is in here, but I’m sure it’s pretty steep. You know, these historic buildings – and this is a beautiful one – aren’t cheap. But you put all of that into the budget, and you know what those costs are, and when you’re doing it properly, there are not a lot of surprises.

You still have a contingency fund for those emergencies. I mean, we have it here in the province. Whether there are forest fires or pine beetles or flooding, there are always unexpected things that come up, and you need to have a contingency plan for that. Even families tell you: save 10 per cent, and have those savings so that if an emergency shows up, you can deal with that.

It’s extremely difficult for those families, though, that are living paycheque to paycheque to do that, yet this government is doing less than paycheque to paycheque. They’ve been sucking out of our sustainability fund for five years. It’s just an oxymoron to say that this is a sustainability fund because what they’ve been pulling it out for isn’t sustainable.

Program growth: my colleague from Airdrie-Chestermere spoke about that yesterday, I believe, that programs, once they’re initiated, are hard to cut back. They go forward. This government

doesn't even look at such things through attrition. It's always growth.

We passed a bill yesterday for a land advocate. That's a new program. It's new expenses. Do we need it? Is it going to be worth while? Those are the questions that we in the Wildrose are asking, Mr. Speaker, and we don't get any answers. We just get the fearmongering that we're going to shut down or not build schools, that we're not going to build ring roads, and there's nothing further from the truth.

What we've put out – and we've shown what we're going to do. The first and most important thing is to cap how much it's going to increase by. What should we cap it by? The rate of inflation plus population growth. This government has failed miserably, going back the last 10 years, I believe, probably 15 years, I think to 2001. Had they capped that growth at inflation plus population, we would have a massive surplus this year plus the last three years, but they failed to do it because they don't cap their spending.

I think I've spoken before that when I was very young and newly married, I went to a finance seminar, and the individual there spoke about the importance of balancing your budget. He said that everybody, even in this audience – I think there were over 400 people there. It was a big room, I would say twice this size, and it was full, with chairs all the way through this auditorium. They were speaking about that. He said: you need to balance your budget. He said that in human nature we have this trait where as soon as we think we're going to get some more money, that we're going to have a raise or income coming in, we'll spend it before we get it.

4:20

He said: "If I could tell you one bit of advice. However you're living today, whatever happens to you, don't change the way you're living for another year." He was referring, of course, to getting a raise or a new job or extra income. He said: "Continue living the way you are for one year before you adapt to that new income you've received. If you inherited something, don't do anything for a year."

That's what you need to do. Have that discipline. When oil royalties have gone up, when personal or corporate tax have gone up, don't immediately run out and say: "Oh, we've got to start a new program. We've got to get this spent." That's the wrong thing to do.

The example that he gave, for those people who are followers of celebrities, was Ivana Trump. She'd just gone through her separation from Donald. He was talking about: everybody has their needs, their way of life. My memory is a little bit foggy on this, but my memory was that she needed \$5,000 a week just to maintain her house. There were flowers. There was hairdressing. He went through this long list of things that she had been doing for years, and she needed that. I think she had a hairdresser come in every morning to do her hair. She had fresh flowers brought in and put out throughout her house. For her, these were all needs.

This is the problem when we get into programs. We start those, and all of a sudden we need those. It's important that you prioritize, and that's what the Wildrose is all about. You prioritize by capping that growth. We had \$800 million that we could prioritize to front-line workers. I believe it was 1,400 nurses. I think it was 1,200 teachers, a thousand seniors' caregivers and attendants. There were 300 more policemen.

That's what the Wildrose would do, prioritize. We would build ring roads, we would build schools, and we would build hospitals first, not museums, not capture CO₂ and stuff it in a black hole in the ground and think it's not going to come back to haunt us. This

government has more programs that have been debunked, starting with Swan Hills, the magnesium plant in High River, the ethanol production, CO₂. There's a long list, Mr. Speaker, of just bogus ideas where someone over there in the government thought: "Oh, isn't this going to be wonderful? Let's prioritize our spending."

Again, for the federal building and to go ahead right now with other things, whether it's museums or sports or recreation facilities, we need the basic fundamentals, all the things that we can and that we should do. We need our education. We need hospitals. We need to have the infrastructure that is critical, the ring roads for the congestion that we're dealing with. We need to balance a budget. We need to be fiscally responsible. We could be if that was our desire. It's not the desire.

The announcements that they've made in the last three weeks aren't as bad as the last election, but it's wrong. Laws should be passed so that they can't make pre-election promises in spending. They're doing it, and this is more debt that isn't paid for. Just like with her promise on the \$107 million, that we'll take it out of in-year savings, she failed to do that. This Premier and this cabinet and this government don't have any desire to balance the budget. They think it's their own money to spend on other people, to buy votes. It's wrong.

The Wildrose would give the people of Alberta a much better budget, that shows a bright future that we could all work toward and enjoy. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Acting Speaker: Thank you.

Section 29(2)(a) is available should anyone wish to question or comment on the previous speech. The hon. Member for Calgary-McCall.

Mr. Kang: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The hon. Member for Calgary-Glenmore talked about building more hospitals. I want to ask him: will they be private hospitals or publicly funded, publicly delivered hospitals?

Mr. Hinman: Well, you know, it's always interesting when we get those questions. Of course, there's always the ideology.

I don't know at this point we need more hospitals. We need the hospitals that we have opened, and we need the workers to fill them. What the Wildrose is absolutely committed to here in the province is that we have a publicly funded health care system, but we are not concerned about whether that's a public or a private facility.

When I go to my family doctor, it's in a private facility, yet it's publicly funded. I don't pull my wallet out to go see my doctor at his private office. Many people seem to cross those lines over, thinking: oh, my goodness, if it's privately run, we're in trouble. The Wildrose and the people of Alberta that we've heard from are all about wanting a publicly run health care system.

What they want in there is choice. What they want in there is some competition, not just the government appointing and saying: oh, you will get to do all of this in the province. We end up paying a premium price for often a poor product. But if there's more than one facility and we were to actually say, "You know, we're going to pay \$12,000 for hips" and then another facility says, "Oh, we can come in and give an RFP, a request for proposal, to do that" – that is what we had going in Calgary.

What happened there was shameful in that we had a provider that was the best in the world. People were coming to see. The incidence of infection and postoperative incidents were the lowest; their time getting out of there was fantastic. This was a world-leading facility. This government, with its ideology, said, "Oh, we're going to shut that place down, and we're going to push it over into the hospital there." That was wrong, in our opinion.

We have many, many experts here in the province that would love to provide better service, but the province and the superboard say: no, we're not going to allow that. I remember that in the by-election the superboard had just made the decision that we didn't need the GreenLight laser down at the Rockyview and that they were going to pull that out. Why? Because they'd said that they didn't need it. This is the type of thing that we're talking about, with the government making central decisions and saying: oh, this is what this area needs; this is what this one needs. The administration and the doctors in the Rockyview very much said, "No, we need this here; we should have it here," and they started to look elsewhere to see: how do we fund it to get it?

Lethbridge. We can go back to the incidents there, the first area in the province to say: "You know what? We can't send all of our people to Calgary to get an MRI done. There's a six-month to a one-year wait. We need one here in Lethbridge." They had to raise the money to get it. You can go out to Taber, again with doctors there raising money for equipment that central decision-makers say you cannot have.

This fallacy or this fear that a private facility can't provide public service isn't the case. We're all excited about having the best: the best price, the best quality, the best time available for people to get in and get treated quickly and not have to wait for six months or nine months because this government has set up a system that causes a backlog that is unacceptable and causes pain for those people who can't get in there.

I do remember meeting a schoolteacher who had to quit working for six months because they hadn't replaced her knee and she could no longer stand on it. The pain was too much. Those are the types of stories. I've heard about knees. I've heard about shoulders. I've heard about hips. I've gone door-knocking and run into these people, and they've all waited too long. Why? Because we've created this monopoly and this centrally driven government that has said: the way we control the price is that we control the flow. It hasn't worked.

We need that option there, where private facilities can look at it and say: "You know what? We can provide it better." They'd put that bid in to the provincial government, to Alberta Health Services, and we'd set up a system where it doesn't matter whether it's a private or a public facility. What matters is that they're accredited, that they're good, and that they provide a great service for the people of Alberta so that we're not waiting so long and don't have such a hefty health care bill.

We pay more per capita here in Alberta, I believe, than any other province, and we need to do better. We can do better, and we'll focus that on front-line service.

The Acting Speaker: Thank you.

The time has expired for 29(2)(a), so we'll move on to the next speaker, which is Fort McMurray-Wood Buffalo, followed by Calgary-Buffalo.

Mr. Boutilier: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker, and thank you, members, for listening intently to my comments. For fear of being redundant, I'd just like to include that I have made comments earlier in this House relative to the budget, and at one point I reviewed the budget. But after reviewing it, I have come to the conclusion that I certainly cannot support this budget.

In doing so, I speak not only as an MLA but as a father of a four-year-old. I believe that all of us in Alberta have to run our homes, our households. We cannot be spending more than we take in. The fact that this budget is in fact going to be running for the fourth or fifth year in a row a deficit: I think that is not the way Albertans run their households. Therefore, in speaking with

Albertans and my constituents in the good communities of Fort McMurray-Wood Buffalo, the constituency, the message I've received from them is that I cannot support this budget.

4:30

I would just like to take a few moments, Mr. Speaker, to draw to your attention what my concern is. As you know, Alberta is spending per capita more than any other province in Canada. Clearly, in the idea of spending money, one assumes that: oh, well, we must be getting the best value. What I am most concerned with is the fact that for the amount of money that is being spent in Alberta, we are not getting the best value. I think each of us in our household as a consumer goes and shops and always looks for the best value. We look over here; we look over there. We look at the product and the quality before we make a decision. So one of the reasons I cannot support this budget is that I do not accept the value that we're getting for what is being spent.

Even more so I cannot accept the priority of this government. The Minister of Education and the Minister of Finance at one point indicated in numerous discussions on this budget that – the Minister of Finance, who is responsible for this budget and who delivered his address to the Assembly, provided a question to me saying: well, how many schools do you think we could have built if we hadn't done the \$350 million federal building? At the time the Minister of Education and the Minister of Finance were indicating: how many schools could we have built?

Well, the average cost of a school is between \$20 million to \$30 million to \$40 million, depending upon the number of students that we have in growing communities such as Fort McMurray-Wood Buffalo. In my judgment, one of the things I would have liked to have seen happen is this: that more schools would have been built by the Minister of Finance and the Minister of Education in Fort McMurray rather than wasting hard-earned tax dollars on a \$350 million restoration of the federal building. Not to say that it's not important, but this is not the right time to be doing it.

Mr. Speaker, I want to say that we welcome the federal building restoration but at an appropriate time. In light of the deficits that are being run and the fact that \$350 million of Albertans' hard-earned tax dollars is being wasted on this building, I can say without any fear of contradiction that the offices that MLAs have in the Leg. Annex are quite satisfactory. It's no different than in your home. In your home you can't always go ahead and do the renovation that you want. Not everyone gets to get the granite or whatever. I don't have granite in my home on the countertops in the kitchen. Maybe people do, and good for them, but that's a choice that they make. My point is, though, that this government's priority to spend \$350 million could have potentially built 15 to 20 more schools.

I'll conclude with one other comment. It is a comment to the Minister of Finance, who at one point was the minister of health. Not only do I talk about building more schools; I also talk to the Minister of Transportation about twinning highway 63. The fact is that there has been no twinning over the last four years and that they've only twinned 16 kilometres of highway, when in actual fact we are the economic engine feeding Alberta with billions of dollars in revenue, but we are not getting our fair share back.

Mr. Speaker, what I would like to conclude with is this. To the Minister of Finance: how dare he provide a budget where he has ignored the senior citizens that built this province. The Minister of Finance, who was once the minister of health, discontinued a long-term care centre in Fort McMurray before the last election. As of this point in time, over four years later, where they've had now five announcements, they have still not even broken ground.

How dare a Minister of Finance be willing to spend \$350 million on MLA offices with over a hundred thousand people, our seniors, and almost 65 of them at our Northern Lights hospital in acute-care beds, which are really like jail cells, and we are still waiting for our first long-term care facility. I think it's shameful, and just on that principle alone I believe it says that this government has got its priorities wrong.

So no twinning. I haven't seen it in four years in terms of what's going on in the budget. The Minister of Transportation in estimates the other night indicated they're not going to plan on doing any twinning till 2013. I might say for the record that the Minister of Transportation said: oh, well, the mayor was happy in Fort McMurray. I talked to the mayor. In speaking to her, she is quite clearly not happy. What the Minister of Transportation said in budget estimates was not accurate. I took the time to speak directly to the mayor on that point, and she assured me that she is not happy with what is taking place and the lack of work that is going on with highway 63.

Finally, Mr. Speaker, the Minister of Finance, the former wrecking ball of the ministry of health, who said no to the seniors, who built this province, about a long-term care facility – now we are four years later, and still we have not seen a shovel go into the ground for our seniors, who built this province. Some of our seniors have passed away in acute-care beds, and that is shameful in terms of what they have contributed to building our province.

I will not as the Member for Fort McMurray-Wood Buffalo be supporting this budget and the lack of leadership by this Minister of Finance. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Acting Speaker: Thank you, hon. member.

Section 29(2)(a) is available. The hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands-Norwood.

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. To the hon. member: I wonder if he could elaborate on the question of providing seniors' care. We know that the government is proposing to have various forms of seniors' care built by the private sector, and in light of your colleagues' previous comments with respect to that matter, I would like you to elaborate a little bit on what sort of position you have relative to whether or not this seniors' care could be delivered in the government model with the private developers and how you feel that would be accomplished, what some of the economics are.

We know that the Premier hotly denied today the assertion that they had announced an intention to lift the cap on long-term care. Quite frankly, I think that those statements were absolutely false. During her campaign for the leadership of the PC Party she talked about lifting the cap on the seniors' care, and most recently her Seniors minister talked about having a discussion after the election about lifting the cap. There's no question in my mind that the price of having private developers being involved in construction of seniors' care is, in fact, the requirement for them to make a profit, and that's natural. That's what they want to do. But in order to accomplish that, lifting the cap will allow them to charge much higher fees to seniors and their families.

If you have a better way of delivering private health care than the government, I would sure be all ears, hon. member.

The Acting Speaker: The hon. member to respond.

Mr. Boutilier: Yeah. Thank you very much. A very good question, and I'm glad the Member for Edmonton-Highlands-Norwood has asked that question because I was fighting over two and a half years ago for seniors as they were in acute-care beds in Fort McMurray's Northern Lights hospital, if you can imagine, the

only city in all of Alberta that does not have a continuing care long-term care facility after this very government had committed to one in the 2008 election. Here we are – and you may ask me today – but still to this point in time they have not even broken ground. What they have done is that they've had five or six press announcements. I think they should stop killing trees because, really, the press announcement is not worth the paper it is actually written on.

Getting back to the idea of this Premier and her broken promise, where she talked about lifting the caps, that is very concerning to me. Mr. Speaker, I do want to say that in speaking to my seniors in Fort McMurray-Wood Buffalo, they also are equally concerned because lifting a cap means that our seniors, the very seniors who have built this province – and I believe an important value that I stand by today, my job, is to represent them. My job is to bring their voice to this Legislature. I did that, and what did this tired and old government do after 41 years?

Mr. Mason: They kicked you out unceremoniously.

Mr. Boutilier: They kicked me out. Why did they kick me out? They kicked me out without going to their caucus because that's how arrogant they were at the time. But they're not quite as arrogant today – okay? – apparently because they've been listening to Albertans and what has been going on in Alberta. Clearly, Albertans are not pleased with their performance.

I am named after a senior citizen, my grandfather, who lived a very good life. I'm very proud of him and proud to stand here today because of the fact that we treat seniors with respect. I told this PC Premier and caucus that I could not look a senior citizen in the eye, someone who at the time was 101 years old, when the minister of health at the time basically said that she's going to have to wait four or five years. Four or five more years, and at the time she was 101 years old, in an acute-care bed.

4:40

Mr. Speaker, let me conclude on that very good question that I thank the member for. I do not support what the Premier of Alberta has said about lifting the cap because it means the vulnerable, our seniors, who built this province, could be jeopardized once again. You know who can deliver the best care for our seniors? Clearly, it is their families, and I thank every Alberta family who has been supporting their loved ones. But when it comes to a point in time when they are in their home and they have to be moved to a long-term care facility, we need to provide them with the absolute necessary care so that we show them and demonstrate to them the respect that they deserve, that this government has not shown them.

The Acting Speaker: Thank you, hon. member.

The hon. Member for Calgary-*Buffalo* on Bill 7, the Appropriation Act, 2012.

Mr. Hehr: Well, thank you very much, Mr. Speaker, for recognizing me to speak on the Appropriation Act. I'm going to try to give my comments in a global sense, as it sort of directs where we've been as a province over the course of the last 25 years, and what I will try to see is what we should try to do over the next 25 years. I'll use this moment of discussing budgets and our adding to budgets at this time and use this time to try and outline a bit of a plan for where we have been and where we should be going.

If you look at the Alberta situation as it's been since approximately 1987, we have brought in some \$225 billion in petroleum resource revenue. This is a largesse that almost any

jurisdiction in North America and, I would hazard to guess, any jurisdiction in the world would have found to be a bounty of great abundance, which, by all accounts, it has been. But it's important to note what we've done with that unbelievable bounty. It's true that we've put up some hospitals, we've built some roads, we've built some schools and some other things, which, I guess, can be called legitimate government expenses. That is fine, but at the end of the day we have to look at whether this revenue source, which we have used to pay the day's bills, should be used to do that going forward.

I think, actually, that this downturn in the economy, this recession, this almost – I don't like to even use the word "recession." This is not really a recession; it's almost a fundamental breakdown of the market system by the way banks and finance companies and the like have set things up. It has caused us here in 2012 or may cause us to have a much better understanding of what Alberta may be like without oil and gas than we did in 2008. I don't think anyone in 2008 could have foreseen where the Alberta economy, the world economy was going to be over the course of these last four years. I think this lesson in time, if we do take it as a lesson in time, points us to what Alberta could be like without oil and gas revenues.

Like I say, over that 25-year-period from 1987 to 2012 we have spent every last dime of fossil fuel resources that has come in. Largely, we have very little left, if anything. You know, the sustainability fund is virtually drained. As the hon. Member for Calgary-Varsity pointed out, if you really add up the ledger on deficits for school infrastructure, on teachers' pension liabilities and the like, in my view this province would be considered in debt in cash due and owing. That's despite this largesse of one-time fossil fuel resources that we've enjoyed. I think we have to do a better job of planning for the long run here in this province. But, you know, as John Maynard Keynes said, "In the long run, we are all dead," so it's difficult to do that. I recognize that the pressures of the day dictate that sometimes that's difficult, but I think that given what we know and where we've been these last four years, we can do that.

I might introduce something here that may actually be a conservative principle going forward. I don't find it conservative at all, what we've been doing to this point in time, which has been to spend every last drop of fossil fuel resource that's coming to the public purse on paying today's bills. I don't think that it's conservative to have lowered taxes to such an extent that we used fossil fuel resources to lower taxes. Okay? I don't think that's conservative at all. I think that that's almost taking advantage of the fact that we live on 25 per cent of the world's oil resources and saying that it's our God-given right to blow it all on one generation. I don't believe that's conservative.

I think our future budgeting should look more like: what we use today, society should in fact pay for. Okay? Let's have that discussion with the electorate. What we use today as a society we should in fact pay for. With that principle you get a budget, and you factor that out. With this budget I think we're spending \$11 billion in nonrenewable resources paying today's bills. You'd say to society: "Well, we bring in \$30 billion worth of revenue. In order for you to pay for the services that you use, we're going to cut \$11 billion from those services." I'm, by all means, not advocating for that, but that would be a legitimate starting place, to say: where do we cut? Then you legitimately ask people: "Do you want to cut teachers? Do you want to cut nurses? Do you want to cut hospital staff? Do you not want us to build roads? Do you not want us to do all this stuff?" Then they have to ask themselves whether they truly want to pay for the services; i.e., taxation. That's what it is.

We have to understand here that sometimes governments are involved to deliver services to society in a more efficient manner than individuals can do for themselves. It's a trite example, but imagine, Mr. Speaker, if we all went out and built our own roads. Can you imagine us all building a road to the Legislature, all building a road to our school? This isn't a very decent way for society to organize itself. So there are certain things that government can do. I would say that in the main those are public health care and public education. In my view, clearly those are appropriate expenditures for government to be involved in to help with the organization of society or the creation at least of equality of opportunity, a place where rich and poor can develop their lives, strive to build their lives in the manner they see fit.

Back to my point on this budget, have that conversation with Albertans about what, actually, government services provide and have them legitimately pay for them. Or if you wanted, then say: "You want to do it yourself? Let's cut from that position that doesn't cut into the fossil fuel resources side of things, or let's add to that position without spending the fossil fuel resources." Okay? That would be a legitimate, open, honest debate of whether you're in favour of cutting services, like someone on the alleged right-wing side of the spectrum would want, or adding to services, like someone on the alleged left-wing side of services would want.

4:50

What we've done here is simply thrown these fossil fuel resources into the mix and considered that it's ours to blow. We've tried to trumpet around that we are being fiscally conservative by keeping taxes low, but we're not. We're just being fiscally irresponsible, which is more to the point. We're being fiscally irresponsible to future generations, to Alberta's future, and to really doing pragmatically what would be correct and fair to the people of Alberta both now and into our future. So if we're going to have that debate with people, let's not confuse it with our fossil fuel resources. Then you can have a legitimate debate about what role government has in your society and what it doesn't.

What this government does is try to claim to be conservative by keeping taxes low while all the while blasting through fossil fuel resources. Really, it's taking the cop-out position, and that, in my view, has to stop. If you want to have this discussion with people, have it in an open and transparent fashion.

Let's point to the example of Norway. Okay? Norway, as you well know, has a fund set up of \$600 billion, maybe even \$700 billion. What they have done, then, is considered fossil fuel resources one of those things we set aside, and we discuss with the citizenry what we're going to pay for today and what we're not going to pay for today. This money is set aside because it's not our right to blow it in one generation. That, to me, is a legitimate position.

I believe in all objectivity that if someone from around the world or if someone from Mars, let's say, came down and looked at the way Norway did it over the last 25 years and the way Alberta did it and objectively looked as to who did it right, there's only one answer they can come to. There's only one sane answer you can come to. It was Norway. Okay? So let's try and get to that legitimate debate with people about what we use, what the role of government is, and let's have that starting point with our people, not fudge it by blasting through oil and gas revenues. That's why I was encouraged to hear in the throne speech that we will be looking at all revenue sources.

Now, I realize it's election time, and we have to take positions. If this government is back – and by all accounts that might be a difficult thing to say; right now it's not clear whether they will be

back – I hope that is a position they honestly take. I believe honestly that Albertans will appreciate the fact that we're giving some view to the long run, our future prosperity.

Guess what? Say if we even draw a dot. I always go back to this. People say people are moving here for the low taxes. Well, I'll tell you what. Out of about the last 60 people I've asked why they moved here, they moved here for a job. Actually, in fact, the next person I meet who says they've moved here for the low taxes will be the first person. Okay? I simply don't run into them.

We must remember that, you know, oftentimes it's accidents of geography; i.e., us living in the Pembina basin, which has a lot of geological basis that allows us to have this oil and gas wealth, is the reason for our prosperity. I know the old joke is: well, the Tories put the oil in the ground. But I've been here almost 42 years, and my dad's been here 69 years, and he rightfully tells me that it was the Social Credit who put it in the ground anyway. So let's give credit where credit is due, if we're really trying to be cute with it. Let's remember that our economy runs principally on accidents of geography.

If we could consider some of the things I've said in here, maybe it holds some validity on how we should do future budgeting and how we should really talk about the future best interests of this province. Maybe I've said something of relevance, or maybe I haven't, but I've tried.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I look forward to other people's thoughts on the matter.

The Acting Speaker: Thank you, hon. member.

Section 29(2)(a) is available for five minutes of questioning or commenting. The hon. Member for Calgary-Varsity.

Mr. Chase: Yes. Possibly, Mr. Speaker, I already know the answer for what I'm about to ask. It may be a rhetorical question, but if you could comment briefly on the importance of both a public education system and a public health care system that is public, not only publicly funded but publicly delivered, publicly administered, how that is important in the budgeting process to make sure that we have the most appropriate funding for both public education and public health care.

Mr. Hehr: Clearly, I hope you'd start with the principles outlined before. We bring in \$30 billion in federal transfers, some revenues from user fees, another \$12 billion from personal and corporate taxation. Hopefully, you would build a budget with what the government of the day does to provide public health care and publicly delivered health care, because I believe in the main that that is the most reasonable approach given our geography, our history, and actually getting results from the health care system as well as simply funding a public education system.

If I could comment on the role of government in public education, I believe their only role under the Constitution is to provide funding for public schools, our separate schools. Our francophone schools outside of that constitutional responsibility the government has made an accommodation for.

In fact, I believe a splinter society doesn't add value to it and doesn't move your society forward in an egalitarian way that recognizes equality of opportunity. That's what the education system is there for, to recognize equality of opportunity. Your education should not be based upon the wealth of your parents or, actually, frankly, the religion of your parents. If you want that you can pay for it yourself.

In the main, in returning those two things to a budget, whether it was a Liberal government, a Conservative government, a New Democrat government or a Wildrose government, I hope they

would go back to that base principle of trying to at least give out what our oil and gas resources are, and say: no, these we don't touch.

We're able to in Alberta have corporations that because of our accidents of geography, i.e. living on 25 per cent of the world's oil resources, are able to make large profits. Accordingly, they should be asked to pay for some of those things that we do today. Their employees use it, the owners use it, all of that stuff. We should have corporations pay a little more, and I think in the Liberal platform we struck a reasonable start on that, like 2 per cent more.

I also think it's insane that we've adopted a flat-tax system here in Alberta, a system that sees a person making a million dollars a year pay the same rate of tax as the person making \$30,000 a year. [interjection] Still, if we look at it, we're the only jurisdiction in North America that has this type of taxation system. You know, being the only person doing it is not always a good thing. You might have to question why governments haven't followed this lead if it's been such a panacea, if it's been such a real value for us. It hasn't been a real value for us. It's allowed us to snow through all of this resource revenue at once.

I heard an hon. member say: well, they paid more tax. But I'm looking at society in general. Has it been that you want to go to this taxation principle to then snow through all these fossil fuel resources? Well, that is a government choice, but I don't believe it serves society well in either the short term or the long term. In the short term, because you can never tell what your resource revenue is going to be from year to year, it doesn't allow for predictable and sustainable funding. In the long term it doesn't allow us to save and protect future generations. He's just putting off the day when the oil and gas is gone, and then those people will be forced to pay a 50 per cent tax rate if they want to keep up the services we have today.

5:00

The Acting Speaker: Thank you very much, hon. member.

The chair is pleased to recognize the hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands-Norwood on Bill 7, the Appropriation Act, 2012.

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It's a pleasure to rise and speak to Bill 7, the Appropriation Act, 2012, which is predominately a bill about this coming budget. It appropriates the funds to meet the budget estimates for the 2012-13 year.

Mr. Speaker, today in question period I posed a number of questions to the Premier relating to her habit or tactic of postponing difficult decisions until after the election to create reviews that are supposedly independent, which may or may not have fixed terms of reference and times that they're going to be coming back to us, in order to dispose of difficult questions that might cause the Progressive Conservative Party some trouble in the election. And I said during that debate that this has become such a common tactic employed by the Premier that it's almost a cliché: of course, that's what she's going to do.

She stood up and said, "Well, you know, I can't interfere with the process that we have here," as if the process was something set by someone other than her and set for some purpose other than to create some distance from a difficult issue and sufficient delay to get it past the election. We've seen this with the so-called public inquiry into health care, which is not on any of the matters that were promised. There's a review on electricity prices. There's a review on MLA compensation. There's a review on whether or not the cap for long-term care fees is going to be lifted. The list goes on and on.

Mr. Speaker, I was trying to characterize this budget, and it occurred to me as I was thinking about it that this budget does exactly what the Premier has been doing with every other difficult issue. At first, it was a surprising sort of budget to be tabled by a Conservative government because there was a little more spending on things like education and health care, some of the things that the Conservatives traditionally cut between elections.

We knew it was going to be an election budget – we knew that – but if you really examine it, Mr. Speaker, you'll find that this increase in funding, which is intended to be popular as the Conservative Party goes to face the people, is a bit of a sleight of hand, that, in fact, what they've done here is not sustainable and it is not realistic. The chickens will come home to roost, but the government has carefully arranged things so that they will come home to roost, they hope, after they are safely re-elected.

The assumptions in this budget are, quite simply, so optimistic that you might consider that it is just a hope and a prayer. The fiscal plan, for example, forecasts nominal GDP growth at 7.7 per cent next year, Mr. Speaker. That's a phenomenal rate of growth. They're predicting that personal income tax revenue is going to increase by 9.3 per cent, but at the same time they're only predicting that the population will grow by 2 per cent in the same period of time. They are expecting corporate income tax to go up by 11 and a half per cent, so an additional \$500 million and an additional \$800 million for personal income tax.

Quite frankly, Mr. Speaker, it goes beyond optimistic. It really looks to me that they have put deliberately overly optimistic figures in terms of the economic growth that they're predicting in this province. Now, that might happen. You know, I've heard the government ads that are being run at taxpayers' expense: the boom is back and good times are returning to the province. They really are something that the Progressive Conservative Party should be paying for, but we're all paying for the government's very upbeat message as they head towards an election. I would suggest that they are misusing taxpayers' funds.

They are trying to create the impression that all of the spending that's included in this budget is going to be sustainable or achievable, and I think that that is really stretching it. It's possible, but the chances of significantly less growth are there as well. So they're gambling. Of course, if they lose, then we all lose. But they plan to be safely re-elected by that point, Mr. Speaker, and then have another three years or so to figure out what to do to dig the province out of the hole that they've put us in.

Now, one of the things that I think is important is that this government is continuing to provide significant expenditures for program expenditures. There's no question about it, Mr. Speaker. Whether it's spent wisely or not is another question, but we all know that Alberta spends more, for example, on health care per capita than any other province. They're doing that at the same time as they're continuing along with the tax cuts for the wealthy and the corporations that they promised and delivered on years ago. This government has in the last 10 years cut corporate taxes from 16 per cent to about 10 per cent. That's about a one-third or slightly more than one-third cut in corporate taxes that's taken place in that time. Also, they imposed a flat tax on personal income, which provides a very, very handsome tax reduction for the very wealthiest amongst us.

That's their priority, and those are the things that they've really done. There's no indication that they're going to change that, nor is there any indication that they're going to change the fact that we have some of the lowest royalties in the entire world on our natural resources, particularly on our oil. They did this, Mr. Speaker, at a time when gas prices were very high and the government was getting enormous amounts of revenue from

natural gas royalties. Now, as we all know, the shale gas finds in B.C. and in the United States and so on have depressed gas prices, and they're going to stay depressed for the foreseeable future, so the revenue has dropped.

That brings us to why we're running a deficit in the province. It's not because the government is overspending on social programs, but it is because it has become too dependent on nonrenewable resource revenue to fund programs. Right now, Mr. Speaker, about 30 per cent of our program spending is funded by nonrenewable resource revenue, and that became necessary because of the tax cuts that the government has created.

When you look at the budget, Mr. Speaker, there are many aspects of it that I think are seriously deficient. But the main point that I want to make is that they have basically brought forward a budget that is not realistic, that overestimates the revenue, that paints a really rosy picture, that's designed to get them re-elected, and we will all pay the piper sometime down the road. They're doing that, I think, in a very deliberate and very cynical way. I think that's the main point.

5:10

There are a number of problems with how the government is approaching different questions. Of course, long-term care is one of them. We have a serious shortage of long-term care. The government tries not to even talk about long-term care. They talk about continuing care and they talk about assisted living and so on and that they are planning to have this delivered by the private sector. So the private sector has told the government, you know, that: "If you want us to invest our capital in your assisted living facilities, we're going to have to make some money from it. We're going to have to make a profit. That's the business we're in." That is, in fact, a requirement if you're going to go to the private sector for anything.

So they've said that one of the things you're going to have to do is take the cap off of long-term care fees. The Premier said today that allegations that the government was planning to do that were completely false, that my question was full of things that just simply weren't true. But actually, Mr. Speaker, if you go back to her campaign promises, when she sought the leadership, she talked about removing the cap on long-term care. Her own minister of health talked just the other day about having a discussion with Albertans after the election.

Ms Notley: Her Minister of Seniors.

Mr. Mason: I'm sorry. The Minister of Seniors said that.

There's no question in my mind that the government is intending to do this, but they are simply going to defer the decision until after the election. I don't know if anyone else sees a pattern here, Mr. Speaker, but I certainly do see a pattern.

The Conservatives are running as if they were Liberals or New Democrats in this election. But when you really scratch the shiny new paint job, Mr. Speaker, you see the same old Tory blue underneath because this budget, if you analyze it, leads back to the same old Tory policies once the election is over. We're going to see more costs loaded onto people, onto families for health care, for seniors' care, for electricity.

The Premier has claimed that they've stabilized electricity prices. In fact, there are ads that I've seen on the Internet and other places saying that the government has brought in a program to stabilize electricity prices. Nothing could be further from the truth, Mr. Speaker. What they've done is that they've frozen some of the intermediary fees, the ancillary fees, that are the most stable part of our power price, and they've stabilized them at the highest

price they've been in 10 years. They've done a big favour to those companies because they've frozen those fees at a very, very high level. So those companies are guaranteed lots of revenue from those fees. What they haven't done is done anything about the cost of actual electricity, which remains extremely volatile, which remains very high, unstable. They've done nothing. The government's claim and its use of taxpayers' money to claim that they've stabilized electricity prices is absolutely false.

Mr. Speaker, there are many other issues related to this budget, but because this bill is about appropriation, I've tried to focus primarily on the revenue side and the overly optimistic estimates that the government has provided in order to justify a budget that not only combines tax reductions or very low taxes for the very wealthiest and their friends in the corporate sector, who fund their election campaigns, but at the same time provides some increases to program spending.

It's not an honest budget, Mr. Speaker. It is a sleight of hand. It is, in fact, the very, very embodiment of this Premier's philosophy, which is to stall for time, to put off difficult decisions until after the government is safely re-elected. It is my sincere hope that the people of Alberta will see through this budget, will see through the Progressive Conservative Party and throw this government out, as it should, when the election is called within a few days.

Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

The Acting Speaker: Thank you.

Hon. members, section 29(2)(a) is available. The hon. Member for Calgary-Varsity under 29(2)(a).

Mr. Chase: Thank you. I'll repeat the question that I put to the hon. Member for Calgary-Buffalo. Your opinion with regard to the budgeting for publicly funded, publicly administered, publicly delivered health care and education: do you feel this budget addresses those concerns or that it's tending toward privatization or other methods of delivery of services at public expense?

The Acting Speaker: The hon. member to respond.

Mr. Mason: Yes. Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I will just note that it's the New Democratic Party that has been over the long run the most consistent supporter of publicly funded and publicly delivered education and health care, and we're very proud of that. We haven't wavered. We don't say one thing in one election and something else in another. I think you could probably also say that, although they're a young party, of the Wildrose, that they are fairly consistent in wanting more private health care. The government also wants more private health care, but they don't say so at election time. They do it afterwards, and, you know, I've had enough experience to realize that that's the case. In the 2004 election I challenged Ralph Klein in the leaders' debate that he had a secret plan for privatizing health care, which he hotly denied. A few months later we had the third way, which was two-tiered private health care.

The same thing happened when the last Premier was in the debate in the campaign in 2008. He had said absolutely nothing about the government's plans for changing health care, but as soon as he was re-elected, he appointed the health minister of the day, who was, as we've said, a one-man wrecking crew in the health system. He closed beds, and he shut down hospitals, and he laid off nurses. He created a corporate model of health care to be delivered here, which the government has still not gotten rid of.

There's lots of evidence that this government deliberately hides its plans for private health care before elections and then implements them after. I believe they're doing it again because, of

course, we do have that caucus document, that was presented to the PC caucus by the current minister of health, that talked about more private delivery, more private insurance, doctors operating in both the public and the private systems at the same time. That's where they're going again, Mr. Speaker. At least the Wildrose is honest about their plans, and I think that that really speaks volumes. There is no question in my mind that this budget doesn't meet fundamental tests in terms of protecting public health care, and by that I mean publicly delivered health care, not just publicly funded, and education.

Just on that point, I wanted to just, you know, talk a little bit about what this government does and what it means when they say: public health care. They clarify, if pressed, that they mean publicly funded health care, that they're committed to publicly funded health care, but what that means is that they want to use taxpayers' money to subsidize the private profits of their corporate friends as they deliver, whether it's a drug company or an insurance company or private health care, a private hospital or a private clinic. That's what they mean. Sure, it's publicly funded, but what it actually is is taxpayers' money supporting private profit in health care. All of the evidence shows clearly that publicly delivered health care provides the best outcomes at the lowest price, so if you want to control costs for the taxpayer, a publicly funded and publicly delivered system is far and away the best option. That's something we've been consistent about, Mr. Speaker. It's not just this election.

The same for education. The government likes to talk about choice in education. They like to talk about private schools, home-schooling, and so on, but we're committed to strengthening the public school system and making it stronger.

Thank you.

5:20

The Acting Speaker: Thank you.

Hon. members, the Government House Leader wishes to speak. We'll try to maintain a reasonable rotation list here. For some answers to some of the questions posed, I will recognize the Government House Leader, and then we'll go to Calgary-Currie and wrap up with Airdrie-Chestermere.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I've been sitting here patiently listening all afternoon to some of the comments on the Appropriation Act. I have to say that I live in an almost entirely different world than the other speakers. I live in an optimistic world. I live in a place where people care about their province and the future of their children and their grandchildren. Investing in people was a priority for the constituents in Edmonton-Whitemud, recognizing that there are two ways to build our province for the future. One is investing in infrastructure, which this government has consistently done, and the other is investing in people so that they have the knowledge, skills, and ability to be able to take advantage of the opportunities that exist here in this province.

That's what Budget 2012 was about: investing in people and ensuring that we have the kind of society, the kind of place where Albertans can live in dignity, where if they have issues or barriers to success, problems to overcome, as a society we come together to help, not to do it for them, not to take away their independence but to help where help is needed, so that every Albertan has access to those opportunities. That's what Budget 2012 speaks to.

Budget 2012 speaks to that sense of the place that we're in now, which is the envy of virtually every place in the world at the moment, certainly of every place in North America in terms of the economic opportunity and the quality of life: the ability to live in a community that has clean air, clean water, a big blue sky; the

things that are rich about our community, the ability to go for a walk in the river valley in Edmonton or to go to the new Art Gallery of Alberta or to go to a football game or a hockey game, if that's your idea of culture, or to go to a symphony.

I had the privilege, Mr. Speaker, a number of years ago of heading a process to develop a 20-year strategic plan, and we talked about unleashing innovation and leading and learning so that we could compete in a global marketplace and ensure that Alberta was the best place to live, work, and raise our families. In fact, that's what we're achieving. We're well on track for that 20-year strategic plan, understanding that oil and gas and carbon resources are fundamental to our economy today with agriculture, forestry, which is a carbon resource as well, and people and tourism.

When I hear people talking about Budget 2012 the way that we've heard this afternoon, I'm thinking that that doesn't describe the people I've talked with in Edmonton-Whitemud or across Edmonton or across the province, for that matter. That doesn't relate to their sense of hope and optimism in the province for themselves, for their children, for their families.

I heard the hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands-Norwood talking about projections and not being realistic in the projections. The hon. member should know and understand, because it's been discussed before – or he could read it in the estimates and the business plan – that the way we project revenue now is the same as we projected revenue before. Nobody is making up new numbers. You basically look at: what's the price of oil going to be? Nobody actually knows what the price of oil is going to be. You look at the best prognosticators in the world, you take all of their advice, you take an average of what they're talking about, you look at some private prognosticators because we have access to good information as well from private companies, and then you take something that's slightly lower than their average in order to be more conservative about the prognostication, the same process as has been used in the past.

When you take a look at the volumes, you don't make up the volumes. You go and ask the people who are in production how much they're going to produce, and you base your projection of revenue based on price and volume. Both of those are numbers that are not made up; they're numbers that come.

When people talk about optimistic projections, indeed they are optimistic. They're optimistic because the prognosticators around the world, the best people in the field, are very optimistic about where the price of oil is going to be. They're not that optimistic about where the price of gas is going to be, but at least they're putting out their figures as to what they believe it'll be. We know with some degree of certainty, barring a disaster, what the volumes are going to be.

So the projections are not made up. The projections are a process that's used every year to determine what revenues we might be able to achieve from royalties based on those numbers.

In terms of balancing the budget, again, I've spoken to many, many people in my constituency and in Edmonton and, indeed, across the province about what their priority is. Do they want to balance the budget this year at all costs? Well, the answer has been a resounding no. They don't want government to cut back on health, they don't want government to reduce the funding to education, and they certainly don't want to decrease the investment in people services, in human services. In fact, there's been a lot of sentiment expressed, a lot of very, very good comments from across the province, about the increase, for example, of \$400 to AISH recipients, a promise that was made by the Premier and a promise that we kept in this budget, a very important statement about people living in dignity.

Albertans are not cruel people; they're not inhumane people. They don't want to balance the budget at all costs. They want to know that there is a plan and a process by which we will be able to live within our means. They want to know that we're using the contingency fund appropriately, that we know where we're going, and that we are being very prudent with the resources so that we get value for money. Indeed, I've talked, again, with a number of people who think that Bill 1, the value review process for budgeting, is a very important process because what it says is that we want to have certain programs to ensure that Albertans are helped when they need help, that we want to have education and health care, but we want to know that the money that's being spent is being spent prudently and achieving the results. So the Results-based Budgeting Act is a very important piece of legislation to highlight that that's exactly where we're going.

The projections are not outlandish. They're not off base. They're done in a prudent manner. They may be wrong – and, heaven knows, they've been wrong before – but that's because they have to be based on numbers that nobody can actually ascertain until they look in their rear-view mirror, and we will do that eventually. But for now we're projecting the revenues in exactly the same way as we've projected revenues before, and it's an appropriate way to do it.

We're planning for programming for Albertans in a manner which allows us to look at each program and say, "Are we getting value for money, and are we achieving the results that Albertans want?" We'll continue to do that.

Then we come to the capital budget. Some of our friends here think that the way to balance a budget is to not spend so much money on capital. Of course, at the same time they say: but spend the money in capital in my riding because my kids are more important than your kids. That's just untenable, Mr. Speaker.

We have a province that has had significant growth spurts. One of the growth spurts was in the '70s, and a lot of buildings were built in the '70s. A lot of schools were built in the '70s. Fifty per cent of our school buildings are now more than 40 years of age. There's a lot of work to be done. There's been a lot of maintenance work done on them over the years, but there's a lot of work to be done to modernize those school buildings that we still need and to build new in areas of growth like Edmonton-Whitemud.

In Edmonton-Whitemud there have been eight new schools built in the period of time that I've represented that constituency. I think that's the highest number of schools in the province. They're not being built because of me; they're being built because we've had phenomenal growth. Of the four new schools that were opened not this last fall but the fall before, all of them are looking for additional modulars to be attached to those schools, all of them are well over capacity, and all of them are looking for answers in terms of how they can deal with the children that they have coming to those schools and how they can find the right places for them.

To suggest that we should take our capital budget and stretch it out over a few more years so as to balance the budget as opposed to investing the capital now and amortizing it over a period of its useful life is, in my view, wrong headed. We need to invest now in the roads that help to create the economy. We need to invest now in the schools which help to invest in people and create the opportunities for our citizens. We need to do that now, and we are doing it now, and it happens to have been a very good policy to do it over the past few years, when there was a slowdown in the economy, when prices went down a little bit, and when people needed jobs. It was a good investment then, but it's still a good investment now to build those schools when we need them and not

to take the advice of the Wildrose Party, which suggests to stretch the capital funding out.

5:30

Now, they suggest: well, you could actually just prioritize your funding. They would have Albertans believe that the \$350 million, which they seem to have spent about 150 times in the last two years on different things, that is budgeted for the federal building could have just been saved. Well, a building like the federal building costs money when it's sitting empty, and that's not very good value for money, so one has to make some tough decisions sometimes. Are you going to invest in that building, or are you going to dispose of that building? What are you going to do with it? Are you just going to have costs thrown away every year? So very prudent decisions are made, but that's not money that's spent every year in the budget. That's money that's spent over the build of the project.

So you can't spend that \$350 million every year like the Wildrose would want us to do or \$2 billion for carbon capture and storage or \$2 billion for GreenTRIP. They would have us just redirect all that money. Well, I've got news for them. There isn't \$2 billion in this year's budget for carbon capture and storage or for GreenTRIP. That's money for projects which are deemed to be important, and the money is budgeted for those projects over a much longer period of time. In fact, it's similar to what they are suggesting, that we have to spread some of the things out a little bit longer. Well, news to them: we did that.

The reality is that this budget is a very important budget for Albertans. It's about investing in people. It's about ensuring that we have that balance between building the right kind of infrastructure for the right reasons and in the right places to ensure that we support the growth of the economy – the new people who are coming here, the baby boom that we've had here – and that we can support the infrastructure that we need in health, for example. It's not just the new buildings like the Calgary hospital or the Edmonton clinic, which are going to be very important as we move forward not just to service the health needs of Albertans but to find the new knowledge we need to be able to do it better – those are important investments – but it's also investing in people so that we have the people capacity to do the work, whether it's research work or whether it's nursing or whether it's doctors or whether it's otherwise delivering those services to Albertans.

So quite apart from what we've heard over the course of this afternoon about the doom and gloom of the budget or the bad projections or the failure to invest properly, Mr. Speaker, I would suggest to this House that this is a very good budget for Albertans. It's the budget that Albertans asked for and want. It's the budget which maintains and builds on the programs that they want for their children, for their parents when they need it, in health or in education, that builds the infrastructure we need, and, hopefully, one that we can build on so that places like Edmonton-Whitemud, that right now has 74,000 residents, which is the largest constituency in the province until the writ is dropped and growing every day, can build the infrastructure we need so that we can invest in people in the way that we need to ensure that they can contribute back to our province in the strongest possible way.

That's the kind of Alberta that people want. That's the kind of Alberta that Edmonton-Whitemud constituents are telling me about. It has nothing to do with the type of Alberta that the members of the opposition seem to be living in.

The Acting Speaker: Thank you.

Hon. members, 29(2)(a) is available. Calgary-Varsity, proceed.

Mr. Chase: Thank you very much. I like to be a positive person as well and make judgments based on reality and also have a degree of faith and hope for the best, but what no member of the government has indicated is the contingency, or fallback, plan. Now, we've seen circumstances within recent memory, for example, of the manipulation of the power market, where TransAlta Utilities suffered a very small fine but made almost 3 and a half million dollars. There appears to be, because I haven't heard it, and I look forward to hearing it, no backup plan.

Right now this province is still dependent for over 80 per cent of its power production on coal-fired generation, an archaic form of power generation with many negative side effects. But what happens if, because of the aging of this power infrastructure, we have repeats, that we've seen before, of three coal-fired generation plants shutting down at the same time? Surprisingly, the cost of electricity goes sailing through the roof, and we have to import it from B.C. at a considerable higher price, yet the power generators benefit from that inflated price. So there's no large motivation for them to get these monolithic coal-fired plants back in gear.

We are repeatedly, with our weather and our climate change circumstance, seeing 100-year anomaly flooding examples occurring year after year. With the climate warming, we saw this past summer the terrific fire that consumed the larger portion of Slave Lake. Previously, in 2003, we saw the Lost Creek fire, that was very devastating.

The government does not seem to be concerned about the effects of climate change and water on its practice of clear-cutting. They're clear-cutting in the southern watershed, in the Castle-Crown region. They're clear-cutting in Bragg Creek. Those clear-cutting costs are not reflected in this budget, and that's a concern I have because the residents down south, as I mentioned in my question today, from Beaver Mines east – Beaver Mines being the closest community affected by the clear-cutting – are all going to see significant increases in their water filtration costs because of the erosion that will take place. Again, the government has refused to show documentation that would prove to the contrary.

For the 1.3 million individuals living in Calgary and then add on close to another .2 million in the vicinity that are dependent on both the Bow and Elbow rivers, when you clear-cut in the Bragg Creek area and the silt runs into the river because it's no longer being held by the roots of the trees, which are no longer there, then there are considerably greater costs in the filtration process, which is not taken into account in this budget.

The minister mentioned with pride that we're not just oil and gas. We're also agriculture. We're also forestry. But if we continue to have forestry practices that are not sustainable, that actually take away from the budget as opposed to contributing to it, then we're going to be in trouble. Again, the government hasn't accounted for that. They're blissfully believing that clear-cutting is still a sustainable practice. It has been abandoned in B.C. It was never practised in Europe. It's been abandoned in the majority of southern States. There are costs associated with this failure to look at long-term sustainability.

Now, we are, as I mentioned earlier . . .

The Acting Speaker: Thank you, hon. member.

The chair is pleased to recognize the hon. Member for Calgary-Currie, followed by Airdrie-Chestermere, and then Vermilion-Lloydminster in that order.

Mr. Anderson: How much time . . .

The Acting Speaker: Calgary-Currie has the floor first.

Mr. Taylor: Thank you. Don't worry, Airdrie-Chestermere, you are going to get a chance to speak. If we do this right, we may even be able to vote on this before 6 o'clock because I'm not going to take a great long period of time. Lord knows, a lot of speakers so far this afternoon have.

You know, there's much on both sides of this House that I agree with in the debate that's gone on so far. I personally don't think this is that bad of a budget. I would quibble with what the Human Services minister says in that this is a very important budget for Albertans. When you're spending \$40 billion a year, every budget is very important for Albertans, not just the budgets that precede an election call.

Despite what I like or don't like about this budget – and many of those points have been covered already, Mr. Speaker – there is one very clear and specific reason why I will be voting against the Appropriation Act today, and that is because of the process that's involved in going through the estimates of the budget.

5:40

I can put it very simply and very succinctly. The amounts that we're being expected to vote on for Tourism, Parks and Recreation: expense, \$158,214,000; capital investment, \$13,582,000; non-budgetary disbursements, \$400,000. You know what? That works out to about \$170 million to \$175 million, and we spent three hours debating the estimates of the Ministry of Tourism, Parks and Recreation.

The amounts for Health and Wellness: expenses, \$15,894,912,000; capital investments, \$77,226,000. We're basically talking about \$16 billion in Health and Wellness, the ministry responsible for the issue that repeatedly shows up as the issue that is most important to the people of Alberta, most concerning to the people of Alberta. How much time did we spend? How much time did we have to debate the estimates of the Department of Health and Wellness? Let's see. Three hours. Three hours for \$175 million; three hours for \$16 billion. That is a fundamentally flawed process.

This Legislature could do so much more, could do so much better: the 83 people who sit in here until the call of the election. I am confident the 87 people who will sit in here when the 28th Legislative Assembly of the province of Alberta is convened following the election will have a great deal to contribute if only they'll be allowed to contribute. If they're allowed to work in a bipartisan or multipartisan fashion to drill down into some of these numbers and really have parliamentary-style budget hearings that allow us all to get to the facts of the matter and amend and suggest changes and so on and so forth, we will come up with better budgets.

I'm not saying that this is a bad budget. In fact, the very first time I talked about it in this House, I said that it wasn't a bad budget and that there was much about it that I agreed with. I'm a little suspicious of those sunshine-and-lollipops projections for the next two fiscal years after we get through this one coming up, but for this fiscal year there is a lot in this budget that I can support.

But why I cannot support this budget – and this is not to deny our hard-working civil servants a paycheque; this is not to deny people on AISH their payments; this is not to deny people who deserve to have schools their schools; this is not to deny health care to anybody, whether they've been intimidated or not – is because the process is flawed. We have \$16 billion at stake in one department, \$40 billion at stake overall give or take, and we spend so little time going through the details of that. The process is flawed. I will be voting against Bill 7.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Acting Speaker: Thank you.

Section 29(2)(a) is available.

If not, we'll proceed with the hon. Member for Airdrie-Chestermere's comments.

Mr. Anderson: And then who is after me, Mr. Speaker? Is he here? Okay. Good.

Well, I won't take the full time – I think there is one other that wants to speak to this – but I do want to say that, obviously, I'm opposed to this budget. There are parts of it that I agree with. For example, I agree that the education build, the new school build that's outlined in the Education budget, is a priority area for Alberta. In fact, I'd like to see more resources taken from other areas of the budget and put into the Education portion of the budget, particularly in the area of new schools and upgrades and so forth.

However, there is so much significant waste that it's appalling. I've outlined that, you know, many times throughout this budget debate. I just want to say again that we have to start looking at this budget from a different perspective than we have previously. We cannot continue this game of saying that we can either have a balanced budget or we can have schools, that we can have a balanced budget or we can have new hospitals and so forth.

That is so beyond shallow of an argument. It really drives any logical thinking human being nuts because it's just absolutely not the case. You can balance the budget, and you can have the schools and health facilities that you need, but you have to be able to prioritize. You have to be able to say no to certain special-interest groups. You have to be able to say no to padding your own pockets with regard to salaries and benefits and so forth. You have to be able to say no to some things.

You know, as someone who considers himself a fiscal conservative, I was hoping, when I joined the PC Party in 2007 – well, I joined them before that but ran for them in 2007 as someone who thought he was joining a fiscally conservative party. We cannot continue in this way because fiscal conservatives don't say: one or the other. They say: we can do both. We can build what we need with what we bring in, and we will make do with that. That means putting other things off.

I hope that that mentality over time will change going into the next budget. I definitely believe and hope that it will be a Wildrose caucus that presents that next budget, to show how that's done.

Mr. Speaker, although we agree with some of the things in this budget, we do not agree with the overall idea of running yet another deficit at \$105-a-barrel oil. We think it's irresponsible. We think the projections are irresponsible. We think it's a disservice to future generations. So we will not be supporting it.

We would also add that the comments earlier that there was no tax increase in this budget are not accurate. There was a tax increase. Last year's budget: there was no tax increase in that budget. This year there was. There was a property tax increase in this budget.

As the *Herald* editorial said today, it was another broken promise by this Premier. She raised property taxes, and she didn't have to, especially since she said that she wouldn't, and to disguise it as anything else is just not the case. Calgarians and Edmontonians and Albertans from east to west in this province are going to receive higher taxes because of their decision on this.

With that, we will not be supporting this budget because of the deficit and the tax increases and several other problems in it. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Acting Speaker: Thank you, hon. member.

Section 29(2)(a) is available.

Seeing no one, I would be pleased to recognize the hon. Member for Vermilion-Lloydminster.

Mr. Snelgrove: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Just a few comments on the budget, probably from what we would call the 50,000-foot view as opposed to individual issues. I guess the concern that I have is that the world financial markets have looked at us for quite some time now and said: "You are growing. You are spending too fast. You are in waters that are unsustainable, and it causes us concern."

I had the privilege of meeting with some of the moderating people last year, and they said: "It's not what you're spending right now, but you're building into your budget money that can't possibly continue to grow at that rate. You have to make some tough choices." Common sense, Mr. Speaker, would say that we can't be spending this much more than other provinces, yet we're not getting significantly different results.

I will give an example that I know future governments will probably deal with. What about the Education minister? I know he's very passionate about looking for money to build more schools and then is saying: but we have 40,000 empty seats in Edmonton public. I just got back from Jamaica. They run two shifts in their schools. Maybe that won't work here; maybe it will. Schools that are now empty 180 days a year could be used far more effectively. We have population centres now that can support it, in the bigger centres. Maybe it's four semesters. Maybe it's six. Maybe it's 12. And the hours of instruction per subject: put that all on the table. You won't get there if you don't say: "No. Hold it. We've got to fix some things here."

5:50

I can appreciate the work that many of the departments have done over the past few years to bring change. Industry gives us examples every day of industries that have been forced to change, and they come out of it stronger. We shouldn't be any different in government when we're challenged with making changes to our health care and our education.

I can tell you that one thing Albertans have is courage to work with you. If they know what you're trying to do, they'll work with you. They want us to make decisions. We have far more information in here than the average person on the street will ever know, and they don't want to know. They want to trust us to see the information, to make good, sound judgment calls based on our party policies or our values, and then go forward. Quite honestly, most would rather that we didn't have to spend so much time in front of them, I think.

The point that I'm trying to make is that you could use whatever projections you want. They aren't an issue with me. I always found it interesting, too, that the experts from Ontario and other large centres would come here and tell us how to save money, but I never heard what they were telling Ontario. I never heard what they were telling Quebec, who haven't got a prayer of saving money well into the next generation because of the debt they accumulated. I think that they think: "Well, they're lost causes. We might as well go to Alberta, where there's hope, and we'll tell them how to run their business. We didn't do that well here in Ontario." I'm kind of a show-me guy. If you've done a better job than Alberta, show us, and we can learn from it.

I also find interesting the people that say that we have to loosen our dependency on oil. That's a little bit like telling the farmers in Kansas that they shouldn't be counting on wheat. You know, you have to hunt where the ducks are. We're sitting on the largest pool of hydrocarbons in the world, and if we believe that the world is

not going to use oil in the near future, then we better think about changing.

It's one of the tools we've got, one of the opportunities we've got as a province. Do we need to do it right? Absolutely. Could we be leaders in research and technology? Totally. Do we need to develop new markets? Yes. And we cannot forget about lumber or agriculture. That's all part of it. Somehow being lucky or being situated on top shouldn't come with an anchor that says that you have to change just because no one else has this.

It also does cause problems, Mr. Speaker, for our other provinces. When we provide contracts for people who work for us, whether it's nurses, teachers, doctors, or whatever, it forces other provinces to do the same or lose them, and they can't afford it. They don't have the resources we've got, and it does not make our position at the Council of the Federation very popular when we spend it because we can.

I can tell you that the Minister of Human Services has often said before that it's not how much we should spend on education. It's: what do we need to spend? It's not how much money we've got or whether we need to lead the world. My last son will be in grade 12 next year. I'll tell you that he doesn't leave home till about a quarter to 9, and he's back home at 20 after 3. He's taking grade 11 matriculation. That's not much of a day. I'm not sure that we are not getting too close to the problem, getting balled up in it, saying: well, the only solution is just to do more of what we were doing.

Mr. Speaker, I know it's not easy. I know the hon. minister was correct when he said that it's what people want. People want everything. I asked at a convention last year: who wanted more roads? They put their hands up. Who wanted better health care? They put their hands up. More money for municipalities? They put their hands up. Who wants to balance the budget? They all put their hands up.

They count on us in here to make the balanced judgment decisions that are in their best interests. I know it's not easy, and I know democracy isn't always pretty, but I think that they do expect more discipline. They do expect to be told no occasionally when it's put up against the other pressures they've got. So I know it's not easy.

I'm a very positive person on the future of Alberta. There's no other place I would want to live or do business or raise a family. But you have to back up and take an approach that says: we can afford to do this this year and next year. The 7 per cent increase this year is no different than compounding interest on a bad loan. That 7 per cent is built in. The \$107 million in schools is \$187 million this year and \$245 million next year. You can say: "That's great. We'll spend everything we've got in education." But the taxpayers shouldn't be getting the education.

I'm simply saying that I know it's not easy. Thankfully, I'm not going to go and campaign for either side of this budget. But I will tell you that every dollar you build into your operating expenditures now, you have to pay for for a long, long time. I can tell you how hard it is to come back after and say: "Well, we've outgrown it. For whatever reason we don't quite have it." Then you have to start cutting it back down, and that is not as much fun as announcing new programs and new spending. It's not as much fun as trying to make everyone happy. Often, when we try to make everyone happy, we end up pleasing very few.

But I will say this. It's been an incredible experience to be involved in putting budgets together. I know that the Alberta government has some of the brightest, some of the hardest working people on the planet working in their departments, in Treasury Board, in Finance, and all the departments. I know that I know they care very deeply about what they're trying to do, and

they are trying to accomplish what Albertans want. I came in here not having a great deal of love for government. I have a lot more respect for it now and for the people that make the Alberta government work, including the members of this Assembly.

Mr. Speaker, I will close by saying good luck to the people that are going to be implementing this on a go-forward basis, good luck to those that are running again in, apparently, the election that's nearby, and all the best to those who don't.

To you, Mr. Speaker, have a good night.

The Acting Speaker: Thank you.

Hon. members, we have about four minutes left before the adjournment hour, but 29(2)(a) is available. The hon. Member for Calgary-McCall.

Mr. Kang: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My questions are to the hon. member. If he was to bring in this budget, what would he have done differently than what's in this budget?

Mr. Snelgrove: I would have made it very clear that we're going to have to find more efficiencies within it. I think they're well on the way. I know the hon. Minister of Human Services has said that you can't cut back on infrastructure; I think they have. I think there needed to be a very strong commitment to that.

The other part that I think I would probably have done is come out and said: this is what we're doing, and these are the real costs. Not necessarily too rosy a projection, but I don't think that it really shows the actual costs of some of the program increases on a go-out basis. I look over into the third years of some of the budget, and I don't see the numbers over there.

It's a little bit hypothetical – of course, I'm not there – but I think the most important part is to be able to defend the money you spend on what you've spent it on, and Albertans will generally give you a pass on that as long as you're up front. I'm not questioning projections of revenue, but I don't believe that the expenditure increases and the savings they projected in some departments down the road are going to be achievable. I think many of the departments have been squeezed over the last three or four years down to where they are just about running – if you're going to maintain them as a department, you're going to have to pay them, or you're going to have to shut down programs there.

With all due respect to the Wildrose, the fat in many departments has been trimmed down to the point where you either need

to shut it down or pay them, but there wasn't a heck of a lot of waste left last year.

The Acting Speaker: Thank you.

Anyone else? Calgary-Varsity?

Mr. Chase: Under 29(2)(a), please, yes. The hon. member commands respect because he's been in the position of creating a budget as a former President of the Treasury Board. He knows his stuff. He's commented on the quality of the civil servants who've worked so hard to do their best work. I think every member of this House appreciates the work they've done in terms of having, actually, so much money with which to come up with a budget.

My question has to do with your opinion on saving. You've talked about making hard, responsible, sustainable, long-term choices. I'd like to hear your opinion on the need to refurbish the sustainability account and also your opinions on saving a greater portion of our nonrenewables in the heritage trust fund, if that's possible, in your opinion.

Mr. Snelgrove: In the brief time I will say this. I believe that you should look at the chance to only use from your resource revenue what a sales tax would raise otherwise. I think that can be our guiding thing, which says: if we had a 7 per cent sales tax, like our other neighbouring provinces, instead of us coming up with it, it's coming out of oil. I believe you do have to replenish your sustainability fund, but you can't do both if you don't have the revenue. You have to set targets that say, "We are not going to spend past this point," and the decisions that will be made may be tough.

I also don't believe that saving just for the sake of saving is good. I've been in business. I still am in business. The best money I've used is money I've invested to make more money. The heritage fund is a good tool, but the infrastructure and the investment in our colleges, universities, schools, in my opinion, are still very worthwhile investments, and I consider them every bit as important as a saving strategy, as an investment strategy.

The Acting Speaker: Hon. members, I hesitate to rise and interrupt this wonderful debate. However, according to our standing orders it is now 6 p.m., and I must declare the Assembly adjourned until 7:30 this evening.

[The Assembly adjourned at 6 p.m.]

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Province of Alberta

The 27th Legislature
Fifth Session

Alberta Hansard

Tuesday evening, March 20, 2012

Issue 21e

The Honourable Kenneth R. Kowalski, Speaker

Legislative Assembly of Alberta

The 27th Legislature

Fifth Session

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Deputy Chair: Dr. Taft

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Legislative Assembly of Alberta

7:30 p.m.

Tuesday, March 20, 2012

[Mr. Zwozdesky in the chair]

The Acting Speaker: Please be seated.

Government Bills and Orders

Third Reading

Bill 4

St. Albert and Sturgeon Valley School Districts Establishment Act

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Government House Leader.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased to move Bill 4, the St. Albert and Sturgeon Valley School Districts Establishment Act, on behalf of the Minister of Education.

It's one of those pieces of legislation that has a special purpose. It's brought forward to deal with a specific circumstance in the province. It's a unique circumstance in the province, but it is one that needs to be dealt with, so I would encourage all members to pass this bill tonight so that we can get on with the necessary reorganization in the St. Albert-Morinville area.

Essentially – it doesn't need repeating, Mr. Speaker – I just want to say that in the area of Morinville and Legal we have this historical anomaly where the public board is the Greater St. Albert Catholic board. In accordance with sort of the modern parlance, Catholic education talks about permeation. In other words, Catholic values permeate everything they do in the school. The Greater St. Albert Catholic board, although it's a public board, has been very reluctant to provide a secular option for students in Morinville and Legal.

Of course, everyone has a right to choose an education. If they wish to choose a non faith-based education, what we would consider to be in the normal parlance a public education, they have the right to do that. This has been a particularly difficult issue in that area because, I think it's safe to say, the vast majority of people served by the Greater St. Albert Catholic public school board are quite happy with the education that they get, whether they're Catholic or not. A majority of the parents and students in the area would like to see the status quo, but there are people in that area who have the right to a secular education.

The only way that it can be provided in the long term – there was a short-term solution whereby Greater St. Albert Catholic contracted with Sturgeon to provide secular education in Morinville, but of course in the long run parents also have the right to vote for their school trustees. Because the secular program is being offered under contract by the Greater St. Albert public school board – Sturgeon is offering it, but they're offering it pursuant to a contract – one could say: well, you are voting for the trustees that represent you. But, in fact, people would like to have a much more direct connection with their school board, with the school that's delivering the program, so what's needed here is to establish that area as a public board. This act will do that by adding it to the Sturgeon public school board.

Then, of course, you have the issue that you have the Greater St. Albert board operating in the area, and it's disestablished as the public board but then gets established as a minority faith board and therefore can then continue to operate in that same jurisdiction but now as a minority faith board, which is, in fact, the way in which it's been operating. With this solution you can satisfy the parents and the students who want to continue with Greater St.

Albert Catholic regardless of their faith. You can provide a secular option through the Sturgeon composite as the new public board. The Minister of Education will have to of course deal with the issues of how you actually deal with where the schools are located, et cetera, but that's an operational issue which will have to come very shortly. It is necessary to pass this act now so that they can get on with ensuring that it's all operational by September 1.

The other issue that we've heard in the House, of course, is that if Greater St. Albert Catholic is the minority faith board, what happens to St. Albert Protestant? St. Albert Protestant is currently the minority faith board within the city limits of St. Albert. The act also provides for St. Albert Protestant to become the public board within the confines of the city limits of St. Albert. In this way we can regularize the school delivery process in that area, ensure that there is a public option, that there is a minority faith option, that everything can move along, and that the students in Morinville and Legal can have access to the secular education option that their parents desire for them.

None of this is easy. It does involve disruption for people, but this is the best solution available to solve the problem in that area. As I say, it's a local problem. It's a one-purpose act, really, and I think it's time that we deal with it and move on and allow the Department of Education to work with the school boards involved to ensure that all of the operational pieces are in place for our students. Of course, fundamentally, what's important about all of this is to make sure that students have a good education and an opportunity for a good education and to make sure that that's in place for them for September 1.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Acting Speaker: Thank you.

The hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview.

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. This is a surprisingly complicated and divisive issue. On the surface of it it seems pretty straightforward, but there are very strongly felt positions on both sides, pro and con. Those have bubbled up in our caucus, and it was interesting to watch them become public in the government caucus as well.

I must comment, with great respect, on the speech given by the government member for St. Albert, a very well-expressed, well-thought-out speech that I heard about a week ago, in which he stood in opposition to his own government on this. I was impressed with the nature of his arguments. I was equally impressed by the guts of a government member to stand up and so strongly and pointedly and extensively speak in opposition to a government bill. I am glad that the government allowed that, not that they would have been able to stop him. I would like to see more of that debate, where members of this Assembly follow their own conscience and their own constituents rather than what's laid down by their leadership.

I am just going to make two other comments. My strong sense is that this has probably been quite traumatic for the community in Morinville and in and around Morinville. These kinds of disputes tend to pit neighbour against neighbour, family against family, friends against friends, and that's very unfortunate, but my bet is that that has happened.

I would urge the minister or the MLAs for the area or any of us, if we have the opportunity, to try to work somehow to reconcile those differences. We're talking about things that are very, very important to people: their religion, their children, and their community. It doesn't get much more basic than that. I think some recognition that this has probably torn the fabric of that

community and that there might be some special way to help heal that would be important.

The last point I'll make, which might be a gesture towards moving forward, would be that this issue, as I've understood it, will ultimately require a new school building in Morinville or in the area, and I would urge this government to move quickly to provide that facility, if it is needed, because of the particular strains that this issue will be causing in that community. If the need for a new building is an outcome of this issue, then let's get on with that. Let's not force this wound to fester; let's try to heal it. I would certainly support the government in taking that kind of a step.

With those comments, I believe that's it for me. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Acting Speaker: Thank you.

[Motion carried; Bill 4 read a third time]

7:40

Bill 5 Seniors' Property Tax Deferral Act

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Member for Red Deer-North.

Mrs. Jablonski: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise today for third reading of Bill 5, the Seniors' Property Tax Deferral Act.

I'm so pleased to see this important piece of legislation going forward. I'm also pleased to be able to thank all members who have taken time in this House to speak to the bill and the Minister of Seniors, who was very adamant in having this bill come forward and be debated.

There were many thoughtful questions raised, and I can assure the members that this government is giving all of them consideration as we review the best options for this program and as we work to develop regulations over the summer and fall. Some questions arose related to the interest rate, specifically how it would be set, and suggestions that it be set at a level so as not to burden our seniors. We are committed to a lower interest rate for this program. In addition, this interest rate will most definitely not be set arbitrarily, as one member thought that it might.

Income and means testing were inquired about by a few members. Our desire is for this program to be available to all senior homeowners. As such, eligibility will not be related to income levels or assets. Again, I would like to reiterate that many of these details will be thoroughly thought out as we develop the regulations.

Lastly, I would like to address a concern that came up more than once regarding home equity for eligible seniors. This is an insightful concern, and I'm very pleased with the depth of thought that other members have given to this bill. A minimum level of home equity will definitely be worked into the regulations.

It is not the intention of the program to put any seniors in difficult financial situations. Indeed, the intent is the exact opposite. This program is designed to give seniors additional assistance by freeing up funds. Senior homeowners will have the ability to defer a portion or all of their property taxes and can then use the extra cash for other priorities. But we don't want seniors to be borrowing money they don't need or they don't have. As many members pointed out, there are seniors who have equity in their home that they can use to their advantage, and we want to help them do that.

Other provinces have similar programs – B.C. and Ontario as well as New Brunswick and the Yukon – but I would caution members not to compare Alberta's program too closely to those

programs. The program will be designed to meet the needs of seniors in Alberta. In some jurisdictions municipalities administer their version of a seniors' property tax deferral program, but municipalities here in Alberta have asked us not to add to administrative burdens through the introduction of this program, and we have listened. Government will take responsibility for managing this program and will communicate with municipalities to ensure the most efficient delivery of the program.

I would like to sincerely thank all members again for taking the time to speak to this bill, and thank you to the many members who support this bill and who support a seniors' property tax deferral program. It's just one more option we can provide to our seniors to help them to continue living independently in their own homes in their own communities with the dignity and respect they deserve.

Like the hon. Member for Whitecourt-St. Anne I, too, have heard from many seniors requesting this type of program. I thank the Member for Whitecourt-St. Anne for being the inspiration behind this bill. It makes me very proud now to be a witness to this government listening and delivering on the needs of our seniors, who built this amazing province.

I look forward to working on the development of the regulations for the seniors' property tax deferral program this summer and fall. Thank you.

The Acting Speaker: Thank you, hon. member.

Are there any other speakers? The hon. Member for Calgary-Mountain View.

Dr. Swann: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. A pleasure to speak to Bill 5, the tax deferral bill, which I think most of us feel will be welcome in the current context of market value assessments being such a burden for, especially, the inner city but in many cases suburbs as well, where seniors have seen their property values rise tremendously over the last decade and in some cases constrain their ability to live in a healthy way with the rapid rise in their property taxes.

In the main I think this is an excellent approach to delaying the tremendous costs that are accruing for those on a fixed income, and a small fixed income. I think it's a plus that it's flexible, that it's based not on means testing so much as individual choice and preference, and that means it can be customized to meet the needs of the individual or family and their potential future. Certainly, there are questions around what might happen with the bequeathal of a home to a child, a spouse. The ultimate decision, I guess, is going to have to be made as a family on the basis of what kind of accruing cost and interest is going to have to be met at some point in time. Again, that leaves a lot of onus on the individuals and their families to sort out the short- and long-term implications of a growing debt, I guess you might say.

We're on the record as disagreeing with the current market value assessment, and we hope that this will be another incentive. I mean, this is a stopgap for dealing with the tremendous burden that the market value assessment has placed on especially inner-city homes when a lot of the outlying homes have had a much more onerous cost on local government services and the servicing costs associated with their building. We think there has got to be a more equitable way of sharing the costs of urban development. It seems to me, at least, that there has been not enough thinking go into the whole notion of market value assessment, based on the kind of inflationary changes and local real estate values that don't necessarily reflect the true value of a home or, indeed, don't reflect, as I believe, the true value of some of the suburban and marginal homes in the outskirts.

At the same time that I can support this notion of taking pressure off especially people on a fixed income and seniors, I do have to register again my concern that the market value assessment approach is not serving the majority of inner-city people and is creating, I think, a tremendous burden on many who want to stay in their homes but are now paying much more significantly. When this bill passes – and I say when it passes because every bill that this government brings forward it chooses to pass; it has the numbers to do that – it means that people will be deferring that for an indefinite period and still at the end of the day paying a tremendous amount that may be difficult, depending on the circumstances.

With those few comments, Mr. Speaker, I'll take my seat.

The Acting Speaker: Thank you.

Are there any other members who wish to speak? The hon. Member for Lethbridge-East.

Ms Pastoor: Yes. Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Firstly, I'd like to acknowledge the hard work that's been done over the last number of years by the Member for Red Deer-North. This has been a passion of hers as seniors have been a passion of mine. Certainly, when I was on the other side of the table we worked closely together because this is an issue that is passionate to both of us, so I just wanted to thank her for the work that she's done on this very important bill.

One of things it does is give seniors choice, the choice to be able to stay at home. To me it's even more important because it will allow those that are on such tight incomes to be able to have some extra money to be able to live and not just exist from pay cheque to pay cheque.

I've spoken on this before, so I'll be brief. I do believe it's very important. It opens up a whole new way of seniors being able to be independent and to actually make some of their own decisions and not having to go to the bank. I think that this is going to be a much easier way of doing it.

I know we heard about creating huge bureaucracies. I don't believe that's necessary. I think we've got a perfectly good Seniors ministry right now, and I'm sure that they can work that through in some fashion. I'm not expecting it to be a huge take-up, but for those that do take it up, it will be more than beneficial to them. So I'm certainly pleased to be able to support this bill.

Thank you.

7:50

The Acting Speaker: I have the Government House Leader, who rose just moments ago, followed by the Member for Calgary-Nose Hill. First, Standing Order 29(2)(a) is available. Is there anybody under 29(2)(a)?

Hon. Government House Leader, please proceed.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I am delighted just to add a few words to the debate on Bill 5, the Seniors' Property Tax Deferral Act. This is one of those bills which makes it worth while to keep coming back and to continue to participate, and I say that because this has been something that I have been pushing and sponsoring and advocating for for many years.

In my riding of Edmonton-Whitemud we have some strange anomalies. It is the highest income, highest education riding in the province, or it was at one time. I couldn't verify that it is still today, but at one time it was the highest education, highest income riding in the province. It also has some neighbourhoods that have some very nice houses, and I have to admit that some of the neighbourhoods I'm talking about I ceded to Edmonton-Riverview a few redistributions ago.

A community like Grandview, for example, that was in Edmonton-Whitemud, is now in Edmonton-Riverview, is where people bought their houses in the early '60s, they raised their families in their houses, and they wanted to stay in their houses as they grew older. The houses had significant value; therefore, their tax bills were quite high. The houses were also getting older; therefore, the cost of upkeep was high. For many people it forced a decision that they didn't particularly want to make, a decision that they had to move when they would just as soon have stayed, lived their lives out in the house where they raised their families and the place they called home.

That's not limited to Grandview. That's a number of different communities in my constituency, where you have people who have worked hard all their lives, who have invested in their homes and their families, and who, in fact, have a lot of their net worth tied up in their houses. They've perhaps paid their mortgages off, but they're what I would called living on the margin. Costs of living have been going up. The pension is not going up, or the income is not going up. Sometimes they have investments that they were earning interest on, and of course we know what's happened with the interest rate now.

People who are good, hard-working, prudent people find themselves in the position of having to make very difficult choices about their living – which bill do we pay? – because of the costs. Sometimes we have, as we did this winter, an almost inexplicable spike in the electricity rates; for example, when a power plant goes down on an unplanned basis, and the price goes up. The cost of heating for some of those houses can be very high in the winter. So the cost of staying in your home becomes an issue.

Ever since my first election, actually, I've been a very strong proponent of this type of act. For various reasons over the years I have a number of memos from a number of different Finance ministers over the years which explain why this is something we cannot do, and I put them in my file. We continued to advocate, and I know that others in this House did as well. The Minister of Seniors, for example, had brought this forward as a private member's bill, I think, several times. Others have been advocating for it.

This is a very prudent piece of legislation. It's not about giving people something for nothing. It's about setting up a system where a senior can use the equity in their home to stay in their home. They can pay their taxes using their equity in the house.

I mean, at some point it would be interesting if we could go further and say that we could help them with some necessary renovations to help the building envelope or those sorts of things, but I'm actually quite excited about where it goes now because we do have a lot of people who have built up the equity in their home, who've paid off their mortgages, who've lived prudently, who've raised their families, and who want nothing more than to be able to stay in their neighbourhood with their friends, tend to their gardens, go on the odd holiday.

The cost of living has increased. I mean, we celebrate the strong economy in this province and the fact that it's coming back better than anywhere else. That overall is a very good thing, but it can be a challenge for somebody who retired on a fixed income or somebody who retired expecting a certain set of circumstances with respect to the interest rates and is facing a different set of circumstances because that's changed on them.

I don't want to belabour the point. It's a relatively straightforward bill. I do want to say for the citizens of Edmonton-Whitemud that I would encourage you to vote in favour of the bill, to pass it tonight so that we can get this in place for next year's tax

season so that these people, who are in essence living on the margin and others if it makes sense for them, can have the benefit of borrowing at a government rate against the equity in their homes in order to be able to stay in their own homes for as long as possible. That's what this really allows. It really enables that option for many seniors who live in my area.

For that, I thank the hon. Member for Red Deer-North for bringing the bill forward, I thank government for making it a government bill, and I would thank members of the House for passing this this evening and making it possible.

The Acting Speaker: Thank you.

Hon. members, 29(2)(a) is available.

Seeing no one, I'll call on the hon. Member for Calgary-Nose Hill to speak next.

Dr. Brown: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure to rise in support of the Seniors' Property Tax Deferral Act, Bill 5. Much of what I wanted to say has already been said by my colleagues, but I would like to mention a couple of things.

We have had in Alberta a property tax freeze for the provincial portion of property taxes since 2004, and I think it's worth stating on the record because I've found in my years of service as an MLA that a lot of seniors are not aware of the fact. They may not have been in a lower income bracket where they felt inclined to apply for the Alberta seniors' benefit, but you do have to make an application in order to get your name on that list, initially at least, and then every year it automatically happens that your provincial portion, which is the education portion of the property tax, has been frozen since 2004 for anybody from the age of 65 and older.

Now, I think Bill 5 is taking the next logical step here. We're not just freezing our portion of the taxes, but we are enabling seniors to access some additional cash flow by allowing them to defer all of their property taxes, both the provincial portion and the municipal portion.

As my friend the hon. Government House Leader has said, it's something that doesn't have to cost a lot of money to the provincial government. It need not cost any money, really, if it was somewhere near the market rates for interest that was charged. With interest rates the way they are right now, it would not cost a lot of money to the seniors in order to access that additional cash flow. As the hon. Member for Lethbridge-East has said, quite often that additional cash flow can make a big difference to a senior who's living on a fixed income, perhaps a pension or a spousal pension. Being able to access that additional money which they would otherwise pay towards property taxes can make a significant difference in their lifestyle.

Another thing I would like to point out, Mr. Speaker, is that this will particularly be a benefit to those people who are living in our larger centres, places like Calgary and Edmonton, who are living in older neighbourhoods which have become quite desirable over many, many years. People who are living in the inner city have been there since the 1950s, a lot of them, and they've seen their property values skyrocket because it's a desirable place to be, has good access to the downtown and to the places of work.

Through no fault of their own they have been subsidizing a lot of the growth of our large urban centres, a lot of the new areas and the infrastructure that happens: the overpasses, the hospitals, the water treatment plants, the sewage treatment plants. All of those types of things get piled upon the property tax, and unfortunately the people in these established neighbourhoods, particularly the seniors, are often paying the price. So this will have a very significant impact on many of my constituents that live in Huntington Hills and in Beddington and in Thorncliffe.

I applaud the hon. Member for Red Deer-North for bringing this bill forward. Also, the Minister of Seniors, I know, has been a great proponent of it. I urge all my fellow MLAs to get behind this bill and to pass it.

8:00

The Acting Speaker: Thank you.

Standing Order 29(2)(a) is available.

Seeing no one, I will call on the hon. Member for Leduc-Beaumont-Devon.

Mr. Rogers: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'd just like to take this opportunity to make a few brief comments on this bill, the Seniors' Property Tax Deferral Act, and thank the hon. Member for Red Deer-North for her efforts in shepherding it this far. I also want to acknowledge the Minister of Seniors, the hon. Member for Whitecourt-Ste. Anne, for his tenacity over the years in raising this in our caucus among many government members. Actually, this has been championed by many government members over the years.

Mr. Speaker, from my own personal experience going back to my earlier years as someone who worked in the finance department of a municipality and knowing the tax system and the growth of assessment and the strength of our economy, I remember reading a story some years ago about I believe it was West Vancouver, where seniors living in that part of B.C. had owned these very modest properties that they were still living in after 30, 40, 50 years. Because of the growth in the value of those properties, through no fault of their own, they now found themselves in a position where, frankly, they had a tough time paying their taxes, and some of them were in jeopardy of losing their homes. I think that is probably why the province of British Columbia some time ago brought in a similar bill.

Certainly, with the strength of the economy and the growth of real estate in our province I know that this will be a very welcome addition to the tools that our seniors will have available to make their lives just that much easier. Just to mention, Mr. Speaker, for anyone that would think that this is a gift, this is not a gift. This is an opportunity for seniors to defer this value on their taxes. This will be paid at some point in the future.

I just can't say how much I appreciate that we're at a point where we're finally going to bring this measure forward and give some welcome relief to our seniors. I, too, Mr. Speaker, would encourage all hon. members in this Assembly to support this very worthwhile bill.

Thank you very much.

The Acting Speaker: Thank you very much, hon. Member for Leduc-Beaumont-Devon.

Standing Order 29(2)(a) is available if anyone wishes to question the previous speaker.

Seeing no one, is there anyone else who wishes to speak at third reading to the Seniors' Property Tax Deferral Act? The hon. Minister of Tourism, Parks and Recreation.

Mr. Hayden: Very quickly, Mr. Speaker, I'd like to congratulate the hon. member on this bill and also add my name in support. Anything that we can do to add an opportunity for people to retire with grace and dignity and comfort is something that I support, and I encourage all members to support this bill.

The Acting Speaker: Thank you.

Standing Order 29(2)(a) is available again.

Seeing no one, are there any other speakers at third reading?

The hon. Member for Red Deer-North to close debate.

Mrs. Jablonski: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. We all know that many of our homes over the past few years have escalated in value, and that means that for some the taxes have gone up. In order for our seniors to be able to stay in the homes that they may have built and that they love and, possibly, raised their families in, this bill will give them that opportunity. For that reason and for another reason, to help them get through the month if they have a gap in their income and their needs, this is another tool. This tool will help in that area, too. For those reasons I'm very pleased to have been able to bring this bill, in partnership with the Minister of Seniors, to the floor.

I'm thanking all the members again for supporting this bill and urge all to support it. Thank you.

The Acting Speaker: Thank you.

[Motion carried unanimously; Bill 5 read a third time]

Bill 6 Property Rights Advocate Act

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Member for Bonnyville-Cold Lake.

Mrs. Leskiw: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It is indeed a pleasure to rise and move third reading of Bill 6, the Property Rights Advocate Act.

On behalf of my colleague the Minister of Environment and Water I would like to thank this House for the support shown for this bill and what it's designed to accomplish. We truly appreciate the input from Albertans all across this province who took the time to speak to the government about issues near and dear to their hearts.

Through second reading and Committee of the Whole we better examined what this act could achieve for Alberta. We discussed the importance of property rights, the importance of listening to Albertans, the need to ensure that we are addressing consultation, compensation, and access to the courts and the need to establish an advocate to assist Alberta landlords. Bill 6 will build landlords' confidence through the advocate, a source of independent information and assistance to all landlords in Alberta.

The next step is passing Bill 6 so we can establish the property rights advocate office. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Acting Speaker: With that, can I assume that you are moving third reading on behalf of the minister? Would you like to just comment?

Mrs. Leskiw: Yes. On behalf of the minister I'd like to move third reading.

The Acting Speaker: Thank you very much.

Are there other speakers to Bill 6? The hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview.

Dr. Taft: Thanks, Mr. Speaker. Bill 6 is one of those bills that strikes me as a kind of window dressing piece of legislation. It's harmless. It may even be a little bit helpful. I'm not sure it's ever going to really change anything, and I'm not sure it's actually intended to. What it is, essentially, is some political damage control that the government has brought in because of self-inflicted injury largely stemming from, if you trace the roots back far enough, the misguided move, in my view, to a deregulated electricity system.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear.

Dr. Taft: I have at least a couple of people supporting me on that view.

The great rise of concern over property rights in Alberta has largely been because of the efforts or the push to build enormous electrical transmission lines at great lengths around the province. These are transmission lines of a scale that's unprecedented so far in Alberta. The towers are 20 storeys high, one after the other. If you imagine owning a farm or living in a town or something and you've had an open view of the landscape, of the prairie, or of the sky and now there's going to be this array of 20-storey-tall transmission towers from one end of the horizon to the other, you can see why people are unhappy. It affects property values, it affects quality of life, and so on.

The way that government has rather clumsily implemented all of this has fuelled people's fears that they've had no opportunity to step forward and protect their property, that, in fact, if worst comes to worst, the government will seize their property and so on. I have no doubt, Mr. Speaker, that there's been a lot of misinformation spread around these issues, but perception becomes reality in politics, as we sometimes learn.

I just want to make the point that if we had not gone to electricity deregulation, we wouldn't need such extensive transmission lines. Under the regulated system there were monopolies. They were regulated monopolies, and they worked incredibly well. The same companies who did the generation also owned the transmission and distribution lines and did the retailing and everything else. When they brought forward a plan for generation, they only required transmission that was necessary for that generation. No more. They didn't have to overbuild anything. They would seek approval. They were required to finance 50 per cent of the transmission lines, and we didn't end up with these great big brouhahas.

8:10

Under a deregulated system the whole transmission structure of Alberta has to be massively overbuilt because there's no connection, no co-ordination and planning between generation and transmission. The transmission lines have to be built so that they can accommodate generation almost anywhere along the route. As a result, you need far more capacity. The other problem that this government imposed on this system is that it removed all responsibility for financing the cost of building transmission lines from the electric companies, so there's absolutely no incentive on the transmission companies to curtail their ambitions for construction.

Finally, the New Democrat caucus brought this up, I think, yesterday. The Liberals have brought it up repeatedly over the years. I've actually seen the maps. I've got a copy of the map in my Annex office, Mr. Speaker, of a proposal – this is a map out of the United States – for a massive transmission line running straight from northeastern Alberta, right through Alberta, right down to the western U.S. and ultimately California. Again, there's every reasonable perception that Alberta's about to get into the electricity export business in a really big way, hence the demand for these transmission lines.

Mr. Knight: Kevin, you know that Northern Lights tried it about six years ago.

Dr. Taft: I urge the Member for Grande Prairie-Smoky to stand up and jump into the debate. I'll send him a copy of the map tomorrow. The Member for Lethbridge-East has seen it, actually. Anyway, all of this is background.

Because of these fumblyings by the government of the electrical system we created a huge backlash, and part of that backlash was

around property rights. So what we have now is a Property Rights Advocate Act, which is, as I said earlier, political damage control.

The act proposes to establish an advocate that will field questions and provide information and so on to the public around the topic of property rights. But, really, it's mostly public relations. It seems harmless. It probably is harmless. As I said, it might even be a little bit helpful. It's going to cost some money, not a huge amount, I hope. Ultimately I think it's essentially an exercise in damage control. If we'd had better management of the electrical system and had avoided the debacle of deregulation, we wouldn't be needing this piece of legislation, Mr. Speaker.

Those are my comments on it, and I'll leave it at that. Thank you.

The Acting Speaker: Thank you.

The hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands-Norwood.

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Well, I would like to join the debate on Bill 6, the Property Rights Advocate Act. I will echo the view of the hon. member for Edmonton . . .

Dr. Taft: Edmonton-Riverview. After all these years you still don't know?

Mr. Mason: I'm going to miss you. Yeah, I will.

I'll go maybe a little bit further and say that this bill would not have been necessary and should not be necessary if the government had not shown its contempt for the rights of landowners in the province of Alberta through the introduction of a number of pieces of legislation. It has been backing up and backing up and backing up on this issue ever since because it created a fine, fine political mess, basically attacking the rights of its own political base in rural Alberta, the people that have voted PC over and over, year after year. Then this government just showed what a heavy hand it had and what little respect it had for their rights and for the democratic rights of all Albertans.

Naturally, there's been a reaction. When three bills were introduced – Bill 19, the Land Assembly Project Area Act; Bill 36, the Alberta Land Stewardship Act; and Bill 50, the Electric Statutes Amendment Act – the NDP stood up and fought each one of those bills, not because everything in each of those bills was wrong but because they contained an overriding power, unchecked, over the rights of individual citizens, and it was wrong.

Mr. Speaker, if you go back and look at what the government was trying to do at that time, I think you'll understand why exactly people became convinced that this government didn't respect their rights. Bill 19 was not a bad act in many respects – the government obviously has to assemble land – but the provisions that it contained that allowed it without due process to essentially sterilize for great periods of time people's land and not allow them to develop or use it without compensation or without defined compensation and without due process were, frankly, completely unacceptable.

Similarly, Bill 36, the Alberta Land Stewardship Act, had some important directions. We support the principle of a land-use framework, but we oppose the provisions of the act which concentrated decisions regarding land-use plans in cabinet. So it's the centralization in this particular case over land-use planning, Mr. Speaker, that gave the problem.

Perhaps the most serious and egregious piece of legislation of that ill-starred trio was Bill 50, the Electric Statutes Amendment Act. The hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview has identified the relationship between this particular piece of legislation and

electricity deregulation, which requires massive transmission capacity to support a market-based approach to generation, perhaps one of the most misguided actions of this government in its history, and has now forced the government to go ahead with a transmission infrastructure which is massively overbuilt and far more than a regulated system would require for the reasons the hon. member outlined.

In order to get this all through in record time, the government, of course, subverted its own intentions to keep transmission as a regulated requirement and did away with the regulatory oversight. In that way, Mr. Speaker, they were able to push through transmission – very, very expensive transmission – without proper process and oversight. That is the third, I think, and final bill. Of course, it has the right under Bill 50 to push through transmission infrastructure regardless of the wishes of the people who may be in its path.

So the government has created a problem. It has created a fear and a concern, legitimate to a large degree, on the part of landowners in this province that it can't be trusted to protect their rights. In order to try and pacify those people, it's creating this advocate, somebody to keep an eye on the government because the government can't keep an eye on itself. The government just can't resist exerting its authority and its power over the citizens of this province, so they've set up this bill to set up the advocate.

Now, the hon. member has also said that, you know, it might help a little bit, but it's pretty neutral. I have a better idea, Mr. Speaker. Instead of passing Bill 6, the Property Rights Advocate Act, why don't we repeal Bill 19, repeal Bill 36, and repeal Bill 50? Then we won't need Bill 6. We'll have four fewer bills.

8:20

I think, Mr. Speaker, that this government has forever damaged its own reputation. Conservatives, at least in theory, are supposed to be people who believe in property rights. It's not that social democrats or Liberals don't, but it's always been my thought that, you know, Conservatives were really concerned about property and property rights, yet the opposite seems to be the case. I don't understand it.

I thought it was very odd that it was the NDP that was standing up and fighting for the property rights of rural conservative Albertans and not the Conservative Party. It was a very odd kind of situation. But I'm proud of what we did at that time to challenge these bills. Had the government listened to the arguments we made, it would have saved itself a whole lot of trouble and we wouldn't have to be voting tonight on Bill 6.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Acting Speaker: Thank you very much.

Hon. members, 29(2)(a) is now available.

Seeing no one, is there anyone else who wishes to speak at third reading on Bill 6?

If not, does the hon. Member for Bonnyville-Cold Lake wish to close debate?

Mrs. Leskiw: I want to thank the hon. members for their comments on third reading. As we discussed, it's the importance of property rights, the importance of listening to Albertans, and ensuring that what we heard is addressed: consultation, compensation, and access to the courts.

I call for the vote on this bill.

The Acting Speaker: Thank you.

[Motion carried; Bill 6 read a third time]

Bill 7
Appropriation Act, 2012

[Debate adjourned March 20]

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton – oh, sorry – Calgary-Mountain View.

Dr. Swann: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I am coming from Edmonton tonight, but I do represent Calgary.

Dr. Taft: The Oilers won, 5 to 2.

Dr. Swann: The Oilers won 5 to 2, I'm hearing, so good news for Edmonton.

Ms Pastoor: Where is Canada in the curling?

Dr. Swann: I can't comment on other sports at this time.

The Acting Speaker: Tie it in with Bill 7. Proceed, please.

Dr. Swann: I'll focus my attention on Bill 7, the Appropriation Act, 2012. Well, Mr. Speaker, it's difficult to support a budget that once again provides no stability, no plan to save, and no decision to stop living off of the resources belonging to our children, some of whom are in the gallery today, to hear about a budget that really plans to continue the status quo of living off the resources that we've been so wonderfully blessed with.

We're living on a wing and prayer, I would say, that the oil prices, the resource prices will continue to be high and that we will have this one-third of our budget sustained so that we won't have to cut the budgets for education, health care, our most vulnerable people, since we haven't had the guts to charge Albertans today what it requires to pay for the services today.

We're living off the backs of our children, nonrenewable resource revenues. We've heard it said many times even by members in this government: we have to stop selling off the topsoil; we have to stop living off of a nonrenewable resource and start saving. How many years have we been hearing this? Yet once again we have a budget that has the same agenda. It's really staggering that a Premier would promise to do things differently and come forward with a budget that continues to reinforce a structural deficit year after year which hopes that the prices of this commodity will increase and that in some way, magically, we will leave our children and our grandchildren as stable and as resource rich and as environmentally protected a province as we inherited, which is now far from the truth.

It's clear that we need leadership in this province. Something like the leadership in Norway would be welcome, Mr. Speaker. As we've heard, past ministers have gone to Norway and have in some ways appreciated and celebrated what they saw in Norway, where in half the duration that we've had, they have accumulated \$500 billion in their savings, managed to protect their citizens with stable resources and taxes and maintain programs, have some of the best health indicators in the world, ensure that street people are properly dealt with, people with disabilities are well cared for, have among some of the lowest psychiatric and social problems in the world.

We don't seem to be able to make the change to that kind of thinking, that kind of leadership, where we actually draw upon the resources that each of us earns in taxes. Tax is not a bad word. It is something that, actually, modern governments that really think about the long term and think about the well-being, the stability of their society would do well to acknowledge. We still wait, two decades on now, for that kind of leadership in this province.

Environmental stewardship goes with the leadership in Norway and profoundly offers the future to their children and their grandchildren by ensuring that the resource revenue is saved and they meet, internationally, among the highest standards in the world in terms of their limited ability to grow. They recognize limits. That, Mr. Speaker, has to be the foundation of good financial planning.

I would have thought that people who call themselves fiscal conservatives would acknowledge and embrace that concept, that we have to live within our means. We cannot borrow from the future and expect to get respect, expect to have stability, sustainability, and honour our commitment to both our environment and to future generations. This is a government that has snubbed its nose at climate change for decades and only in the last few years has said, as I quote the former environment minister: climate change is real in the last few years, and we must be serious about addressing it.

This goes hand in hand, I think, with a government that wants to live for today and assume that our wonderful wealth of resources will go on forever and that those who are most struggling in our society – and the very foundation of our prosperity is really education. We hear the words on the other side. We just don't see the actions to back up the words, to say: "We are going to fund our education system. We are going to provide full-day preschool so that we enrich the lives of our most vulnerable kids. We are going to ensure that all families have fair and equitable access to the best possible education, that our postsecondary students are going to get the best possible opportunities to both get in and succeed at school by helping them with lower tuition fees and incentives to give them success in their work, psychological help if they need it, extra learning skills if they lack them." It's willingness to truly match our words with real investment, which is what it is.

We also, I think somewhat predictably, suffer in Alberta from some of the highest rates of social problems, family violence, depression, addictions, and a not very enviable, I would say, infant mortality rate. It may be that our high-class health care system, with the most expensive and high-tech medicine, can save lives and prolong life, but we have almost no meaningful investment in prevention and early intervention, that would save not only lives over the longer term but would also ensure that our future generations don't struggle as we are now with obesity and diabetes and high blood pressure, a lot of preventable issues that to me reflect a budget that doesn't get it, a government that doesn't get it, about thinking longer term and planning for the long-term future.

8:30

Taxes create a just, stable, and community-centred society where we share the gifts and we all benefit. The government's primary job, in my view, is to ensure that we create stability, social supports for people who need them, and an equitable society which helps people reach their maximum potential both in terms of their personal skills, attitudes, and values and also in their ability to contribute back to the public purse. It's a very short-term notion, a very narrow notion, that doesn't see the importance of a stable tax base to help us create a more equitable, healthy, and prosperous society in the end.

With stable funding we could ensure all of this. But, again, this government doesn't see that as its role. It sees its role as a banker, trying to minimize costs, trying to maximize short-term profits and to ensure that we actually expand only the areas where we have the greatest strengths instead of developing our weaknesses and areas that will be potentially and likely already are eroding the very fabric of this society and eroding our prosperity. It's only that

this government doesn't measure the impacts of high rates of homelessness and family violence that I've talked about.

We have, on the other hand, on this side of the House a strong commitment to the social fabric and to the community values that built this province. We believe in honest and upfront commitment through a taxation system that is fair and equitable and ensures stability for some of these essential services. We definitely want to see that those in our midst who need it are cared for. We also want to ensure that we are building on the future of a knowledge-based economy, not a resource-based economy, that we're building on new energy forms and diversifying our energy mix, that we're building on the highest standards of environmental protection in the world. Why shouldn't we expect that here, where we have the greatest minds and opportunities for science and the financial wherewithal to not only establish the best standards but to monitor and enforce those best standards? This is all part of the economy.

I see a very narrow focus in this Legislature, often on dollars as opposed to the broader range of resources – human resources, natural resources, and the knowledge resources – that actually contribute to an economy that we not only can be proud of but one that will sustain us into the future.

We still, unfortunately, have a budget roughly 30 per cent dependent on fossil fuels and, therefore, remain vulnerable to world prices. We cannot assume year after year after year that we are going to be able to draw on these nonrenewable resources.

As the Member for Edmonton-Riverview has so eloquently expressed in his book *Follow the Money*, we have now left so much on the table for these corporations that we are in the position of, again, tremendous weakness in terms of our ability to fund basic services that should be there for everyone. Seniors' care has been compromised. Child care is being compromised, with many people unable to get access to child care. Our most disabled struggled to have enough income until this year, when there was a generous increase in their monthly stipend. Until this year there were very, very straitened circumstances for our disabled. All of this because the government wants to take the largest pride in having the lowest tax structure in our history and in our country at great cost, as I say, to social and environmental standards.

We have, as I've indicated, on this side of the House clearly stated that what a responsible government will do is ensure that we tax appropriately to ensure that these services and supports are available and that standards are kept and met. It's one thing to have standards and then to not actually monitor those standards and enforce standards, which is why we now have a black eye internationally around our oil sector.

Postsecondary investments have not kept pace with what's really needed if we're serious about diversifying our economy and developing new technology, a knowledge-based economy around petrochemicals, around biotechnology, around information technology and new energies. As I've said, I don't see in this budget a strong commitment to a kind of a sustainable future that would allow us to move in that direction. On this side of the House we're pushing for those important investments.

Mr. Speaker, as you can tell, I won't be supporting this budget. I have to say that it's more of the same old same old from a government that touts itself as fiscal conservatives. I don't see the conservative here. I don't see the longer term thinking. I don't see a commitment to a new way of financial planning that would support the kind of values that I think Albertans want to see. We continue to look for leadership in this province, and I will be voting against this budget.

The Acting Speaker: Thank you.

Hon. members, Standing Order 29(2)(a) is available to question all of the tax dollars that are being left on the table. The hon. Member for Calgary-Glenmore.

Mr. Hinman: I'm just wondering. The hon. member talked about all of the tax dollars that are being left on the table. I have to apologize that I haven't read all of your plans, but how high do you feel these taxes should go in order to get the best value for, I guess, industry's work here in the province? Where should tax levels be moved to, personal and corporate?

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Mountain View to respond.

Dr. Swann: Well, thank you. Thank you for that question. I guess in brief what we want to see is an assessment of what our expenses are, what our essential services are, and that our taxes reflect what we are going to guarantee to provide in this province for people and for an environmental protection system that actually will make us proud to leave this next generation what we have.

We've talked about that for individuals earning over a hundred thousand dollars, we would move to a 2 per cent increase on their income tax and a graduated scale up to 3 or 4 per cent after \$200,000 and over \$300,000. That would be more of a progressive tax in those areas. We've also talked about a 2 per cent increase in corporate tax for large corporations.

What that means to me is that we are simply alerting our population that we do not intend to ignore the elephant in the room, that taxes form the basis of a stable, functioning society. If we are not prepared to at least provide stable funding for health care, education, supports for people with disabilities, and ensure that we have something there for emergencies, then we are not acting as a responsible government.

Mr. Hinman: That's definitely an interesting perspective. I guess my question is that as the Liberals would point out that we're not being taxed enough, is there an ideal percentage? With corporate you say 2 per cent this year. Is it going to be 20 per cent in five years? Have you done any economic studies for where you feel that you can tax corporations? What I see very much is that as soon as we tax a corporation, they turn around and charge the people, and their profits come back. So is there a limit to where you feel, you know, corporate tax and personal tax should be? It's fine to start the incremental, but once you do that – and we've got a \$3.1 billion deficit here in our budget this year that continues to grow – how do you determine that? Is there an ideal tax rate that you're looking at for corporations and personal income tax that you want to get to?

The Acting Speaker: The hon. member.

Dr. Swann: Thanks, Mr. Speaker. Well, first of all, we have to look at our expenses. I think all of us on the opposition side of the House have recognized quite large numbers of expenses that we would like to see trimmed down. We have a bloated government that should be smaller. We have too many MLAs in the House. We have an experimental science, that's still evolving, in carbon capture and storage that has got way too much of the lion's share of our investment in climate change mitigation. So there are a number of areas where there is waste and there is inefficient spending, and that has to be addressed.

8:40

Quite apart from that, I don't have a target in mind for taxation. What I've said is what I stand by. What are the basic levels of

services that we intend to provide to all Albertans on an equitable basis, and what does that look like in terms of tax? The Member for Edmonton-Riverview's book *Follow the Money* indicates that we are leaving over twice as much on the table for the biggest corporations, many of them from outside the country, as all of the rest of the provinces in the country, which is about 12 per cent of GDP. As I recall, 10 to 12 per cent of GDP is in corporate profits. It's billions.

What we're saying is: let's look at that. Why are we so out of sync with the rest of the country in terms of how much corporate profit we're willing to give, when we have serious needs within this province and an unstable economic resource base for our essential services?

The Acting Speaker: Anyone else under 29(2)(a)?

Seeing no one, I'll recognize the hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview to go next.

Dr. Taft: Thanks, Mr. Speaker. I appreciate the comments from the Member for Calgary-Mountain View. Before I go further, I have spoken at some length on the budget, on the Appropriation Act, when it was in committee.

I just want to say that I really appreciate that there are members of the public here and just give them a quick primer of what's going on here. We've already in about an hour moved a number of bills through third reading, which means they have become law, short of the government later on proclaiming them. You are about to witness tonight, I expect, something you probably won't see all that often, which is a decision to spend \$39.4 billion, which is certainly more than I will ever dream of spending. We are in the last stage of discussion on the debate on the budget bill, which covers the expenditure of \$39.4 billion. Really, there has been quite a lot of extensive debate, so it's winding down. You can probably feel that winding down occurring here. I just thought that might be of interest to you to see what's going on.

I wanted to get a couple of things on the record. What would it be, Mr. Speaker? Five or six weeks or something that the budget has been working its way through procedure? In that time news develops and factors develop, and one that's continued to develop, which I've raised here occasionally, is the dramatic shift in the supply of oil in North America. I've raised this in the Assembly before, that the very same technologies that brought a huge increase in the supply of natural gas and, therefore, a massive drop in the price of natural gas are also playing out in oil. The reason that's of such importance to the budget of Alberta is that a very significant portion – I can't pull it off the top of my head – of the Alberta government's budget depends on royalties from oil and gas. When those prices of oil and gas drop, the royalties drop and this provincial government is in trouble.

Mr. Speaker, this budget forecasts the price of oil staying quite firm and, in fact, forecasts significant increases in royalties from bitumen in particular. But what I've seen in recent weeks has actually caused me to be increasingly skeptical that that's going to play out. I'm thinking that perhaps just on Saturday there was an extensive article on this huge surge of oil production in the United States such that the United States is rapidly reducing the amount of oil that it imports. Lo and behold, the largest export of oil to the U.S. is not Saudi Arabia or Venezuela; it's Canada, essentially Alberta.

In fact, the term is getting floated around that the central plains region of the United States is becoming so productive – many of us will have heard of the Bakken oil field, for example, in North Dakota and other ones – that it's getting nicknamed Saudi America and that the day may arise when the United States

actually becomes a net exporter of oil. That has massive implications for Alberta.

In fact, this article just the other day was saying that it may well be a good thing that the Keystone pipeline did not get approved because if the Keystone pipeline gets built, it means we're just going to be tied into shipping our oil into a market that's flooded, and we'll be forced to take a terribly discounted price for our product. The suggestion was – and there's some merit to this – that the real priority for Alberta and Canada should be a pipeline to the west coast or perhaps a pipeline running east-west right across Canada.

My point here is that I'm concerned this budget is based on the smoke and mirrors that often blind governments in the lead-up to an election. The smoke and mirrors are the price of oil. I think there's a very real risk that the price of oil is going to drop, that royalties, therefore, will drop, and that this budget will not be viable, Mr. Speaker.

The Member for Calgary-Glenmore asked about taxes. It's very clear from the government's documents that Alberta's taxes could be raised I think it's \$10.7 billion more and still be tied with the next lowest province as having the lowest tax rates in Canada. It makes no sense, when we're running deficits, when we're curtailing programs, when we're jacking up tuition fees, and when we're draining the heritage fund, to be leaving \$11 billion a year on the table, a significant portion of which leaves Alberta. It goes to investors on Wall Street or in Houston or London or Shanghai. It makes no sense. We own this resource. We should get the best price possible for it. If we did that, the fiscal challenges of this province would be immediately resolved.

I want to make one other point. This is not particularly a position of the Liberal caucus, but it's certainly my reading of the literature that tax rates, while they're easy political targets, are vastly overrated in terms of their economic impact. Taxes are the price of civilization. If you want to go to a low-tax jurisdiction, I say: "Go to Somalia. Go to Haiti. Go to Afghanistan. That's what happens when you don't have a functioning tax system." On the other hand, if you go to, let's say, New York City, Mr. Speaker, an exciting place to go, one of the absolute capitals of global capitalism, you know what? Taxes in New York City are way higher than in Edmonton or Calgary. But I can't think of a single corporate headquarters that's relocated from New York City to Edmonton or Calgary. It's because tax rates are not particularly high on the list of factors that corporations take into consideration when they decide where to locate.

Alberta should have competitive taxes, but there's no point in being in a race to the bottom because we just bankrupt our future when we do that.

With those comments, Mr. Speaker, I will inform the Assembly that, like the Member for Calgary-Mountain View, I can't support this budget. I don't think it's terribly credible. I think it's misguided on several fundamental aspects, and really I'd like them to start all over again on it.

Thank you.

The Acting Speaker: Thank you.

Hon. members, 29(2)(a) is available. The hon. Member for Calgary-Glenmore.

Mr. Hinman: Yeah. To the hon. member. I don't have the numbers with me right here, but I believe that corporate tax at this point – is it \$4.5 billion that the province brings in in revenue right now? If you're talking about \$10.1 billion left on the table, I assume that was corporate tax.

Dr. Taft: That's all taxes.

Mr. Hinman: Okay. Well, I didn't understand that. Again, to do that Liberal simple math, 2 per cent isn't going to produce \$10.1 billion. If you could clarify where your goal is to capture that \$10.1 billion, I would appreciate that.

8:50

The Acting Speaker: The hon. member to respond?

Dr. Taft: Sure, Mr. Speaker. The \$10.7 billion, actually, this year and the \$11 billion last year are the sum totals according to the government's own records – you've been in the Assembly when you've heard the Treasurer give his speech – that taxes in Alberta could be raised and still be tied with the next-lowest province, which, I believe, is B.C., for its tax take. That includes sales tax. We are not advocating a sales tax. That includes personal income tax. It includes corporate tax and so on.

There's a whole mix here of ways to increase revenues. The Member for Calgary-Mountain View made it clear that we're the only party, the only caucus that's come forward and actually said that we need to return to a progressive income tax, which every other province has and I think every single state in the United States has. [interjection] No? Okay. Well, most do, anyway. I'm not sure which one doesn't.

An Hon. Member: Utah.

Dr. Taft: Okay. Utah, then. There may be one state that has a flat tax.

In any case, we would return to a progressive income tax, as the Member for Calgary-Mountain View has pointed out, and to a higher rate of corporate income tax.

With the kinds of silliness that are under our current tax system because our corporate taxes here are lower than in the United States – combined federal and provincial corporate taxes are significantly lower in Alberta than they are in the United States – when an American-owned company working in Alberta earns income here and doesn't pay the same level of tax as they would in the United States, when those profits are repatriated to the parent corporation in the United States, the difference in tax is collected by the U.S. government, collected by Washington. We give a tax break to Imperial Oil, and those profits flow through to Exxon. They are really collected by Washington. For Conoco-Phillips and all the many, many American companies operating in Alberta, when they pay lower taxes here than in the U.S., the U.S. law is very clear. The difference will be collected by Washington.

When we're draining our heritage fund, when we're jacking up tuition fees, when we're running deficits and giving a tax break to Washington, I think that makes no sense, Mr. Speaker, and I for one as an Albertan would like to see that brought to an end.

The Acting Speaker: Thank you.

Anyone else under section 29(2)(a)?

If not, are there any other speakers at third reading to Bill 7?

Is there somebody closing debate here on behalf of the Deputy Premier and President of the Treasury Board?

Hon. Members: Question.

The Acting Speaker: If not, the question has been called.

[The voice vote indicated that the motion for third reading carried]

[Several members rose calling for a division. The division bell was rung at 8:53 p.m.]

[Ten minutes having elapsed, the Assembly divided]

[Mr. Zwozdesky in the chair]

For the motion:

Amery	Groeneveld	Lukaszuk
Benito	Hancock	Pastoor
Berger	Hayden	Rodney
Brown	Horne	Rogers
Denis	Jablonski	Sarich
Drysdale	Johnston	Tarchuk
Fawcett	Klimchuk	Vandermeer
Goudreau	Leskiw	

Against the motion:

Anderson	Hinman	Swann
Boutilier	Mason	Taft
Forsyth		

Totals: For – 23 Against – 7

[Motion carried; Bill 7 read a third time]

Government Bills and Orders Committee of the Whole

[Mr. Zwozdesky in the chair]

Bill 2 Education Act

The Deputy Chair: Are there any speakers at this time? The hon. Member for Airdrie-Chestermere on Bill 2.

Mr. Anderson: Yes, on Bill 2. Thank you, Mr. Chair. I'm grateful to have this opportunity to talk about Bill 2 and to debate Bill 2, the Education Act.

Dr. Brown: Some new observations.

Mr. Anderson: A few observations. [interjections]

Chair's Ruling Decorum

The Deputy Chair: Hon. members, I wonder if we could start this part of the debate in the proper form with observance of decorum of the House. That would be just wonderful. The hon. Member for Airdrie-Chestermere has been recognized, and he actually has the floor, so he should be the only one speaking. Others who have conversations to carry on: I invite you carry them on in the coffee room.

Please proceed, hon. member.

Mr. Anderson: Exactly. When that hon. member heckles me, it throws me off. I'm not used to it. He doesn't do it very much.

Debate Continued

Mr. Anderson: Anyway, I'm grateful to have the opportunity to speak to Bill 2, the Education Act. Particularly, I think tonight's debate is going to focus primarily on the issue of parental rights in education. I had the opportunity yesterday to witness and participate in a rally on the steps of the Legislature. The Minister of Education was there. The Member for Calgary-North West was there. Calgary-Glenmore was there. I was there, and also the Member for Calgary-Mackay was there. The Member for Fort McMurray-Wood Buffalo, and of course Danielle Smith, the

leader of the Wildrose, were all there in attendance. Were you there, too? Calgary-Fish Creek was there, too, I guess.

Mrs. Forsyth: Freezing our butts off.

Mr. Anderson: It was very cold. It was a very cold day, but it was made warm by the spirit and passion of the over 2,000 protesters, Albertans. I don't even want to call them protesters. Albertans.

An Hon. Member: It was not that big.

Mr. Anderson: It was well over 2,000. They kept a count because, you see, it wasn't actually just home-schoolers, hon. member. There were lots of Catholic parents and Catholic students. There were some Catholic trustees there from the Catholic school boards. There were lots of independent, faith-based schools there. There were, obviously, lots of home-schooling families there. There were even a few signs, I noticed, that said that they were public school students against Bill 2. So it was a very diverse group.

9:10

There were also different backgrounds. There were some from different faith backgrounds. There was, obviously, a large contingent there with a Christian background, but there were also some, I noticed interviewed on the news, who were holding signs as well that were not of that background and were just there protesting against Bill 2 and its infringement on parental rights. These were just self-described libertarians. They weren't there for any other reason but that they had students in home-school, and they didn't appreciate Bill 2 and what it did with parental rights.

The first one we went to, which was about a week before that, the Minister of Education came as well to that, and a week or two before that. The paper said about 350, 400; it was much larger than that. It was probably close to 600, 700. But this last go-round was a huge, huge audience, certainly well over 2,000. They actually signed people in as they came in order to verify that because sometimes the media doesn't really give credit where credit is due on the size of these crowds. In fact, many of the reporters that were there remarked that it was the largest rally they had been to at the Legislature. Now, granted, I'm not sure that some of those reporters were there in 1993. There were some big crowds back then. But it was certainly a large crowd and a boisterous crowd yet a very respectful crowd. They were passionate to be there, and I thought they were very respectful.

I do give credit to the Minister of Education, who did show up and speak. It wasn't a very warm reception for him, but he did speak, and you have to give one credit for standing and facing people that disagree with him on issues.

What was this group passionate about? Well, I had the opportunity to ask them. I said: who here loves liberty? And the crowd very clearly made the point that they were there. They were a crowd that loved the concept of liberty, of freedom of speech, freedom of assembly, freedom of religion, freedom of conscience: all these freedoms that we take for granted sometimes in our society. These folks were very passionate about it, and they cheered at even the mention of those freedoms. They were so excited about it. These were patriots that were there, Canadian patriots and Alberta patriots, people that care so deeply about this province and this country and about the freedoms that they enjoy in this province and this country. That was very evident in the group there.

It's important that we don't minimize those folks throughout this debate. These were Albertans that were there of their own free will, standing there in rather cold temperatures for about an hour or a little more than an hour. So some of the members here were

mentioning earlier that maybe the crowds weren't that big. That's a real disservice to the passion and devotion of these folks. Lots of questions from all kinds of members on all sides are just passionate. I know there are going to be a lot of speeches here tonight from these folks here.

Why were they there? Bill 2 has some good things in it. There's no doubt about that, and I've noted them. I like the extensions of the charter schools, allowing charter schools to be more permanent fixtures. Allowing more of them, I hope. These are things that we very much support.

People often forget this. Charter schools are public schools. They're publicly funded. There's no tuition. They're open enrolment. In other words, you have to get on a waiting list and wait your turn in order. You have to agree to the charter, obviously. If the charter is, you know, science or whatever, you have to agree that you're going to be okay with taking that charter on or having your child go to that charter. If it's more behavioural, like you're going to wear a uniform or something like that, you have to sign on to agree to that because some charter schools like to have structure, and they think children learn better in a structured environment and so forth. But they are public schools. We do very much appreciate these charter schools because they provide a very good piece of choice and competition in our schooling system, in our Alberta education system. So there are things in Bill 2 that we do agree with, and that's just one of several.

But there are some very severe problems. We saw this earlier on in debate on Bill 2 when we brought forth amendments to enshrine in the preamble the idea that the rights of parents are paramount when deciding the educational choices for their children and what kind of education their children are going to receive. We put a subamendment on the floor to a government amendment to make sure that that was clear.

It's not good enough to just say that someone has a right. See, there are rights to lots of things. There are lots of rights out there. Some are fundamental rights. Some are just rights that are given to us because the government gives us permission; for example, the right to drive. Well, that right to drive exists because the government sets rules, parameters, licences, and so forth, and you have a right to drive unless you break the rules. Then you get your licence taken away. You get tickets, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera. So there are lots of rights out there.

There are also lots of competing rights out there, and we see this in the courts all the time when you get into constitutional issues, where you have competing Charter rights, where you have to find that balance between, say, the freedom of equality and the freedom of religion or the freedom of speech and the freedom of assembly. There are all kinds of competing rights, and the courts have to find a way to balance those rights.

In just saying, as the government has put forward in one of their amendments, that parents have a right to decide what the educational choices will be for their children and so forth, in and of itself, especially being in the preamble where it's really of no force and effect, it's not really binding in any way. It's kind of just window dressing. That's why we brought a subamendment to say: "No, no. When it comes to competing rights, parents have the paramount right and responsibility over deciding what education they will have their children given and taught." That is something that we felt passionate about, and we brought in amendments on that.

Now, amazingly, the government refused to pass that amendment. They wanted to just give a right. They wanted to recognize a right, but they didn't want to give parents a paramount right. They weren't comfortable with that, so they voted against it for several reasons.

Then the next day in the *Calgary Herald* it was quoted that, in fact, with the amendment that they had passed the night before – and I heard this on a radio talk show as well – they had given parents a paramount right to choose the education for their children, which was exactly what they voted against the night before. They voted against that exact language, yet they were out the next day saying: well, we passed an amendment that makes it so that parents are recognized as having paramount rights over their child's education. Not true. They voted against that. It was a standing vote on the record of voting against that exact language, so it was very disingenuous.

Again, I give credit, you know, to the Liberals and the NDP. They certainly voted against our amendment as well, but at least they were truthful about it. They said, "Yeah, we voted against it; this is why, and we're proud of that" whereas the PCs voted against it and then went to the media the next day saying: "We voted for it. In fact, it was our idea." In fact, it wasn't their idea in the first place, and they voted against it. So this is the kind of disingenuous behaviour that is becoming commonplace with this government.

We're going to have to discuss the paramountcy of parental rights, and we will. We've got an amendment to that effect. However, before we get to that amendment, there is another amendment – and we're going to talk about that right away here – and that revolves around section 16 of this bill, Bill 2. This is a real sticking point because this is really what the rally was about.

9:20

Section 16 says:

All courses or programs of study offered and instructional materials used in a school must reflect the diverse nature and heritage of society in Alberta, promote understanding and respect for others and honour and respect the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms and the Alberta Human Rights Act.

Well, that sounds great, doesn't it? The only problem is those last six words. You see the signs in the audience: just change six words. And what were those six words that they were talking about? If the folks up in the gallery could speak, which they're not allowed to, I bet you they could repeat those words verbatim, but I'll repeat them for you. The last six words: "and the Alberta Human Rights Act."

Over the last decade or so there has been no larger violator of human rights in the province of Alberta than the human rights tribunal in the name of this Human Rights Act, no greater infringer on freedom of religion, freedom of expression, free speech, freedom of conscience. This Alberta human right tribunal is one of the most widely criticized, one of the most roundly criticized, by folks from right across the spectrum, as being, frankly, completely out of touch with the realities of the Charter of Rights and Freedoms and so forth. It has been a travesty. We'll go through some of those examples.

For people that are home-schoolers and private schoolers and Catholic schoolers, this really is a problem for them because it mandates, essentially, that all course or programs, instructional materials, et cetera, have to reflect, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera, the values taught in the Human Rights Act. As interpreted by whom? Lots of good stuff in the Human Rights Act, but who's interpreting the Human Rights Act? A lot of folks have severe problems with that for many reasons. It's not just one issue, one thing. It's a whole range of issues from, like I said, free speech to freedom of religion, freedom of conscience, et cetera.

Mr. Chair, without further ado, I'm going to introduce an amendment to Bill 2, section 16.

The Deputy Chair: Hon. member, if you would please provide those to the page, as I see you are doing, and retain one copy for yourself. As it's being distributed, if you wish to read it into the record, that will move things along.

Mr. Anderson: Sure. I move that Bill 2, the Education Act, be amended by striking out section 16 and substituting the following:

Respect

16 Education programs offered and instructional materials used in schools must not promote or foster doctrines of racial or ethnic superiority or persecution, religious intolerance or persecution, social change through violent action or disobedience of laws.

The Deputy Chair: Thank you very much, hon. member. I'm assuming everybody has a copy now. Not yet? Okay. We'll just give them a couple of seconds more here.

All right. Hon. member, if you wish to proceed with this amendment, which will be numbered A6.

Mr. Anderson: This amendment: what does it do? Well, it changes, as I said, section 16, strikes out the entirety of section 16, and replaces it with something else. You will recognize the language here because it's the language of the current parallel section that's in the old act, the second subsection from it:

3(1) All education programs offered and instructional materials used in schools . . .

(2) . . . must not promote or foster doctrines of racial or ethnic superiority or persecution, religious intolerance or persecution, social change through violent action or disobedience of laws.

Mr. Chair, there's this old adage, and it's such a good piece of advice, especially for this government over the last several years when you think of the royalty framework, when you think of property rights, when you think of the whole swath of issues that have just absolutely brought this government to the brink, to where they may not be the government again after 41 years. Here's the adage, the useful advice that someone should have told somebody four or five years ago: if it ain't broke, don't fix it. If it ain't broke, don't fix it.

The School Act in this area was not broken. It was fine. It was a good balance. The language used here:

3(1) All education programs offered and instructional materials used in schools . . .

(2) . . . must not promote or foster doctrines of racial or ethnic superiority or persecution, religious intolerance or persecution, social change through violent action or disobedience of laws.

We have used this for years and years and years and years, and it has been very successful in promoting diversity and respect.

What does the government do? They take this obscure section in the act, which no one was complaining about – it was fine – and they have decided that they are going to change it. What do they do?

All courses or programs of study offered and instructional materials used in a school must reflect the diverse nature and heritage of society in Alberta, promote understanding and respect for others and honour and respect the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms and the Alberta Human Rights Act.

People are very worried about those last six words. Now, I would be open to any kind of subamendment or other amendments that other members might bring with regard to just getting rid of those last six words, but I take a more kind of common-sense approach. Why fix something that wasn't broken? What's the point? Why do it?

[Mr. Cao in the chair]

What are people concerned about? Well, they're concerned about a few things. In section 29, I believe it is, of the same act we look at private schools. Some of them are faith-based schools. Most of them are nonprofit. We have a great faith-based school in our constituency. It's a different faith from my own, but it's a phenomenal – phenomenal – faith-based school.

The Chair: Your 20 minutes are up, hon. member.

The hon. Member for Calgary-Fish Creek on amendment A6.

Mrs. Forsyth: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I am grateful to talk about something that is important to me and many Albertans, and that's the importance of parents. It may seem obvious that parents are important to Albertans, but that's why I stand here today discussing amendment A6.

It's not clear to me and concerned parents about the place of parents in our education system. Traditionally we have always respected the fact that the most important and influential educators of children are their parents. It seems unquestionable to me, but that is why we've seen hundreds of families protesting at the Legislature. You know what, Mr. Chair? Someone is questioning their authority over their children.

Parents are the greatest source of stability in a child's life. Mom and dad are like water and sunshine to a growing plant. When there is plenty, the plant thrives, and it grows like an unstoppable force. Cut off the plant from the water and sunshine, and you get something that not only ceases to grow, but it withers away.

Parents that home-school their kids are showing a supreme commitment to their kids. These parents are upset with the preamble of the Education Act because it interferes in what they can teach their children. The preamble speaks to how important parents are, but you know what, Mr. Chair? It seems like lip service. When it comes to people's children, they do not respect lip service. They respect action. But that failed, so we're now trying with this amendment.

9:30

The amendment proposed by the Member for Airdrie-Chestermere, A6, was important on its own but especially in light of section 16 because section 16 puts the lessons of home-schooling parents – Christian parents, Catholic parents, parents in general – at the mercy of the human rights tribunals. The amendment does make the situation clearer, that parents are the ultimate authority in a child's life, especially when it comes to their education. It is clear that it is a parent's right to teach morality, beliefs, and their sense of right and wrong.

Quite frankly, Mr. Chairman, I'm confused. A parent that home-schools or takes time to find a specific school for the kid proves to me how much they care. So why are we undermining devoted parents? As the minister of children and youth services I spent a lot of time consulting those with addictions. The last thing you ever want to do is undermine people that care. Section 16 undermines the authority of parents, and it undermines the authority of people that care.

Something that my parents taught me was to keep things simple. All too often these days government keeps creating more and more laws and more and more regulations and checklists that bog us down and complicate things. Now, I've heard in this House how out of date the old School Act was. It seems like the government is throwing the baby out with the bathwater.

There was a lot of good legislation in the old act, and there's no question that there's a lot of good legislation in the new act. I can refer to several pieces in the new act, and I like to remind the government that the bullying section that they have in the old act

was actually my bullying bill, that they have now incorporated into the new act. At the time that I brought the bullying bill forward, many members of the government defeated it and spoke against it in this Legislature.

Parents that home-school or send their kids to independent schools are worried about the new diversity language in the new Education Act. The old language was clear: don't promote racial or ethnic superiority or persecution or religious intolerance or social change through violent action or disobedience of laws. As long as parents met these guidelines, they were free to teach their children as they saw fit. You know what? We didn't have any problems.

The new language scares parents because it drags in the Human Rights Commission. Quite frankly, the behaviour of the Human Rights Commission in this province and across Canada has been discredited. It has been used to censor people's freedom of speech that has offended some people. No hatred promoted, just opinions that have ruffled feathers, and no one ever was hurt physically, but people were dragged through the commissions, which aren't even real courts of law. To me, Mr. Chair, these issues clearly show a difference between the government and my caucus on education and parents.

Mr. Chair, I believe in the grassroots, that the people are where we draw our power and where we draw our guidance. Parents are the foundation of education, and Albertans are the foundation of what makes this great province. I don't think that there is that belief on the other side of the House. I believe that the belief is that the governing party and the government in general are the driving forces in this province.

Top-down ordering is how this government operates. If they get it wrong, then they consult. I wonder: what consultation was done with home-schoolers? What consultation was done with the Christian parents? What consultation was done with the Catholic parents? Was the consultation done with a few choice friends that nod their heads when the minister asks them questions? [interjections] You know, Mr. Chair, I love it – I love it – when we're debating a piece of legislation and . . .

The Chair: Hon. members, the hon. Member for Calgary-Fish Creek has the floor, and the procedure is to address the chair.

Mrs. Forsyth: The Minister of Education has the opportunity to stand up and speak in the Legislature. What the Minister of Education is doing is showing how disrespectful he is to the parents in this province, and quite frankly he's not showing a lot of leadership to the children in this province.

I do want for a moment to recognize the importance of teachers in Alberta. They work day in and day out to make sure that our kids have a great education. Alberta is the envy of the world in large part because of the wonderful teachers we have, but we cannot forget that parents are the moral compass. Morality comes from the home to the school, not the other way around. I hope that this government sees the light on this issue. We need to support the great parents that we have in this province, and they can't be taken for granted. We cannot assume. We all know what happens when we assume.

I urge the House to recognize the essential nature of mom and dad and the growth of their children and their education. We need to recognize that parents are paramount in educating their children.

I can't recall, to be honest with you, as a sitting member of this Legislature for a long time, quite frankly, the last time that I received so many e-mails, so many phone calls, so many letters in regard to an issue. I think the Member for Airdrie-Chestermere

brought it up as we spent many hours speaking in the Legislature. I think both of us have come to the conclusion that the last time that happened was with the royalty. We at that time received, I'm sure as you did, Mr. Chair, as a member of the government hundreds of letters. I have received letters, e-mails, phone calls, and I want to read one of those in the House if I can.

This letter was actually written to the Solicitor General and the Member for Airdrie-Chestermere. I know we can't read names, but I'm going to read this as per the letter, verbatim.

[Dear] Jonathan.

I am aware that the Education Minister has thrown a little "bone" to the people of Alberta, assuming that making a small change in the wording of the preamble of the bill will make everything "all better." We all know that the preamble is only words, an introduction, and has absolutely no legal force. The words of the bill itself are what is law. Regardless of what the Premier says to the media, or what any other Alberta PC politician states when you say it will be fine and not to worry, once the bill passes . . . it must be enforced. If the Alberta Government does not enforce it, as the Education Minister stated 2 weeks ago at a rally at the Alberta Legislature, then the Alberta Government in fact will be breaking the law! Can you please explain to me Jonathan what plan the Alberta Government has in place to manage/monitor all people of Alberta to ensure they are not breaking the law?

The reference to the Alberta Human Rights Act has absolutely no business in the Education Act. To my knowledge, no other Canadian province or American state makes such references in their Education Acts. It is my opinion the Premier of Alberta has enshrined it in this new bill as she is a Human Rights lawyer and feels it is her "right" as "the boss" to push her . . . personal agenda that will negatively affect the people of Alberta for decades to come. For this I am deeply saddened not only for my children or future grandchildren but for all citizens of Alberta. Why not remove 6 simple words from Section 16 of this bill? These 6 simple words are ". . . And the Alberta Human Rights Act . . ." Why is the Alberta Provincial Government digging its heels on such a simple solution?

Now, Mr. Chair, I know my time is limited, so I'm not sure how much time I have left.

The Chair: More than eight minutes.

9:40

Mrs. Forsyth: Eight minutes. Okay.

The Alberta Human Rights Commission and its tribunals have a proven Alberta history to be intolerant of Christians who speak according to their faith. It (the Alberta Human Rights Commission) is in itself a direct attack on all faiths because the beliefs of [all faiths] are different than those of the Alberta Human Rights Commission. Therefore, there's no protection whatsoever for homeschoolers or any faith based school with this new act – no religious freedom. It is also my belief Jonathan that as a lawyer yourself, and as the Solicitor General of Alberta, (and our MLA) that you would already know all of this.

The Chair: Hon. member, I just want to remind you that you cannot refer to hon. members by name directly or indirectly.

Mrs. Forsyth: All right. I'm sorry. I was going from a ruling that went on this afternoon in regard to the Minister of Education referring to the Member for Airdrie-Chestermere.

Mr. Anderson: What's good for the goose, right?

Mrs. Forsyth: What's good for the goose, Mr. Chair, is good for the gander. If you're going to be ruling that I cannot use some-

one's name, then I think you should have made the same ruling this afternoon when someone was quoting directly from . . .

The Chair: Hon. member, continue with the bill. You should not challenge the chair.

Mrs. Forsyth: I'm not challenging the chair, Mr. Chair. I'm trying to get clarification.

The Chair: Please, carry on with the bill.

Mrs. Forsyth:

I am here to plead with you [Solicitor General and Member for Calgary-Egmont or wherever you're from] to go against your party and vote no to the changes that have been proposed to date with the New Education Act. I know there is only one more reading of this bill and if it is not voted down, it will pass. If it passes then parental rights will have been taken away by the state and people of all faiths will no longer have freedom. Alberta's current motto of Strong and Free will need to be changed to something like Weak and Controlled. If this happens then we no longer live in a democracy in Alberta as the state now has the control. I can think of several countries I could effectively compare us to, none of which I . . . would care to live in!

Then it goes on to say to the Member for Calgary-Egmont:

You have stated to me in several emails and telephone conversations that you yourself are a Christian. You have also indicated that you have teachers in your family as well as homeschoolers. If this is the case then you must, in all good conscience, vote no to this Bill. How can you begin to look your family in the eye, tell them you are voting yes to this bill, and convince them it is best for everyone? If this bill passes, are you personally prepared to deal with the repercussions for your future children or grandchildren? Is this the legacy you want to leave in Alberta's history books once your political career is over?

As I have mentioned to you on several occasions, I am praying . . . for the . . . Provincial Government leaders to do what is right and just, for all citizens of Alberta, and for all of you to remember the . . . roots this province was built on.

Thank you [Member for Calgary-Egmont], for your time.

Sincerely,

and it's signed off.

Mr. Chair, that's just one of many. I could go on and on and on and read into the record e-mails we've gotten. I just want to read another one. Can I say Heather, or do I say the Member for Calgary-Fish Creek?

My husband, Ken asked me to forward to you [a] copy of a letter he sent to the *Calgary Herald* last evening. Whether it gets published or not, it reflects our very strong concern with the anti-religion, anti-family values intent of part of this legislation. Bringing the Human Rights Commission to police/enforce this act is bizarre, irrational and dangerous. It is a direct threat to silence and intimidate well meaning parents and schools who may object to what is being forced down children's throats by agenda driven bureaucrats and politicians. The costs and inherent unfairness of the [Human Rights Commission] process are enough to discourage all but the independently wealthy.

Then it goes on in the letter in regard to what my constituent wrote to the *Calgary Herald*. Mr. Chair, it goes on and on and on.

We've received a media release from the Alberta Catholic School Trustees' Association questioning Bill 2, the Education Act. There are just too many to even go through. I finally, quite frankly, have quit putting things in my binder because my binder is getting too heavy for me to carry because of all of the correspondence that we've had.

I'm going to end by saying this. When we started speaking on Bill 2, the Education minister made a comment in the Legislature – and it's in the records of *Hansard* – that: why would we as the Wildrose Party bring forward an amendment in regard to the preamble when we had 16 months of consultation? What I found absolutely mind boggling and hilarious was that we had been dealing with an amendment, A1, that the minister had tabled in the Legislature only a couple of days after he had tabled the legislation in regard to the preamble, and he's criticizing the Wildrose for bringing amendment A2 in regard to the preamble. He was quite forceful in his criticism to the Wildrose about all of the consultation that he had done.

Well, Mr. Chair, it's amazing to me, if the minister has done so much darned consultation on this bill, why we are hearing from the Catholic school parents, the Christian school parents, the home-schooler parents, the charter school parents, and parents in general that are very, very concerned in regard to where this Education Act is going in regard to the preamble and section 16.

With that, Mr. Chair, on behalf of the constituents of Calgary-Fish Creek and on behalf of the parents that at 10 to 10 are still sitting very patiently in the gallery listening to what's going on, thank you. We appreciate your time, we appreciate your dedication, and more importantly, we appreciate you as parents.

The Chair: The hon. Minister of Education.

Mr. Lukaszuk: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. It's a pleasure to rise and speak to the amendment. I, too, together with the Member for Calgary-Fish Creek, would like to thank the parents – and there are some young ones as well, children – who are in the gallery. That is good. It definitely shows ongoing commitment. Also, it's a good part of home-schooling being in the Legislature and seeing what happens, really, in democracy and how bills become laws.

Mr. Chairman, a couple of points just in response to the comments made by the hon. Member for Calgary-Fish Creek. The member is correct. When I stood up in the House and I indicated, "Why is it that the Wildrose opposition raises concerns now and not earlier," she is right that on that particular amendment they didn't have an opportunity to raise it earlier because it was just a freshly tabled amendment on the floor of the Legislature, so they couldn't possibly have had the time to research it and to raise issues with it.

Maybe I didn't make myself clear enough, so I will now for certain. What I meant to say is that I meant on this bill overall. My predecessor, who is now the Minister of Human Services, who was then the Minister of Education, properly tabled this bill on the floor of this Legislature – help me with the time – some 18 months ago, about a year and a half ago.

The minister was quite well known at that time for having a very robust consultation. There was Inspiring Education and transforming education, and there was consultation on the bill, and then the bill was tabled in the Legislature for all members of this Chamber to review. I certainly hope that every member reads every bill because if they don't, I hope that they don't debate the bills they haven't read. So I assume that every member of this Chamber has read Bill 18. I certainly know that all stakeholders, school board associations, and others have read Bill 18.

9:50

A new opportunity came. There was a switch in cabinet. As a new minister I wanted to satisfy myself because I firmly believe that the Education Act is one of the most principled pieces of legislation that a province could ever pass. It truly is a piece of

legislation that shapes the future of this province. It's about kids and how we educate them and how they will be leading this province into the future. So I thought that perhaps it was an opportune time to take a bill, a draft bill, and give it back to Albertans outside of this Chamber and say: read it again and tell me if anything is missing in the bill, if anything should be added or changed or omitted so that when we retable that bill in the Legislature, we know that we did our homework. The last School Act was passed in 1988. It lasted us over 20 years. Odds are that this bill will be in power for some 20 years. I just want to make sure that I get it right.

We ended up having town hall consultation meetings and not by invitation; anybody could attend. We ended up having telephone conference meetings; literally over a thousand parents called in. We ended up having a mail campaign; we received thousands of letters. And then, if that wasn't enough, I sent a letter to every single child in every classroom in Alberta asking them, with teachers and parents, to write me back and tell me what they would like to see in this legislation to make sure we covered all bases. By the way, I have received over 7,000 written or drawn responses from children from all over the province, and there are some real golden nuggets in that.

It was to the point where – and I'm not sure from what political affiliations – I was actually criticized on the record for over-consulting on this bill. There are political accusations that I'm using this for electoral purposes and that we're having I believe it's a dog and pony show is the term being used. You know: "Stop shopping this bill around. You're consulting it to death. It's costing people money." There were questions in the House asking how much money it cost to consult the bill so much. I can pull *Hansard*. There was a concern that I'm actually . . .

Mr. Hinman: Good question. How much?

Mr. Lukaszuk: Well, there you go. There is the question: how much did I spend on consultation? Because apparently we spent too much money on consulting on this bill.

Mr. Hinman: I didn't say too much; I said how much.

Mr. Lukaszuk: I don't know, hon. Member for Calgary-Glenmore. I will find out how much it cost.

Consulting on the education bill is the right thing to do. Throughout this entire process, for 18 months, as this bill was consulted with everybody, not one letter, not one memo, not one visit to the office, not one communication of any sort, neither to my predecessor nor to myself, from that particular caucus on this bill. No criticism or no constructive suggestions on what should be changed or how to amend this bill. Nothing. So as far as I'm concerned, the bill has met the standards of that particular caucus. That is why, hon. member, I was so shocked to find out that at the final line – it was in second reading – all of a sudden we have a whole array of amendments. Where were they before? It could have been done, but where were they before?

Mr. Chairman, the picture will be painted that the whole world is against this bill, and I can tell you that it is not. This bill is for roughly 600,000 children in our classrooms. This bill is probably the most innovative piece of education legislation that this country will have seen ever. It is a very progressive bill. It deals with bullying. It allows kids to earn credits in universities while in high school. It gives extra powers to parents so they can sit on parent councils. It formalizes students' unions and associations so that they can direct the minister on future policy changes. The list goes on and on and on.

Bullying, frankly, to me personally is one of the most important ones because it's something we need to eradicate throughout school boards.

Mr. Hinman: You use it best.

Mr. Lukaszuk: Hon. Member for Calgary-Glenmore, I won't even honour your comments with a response.

Mr. Hinman: You have no honour, so that's okay.

Mr. Lukaszuk: Mr. Chairman, I should call a point of order at this man suggesting that I have no honour, but I will just ignore him, and I will carry on.

Mr. Hinman: You're disgusting.

Mr. Lukaszuk: And that I'm disgusting. But I will also ignore that as well.

The Chair: Hon. member, the minister has the floor.

Mr. Lukaszuk: This is the kind of rhetoric that we've been dealing with, Mr. Chairman, in this Legislature for the last few days, so don't even worry. It doesn't faze me. That's how they want to conduct themselves on *Hansard*, on the record.

Point of Order Inflammatory Language

Mr. Hinman: I'll give a point of order under 23(h), (i), (j). He's saying things that are inflammatory, that aren't correct, and he's trying to cause disruption of the Assembly with the things that he's saying. He's the one who's starting it. If he wants to talk the truth, speak the truth. But for him to get up and say that we haven't given anything when this bill didn't come out – Bill 2 is not Bill 18, and because they had Bill 18 around for 18 months doesn't mean that they went around for 18 months on Bill 2. It just came forward here. How long ago, Minister? Let's put some facts on the table. You're being disruptive; you're being misleading. You should call him to a point of order.

The Chair: Hon. member, point of clarification.

Mr. Lukaszuk: I didn't hear a citation. It's odd. You know, the member calls me . . . [interjection] I'm speaking to a bill, Mr. Chairman. I'm trying to focus. The member calls me awful names in the meantime, and somehow I'm causing a disturbance? Let it be. I want to focus on this. This is more important.

The Chair: Hon. minister, the member is upset about that point of order. Continue on with the bill.

Mr. Lukaszuk: That's fine.

Debate Continued

Mr. Lukaszuk: It should be mentioned, Mr. Chairman, that bills 18 and 2 are one and the same. It's the same bill reintroduced. The only reason that the number changed, as you well know, is that every time we reintroduce a bill, it loses its placement order, and it just simply receives a different number. It's the same bill with a different number on the cover. But that's fine if they want to argue that.

I want to tell you, Mr. Chairman, what other Albertans say about this bill. The Alberta School Councils' Association is an association that conglomerates the majority of our independent

Christian schools. I want to read a letter to you signed by Marilyn Sheptycki, president of this council, addressed to myself, that says:

Dear Minister Lukaszuk,

I am writing to you in support of Bill 2, the Education Act.

Over the past three years, Albertans have had many opportunities to engage in discussions on shaping the future of education in our province. Bill 2 captures and distills those many conversations and reflects the thoughts and ideas of all who participated in the consultations.

Bill 2 represents the legislative framework Albertans believe is needed, to not only maintain our province's world class education system, but to provide even greater opportunities for student learning.

The Alberta School Councils' Association encourages all Members of the Legislative Assembly to view Bill 2 as a good, solid piece of legislation, one which reflects the collective wisdom of Albertans. It will serve all the students of Alberta well today, and in the future.

Sincerely

Marilyn Sheptycki, President

The Alberta School Boards Association, Mr. Chairman, a body that represents many, many, many school boards and hundreds of thousands of students in our schools, put out a media availability, and it says:

ASBA Urges Passage of Bill 2 Education Act

Bill 2 Education Act is a good piece of legislation that should be passed before the Legislative Assembly adjourns, says ASBA Vice-President Cheryl Smith.

"For two years, the government engaged in extensive consultation with all education partners including parents about how education in this province should go forward. We believe the Act should be passed because it reflects this input and replaces legislation that no longer meets our needs," said Smith.

And then there's contact information for the Alberta School Boards Association.

Mr. Chairman, the Public School Boards' Association also put out a news release saying:

The Public School Boards' Association of Alberta . . . was pleased to see Bill 2 introduced in February 2012. We were the first Association to ask for the following provisions:

- Natural Person Powers, Establishment of Separate School Districts, Trustee Eligibility and Inclusiveness as a Core Value.

We are very pleased to see those provisions within Bill 2.

They go on to say what a good piece of legislation, how reflective, it is. Then it says:

The PSBAA is the only Association in Alberta that advocates exclusively for the interests of Boards offering a Public School Education and the students attending Alberta's Public Schools. When our Association speaks, we represent the voices of over 228,000 children attending Public Schools.

Mr. Chairman, if that's not enough, I will read you a letter from the Alberta Teachers' Association that, again, calls for "inclusive comprehensive public education." In their statement and press release – I won't read it because it's actually quite lengthy – they are asking for immediate passage of Bill 2 because it is good for all children in the province of Alberta.

Mr. Chairman, I don't question why the members do what they do, and I definitely have a great deal of respect for parents who fear that in some way their educational choices and their ability to teach or not teach certain concepts may be compromised. I have satisfied myself not only through analyzing the legislation but actually outsourcing it to individuals much brighter than me in the matters of law that there is nothing in the act that in any way will affect parents who choose to home-school their children or, frankly, any type of religious education.

10:00

As I said, Mr. Chairman, it's rather ironic. As I was speaking with somebody earlier today, I said that I have a pretty boring routine every morning. First thing in the morning I drop off my older daughter at a Catholic school, where I sit on a parent council, and then I drop off my younger three-year-old daughter at a daycare in a Catholic convent, in a nunnery, where she's taken care of by Catholic nuns. I don't know how many members in this Chamber actually have the opportunity of engaging where religion blends with education. That is a choice that I'm making, and I'll tell you, I would be furious if somebody was to tell me that I cannot exercise both of those options because they're very important to me and to my family.

Also, when my children come home from school, I teach them what is right and what is wrong. Every parent does that in the province of Alberta. My wife and I tell them what we believe is right, what is a sin, what isn't a sin, what is wrong, how to treat your neighbour, how to play with other kids, what is morally acceptable, and what isn't. That is not the role of teachers. That is not the role of the education system. That is not the role of strangers.

Teachers, as well intentioned as they are, are trained to teach curriculum. They're not trained to teach morality. They may tell kids how to engage with each other in school and what's the proper behaviour and code of conduct, but they're not there to teach morality. That is something that comes from the home, and that has been understood in this province for over a hundred years now. That is something that will remain.

I don't think that there's a member on any side of this House that would argue with the fact that what a parent believes is right for a child the parent has the right to teach. There is no role for state, for government, for legislation, for commissions, for quasi-judicial bodies, or for anybody to step into our house. Even if somebody disagrees – because, frankly, it is very possible that I may be disagreeing with what my neighbour is teaching his or her kids relevant to what is right and what is wrong, but that's none of my business. That's their castle, and they get to make the rules. They get to teach their kids what is appropriate for their family values, cultural values, religious values, and the list goes on and on.

Mr. Chairman, I regret that some feel threatened. It's an awful feeling to honestly believe that you may lose something that you hold so dearly. I feel terrible that I'm somehow perceived *de facto* as an instrument of bringing that fear upon that group. I'm not sure what it is that I can say to reassure this group that it isn't the case.

The fact is that it's rather disingenuous to say that if I was to remove references to certain pieces of legislation, then that legislation wouldn't apply. We all know in this Chamber that there are such pieces of legislation that are known as overarching pieces of legislation, whether we make references to them or not. They do apply to formalized schooling, but our homes and our teaching of children are exempt from that. As parents even in formalized schooling, if we choose to exempt children from certain courses, we can.

Let's not all think that we all have the same values. As a matter of fact, Mr. Chairman, in my riding there is a small group, a small pocket of residents, who come from a non-Christian religious background who strongly feel that their children should not be exposed to music, any kind of music. You know, in regular schools learning your ABCs usually is done through music. That's part of the pedagogy of teaching children. That's how children often learn. Well, this particular group of individuals strongly feels that music is something that neither children nor adults should be exposed to, and our schools accommodate that.

We respect choices, not only choices that are based on Christianity and many of the common values that most of us share, but we accommodate the choices of other faiths, of other religions because we are a pluralistic society and that's what we do. So parents get to remove those children from classes where they are exposed to music or teachers accommodate, where they can, because that's what Alberta education is based on. It's based on choice.

That is why – and sometimes we're criticized by others – we offer this wide array of choice: private school, public school, charter school, Catholic school, or home educational program. There's also a reason, Mr. Chairman, why we made a deliberate effort in the act to refer to others as schools, but we refer to educational programs as programs because we know that home is not a school. None of the regulations that pertain to school buildings pertain to homes, nor should they.

We also acknowledge the fact that when you're home-schooling a child, there is no regimented schedule. Kids don't wake up at home in the morning, jump out of their pyjamas, and study from 9 o'clock till 3 o'clock, and then the rest is family time. Kids learn from the moment that they wake up to the moment that they go to sleep. When the family travels in a family van to pick up groceries, they use that trip as part of education. That's part of home education.

So it is obvious that if one even tried to implement any type of legislation, it would be impossible because how would you ever know whether the child is actually learning right now or whether this is part of family discussion, like you are having with your children and I am having with my children at home when we're not home-schooling?

Mr. Chairman, I wanted to reassure not only those here in the gallery that it is unfortunate that this matter has been elevated to the status that it has, that emotions and fears have been elicited. It is sad because I know for a fact in my heart that if and when this bill passes, home-schooling families will wake up the next morning, and life will be just the same. They will be teaching them what they always have. They will choose not to teach them what they always have. Sins will remain sins, not-sins will remain not-sins, and the government of Alberta will keep its paws far away from anybody's home.

Mr. Chairman, I thank you for this time. I hope that we will be able to engage in a debate that is fact based, not emotion based, and that we will manage to keep the decorum of this House at the level that we're enjoying, actually, right now.

Thank you.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview on amendment A6.

Dr. Taft: On the amendment, yes. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. It's an interesting discussion. I've been looking at the amendment.

I must reflect, though, a little bit on the comments from the minister that we just heard at some length. I will say that it takes some doing as a member of the opposition to feel sympathy for the position of the minister, but I've got to be honest, Member for Calgary-Glenmore. I heard the minister speaking calmly, trying to address the issues. I didn't think your calling a point of order was at all appropriate, if I may get that on the record. It just seemed – I don't where it came from, but it concerns me.

I also want to say, Mr. Chairman, that I may have been one of those who said, or at least thought, that perhaps the government was almost overconsulting in developing this act. I certainly thought and I may have said that the consultation that went into

the Education Act was a model that I'd like to see more government legislation follow.

Very often we get bills dropped on us. Gee, last fall we got the one on driving under an alcohol influence of .05. We get lots of bills dropped on us very, very suddenly. Last fall I think there were three bills pushed through in two weeks. So having a piece of legislation brought to the floor of the Assembly after being developed and then tabled and left after first reading for broad reaction for I think it is 18 months is extraordinary. There has been ample, ample opportunity for people to give their reaction, so for this to be coming up at the very last minute is a little bit of a surprise.

Nonetheless, that kind of thing happens, and it's been an interesting debate. These are genuine, heartfelt issues on all sides, including our side. You know, I've got two adult kids, and I like to think that they've turned out pretty well. But I understand from our perspective, you know, the old saying that it takes a village to raise a child. I hear a tremendous amount about the supreme rights, or some phrase like that, of parents with their children. I don't think it's supreme but overarching or paramount, and I have mixed feelings about that.

10:10

I happen to know that there are many parents who are not competent and who do a terrible job of raising their children. Our society, sadly, is filled with abusive families. We recognize as a society that there are times when the rights of a parent are not paramount and should not be paramount, when we have to intervene, for example, to protect children.

In much less extreme cases there are all kinds of examples where at least I, speaking for myself, am quite comfortable with my children learning from other people and that other people, whether they're schoolteachers or principals or neighbours or aunts and uncles or religious figures or whoever, have rights. I don't regard my children as chattels. I don't regard them as something I own. I regard them as citizens in a free and open society, who right from the day they're born benefit from a very broad and rich learning environment from which they'll learn their morality and they'll learn right and wrong. I just think that's good.

So we have different views – different views. There's no question about that. You know, we're not going to change each other on that. Fair enough.

I have noted in this amendment a couple of things. The amendment has the effect of removing reference to the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms as well as to the Alberta Human Rights Act. The Member for Airdrie-Chestermere and others who have spoken in favour of the amendment have specifically expressed concern about the reference in Bill 2 to the Alberta Human Rights Act. I haven't heard any reference of similar concern to the Charter of Rights and Freedoms.

So I'm not sure if I should understand that those are in the same category or not because the amendment deletes references to both. [interjection] Okay. I'm getting an indication from the Member for Calgary-Glenmore. I'm going to infer here that the reference to the Charter of Rights and Freedoms is less of a concern than the reference to the Alberta Human Rights Act. I'm getting a nodding of agreement from Calgary-Glenmore on that.

I don't understand enough to know why the difference. I don't understand what it is, so maybe one of them can explain it to me. I mean, I know they're two completely different pieces of legislation. I actually happen to have a copy of the Alberta Human Rights Act here. If you're concerned about the Human Rights Act, why are you not also concerned about the Charter of Rights and Freedoms? I'd like to understand that. Secondly – I have to be

honest – I just don't understand and I haven't heard why you're so concerned about the Alberta Human Rights Act. I just don't understand what the fear is.

Perhaps I'll sit down and let one of those members explain it to me. Thank you.

Mr. Hinman: Well, I've sat in here and listened intently and with great interest to the discussion that's gone on. I find it interesting that there's so much misunderstanding. For me there's not too much to be misunderstood. It's quite clear what the government is trying to achieve with those points.

I guess I'll start off. The hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview couldn't understand the point of order. If you look at (h), "makes allegations against another Member," he mentioned the Wildrose and made all types of allegations towards us that were wrong, saying that we hadn't done anything, we hadn't been proactive, and why are we all of a sudden doing it now? Absolutely not correct. Imputing false motives.

The Chair: Hon. member, the chair has already addressed that point, so please carry on.

Mr. Hinman: Well, you allowed him to ask the question, so I was answering his questions. He didn't understand your point, my point, so I had to clarify it for him. Neither one of us was able to articulate it in a way that he could understand.

The Chair: All right. Go on with the amendment.

Mr. Hinman: Okay. The Charter of Rights and Freedoms is very different from the Human Rights Commission. It's appointed. There's no rule of law. They make their own arbitrary decisions. They can proscribe their decisions. There's no place to appeal. It's very, very different from the Charter of Rights and Freedoms. I can't even personally understand how you could even think the two are correlated. They're not.

This whole bill in its current state is a major point for people of faith who want to do things at home. The minister says: "Oh, I'm not going to go into their homes. I'm not going to intrude." Well, he won't need to. He's handing it over to the Human Rights Commission. They are the ones that are proactive, and there are community activists who have an agenda, that want to force that on other Albertans. Albertans have paid a high price for that. They've lost their freedom of speech, freedom of religion, freedom of congregation because the human rights activists, the community activists, who don't agree and who have zero tolerance, though they preach tolerance, have abused the system.

It's a kangaroo court at kindest. It's caused all kinds of problems, Mr. Chair, and that's why there was a rally out here with 2,000-plus people. Again, the government says that we shouldn't ever be quoting from the papers. How many members in here received e-mails, like I did, but didn't have the courtesy to go out and see the rally? Yet they'd make comments, saying: oh, I think there are only 300 people. It's insulting to the people of Alberta that we make those types of comments right here in this House when the people got together right on the Legislature steps. Yet we don't even realize it's going on. Talk about living under the dome in a bubble. Wow. And then we wonder why the people are upset and don't think that this is in their best interest.

Again, putting words in the mouths of others, when did I ever say: too much? When someone asks how much, does that mean you can't buy something? If you go in, Mr. Chair, and you ask someone how much, are they insulted? "Oh, how dare you ask how much?" I think that people have a right to know before they buy or when something has happened. What is wrong with asking

how much? They immediately take it to decide that they're so against it. Very, very different, and they always jump to some pretty pathetic conclusions.

It was interesting that when my hon. colleague was talking in depth about the Human Rights Commission and whatnot, the Member for Edmonton-Whitemud's words were: mindless babble. Mindless babble. Because of her concerns and sharing what she's heard about the Human Rights Commission from Albertans. To me, that's exciting and causes some problems. Then he used the great word, that this is pathetic. I use that word a lot. I do think that what we're doing in here is truly pathetic, so I understand.

We should have the freedom of speech, but it can get people somewhat excited when they're talking about something that they're very concerned about and very passionate about. What the problem is and why we've brought this amendment forward, Mr. Chair . . .

Dr. Taft: Paul, can I ask a question, then?

Mr. Hinman: Sure. You bet. I'll go all night to discuss this. If you're asking questions, I'll be answering and be pleased to.

There are two main issues here in the purpose of this amendment coming forward. One is the question of parental rights. The hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview has said many times over the years that I've been in here that he believes it takes a village to raise a child. I do not believe that. I believe a family can raise a child. You don't have to be in a village before you're successful at raising a child. There's great strength and value to be living in a great village, but it doesn't take a village to raise a child.

Sometimes there are people in our community – again, the Minister of Education brought up an excellent example of a group of individuals who are very concerned and obviously feel that music is bad and that we shouldn't be exposed to it. Who am I or who is anybody in this Legislature to say that that is wrong?

Dr. Taft: Nobody said that.

Mr. Hinman: Nobody did. I said: who are we to say that it's wrong? I didn't say that we shouldn't say that. Again, you're jumping to conclusions, negative attitudes.

I think that there are many, many experts, Mr. Chair, who have shown that music is a great enhancer of a person's ability. Should we as a state, then, pass a law and say, "Well, we've got the scientific proof to show that a child's development is improved if, in fact, they're exposed to music"? Should we attack this group because their belief is that they shouldn't? It's a really good example of where we can show the science, yet we can say that this shouldn't be. This is what's wrong if we want to impose law or legislation on someone saying: "No. We know better. The state knows better. Therefore, you must do it."

10:20

The number one issue here is parental rights. Do they exist, or do they not? I would argue that parental rights do exist – I have a strong belief in that – but I would also agree with the Member for Edmonton-Riverview that we actually have a Criminal Code and that if parents are negligent or causing harm to those children, then it is our duty to step in and to take those. But, my goodness, I don't want to be the person to be making that decision even on such simple things as music. Maybe that's why I'm so challenged, because I don't listen to very much music. My mother tried to teach it to me, and the music teacher said that she was wasting her money, that I had two left feet and was trying to play soccer. Well,

I don't have a lot of music talent, and I'm the first to admit it. I have tried a few times, though, and whatnot, but I can't even carry a tune in a bucket. It escapes me. So there you go.

Parental rights: it is paramount that we have them right in the legislation. If this government is so astute and has done so much consulting and all of those other things and says that they don't want to step in the way of parents, that they can teach the morals, the beliefs, the values to their children, then simply put it in the bill so that it's clarified. Unless, of course, they have an agenda, that they really do want to supersede the parent with their curriculum and what they want to teach so that down the road they can implement that.

I don't, Mr. Chair, for the life of me understand. If, in fact, they believe in parental rights, if they have said at different times that they are paramount, why don't we simply correct the bill? We corrected it very simply the other day where it says that students shouldn't bully, and it was unanimous. We all agreed that nobody should bully. Not even the Minister of Education, the top dog in education, should be allowed to bully. Everyone is saying, "Oh, nobody wants to interfere with parents," but will we put that in legislation? No. It's nothing but talk, cheap talk, and that's why people don't trust. It's because you say one thing, but you won't write it down.

I've done it many times myself, done a deal with a handshake. But, boy, I tell you that when one group breaks that deal, it's not very good. I have been burned a couple of times by saying that I'll deal on a handshake. So what do we have? Contract law. We write it down, and we're specific. Then we can go back and say: "Oh, you know what? I can't believe that. Three years later – this is amazing – I didn't think that that's what we agreed on. I'm sure glad we wrote it down." I've had that experience myself as well.

It's critical, Mr. Chair, that it's written down that parents either do or don't have paramount rights over the decisions for their children. It's not written in here; it's not clear. It's very easy for this government to accept an amendment, which they didn't, to clarify that. Therefore, you have to take the side that they don't want it. They say it, but they don't want it, and they're being silver-tongued salesmen saying: don't worry about it.

The other one, though, that's in here that causes a problem is, I want to call it, curriculum. You read section 16 in its current existence and the way it is: "All courses or programs of study offered and instructional materials used in a school must reflect the diverse nature and heritage of society in Alberta." Some people have some concern with that, and I want to respect those people. I think the law and the legislation should respect those people because they're a little bit nervous on what the diverse nature is that the government wants to have in their programs and courses.

I'm going to use another example because it's been brought up today by some of the members in your caucus. There are faith-based people that like to teach out of the Bible. Let's start with the first book, that all the controversy and the discussion is about. Oh, my goodness, if we read the creation of the world in Genesis, it doesn't disturb me. Other people are horrified: "The world couldn't have been created in six days. It's all false. We can't allow our children to know this stuff." Again, I think that's where we can teach and say, "Well, you know, it's not literal," and you can go on from there. But other people might want to teach that, no, this is literal because that's what they believe. Do we need to be paranoid and say: no, you can't do it. Do we need the Human Rights Commission to come in? I think that one of your members today tended to that feeling: oh, my goodness, it's the worst thing in the world for someone to teach that to their children. Well,

they're going to teach it whether they're home-schooling or on the weekends and go there.

It's interesting, though, when you have here "reflect the diverse nature," and I just think we need to respect that diverse nature and allow people to teach their beliefs and values to their children and not have this Human Rights Commission hanging over their head, that has a bad record of pouncing in on people and saying: that's not right.

The rally was about six words, and those six words are the last ones in section 16: "and the Alberta Human Rights Act."

Dr. Taft: Can I ask my question?

Mr. Hinman: Oh, you want me to sit down for your question? Sure. I'll sit down.

Mr. Hancock: This is going to go on for another 20 minutes, and I won't get a chance to adjourn. I don't know about you, but I've had enough.

Mr. Hinman: There again, Mr. Chair, we're having a little sidebar discussion.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Calgary-Glenmore has the floor.

Mr. Hinman: The Member for Edmonton-Whitemud has made it very clear that he's had enough, and he wants to adjourn. I guess the discussion is going to be over tonight. Again, I'm going to use his words because I agree with him on this: that's pathetic. Here we are discussing a very important bill, and he wants to adjourn and go. Again, for what reason?

The question, then, is on parental rights and curriculum.

Dr. Taft: Why do you want to delete reference to the Charter of Rights and Freedoms?

Mr. Hinman: I don't.

Dr. Taft: But the amendment does that.

Mr. Anderson: I can explain that.

Mr. Hinman: Yeah. He'll go over that.

I think that what we have is better. The question that's being asked is: why do we want to eliminate the Charter of Rights and Freedoms and why is it in there? Again, what we want to go back to is, we think, better. If someone would just put in a period at the end of "Charter of Rights and Freedoms," we'll be happy, and I'll be bringing an amendment forward tomorrow, probably, to do that one.

The point that's in here is a problem. The wording has changed. There is a big difference between these two. We want to go back to what was in the Education Act because there that's more about teaching. I want to go back to curriculum.

One of the questions that was brought up yesterday – and it's too bad that all of the members weren't there to listen to the speeches at that rally. There were some excellent speeches given on the purpose of education and what they wanted to do.

Education programs offered and instructional materials used in schools must not promote or foster doctrines of racial or ethnic superiority or persecution, religious intolerance or persecution, social change through violent action or disobedience of laws.

So this is a very different tone. What we used to have was to teach about tolerance and that we can't teach hate or bigotry, any of those things. But with this new one, in my personal opinion and

that of many Albertans I'm being surrounded by, we're going to have this wonderful new curriculum that we're going to be able to teach, and we can get to the point down the years where we'll enforce that curriculum, and that's what needs to be taught.

But, for me, as I look back on education now, we had this old thing that's called reading . . .

Mr. Rodney: Can we get out of here? I've had enough.

Mr. Hinman: The hon. Member for Calgary-Lougheed wants to get out of here. Is the government whip here? Could he answer that for him so that we don't have to be interrupted by him? You're free to go home, I'm sure. Is the whip telling you?

Mr. Rodney: I wasn't talking to you, Paul.

Mr. Hinman: Well, I can hear you, so why don't you go out and talk in the coffee shop?

The Chair: Hon. member, keep the process going. Speak through the chair and on amendment A6.

Mr. Hinman: Well, I'd be happy to, but sometimes I can't help but answer their silly questions. I stopped to do that.

The question is about curriculum whereas education, especially for home-schooling – I've gone to a few of their conferences, and it's quite amazing to listen to them talk about the importance of inspiring children. I guess I want to say that in home-schooling children are wired to learn. They love to learn. It's fun watching them as they're growing up when they're young: their enthusiasm, their desire to touch everything and to look at everything.

10:30

They get into school, and we start to try to teach them to read and to do writing and to do arithmetic. That's the real question: what is the purpose of education? Do we have a curriculum – the minister referred to that two or three times, a curriculum – or do we want to teach them the abilities to learn so that they can actually read and understand, so they can actually write and put things down, so they can do math?

A concern that some of the parents have that have talked to me is that they don't agree with the curriculum, but they very much want their children to be able to read, and then they can look at things and judge for themselves. There is a difference, Mr. Chair, between teaching children so that they have the reading, the writing, the arithmetic, and those skills to be out in this world and being exposed to a curriculum that some parents don't feel comfortable with.

Let me perfectly clear, Mr. Chair, that all of my children went through public schools. I personally don't have any fears of my children going through there, but it's about individual fears. It's about individuals' beliefs and their desires to do what they think is best for their children, and I think that this legislation as we have it and section 16 is very, very concerning to me in that we're actually trying to take those other ones that have other values and bring them in and say: this is wrong.

Like I say, the music one is music to my ears. Here it is that you can argue that this is right or wrong, so where does the state come in and say: no, music is important, and we need to teach that. [interjection] Not yet. But who's to say the experts won't come in and say that these parents are harming their children by not allowing them to be exposed to music? That's what this is all about. Do we have respect for parental rights and are they paramount, or is it, in fact, that they don't have them, and the state has that decision on what's best for the child? Is it about curriculum or

enabling them to learn and to be able to read and to write and to do those things? That's what all of this is about, Mr. Chair.

With that, I'll allow the government to not have to endure any more pain than they're obviously in, sitting in here listening to this, because I get the feeling that the Government House Leader is going to get up and adjourn the debate.

The Chair: The hon. Government House Leader.

Mr. Hancock: Yes, Mr. Chairman. After a few remarks, I would be most happy to oblige the hon. member, but I do want to say a few things first.

Over the last four years there has been an incredible discussion about education in this province. Inspiring Education was a phenomenal opportunity for a generative dialogue with Albertans about what education we need to have, what an educated Albertan looks like 20 years from now, what we need to do to be able to inspire each and every child to find their passion to learn, to maximize their potential?

I've often said, as I speak to graduation classes at the University of Alberta, which I try to do every year, that God has given each and every one of us talent and ability, and it's our duty, it's our obligation to maximize our personal potential so that we can contribute back in a maximum possible way. That's my particular philosophy, and I don't mind sharing it with those that will listen and even sometimes with those who don't. That's freedom of speech.

We have the opportunity to make a difference, we have an opportunity to maximize our God-given talents, and we have an obligation, in my view, to do that.

If the hon. member had been paying attention at all over the last three years, he would understand that it's not about curriculum at all. It's that every child is an individual, and every child has their own learning style and ability. Each child is unique, and each child needs to be inspired in their own way.

The richness of the education system that's going forward, which will be empowered by Bill 2, is that opportunity to be able to design education with the specific child in mind. That will mean that some people will choose for their child home education. That choice could be honestly made for any number of reasons. It may be for religious purposes, but it may be because the child has some barriers to success and they want to focus more on those barriers to success in a home area. It may be because the family travels a lot and they want to be with their children, so they want to take their children with them as they travel, whether it's for work or otherwise. There are all sorts of reasons, and it's not up to us to determine the legitimacy of those reasons.

What is up to us as a government and as a Legislature is to ensure that there are rich educational opportunities for every child in this province regardless of their abilities or their disabilities, regardless of where they come from, regardless of who they live with. This government is committed to that, and that's what Bill 2 speaks to. Bill 2 doesn't speak to government coming into the homes of people and doing something dastardly to their children or telling people that they can't speak to their children about their values.

People, particularly the hon. Member for Calgary-Glenmore, should understand where section 16 of the act originally came from. Ron Ghitter, who was a member of this House, had a task force on Tolerance and Understanding many years ago, and that task force was, unfortunately, a necessary process of the development of this province in understanding who we are as a people. Out of that, there was an understanding that as part of our education system we needed to make sure that our educational

materials and our programs and our curriculum, the programs of study and the structural materials, needed to reflect the diversity of the province, needed to reflect our heritage, needed in fact to reflect tolerance and understanding.

Now, I don't particularly like the word "tolerance." I think tolerance means putting up with people, and I think we should be embracing people. We should be embracing the differences that we have in this province and the fact that it's a very cosmopolitan place.

So we shouldn't be trying to scare people about the Human Rights Commission.

An Hon. Member: How can you embrace it when you have two things that disagree with each other, then?

Mr. Hancock: It's simply a matter of saying: in instructional materials and programs. Now, there's nothing to say that a home-schooler needs to use a particular set of instructional materials and programs. In fact, there are many diverse ways in which home-schoolers deal with instructional materials and programs.

The Chair: Hon. member?

Mr. Hinman: The good House leader often brings this up, and I just have to ask: is this on the amendment?

Mr. Hancock: Yes.

Mr. Hinman: Yes? Thank you. I couldn't see the . . .

Mr. Hancock: I mentioned section 16 a number of times, Mr. Chairman.

The Chair: Hon. member, the hon. minister has the floor. Don't interrupt the hon. member. Talk through the chair.

Continue on.

Mr. Hancock: I don't understand even the point because I mentioned section 16 and brought it right back to 16 and the roots of section 16, so I'm not sure what the hon. member's point is.

However, I do find it very interesting that other members of that hon. member's caucus in previous years worked very hard to ensure that parental choice was enshrined in the Alberta Human Rights Act. So the very people who are now saying the Human Rights Act takes away people's rights and is one of the worst things we have are the people that a few years ago under Bill 44 in this House wanted the Alberta Human Rights Act to protect the ability of people to choose to take their children out of religious instruction or out of instruction with respect to sexual orientation.

Mr. Anderson: What does that have to do with it?

Mr. Hancock: It has to do with the fact that you're trying to . . . [interjections] The hon. Member for Airdrie-Chestermere is very confused tonight. He can't understand that it's entirely inconsistent for him on one hand to denigrate the Human Rights Commission and the Human Rights Act and denigrate their purpose and on the other hand to insist that something be put into it in order to protect potential choice. [interjections]

The fact of the matter is that there is parental choice in this province. It's a choice that this government supports, a wide range of educational choices, and parents are paramount with respect to the education of their child.

Now, the hon. members will immediately start yapping, as they are, about the fact that they had an amendment which could put paramountcy in. Unfortunately, they are very confused in their drafting, so the piece that they brought forward relative to

paramountcy confused the issue as to whether parents have the paramount choice of how their children are educated and where or paramountcy once they've chosen that. Obviously, once you've put your child into a public school, you cannot have paramountcy for parents. The parents can't come into that school on a day-to-day basis and tell the teachers and the principals exactly how the school is going to be operated. That would create anarchy. That would create anarchy. So paramountcy is important, but you don't need to write any more of it into the act to make it real. We have rights, and until those rights are taken away, those rights exist.

I have children, and I have the right to educate those children. I have the right to instill in those children my personal values and to raise them as my children with the beliefs that I believe in, and they have the right to challenge those beliefs. They ought to have an education which allows them to challenge those beliefs so that we can have a proper dialogue and they can understand the basis of those beliefs. But if they're my children – and they're not my chattels; I agree with you hon. member – it is my right in my home to instill my values, my cultural heritage, my religion in those children until they get to the level where they can challenge those beliefs and they can strike out on their own, and it is my obligation to make sure that they have an education which will enable them to perfect, to improve, to maximize their personal potential so they can contribute back to the community and give back in a way that I believe God intended all of us to do.

10:40

I find it really amazing that after all the consultation on this act, all the generative dialogue on this act, all of the discussions, including many, many opportunities that have been had to assure people who are doing home-schooling that there's nothing in this act which is going to change their ability to home-school their children in the way that they want to home-school them, these hon. members at the last minute want to raise these types of amendments.

You know, the hon. Member for Calgary-Glenmore was making some derisive remarks about being tired and wanting to adjourn

debate. It has been a long day, and we worked very hard. Notwithstanding what others might want to say about it, MLAs work very hard. They were here last night until, I think, 1:30. Quite frankly, I think it's time for people to go home and reflect and come back fresh tomorrow with a new perspective on this bill.

I would move that we adjourn debate.

[Motion to adjourn debate carried]

Mr. Hancock: Mr. Chairman, I move that the committee rise and report progress on Bill 2.

[Motion carried]

[The Deputy Speaker in the chair]

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Leduc-Beaumont-Devon.

Mr. Rogers: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The Committee of the Whole has had under consideration a certain bill. The committee reports progress on the following bill: Bill 2. I wish to table copies of all amendments considered by the Committee of the Whole on this date for the official records of the Assembly.

The Deputy Speaker: Having heard the report by the hon. Member for Leduc-Beaumont-Devon, those in favour, please say aye.

Hon. Members: Aye.

The Deputy Speaker: Opposed? So ordered.

The hon. Government House Leader.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'd move that we adjourn to 1:30 p.m. tomorrow.

[Motion carried; the Assembly adjourned at 10:44 p.m. to Wednesday at 1:30 p.m.]

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Province of Alberta

The 27th Legislature
Fifth Session

Alberta Hansard

Wednesday afternoon, March 21, 2012

Issue 21a

The Honourable Kenneth R. Kowalski, Speaker

Legislative Assembly of Alberta

The 27th Legislature

Fifth Session

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Legislative Assembly of Alberta

1:30 p.m.

Wednesday, March 21, 2012

[The Speaker in the chair]

Prayers

The Speaker: Good afternoon and welcome. I would ask all hon. members and those in the galleries to remain standing after the prayer so that we may pay tribute to a former colleague who has passed away.

Let us pray. Renew us with Your strength. Focus us in our deliberations. Challenge us in our service to the people of this great province. Amen.

Mr. George Topolnisky August 13, 1919, to March 19, 2012

The Speaker: Mr. George Topolnisky, former Member of the Legislative Assembly, passed away on March 19, 2012. Mr. Topolnisky served as a member of this Assembly from August 30, 1971, to May 7, 1986. During his years of service he represented the constituency of Redwater-Andrew for the Progressive Conservative Party.

Mr. Topolnisky served as minister without portfolio from September 10, 1971, to April 2, 1975, as well as minister responsible for rural development. He served on a number of committees, including the standing committees on Private Bills; Private Bills, Standing Orders and Printing; Public Accounts; Public Affairs; Public Affairs, Agriculture and Education; and as chair of Law and Regulations. He was also the chair of the Select Special Committee on Recreational and Commercial Fishing Industries in Alberta and served on the Special Committee of the Legislature on Professions and Occupations.

With our admiration and respect there is gratitude to members of his family who shared the burdens of public office. Our prayers are with them. In a moment of silent prayer I ask you to remember the hon. member, George Topolnisky, as you may have known him. Rest eternal grant unto him, O Lord, and let light perpetual shine upon him. Amen.

Please be seated.

Introduction of Guests

The Speaker: The hon. Deputy Premier.

Mr. Horner: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It is indeed a pleasure for me to rise on behalf of the member from the constituency of Stony Plain and introduce to you and through you to all Members of the Legislative Assembly a superb group of students from Duffield school. They are joined today by parent helpers Mrs. Priscilla Spratt, Mrs. Shonia Tarr, Ms Laura Peaire, Mr. Duane Drews as well as their teachers, Mr. Christopher Giauque and Mrs. Cindy Charleson. This group is seated in the public gallery this afternoon to observe question period, and I would ask them to now rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of this Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Finance.

Mr. Liepert: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I have two introductions this afternoon if I could, please. First off, we're privileged to have a group of students from John Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies based out of Washington, DC, visiting Alberta this week. I had an opportunity to meet with these

students over the lunch hour, and we could have used several hours to answer all the questions they had. I'd like to introduce them and ask them to stand as I recognize them and to remain standing to receive the recognition from the Assembly. We have with us today Jeannette Lee, Elena Chobanova, James Stranko, Martin Ross, Gorav Chaudhry, Clarke Lind, Bree Bang-Jensen, Rania Papageorgiou. Their leader is Dr. Charles Doran. They're joined by someone who is relatively familiar to many members of this House, Paul Yeung of the Royal Bank. I'd ask members to please recognize them and welcome them to Alberta.

It's also my pleasure today on behalf of the hon. Member for Calgary-Shaw to introduce to you and through you an enthusiastic group of some 36 elementary students from Trinity Christian school in Calgary. The hon. Member for Calgary-Shaw told me that this is the 11th year that this school has made the journey to Edmonton to visit the Legislature. That's every year that she has been in office, Mr. Speaker. Their teacher, Ms Cheryl Barnard, along with 20 parents have joined them today to learn about what happens inside the Legislature. I'd ask that they all rise and receive the warm welcome of this Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Infrastructure.

Mr. Johnson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's an honour to introduce to you and through you to members of this Assembly approximately 30 students and their teacher and parent helpers from Guthrie school, which is a school that lies right on our military base here at Edmonton Garrison. All of these children have parents in the military, and some are in Afghanistan as we speak, so we thank them for that. These grade 6 students are accompanied by their teacher, Colleen Tremblay; her assistants, Becky Williams and Danny Hagen; and volunteers David Samson and Kerry Boivin. I'd ask them to please rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of this Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Advanced Education and Technology.

Mr. Weadick: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my great pleasure today to rise and introduce to you and through you to all members of this Assembly a truly outstanding Albertan, Dr. Lorne Babiuk, who earlier today was named a recipient of one of the world's most prestigious international awards for research and medical science. He's the winner of the 2012 Gairdner award. Dr. Babiuk is the only Canadian among seven international recipients of the Gairdner award this year, and he is only the second winner in the history of the province of Alberta.

He's being honoured for his research and leadership in infectious diseases and developing vaccines for human and veterinary use. Dr. Babiuk is currently the vice-president of research at the University of Alberta, where he helped establish the Li Ka Shing Institute of Virology and the Helmholtz Alberta initiative. Dr. Babiuk is a leading researcher in infectious diseases, particularly zoonotic diseases, those that pass from animals to humans, and is acclaimed for his work in vaccine development. He has said that vaccines are one of the most effective ways to improve people's quality of life while reducing rates of sickness and death. I don't think anyone could argue with that. He should be very proud for doing something that directly helps not only his fellow Albertans but people around the world. We are certainly proud of him, and we are proud to count him among Alberta's amazing research community. Dr. Babiuk is seated in the members' gallery. Please join me in congratulating him for his excellent research.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-North West.

Mr. Blackett: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's a pleasure to introduce to you and through you to this Legislature Rolly Ashdown, who is the reeve and councillor for division 4. He's actually a constituent of the MLA for Foothills-Rocky View, our Minister of Energy. I happened to run into Rolly at the AAMD and C luncheon, and we were chatting about politics and the upcoming events. He said that he would like to come down to the Legislature this afternoon to see the proceedings, and I said that I would love to have the pleasure of introducing him to this House. I'd ask him to rise and receive the warm welcome of this Legislature.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for St. Albert.

Mr. Allred: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I am pleased to rise today and introduce a gentleman that's certainly no stranger to yourself, I know, and to many other members of the Assembly. I'd like to take the opportunity and have the privilege to introduce him to you and through you to the rest of the Assembly. Mr. Charles Rees is a constituent of mine and a very strong supporter of this government. He is a businessman and an entrepreneur that specializes in promotional gift items. I'd ask him to stand, please, and receive the traditional warm welcome of the Assembly.

Thank you.

1:40

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

Mr. Johnston: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It is my pleasure to introduce to you and through you to all members of this Assembly four guests that I had the pleasure of meeting with today. They should all be up in the members' gallery, and I would ask them to stand as I speak their names: Mr. Len Rhodes, the president and CEO of the Edmonton Eskimo Football Club; Mr. Les Mabbott, chairman and managing director of LPI Corp.; Mrs. Shamsah Panjwani, branch manager, National Bank of Canada, Commerce Place branch, Edmonton; and last but not least my brother David Johnston. He recently transferred here from Saint John, New Brunswick, and he's a financial planner with the National Bank of Canada here in Edmonton. I'd like you to give them the warm traditional welcome.

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

Dr. Sherman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure to introduce to you and through you to members of this Assembly Mrs. Veronika Lewinske. Mrs. Lewinske is a young woman with an inspiring story of what can be accomplished in just under a year in Alberta. In 2007 she left Moldova with her husband and moved to Alberta. Last year she discovered the Microbusiness Training Centre in Edmonton and enrolled in its self-employment program. It allowed her to start her own business and import a little piece of home to share with Albertans, Moldovan wines. Mrs. Lewinske is thankful to be in Canada because of the treatment her two-year-old son can receive. He suffers from cystic fibrosis. The treatment our health professionals are able to give her son is extremely hard to come by in her homeland. I welcome Mrs. Lewinske to her new homeland and ask her to rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of the Assembly.

Ministerial Statements

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Justice and Attorney General.

International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination

Mr. Olson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. As everyone in this House can attest, Alberta's diversity is its strength. We are lucky to live in a province alive with the customs and traditions of many unique and vibrant cultures, where all citizens feel a sense of belonging and pride, from our aboriginal communities to the newly arrived Canadians who now call Alberta home.

Unfortunately, despite this rich diversity racial discrimination does still exist. That's why it's vital that we all take the time to recognize the International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination.

On March 21, 1960, police opened fire on a group of peaceful protestors at a demonstration against the apartheid pass laws in Sharpeville, South Africa. Sixty-nine peaceful protestors were gunned down for standing up for what they believed in that day. It was a horrific loss of life and one not soon forgiven around the world. Six years later the United Nations declared March 21 the International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination.

From this tragedy comes an annual reminder for all of us about the effects that racism can have around the world. Unfortunately, 52 years from the original tragedy it's still a reminder that we need today. The International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination is a moment to honour the memory of those whose lives were stolen in Sharpeville. It's an opportunity for all to join the fight against racism, and it reminds us of the negative power of racism and the responsibility each of us has to foster equality and fairness for all.

Looking around the Chamber today, I see a broad spectrum of races represented, but if I had to guess, most of us have never had to feel the sting of a racist comment or a deliberately discriminatory act. Those in this House who have know the frustration felt by thousands of Albertans who experience ignorance and intolerance on a regular basis and know just how important dialogue, understanding, and tolerance are to ending racial discrimination. These aren't just values we need to learn ourselves; these are values that we need to teach our children, our grandchildren, and our nieces and nephews.

Today in communities across Alberta we are doing just that. Events are being held around the province encouraging Albertans to take an active role in eliminating all forms of racial discrimination.

The importance of this goal is reflected in our province's human rights legislation, the Alberta Human Rights Act, which recognizes the equality of all persons as a fundamental principle and a matter of public policy.

The Alberta Human Rights Commission helps support these goals through its twofold mandate; that is, to foster equality and to reduce discrimination. The commission has championed initiatives such as the Canadian Coalition of Municipalities Against Racism and Discrimination. This international UNESCO initiative encourages municipalities to make a public commitment to a plan of action to counter racism and discrimination.

I'm pleased to let you know, Mr. Speaker, that there are 13 municipalities that have joined the coalition in Alberta, the most that have joined in any of the western provinces. With the commission's support, community-based projects are helping to reduce and counter racism and make our communities more welcoming and inclusive. Where needed, the commission also works with Albertans directly in resolving and settling complaints of racism and discrimination.

It's up to each and every one of us to promote fairness and speak out against racial and other forms of discrimination. The

International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination is a great place to start our efforts, efforts that should carry on throughout the year. By welcoming and sharing our diverse cultures, we are enhancing the richness of life in Alberta and ensuring that everyone can participate, free from discrimination.

Thank you.

The Speaker: On behalf of the Official Opposition the hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Though it's sometimes tough to admit it in supposedly enlightened Canada, racial discrimination remains a threat to our culture, economy, and way of life. Western society has come a long way in the last 100 years. It wasn't so very long ago that our literature, politics, and daily life took it for granted that there was a racial hierarchy, and society's laws and mores reflected those attitudes, with many opportunities denied anyone who didn't belong to the privileged class. These days such outright discrimination is frowned upon by virtually everyone but a tiny lunatic fringe. But that doesn't mean the battle against racism is over. Far from it. Prejudice remains. It can be seen in the poor health and economic outcomes of our First Nations people and their way higher than average rates of homelessness, poverty, and incarceration. It can be seen on the websites of hate groups and chain e-mails circulating racist jokes or outright lies about immigrants.

As elected officials there are steps we can take to fight racial discrimination. First and foremost, we can and should lead by example by speaking out against racism. I think the hon. members of all caucuses in this Assembly do an excellent job of that. We can also improve government policy to better integrate immigrants into Alberta's economy and society. Recognition of foreign credentials remains an important issue in Alberta. For example, it's a barrier to hundreds of well-qualified professionals that could be helping our public and private sectors. We have a shortage of physicians in this province, for example, that could be alleviated if we did a better job of recognizing the credentials of our immigrants. We could and should increase ESL funding at work and school along with settlement funding.

Perhaps most important of all, we must stop the fragmentation of our public school system into private and charter schools catering to all kinds of different religious and ethnic groups. Public schools, in which children of all races, religions, cultures, and socioeconomic status learn and play together, are the single greatest force against racial discrimination. It can be pretty tough to change the mind of a racist adult, but children have no inherent prejudices, and they'll never learn them if they grow up in the environment of diversity and acceptance fostered by public schools.

Thank you.

The Speaker: Hon. members, at least one member has risen. I believe the intent would be to request approval to participate. Under our conventions, in order for additional members to participate, the question of unanimous consent has to be dealt with. So I will ask the question: is any member opposed to allowing additional members to participate in the response to the ministerial statement? If so, say no.

[Unanimous consent granted]

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Airdrie-Chestermere, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona, followed by the hon. Member for Calgary-Currie.

1:50

Mr. Anderson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and thank you to the members opposite. I'd like to echo on behalf of the Wildrose caucus the comments by this minister recognizing the International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination. In doing so, I'd like to quote a favourite passage from Dr. Martin Luther King during his I Have a Dream speech that he gave in Washington. It's one of the most touching pieces that I've ever seen. Every time you watch the speech, your spine tingles because it was such a visionary and wonderful speech. This was a visionary and wonderful man.

I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal."

I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia, the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood.

I have a dream that one day even the state of Mississippi, a state sweltering with the heat of injustice, sweltering with the heat of oppression, will be transformed into an oasis of freedom and justice.

I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.

I have a dream today.

Mr. Speaker, let's all do our part in this Legislature to make sure that one day Dr. King's visionary dream becomes a reality. Thank you.

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

Ms Notley: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. This annual day on the calendar reminds us that there is work to do every day to end racism. News of public events such as a white power rally that may take place this weekend in Edmonton are dramatic reminders. More deeply, the evidence of the pervasive persistence of structural and systemic racism is not difficult to find.

The Human Rights Commission, which should provide leadership in these things, continues to be limited because of what it cannot do such as initiate its own investigations without a complaint. Much of what is happening is in informal situations that do not lead to formal complaints but do add to stress and fear for many people in our communities.

The proof of racism is in such things as the overrepresentation of indigenous people in prisons and children in government care. It is in the overrepresentation of racialized populations in low-income groups.

One of the best tools for creating equality is education. We need effective programs, not just superficial marketing gimmicks. We move in the wrong direction when we do not adequately fund our public schools or make it easier to avoid these issues in classrooms. We need education in workplaces as well, especially with employers, on a continuing basis.

This old government introduced much-needed human rights legislation 40 years ago. Today the lack of resources has marginalized this to little more than a rhetorical issue. Laws that say that there will be no discrimination are only as good as the enforcement of violations.

Fortunately, others in the province are energetic in the practical work to see racism eliminated in Alberta. The many members of Alberta's Urban Municipalities Association that have become part of the Coalition of Municipalities Against Racism and Discrimination deserve recognition. The Racism Free Edmonton program is supported by thousands of individual citizens. Alberta

human rights champions such as Professor Gerald Gall, who died a few days ago, are an inspiration to all of us.

As we renew our commitments to work to end racism, we must also express thanks to groups such as the Centre for Race and Culture, the John Humphrey centre for human rights, and the Sheldon M. Chumir Foundation for Ethics in Leadership that are doing exemplary work to eliminate racial discrimination in our province.

We must make Alberta a home where racism is eliminated. We need to remember that our human rights code prohibits discrimination on grounds that go beyond racism. As the T-shirts of the people at a rally on the steps of this Legislature Building today said: everyone should expect respect.

Thank you.

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

Mr. Taylor: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I will be brief. As the representative of the Alberta caucus and the fifth party in this House it's difficult to stand in response to the ministerial statement and all the excellent responses thus far and not be repetitive. Rather than echo the comments thus far, all of which have been exemplary, I'll simply agree with their statements that any and every step to eliminate racial discrimination in this province, in this nation of ours, and abroad is a good step.

With that said, it's great that today we can recognize the International Day to Eliminate Racial Discrimination. I think all of us in this House can agree that we are abhorrently opposed to racial discrimination in any capacity. But while it's important to recognize the need to eliminate it today, I'm forced to wonder why every day is not International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination. This should be something that we as MLAs and we as individuals and all citizens of Alberta strive towards 365 days a year. Recognizing it one day out of the year is simply not enough.

While we must never forget Sharpeville, it is my hope that someday we do not need to celebrate the International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination as it will truly have become a thing of the past. Until then we have a commitment to treat every day like today.

Thank you.

Statement by the Speaker

Tablets and Other Electronic Devices in the Chamber

The Speaker: Hon. members, on January 27, 2012, I wrote a letter to all Members of the Legislative Assembly, and I'd like to just quote one paragraph.

On a trial basis for the spring sitting and in recognition of the environmental impact of reducing paper use, I am allowing Members to use their tablets and PDAs during Oral Question Period only as virtual reading devices and not for sending or receiving messages. This will require Members to switch their tablets and PDAs to "Airplane Mode" and to ensure that all sounds are muted during OQP.

Well, this morning I received contact from several members who basically said that several other members have violated that. In a matter of just a couple of minutes of research, I see that their complaints were absolutely correct. Members in different caucuses have been doing this.

An Hon. Member: It's a shame.

The Speaker: I think it is.

We had a great discussion about the use of tablets and PDAs. We accepted the recommendation of the members to basically use

them, and then members take it upon themselves to violate it. So I won't name them today, and we'll see what happens. Obviously, there has to be some element of trust and decorum, a very minimal element that should be expected.

Oral Question Period

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

MLA Remuneration

Dr. Sherman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Yesterday the government whip announced that PC MLAs on the no-meet committee would pay back \$5,000 each, saying it's the right thing to do. This current government clearly has no sense of right and wrong. It says no to a true public inquiry, no to lower power bills, no to Albertans who are demanding PC MLAs pay back all the money they took for doing nothing. How can the Premier say that her government's response to yet another scandal is anything more than smoke and mirrors?

Mr. Horner: Mr. Speaker, I would hardly classify the MLA pay package that was passed by the Members' Services Committee of this House as scandalous. What I would say is this. This Premier campaigned on change and within the first 60 days of coming into office as Premier asked the Speaker of the House to commission an independent inquiry into MLA salaries. That independent inquiry will be bringing back a report to the Speaker, I'm told, sometime in the next few weeks. That was point number one.

Point number two, Mr. Speaker, was that . . .

The Speaker: Maybe we'll get that in the second question. The hon. leader.

Dr. Sherman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Given that the Premier had previously stated that she would not be ordering her MLAs to pay back what they took, why has the Premier flip-flopped yet again? Who is really driving her campaign bus?

Mr. Horner: Mr. Speaker, the Premier did not order individual MLAs to pay back anything. Our caucus has agreed to return funds received by members of that all-party Standing Committee on Privileges and Elections, Standing Orders and Printing, and that is from when the Premier took office. That's the fourth point of the response.

Let me continue with the second point of the response. No member of this caucus is receiving any committee pay as we speak, Mr. Speaker, because the Premier has suspended all committee pay.

The Speaker: The hon. leader.

Dr. Sherman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Given that this is the same Premier and same cabinet and caucus that put these rules in and that when the heat is on this Premier has a history of dealing with this scandal and other scandals by making a token gesture and sending the issue off to panels and committees to be delayed until after the election, how can anyone trust this Premier and this government to do the right thing once the heat is off? Make them give it all back right now.

Mr. Horner: Well, Mr. Speaker, the third point of what this Premier has already done is that we initiated, through the Members' Services Committee yesterday, a motion to, for the fourth year in a row, make sure that MLA salaries rise by zero per

cent. I would also suggest that we're being very open and honest about what we're doing. We're not trying to play games with this. This is an Assembly package of salaries. We anticipate an independent review. That's what we're expecting.

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

Dr. Sherman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. He's right. These aren't games. It's a slap in the face of Albertans.

2:00 Long-term Care Serious Incidents

Dr. Sherman: Here's another slap. Today the *Calgary Herald* reports more than 1,000 confirmed cases of abuse against our seniors and other vulnerable Albertans under care in provincial facilities. Many families have come forward to tell their stories of loved ones routinely being left in their own feces, suffering from sores and, in some cases, being left alone to die. But in this House the Premier has dismissed these as unfortunate and isolated incidents. What does the Premier have to say now? Are these 1,000 cases just more unfortunate and isolated incidents?

Mr. Horner: Mr. Speaker, there are on any given day thousands of qualified health care professionals working diligently in this province to provide care for those who are in need. You cannot characterize some unfortunate circumstances as blanketed to all of those health care professionals, and we will not do that.

Dr. Sherman: Mr. Speaker, 1,000 incidents. Given that the sheer volume of complaints makes it clear that this issue is not isolated – it's actually rampant – will the Premier finally admit that her government's policy of starving public, not-for-profit facilities has resulted in an abject humanitarian failure?

Mr. Horner: Mr. Speaker, I will not categorize the health care system or the care system in this province as a failure. I will characterize it as some of the best in the land. This hon. member actually stood up today and talked about some of the best care in the land, in the world, which is attracting people to our province. It continues to do so. Are there problems? Yes, there are problems in our system. We are working with those health care professionals to deal with those problems and to make the system better.

Dr. Sherman: Mr. Speaker, it is the best in the land when the staff are resourced with enough staff and finances. Given that Albertans are clamouring for action instead of more empty promises and slick lawyer talk, will the Premier finally say yes to adequate funding and adequate staffing and adequate monitoring of seniors' care facilities for our parents and grandparents?

Mr. Horner: Mr. Speaker, first of all, I wouldn't characterize the legal profession as being slick. I'm not a lawyer, so I'm not speaking as a lawyer or like a lawyer. I would put that on the record first.

The second piece I would say is that we just passed a budget in this House that is going to do exactly that. It is going to resource the type of facilities, the type of premium health care facilities, that Albertans are expecting from this government, and that's exactly what we're going to do.

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

Donations to Political Parties

Dr. Sherman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Not only has another handful of postsecondary institutions illegally donated to the PC Party; they did so explicitly to get the ear of this government. So far 50 cases of illegal donations to the PCs are being investigated by the Chief Electoral Officer. Clearly, this government doesn't know the difference between right and wrong let alone the difference between legal and illegal. To the Premier: can the Premier tell Albertans why postsecondary institutions, municipal officials, and school boards believe that they need to donate to this PC Party to have their voices heard?

Mr. Horner: Mr. Speaker, they don't need to donate to any political party to have their voices heard. We have said time and time again in this House that the rules are the rules. We expect our postsecondary institutions to follow those rules. We expect the municipalities to follow those rules. I would point out that it isn't just our party that solicits donations from all sorts of organizations, but a number of others do as well.

Dr. Sherman: Mr. Speaker, given that this is coming from a member who received donations from the Bahamas and given that this government doesn't grasp that it is illegal to exchange government time and favours for donations to the PC Party and given that returning the money after you've been caught does not negate the fact that it was illegal, what is the Premier going to do to stop this culture of corruption?

Mr. Horner: Mr. Speaker, coming from an hon. member who won't even tell us how much he makes as a doctor in this House is a little bit incredulous. But let me tell you this. Other people have bank accounts all over the globe. Where they write it from is immaterial.

I want to go back to what I said about other members in this House, other parties soliciting donations. I have another e-mail here from a member of this House that says: "Hi. Hope this finds you well. Just wanted to quickly let you know that there are only about 75 tickets remaining to the dinner with Wildrose Party leader Danielle Smith and myself."

The Speaker: The hon. leader, please.

Dr. Sherman: Mr. Speaker, that's quite rich coming from a party that has top-up funds for their leaders.

Given that this government created a system where backdoor access is given to people with strong relationships to the PC Party and is openly rewarding institutions for illegal financial donations with access to government, how can any Albertan trust this corrupt government to be in power for one extra day?

Mr. Horner: Mr. Speaker, this hon. member loves to make accusations with no truth to them. This hon. member loves to talk about things that, frankly, are not true, as in the party top-ups. He has absolutely no idea, and that's painfully evident to most people.

Let me come back to the MLA for Airdrie-Chestermere's e-mail to the Athabasca University soliciting donations. All of the postsecondary institutions that have been referenced, to my understanding, either have repaid the money or those institutions have also done strengthening to their policies and procedures . . .

The Speaker: Okay. We're going to move on. For all my imagination I can't see anything in the last three questions that has anything to do with the Oral Question Period.

The hon. Member for Fort McMurray-Wood Buffalo.

Fixed Election Dates

Mr. Boutilier: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Spring is here, and in the spirit of hope I'm going to give this Premier a last chance to come clean on the question Albertans expected to know months ago. The Premier promised a fixed election date, a date all Albertans could circle on their calendar, but she's broken that promise because nobody knows except her and her closest PC buddies. But today is a new season, and I'm filled with optimism. To the Premier: will you right here, right now be up front with all Albertans and tell us the day of the provincial election?

Mr. Horner: Mr. Speaker, the provincial election will be held before May 31.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Boutilier: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Based on that non answer and given that the whole objective of a fixed election date was to level the playing field to everyone and given that the Premier speaks about the value of fairness and the value of being open and transparent, why will this Premier refuse to adhere to these important Alberta values in telling all Albertans the exact day today?

Mr. Horner: Well, Mr. Speaker, I think I just told him when the election is going to be. I would suggest that the hon. member get prepared and goes and talks to some of his constituents. I think they miss him.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Boutilier: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. That's going to go over big. I can see that the Deputy Premier isn't in a very springtime mood, so I guess the only question left to ask that really is to the spirit of the Premier, from what I observe here today, is: why is she so afraid of being up front with Albertans with her secret election date?

Mr. Horner: Mr. Speaker, I don't think there's anybody in this province today that doesn't know that the election is coming, and the actions that we've seen across the floor would certainly indicate that we are in silly season.

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

Donations to Political Parties

(continued)

Ms Notley: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Between 2007 and 2010 Grande Prairie Regional College illegally purchased tickets for board members to a Conservative fundraiser. Now, on December 15, 2011, this Premier's cabinet reappointed three people who sat on the board of the college at the time these illegal donations were made. My question is to the Premier, in the words of her mentor, Mr. Mulroney. Premier, you had an option to say no, and instead you chose to say yes to the old attitudes and the old ways of your party with these reappointments. Why?

Mr. Horner: Well, Mr. Speaker, perhaps the minister of advanced education might want to supplement this, but as I understand it, any political donations that have been found to be illegal or have been received in not following the rules have been returned, and that would be for any party in this Legislature.

Ms Notley: Well, Mr. Speaker, given that the Premier chose to say yes to patronage and reappointed three board members suspected of illegal donations to that party and given that, if I may say so, that's not good enough for Albertans, will this Premier apologize for reappointing people who oversaw illegal donations to her party?

2:10

Mr. Horner: Mr. Speaker, I had the privilege and honour of serving the people of Alberta as the minister of advanced education some time ago, and I can tell you that the number of people that volunteer their time to sit as the governing boards of our postsecondary institutions are of the highest calibre and of the highest ethical standard. I don't agree with this hon. member.

Ms Notley: Well, given that this government appoints the boards of major postsecondary institutions throughout Alberta and given that this government is well known for appointing Conservative donors and operatives to these sorts of posts, why won't this government admit that it's created a patronage ring that's fed money back into Conservative coffers from public institutions for years?

Mr. Horner: Mr. Speaker, again, I will not stand in this House and allow disparaging remarks to be made about the character, the ethics, or the moral values of people who have volunteered their time to serve this province on the boards of governance of our postsecondary institutions, which, I might add, are the best campuses in the country, perhaps even the world.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Mountain View, followed by the hon. Member for Calgary-Foothills.

Physician Services Agreement in Principle

Dr. Swann: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My questions are for the minister of health. Today the minister announced an agreement in principle with the troublesome Alberta Medical Association on the eve of an election. After the Premier and minister betrayed all health workers by reversing their decision to hold a public inquiry into intimidation, the minister further insulted physicians by imposing a one-year wage scheme, which has now been withdrawn, now a clear and desperate attempt to buy their silence. To the minister: why was Alberta Health Services not party to this agreement?

Mr. Horner: Mr. Speaker, the agreement that we have with the physicians is one that has been negotiated for more than a year. Currently we're past that year period of time. We are very pleased that we have been able to come to an agreement in principle. This is an agreement in principle. We believe, on this side of the House, that this is working together with those health care professionals in the system to help us fix what is wrong in the system and move forward. We think this is a good deal for Albertans and for the doctors.

Dr. Swann: Alberta Health Services is also asking physicians to sign contracts that include dismissal without cause. Is this going to improve relations with their employer?

Mr. Horner: Mr. Speaker, the hon. minister of health and the president of the AMA had a very effective news conference this morning, I believe. I think what they talked about is that the relationships between the physicians, AHS, and this government are very good and that we're going to work on how we can better

the system, the publicly funded system of health care in this province.

Dr. Swann: Mr. Speaker, Alberta Health Services announced that their quarterly report is being delayed by the minister till May or June. Why are you postponing this required reporting till after the election?

Mr. Horner: Mr. Speaker, I would have to take that one under advisement because I'm not aware of what the reasons would be around that. Certainly, we would be able to provide that answer, I'm sure, in the forthcoming days, weeks.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Foothills, followed by the hon. Member for Calgary-*Buffalo*.

AIMCo Investment in Viterra Inc.

Mr. Webber: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. There are many news reports out there today about AIMCo's involvement in the Viterra deal, and it is my understanding that AIMCo is a large shareholder in Viterra. Could the Minister of Finance confirm this and advise this House to what extent AIMCo is involved?

Mr. Liepert: Mr. Speaker, the member is correct that this was a major transaction that occurred. I'm not in a position to talk about what the impacts are of the purchase by Glencore International out of Switzerland relative to the agricultural aspects of the deal. It does include Agrium, which is based out of Calgary, and the Richardson grain company out of Winnipeg, and it was approximately a \$6 billion deal. AIMCo is a shareholder of about 17 per cent of Viterra stocks.

Mr. Webber: To the same minister, then. I do recall that last year AIMCo did question the abilities of the Viterra board of directors and the board's commitment to seek shareholder input. Now, did that have any bearing on this sale?

Mr. Liepert: Well, it's hard to tell, Mr. Speaker, whether it had any bearing or not. It's probably unlikely because it was November of last year that AIMCo questioned the, I guess, abilities of the board of directors of Viterra around taking shareholder input. In response AIMCo was given one board member, so it's unlikely that having one board member would have significantly influenced the deal.

Mr. Webber: To the same minister again, then. This is a large deal, Minister, reportedly \$6 billion. Is that right, \$6 billion? Could the minister explain to this Assembly, if the deal goes through, what Albertans stand to gain through AIMCo's investment in Viterra?

Mr. Liepert: That's correct, Mr. Speaker. The reported transaction was \$6.1 billion. As I said, AIMCo holds about 17 per cent of the shares in Viterra. Those shares were purchased several years ago at approximately \$8 per share. The closing deal was \$16.25 per share. I'm told that the projected net gain on behalf of AIMCo on behalf of Albertans is going to be in the range of about \$400 million.

Home-schooling

Mr. Hehr: In Alberta we have programs of study guidelines that establish a curriculum that every student, regardless of how they are educated or where they are educated, is required to follow. To the Minister of Education: given that the minister stated that there

is nothing more important to him than giving parents choice to teach what they want, when they want, and where they want, is the minister saying that home-schoolers no longer have to follow the curriculum?

Mr. Lukaszuk: No, Mr. Speaker, I didn't say that. The programs of study guideline is just that. It's a guideline that gives educators, no matter in what setting, the guideline on what children should be covering by way of the course of study. But that doesn't mean that they have to adhere to the Alberta curriculum. The Alberta curriculum is a very well-put-together package of materials that children cover. The guideline is a guideline that could be interpreted by parents or other educators and used with supplemental programs of study.

Mr. Hehr: Well, to the same minister: will the minister continue to uphold the Alberta curriculum, which teaches evolution, the Holocaust, climate change, and racial and sexual orientation tolerance?

Mr. Lukaszuk: Mr. Speaker, the member knows the answers very well, but I will definitely address them. In our schools run by boards and in our public education system all the schools adhere to the Alberta curriculum, which teaches exactly what the member indicated. However, parents in this province, not only in schools but also in home-schooling, have the choice of exempting their children from certain programs of study. We support parental choice. In a home-schooling setting parents have to adhere to the guidelines of what ought to be taught, but they do it within their own needs.

Mr. Hehr: So now just to be clear, Mr. Minister, will home-schoolers no longer have to follow the Alberta curriculum when they are teaching at home? Just to be clear.

Mr. Lukaszuk: Well, that member is clear, and I'm sure he knows the answer to the question. Alberta home-schoolers do not have to cover the Alberta curriculum, but they do have to cover the recommendations of what ought to be taught. Those are just recommendations, and they're open to interpretation. The fact is that Alberta home-schoolers can develop their own programs of study. If there are any aspects of the Alberta curriculum that they feel are not meeting their personal values or religious beliefs, they can exempt their children from having to learn those subject matters.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Bonnyville-Cold Lake, followed by the hon. Member for Calgary-*Buffalo*.

Affordable Housing

Mrs. Leskiw: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I know that rent supplements are helping to keep a roof over the heads of many Albertans. Many of my constituents in Bonnyville-Cold Lake have expressed their concerns about the need for more affordable housing, which is why the ongoing talk about wait-lists for these supplements is so concerning. Could the Minister of Municipal Affairs explain why we continue to have wait-lists for this important housing support?

Mr. Griffiths: Well, Mr. Speaker, Alberta is not alone in its challenges to provide housing for low-income Albertans, but we do a great job, and we meet the challenge head on. We work with households and our local housing authorities to provide rent supplement supports to 12,000 households every month. We have

a couple of hundred households that move back to paying full rent supports to the private sector every single month. Then from those that are on the waiting list, we help those most in need. Not everyone on the list is in critical need. We focus on critical needs.

2:20

Mrs. Leskiw: To the same minister. For those who are not deemed most in need and first in line for support based on the assessment, what is being done to help address the growing need for housing support for those who are waiting for help?

Mr. Griffiths: Well, Mr. Speaker, rent supplements are just one type of support that we provide to those that are in need. We provide stable homes through 26,000 government-owned homes, which range from seniors' single-unit dwellings to multiunit dwellings to community dwellings. Through our capital funding partnerships we have created 12,000 housing units in this province to help make sure that those who are in need have housing available to them.

Mrs. Leskiw: I can appreciate that funding for more than 12,000 affordable housing units is a significant investment, but given existing wait-lists can the minister explain how any of that can possibly alleviate current and growing needs?

Mr. Griffiths: Well, Mr. Speaker, when the commitment was first made to build those 12,000 housing units back in 2007, it was a \$1.15 billion investment. We had 4,000 units built up front, and we had another 4,000 come on line. Even though the money is committed, we still have 8,000 units yet to be built. On top of that, in this budget and for the next three years we have \$40 million going to build more affordable housing plus the investment of \$260 million in the rejuvenation of the 26,000 housing units in this province. That's the best investment anywhere in Canada. [interjections]

The Speaker: I'm going to recognize a member, and I'm going to ask all other members to listen to the response. Let's just try it to see how it works.

Collection of School Fees

Mr. Hehr: Mr. Speaker, I was appalled this week to learn that for decades school boards across this province have had the right to send collection agencies after parents for not paying their school fees. To the Minister of Education: why has your department allowed school boards to take this type of action against parents who are just able to keep their heads above water?

Mr. Lukaszuk: Mr. Speaker, the Minister of Education doesn't allow or disallow. The boards are actually composed of locally elected trustees. It's the parents that actually form the boards by electing the trustees. Duly elected officials, being trustees, make local decisions. The parents, I imagine, must be supportive of it because those are the trustees that have been elected by them.

Mr. Hehr: Mr. Speaker, as the minister knows full well, he's in charge of Alberta Education. Will he stop this practice immediately and, in fact, eliminate school fees altogether in Alberta schools?

Mr. Lukaszuk: Mr. Speaker, I have a feeling that this member wants to go a little bit further than that because when you take his last couple of dozen questions from question periods, he probably wants me to eliminate school boards. That's where he is heading. We're not going to go there. Locally elected officials make local

decisions, and they report to their electorate, the parents of that particular region. [interjections]

The Speaker: Hon. member, I'm still going to recognize you, but, boy, my plea didn't last very long, did it?

Mr. Hehr: Actually, Mr. Speaker, I will ask the minister directly what I'd like him to do: eliminate school fees and stop sending collection agencies after parents who can't afford to pay them.

Mr. Lukaszuk: Mr. Speaker, this government and this ministry send no collection agencies after anybody. Those collection agencies, if indeed they're being sent, are being sent by local school boards. Let's get this straight.

Let's also get another thing straight. I have already indicated I will be reviewing the structure of fees, and we will be making a determination in this province on what fees are and what fees aren't appropriate.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Strathcona, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona.

Fort Saskatchewan Community Hospital

Mr. Quest: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The people of Fort Saskatchewan in northern Strathcona county are pleased that we were able to have a ceremony marking the transfer of the Fort Saskatchewan community hospital from Alberta Infrastructure to Alberta Health Services. To the Minister of Infrastructure: when will the new hospital open for families in these regions?

Mr. Johnson: Mr. Speaker, this is a great-news story, the Fort Saskatchewan hospital. I was on the site on Friday with the Minister of Health and Wellness and the local MLA for Fort Saskatchewan-Vegreville, and we handed over the keys for the hospital, which is now complete, to Alberta Health Services. It's a beautiful facility; we toured it. Alberta Health Services will be stocking supplies in there, training staff, and it'll be open to patients next month.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Quest: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My second question is for the Minister of Infrastructure again. We know this is a local hospital in Fort Saskatchewan, but what need does this hospital fill in the greater Edmonton capital region, and what other hospitals are in progress right now?

Mr. Johnson: Mr. Speaker, this hospital is a good-news story not just for Fort Saskatchewan but the entire area and will serve all the communities on the edge of the Industrial Heartland, which have seen some great growth. The new hospital is about triple the size of the old one. If you were in the old building, you knew for years that they desperately needed a new one. It's another piece of the government's plan to give Albertans effective and accessible health services close to home. It's just one of about 30 projects, worth about \$4 billion, that we have on the go, including High Prairie, Grande Prairie, Calgary, and Sherwood Park.

Mr. Quest: My final question to the Infrastructure minister, Mr. Speaker. This hospital will be a legacy into our future. What positive impacts has the actual construction of this building already had during this recent global recession?

Mr. Johnson: Mr. Speaker, it is a legacy, and so is the overall investment we're making in infrastructure, especially coming

through a time when the global recession affected jobs. One of the great things we've been able to get out of that is to keep people working in this province. At its peak 150 skilled labourers were working on this job in particular. But the approximately \$6 billion, \$7 billion we're spending a year is keeping about 70,000 Albertans working, getting us excellent prices in the marketplace. We're doing that infrastructure at a time when we need that foundation for our economy going forward.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

Long-term Care Accommodation Rates

Ms Notley: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Yesterday the Premier said, "There has been no discussion or commitment of any kind with respect to removing the cap on seniors' accommodation." However, in her leadership campaign platform she stated that she would incentivize private developers to build long-term care beds by, quote, removing the cap on housing costs for seniors at continuing care centres. End quote. To the Premier: will you correct the record and admit to Albertans that you ran on a platform of removing the cap from seniors' long-term care?

Mr. Horner: Mr. Speaker, I think the Premier was quite clear with her answer yesterday, and I think that should stand in *Hansard*. I also believe that the hon. Minister of Seniors has also been very clear that there is a process that would be followed if there was ever a time to go there. I think the Premier was pretty clear with her answer yesterday.

Ms Notley: Mr. Speaker, in fact, the Premier was very unclear. This Premier has broken many promises, and I think this is one that Albertans actually want her to break.

Given that the Minister of Seniors is on the record saying that over the last four months he has been reviewing the benefits and the impacts of removing the cap and he said that he will not remove it until there has been a debate over the next 12 months, will the Premier apologize for providing incorrect information to this House yesterday and either guarantee that the long-term care fee cap will not be removed in the next four years or come clean . . .

The Speaker: The hon. Deputy Premier.

Mr. Horner: Mr. Speaker, I would encourage this hon. member and all Albertans to check *Hansard* yesterday as I know many people use that as a resource to verify what some hon. members think they may have said or some hon. members think someone else may have said. Certainly, I'm not sure that I could understand from that question whether she was for removing the caps or not for removing the caps, but I think the question and answer in yesterday's *Hansard* would clarify it for her.

Ms Notley: Mr. Speaker, the Premier put it in her document, her platform, and the Minister of Seniors has talked about it.

Given the disturbing number of incidents of abuse in our seniors' care homes and given that the satisfaction with the quality of care is shown to be less in private facilities than in centres that are publicly run, will the Premier back off her plan to incent more private-sector involvement through seniors' pocketbooks by removing the cap and instead commit to building much-needed affordable, quality, publicly run long-term care centres?

Mr. Horner: Mr. Speaker, yesterday the Premier was again very clear. We are going to build the appropriate care for seniors in this

province so that they can retire and live in dignity, so that they can have the respect and care that they need in this province. The Minister of Seniors and the Premier are on record as saying that that's what this government will do. In fact, the budget that we passed last night in this Assembly is going to do exactly that.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre, followed by the hon. Member for Lesser Slave Lake.

Residential Construction Standards

Ms Blakeman: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. We keep hearing that the government will eventually introduce new homeowner protection measures. My questions are to the Minister of Municipal Affairs. Can the minister explain how the set of proposals that he has been going on about forever would have actually helped the owners and renters of Penhorwood building in Fort McMurray, Bella Vista in Calgary, Rosedale Court here in Edmonton, and Bellavera Green building in Leduc?

Mr. Griffiths: Mr. Speaker, I've been very clear that when the new home warranty is introduced, the entire purpose of it is not to make sure that people just have coverage but, rather, to increase the quality of the building that's done in this province. In every other jurisdiction we've researched, that's been the case, and that will be the case when we introduce our new home warranty legislation.

2:30

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Ms Blakeman: Thanks very much, Mr. Speaker. Well, back to the same minister: could the minister please tell this Assembly how his mandatory home warranty program for Alberta stacks up against the Alberta Liberal plan to cover three years on defects in materials and labour, five years on defects in the building envelope, and 10 years on structural defects?

Mr. Griffiths: Mr. Speaker, I believe I'd be breaking this House's conventions if I pre-empted that by describing exactly what the legislation would say, but I can tell the member that we have consulted with industry, which they failed to do, and ours will only create a marginal cost, less than half a per cent on the average house, while their projections, from what I can see, could cost the average homeowner thousands and prevent them from even buying a new house. That's why we did the consultations, to get it right.

Ms Blakeman: Have you been stalking me that you know who I meet with or don't meet with?

Back to the same minister. It took a massive leaky condo disaster in B.C. to get legislation put in place in 1997. Now, Alberta has had four large projects with various code violations and repairs needed, so how many more failures will this government accept and allow before we get some action out of it?

Mr. Griffiths: Mr. Speaker, I can assure this member that I have no idea what she does when she leaves this House, and I don't care.

We have worked very hard over the last couple of years to go through a process where we consult with all the stakeholders so that we can get some meaningful legislation, but I'll tell you what. It is already against the law in this province to build buildings that don't meet the building code standards. That would happen regardless of any home warranty. It's against the law, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: I hope there's absolute clarification. There was a suggestion made there about stalking going on, and I hope there was an absolute, clear denial of such occurring.

The hon. Member for Lesser Slave Lake, followed by the hon. Member for Calgary-Glenmore.

Electricity Prices

Ms Calahasen: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Power prices have gone up, and this government has little to show for it except a freeze on our power bills, so help me explain to my constituents, Mr. Minister of Energy. These constituents want predictable bills at fair prices, so what's going on?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Dr. Morton: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. As I've said before, Alberta prices are fair, and they are competitive. They've averaged 8 cents a kilowatt hour over the last five years, which is competitive with jurisdictions that don't have large hydro, like us. They were higher in January and February, but I'm happy to report that in March the regulated rate option is back down to 8 cents, and we've appointed a committee to review that variable rate option to reduce volatility in cost.

Ms Calahasen: Well, the minister has spoken about public debt held by other provinces with the utilities, so to the same minister: can you explain what that has to do with my constituents, who are trying to manage high power bills?

Dr. Morton: A very good question, Mr. Speaker. In Alberta you only pay once for electricity on your monthly bills. What we see in other provinces like Ontario with Crown-owned utilities is billions of dollars of debt, actually \$62 billion in Ontario. So in Ontario they're not only paying their monthly bills, but then in their yearly taxes a portion of their taxes is going to retire that debt. Let's be very clear. In Alberta you only pay once. In Ontario they're paying twice.

Ms Calahasen: Then my last question goes to the same minister. How can you assure this House, especially my constituents, that the cost of a new upgraded electricity grid ultimately paid for by consumers will be a benefit to all consumers?

Dr. Morton: Mr. Speaker, our goal in electricity is twofold. We want to make sure the electricity is there when you need it, when you hit the switch and, secondly, that it's affordable. In terms of need the size of this province has doubled since we last reinforced the north-south grid. Transmission is a bit like life insurance. When you realize you need it, it's too late. Alberta is not going to be too late on the electricity file. In terms of cost we're going to keep costs down by ensuring that the payment for this four-decade infrastructure is spread out over four decades and is not front-end loaded on today's users.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Fish Creek, followed by the hon. Member for Dunvegan-Central Peace.

Long-term Care Serious Incidents (continued)

Mrs. Forsyth: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's shocking to hear about the large number of cases of elderly and disabled abuse that is occurring in our own government. Over a thousand cases of abuse since 2005 were discovered after a FOIP request, and how does the Seniors minister respond? He claims responsibility for

asking them to call in their complaints. What the heck did they do before he told them to call? This isn't the answer that Albertans want or expect. They want accountability, and they want transparency. Why does the Seniors minister keep hiding these numbers from the public?

Mr. Horner: Mr. Speaker, it is mandatory under the Protection for Persons in Care Act that all of these cases would be reported. All of them are taken seriously, and my understanding is that where appropriate, investigations and actions are taken.

Mrs. Forsyth: Given that last year the Premier promised to enact whistleblower legislation that would increase accountability throughout government, including our group homes, can the Seniors minister explain why this promise was broken, or is it not a priority for government?

Mr. Horner: Actually, Mr. Speaker, as the minister responsible for corporate human resources, we are in fact reviewing our process and reviewing the steps that can be taken by employees should they desire to report something that they feel is inappropriate. We will be looking at that as the season moves forward and look forward to perhaps bringing legislation in the near future.

Mrs. Forsyth: Given that your government has manipulated the long-term care bed numbers and given that you are on record for saying that there were 22 fatal accidents or injuries last year in group homes but now you're saying there were only five, can the minister get his own facts straight and give us the real answers?

Mr. Horner: Well, Mr. Speaker, I'm sure the Minister of Seniors will be keen to review the *Hansard* of that question because the preamble is obviously wrong. I do not believe that anyone has manipulated any figures in this House. If the hon. member believes that to be true, there is a process, which she's very well aware of, given her many, many years of service in this Assembly, around a point of privilege, and she should call one if she believes it.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Dunvegan-Central Peace, followed by the hon. Member for Calgary-McCall.

Agriculture Financial Services Corporation

Mr. Goudreau: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Alberta farm producers make incredible investments and take great risk to ensure that Albertans, Canadians, and those around the world have access to safe, high-quality food. For them to accomplish this, they often need help to grow and manage their operations and to continue to be competitive in the global market. My question is to the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development. Could he tell us what he's doing to support these important Alberta producers?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Berger: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Agriculture Financial Services Corporation offers the most comprehensive and innovative lending and risk management programs in Canada. Demand for these loans has grown to nearly \$500 million per annum, and I'm proud to say that on Monday we announced a new revolving loan program for agricultural producers and the agriculture industry.

Mr. Goudreau: Mr. Speaker, my second question is to the same minister. You've just announced a revolving loan program. What is the difference between this program and the traditional term loan programs that you've had?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Berger: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The difference is that this was developed with client and industry input. The revolving loan program offers competitive rates that can be set for one, two, or three years. Clients control when they wish to access the funds. They can reborrow the funds for operating that they've already paid back. They have the control to make this work for their specific operation. It's a very valuable tool.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Goudreau: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My final question is again to the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development. Besides these loans, what other services can our producers expect from Agriculture Financial Services Corporation this year?

Mr. Berger: Mr. Speaker, through current and legacy programs that AFSC has been offering since 1972, we've been working with commercial and agribusinesses to meet their needs. AFSC not only continues to provide agriculture insurance, agriculture stability, income stability, and financial services; it also supports the development and expansion of agriculture. Alberta has the best risk management programs available in Canada, which is perfectly matched with the best producers in Canada, right here in Alberta.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-McCall, followed by the hon. Member for Leduc-Beaumont-Devon.

2:40

School Capital Construction

Mr. Kang: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. A new P3 school in the west end of Edmonton is already grossly overcrowded, but its contract with its private maintenance company doesn't allow any new portables. This means students will now have to be bused to other schools. Parents are baffled as to why the school can't add only four extra portables to an existing school to meet demand. To the Minister of Infrastructure: how can the minister justify entering into a contract with a P3 operator that doesn't allow extra portables to be added when needed?

Mr. Johnson: Mr. Speaker, I need to clarify the issue that we've got at this school in particular. I sympathize with the parents and the students, and we want to provide the best possible environment we can for every student. The P3s are a procurement option. They're not the design and the management, necessarily, of the building in terms of the capacity. We were asked to build a building to a capacity of 600 students. That area has grown. The capacity now is 700. That's what the need is, 750. That's the real problem.

The Speaker: The hon. member, please.

Mr. Kang: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. To the same minister again: assuming that a contract that doesn't allow for a simple, cheap, and needed addition to a school is another supposed P3 cost saving, can the minister tell us how much will be saved by having to unnecessarily bus children to other neighbourhoods every day for years on end?

Mr. Johnson: Mr. Speaker, let me just elaborate on the previous answer. When we're asked to build a school, the core can only have a capacity for so many kids. The administrative area, the libraries, the washrooms, all those kinds of things can only have so many children. We can add modulars onto schools, but once the core is full, we can't add more modulars because the core can't

take more kids. Those are fire code issues and other things that need to be considered.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Kang: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. To the same minister again: given that Alberta Liberals have been pointing out P3 failures across Canada over a decade, will the minister admit that P3s are too restrictive and expensive over the long term and commit to the public construction of public schools?

Mr. Johnson: Mr. Speaker, it's the same answer we've had in this House before, sir. P3s are not right for every community, for every school, but one thing they have been able to do is deliver a lot more schools a lot less expensively and faster and with certainty on the cost for maintenance so that that school has a warranty for 30 years. That's good news for students. That's good 33news for Alberta.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Leduc-Beaumont-Devon, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Community Spirit Program

Mr. Rogers: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The nonprofit sector provides valuable support to Alberta's communities. Government can't go it alone. However, our nonprofit and charitable organizations have struggled due to the slow recovery of our economy and with the ever-rising costs to deliver programs and services and people not finding the time to fit volunteering into their busy lives. To the Minister of Culture and Community Services: what is the minister doing to help this vital sector?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mrs. Klimchuk: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. This is an area that's very near and dear to my heart. We know the vital role that nonprofit, voluntary groups play across Alberta. In fact, Statistics Canada has released preliminary results from a survey on volunteerism, which reaffirms that Albertans are leaders when giving to volunteerism. We've had an increase in the volunteer sector of about 7 per cent. That's not to say that there aren't challenges, but it's a conversation we're having, which began at the Culture Forum 2012.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Rogers: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Again to the same minister. Madam Minister, your ministry offers the community spirit program. Is this program really making a difference?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mrs. Klimchuk: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. This program is indeed having an impact, and we continue to receive great feedback. A survey of the nonprofit and voluntary sector groups that have applied to it have approximately a 95 per cent rate of support for this. Over the past three years more than 5,000 grant recipients have shared about \$52.9 million.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Rogers: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Again to the same minister: Madam Minister, it sounds like this program has been oversubscribed, and if so, what are you doing to alleviate this?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mrs. Klimchuk: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. We know this program is becoming much more well known. In 2008-09 there were 1,592 applications; in '11-12 there were about 2,170. That is an increase of 27 per cent. We know there is much more conversation about this program, but the beauty of this program is that the dollars get back to some of the smaller groups versus some of the larger groups.

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

Electricity Prices (continued)

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. A former Conservative Party member who is totally disgusted with this government's electricity deregulation policy provided to me – and I really appreciate it – the issue brief that the government is planning on using to try to get through this next election, defending their public policy on electricity. One of the responses in this document indicates, and I quote: consumers have options; sometimes consumers in other provinces do not. Given that a member of a rural community . . .

The Speaker: The hon. minister, please. [interjection] The hon. minister, please.

Dr. Morton: Mr. Speaker, we're actually quite proud of the fact that in Alberta electricity consumers do have choices. You can have the variable rate. You can go and get your equal payments based on 12 months, or you can get a fixed rate from 11 different providers. I think Albertans value that choice, and we're proud that we offer it.

Mr. MacDonald: Given that yesterday – and I quote to the hon. Minister of Energy – a couple running a small family farm said that it's getting to the point where both parents have to go to work, and one of the reasons is to pay the power bills, is that a good option for consumers in rural Alberta because of your failed electricity deregulation policy?

Dr. Morton: Mr. Speaker, we're very aware of the hardships from the high electricity prices charged in January and February. That's why we've appointed a committee to review it. That's why we've frozen the ancillary charges right now. I'm happy to report – and this hon. member knows it well – that the average price, the price for the variable rate for March, is back down to about 8 cents, which has been the five-year average.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you. Again to the same minister, Mr. Speaker: how can the Minister of Energy prance around the province on behalf of the government of Alberta and say that there are no subsidies ever given in this province on deregulation when in the year 2000 \$1.5 billion was provided in subsidies?

Dr. Morton: Mr. Speaker, it's been a long time since I pranced around the province, and I wasn't here in 2000, but in case I don't get another opportunity, I'd like to say goodbye to the hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar and thank him for the many good conversations and exchanges we've had over the years.

The Speaker: Hon. members, 19 hon. members were recognized today. There were 114 questions and responses.

We're now going to continue the Routine, and we're going to come up against the 3 o'clock rule. We're going to continue now with Members' Statements.

Members' Statements

Villa Marie Continuing Care Centre

Mrs. Jablonski: Mr. Speaker, who would have thought that 300 years ago the actions of 19-year-old Marie Louise Trichet, who dedicated her life to nursing the sick, giving food to the poor, and managing a hospital in a small French village, would have a huge impact on the lives of the people of Red Deer, Alberta? Who would have thought that a hundred years ago when Sister Marie Agathe came to Red Deer to educate the children, she too would have a huge impact on our central Alberta community?

Well, 300 years ago Marie Louise Trichet founded the Daughters of Wisdom, a congregation of Catholic nuns established for the teaching of children and the care of the poor. Over a hundred years ago Sister Marie Agathe and the Daughters of Wisdom founded the Red Deer regional Catholic school system and Our Lady of the Rosary hospital in Castor.

Today, 300 years after Blessed Marie Louise founded the Daughters of Wisdom and a hundred years after Sister Marie Agathe arrived in central Alberta, Covenant Health is honouring their memory and their great works by naming Red Deer's new 100-unit continuing care centre Villa Marie. Covenant Health in partnership with Alberta Seniors, Alberta Health and Wellness, and Alberta Health Services will start the construction of Villa Marie in April this year. Villa Marie will be one of two demonstration sites that will provide a continuum of care in one location from basic supportive living to long-term care, allowing our seniors to age in place as their health needs change.

Villa Marie is part of the government's commitment to build 1,000 seniors' assisted living units each year. Mr. Speaker, I'm proud of the government's commitment to our seniors, and I'm proud of Villa Marie, our new seniors' care centre in Red Deer, that will carry on the 300-year-old mission of caring for others with dignity and love, with fidelity and tender compassion. Congratulations to Covenant Health. We look forward to the day that Villa Marie opens.

Mr. Speaker, I wonder if any of us will be remembered 300 years from now.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Fish Creek.

2:50

Integrity in Government

Mrs. Forsyth: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Soon in this province Albertans will be heading to the polls, and we'll be able to see democracy in action. The word "democracy" itself means government by the people and for the people, not what the Premier thinks is best for the people. People wanted a fixed election date, and the Premier promised one, to be set in March 2012, back in September, when she was trying to get votes. Instead, she backpedalled, and today we're still trying to guess when the election will be.

Last year the Premier promised new whistle-blower legislation to encourage government workers to speak out about waste, fraud, or abuse in government. Well, here we are today with no legislation and no answers to the waste, fraud, and abuse in government.

On health care people expected and wanted a health inquiry that included investigating the intimidation of doctors. The Premier even said that an inquiry would have to include doctor intimidation and alluded to it more than once over the past several months. Instead, she broke yet another promise and is asking doctors and our other health professionals to take a back seat by ignoring the will of the people.

Is this what the Premier calls real-life leadership? I can tell you one thing for certain, Mr. Speaker. Albertans aren't interested in that type of leadership, leadership that doesn't listen to the people and breaks promises, leadership that says one thing but means another. Instead of building on a province that prides itself on being strong and free, the Premier is looking increasingly weak and controlling. We're starting to hear across the province that people feel this Premier can no longer be trusted because she no longer trusts the will of the people. She has forgotten that it is the people that are in charge and not the PC Party. Soon it will be time for the people to choose and no longer for the Premier to choose for the people.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Grande Prairie-Wapiti, followed by the hon. Member for Highwood.

Alberta Association of Municipal Districts and Counties

Mr. Drysdale: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The Alberta Association of Municipal Districts and Counties, or AAMD and C, is an independent association comprised of Alberta's 69 counties and municipal districts. Since 1909 the AAMD and C has assisted rural municipalities in achieving strong and effective local government through advocacy, communication, education, and the provision of business services. They are a forward-thinking association made up of elected rural councils working to represent the interests of rural Albertans and to meet the diverse and changing needs of its membership.

The AAMD and C works hard to raise awareness of the particular challenges and opportunities available to rural municipalities. The government of Alberta and, in particular, ministries like Municipal Affairs, Service Alberta, Agriculture and Rural Development, and others have worked with them on issues as far ranging as pest management, weed control, utility services, and the development and funding of high-speed Internet access for our rural communities.

I was recently made aware that the rural municipalities retain 90 per cent of the land mass that is home to the resources and industries that form the backbone of Alberta's economy. However, rural municipalities are also responsible for 97 per cent of municipal roads and 90 per cent of municipal bridges. That is a lot of infrastructure and services to deliver to these small but hard-working communities throughout our province, with essential needs that the AAMD and C tirelessly advocates for the betterment of their communities.

In Alberta we're proud that our province got its start from a foundation based on a rural way of life in a land of great opportunity. These municipal districts and counties truly blend heritage with innovation and industry, and our government will continue to work together with AAMD and C to enhance and support their efforts in the delivery and provision of infrastructure services.

Highwood Constituency

Mr. Groeneveld: Mr. Speaker, in my time representing Highwood, which contains the great municipalities of Longview, High River, Okotoks, and the MD of Foothills, our government has invested in the future of our communities by building infrastructure and supporting innovation. We have also invested in making our school system the best in the world for our children, we have invested in health care to make sure the system is there for all when they need it, and we have invested in creating safer

communities through not only policing but through progressive programs.

Mr. Speaker, we are proud of these investments. A great example is the town of Okotoks. Our contribution there has grown from \$8.6 million to \$23 million in 2010. Our partnership with municipalities has paid real dividends. Stable, predictable funding is what is needed to be able to continue building important infrastructure. Our mayors, reeves, and councils have told us this, and we have delivered. Our government works hard every day to help build Highwood communities so that they are able to provide the services we need. Our government's policies have delivered for Highwood. I am proud of what our government's vision has done for Highwood.

Make no mistake, Mr. Speaker; Highwood is and, if I have my way, always will be Tory blue. I can see why the leader of another party would be tempted to parachute into the most progressive and fastest growing constituency in Alberta. But we in Highwood are a tight group, and we look after our own. In the past 76 years all our MLAs are or have been long-time residents of Highwood. The current PC candidate is no different, having lived in High River-Okotoks for 20 years. He knows the issues. His opening line is not: I've been told. I can tell you that the people in Highwood understand that cut and slash, repeal, repeal, repeal is not the answer.

In Highwood we like to live in the best constituency in the best province in the best country in North America. Mr. Speaker, we will keep Highwood blue. To the constituents of Highwood: thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Rocky Mountain House.

Rural Integrated Community Clerkship for Physicians

Mr. Lund: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased to rise today to highlight the success of the Alberta faculties of medicine rural integrated community clerkship. Dr. Doug Myhre and Dr. Jill Konkin oversee the rural ICC program as it integrates medical students into rural settings to provide a unique learning experience that cannot be duplicated in the cities.

This presents an innovative approach to educating physicians by placing them with experienced rural family physicians for nine months of their third year of medical school at the U of A and the final year at the U of C. The goal of the program is to produce high-quality physicians with a good understanding and holistic approach to an undifferentiated patient. At the same time students participating in this program developed a deeper understanding and appreciation for rural life in general and through this understanding are more likely to return to this setting to practice.

Rocky Mountain House and Sundre are two of the 19 rural communities that host these bright young students for the faculty in Calgary. I would like to take this opportunity to thank the doctors who take on the extra work of being the mentors for these students.

There are 19 communities across the province involved between the two faculties. Our medical schools are active in rural medical education. The rural exposure is a valuable learning experience that cannot be duplicated in the cities. Students are given more exposure to delivering babies, treating wounds, stitching, and counselling those who are terminally ill or who have lost a family member.

Rural ICC is an efficient and effective program that builds on Campus Alberta. Students participate in online learning sessions to support what they learn in their communities. This program started five years ago in Sundre.

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

Brenda Lee

Mr. Snelgrove: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Today I want to recognize someone who has been a very good friend of mine, who has been probably the most important person in my political career for the last 11 years. Her name is Brenda Lee, and she started working in the constituency office out in Vermilion 11 years ago and then came to Edmonton about six years ago.

She's an incredible individual who never asked anyone to do what she wasn't prepared to do herself. As you work with people that get to understand each other, sometimes it's said that they know what you're thinking. Well, Mr. Speaker, not only was she able to end the sentences I started; she could read my mind, and sometimes that's quite an interesting event in itself. More importantly, she could read my writing, which is quite an art in itself.

Brenda was never concerned about getting credit for getting things done. She was about getting it done. She treated the people that she worked with with respect, compassion, and understanding. She learned who to talk to in government. More importantly, she learned who to listen to in our constituency. She looked after their concerns, and I can't tell you the hundreds of times I was stopped on the street and thanked for something that I had nothing to do with but that the office had looked after.

Mr. Speaker, it is about relationships. In our office she took everyone under her wing. She wanted them to be all that they could be. She made people better, and it made her proud when they moved on to better positions within government and bettered their lives. She was also concerned about the other things in their lives and, whether it was babies or boyfriends or baseball or birthdays, she had a genuine concern about their lives after government and remains concerned about them today.

3:00

Mr. Speaker, whether I've had success or failure in government, it cannot be said that I have not had the best support possible. Missy Lee was simply the best, and to her husband, my friend Ed, who gave her so kindly for these 11 years, I want to say thank you, too.

I wish her all the very best in what she continues to do, and I can tell you that the people of Alberta have been well served by what she has done over the last 11 years.

Thank you.

The Speaker: Under Standing Order 7(7) I must now advise the Assembly that it is 3 o'clock.

Mr. Hancock: Perhaps the House would agree to unanimous consent to continue the Routine.

The Speaker: Such a request needs unanimous consent. Is anyone opposed to the Routine being concluded? If so, say no.

[Unanimous consent granted]

Tabling Returns and Reports

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

Mr. Hinman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I have some petitions – but they didn't qualify, so they're tablings – from four more companies that are very concerned with the Alberta government and Industry Canada audit for funding CCI Wireless. The parameters of the goal of the Alberta government were to ensure that areas that were not receiving broadband Internet would. This

company has received \$30 million in order to put up towers in rural Alberta, but they're putting out aggressive advertisements saying that they'll buy back the other ones. They're concerned . . .

The Speaker: This is tablings.

Mr. Hinman: Yup. So I'll table these four more companies: SIS Systems, First Nations Technical Services Advisory Group, Whitecourt Communications, and Leon's Cat Service in Mayerthorpe.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Deputy Premier.

Mr. Horner: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Earlier today in question period I made reference to an e-mail exchange from the hon. Member for Airdrie-Chestermere, requesting that the executive from the Athabasca University purchase tickets to the Wildrose Party Danielle Smith dinner, February 29, 2012, so just very recently. It talks about how the reception . . .

The Speaker: Okay. We're dealing with tablings.

Mr. Horner: I have the requisite five copies.

The Speaker: Thank you.

The hon. Minister of Education. [interjections]

Mr. Lukaszuk: I just couldn't believe what I'm hearing from the Deputy Premier.

The Speaker: Okay. Then somebody else.

Go, go, go.

Mr. Lukaszuk: Mr. Speaker, I'd like to table a number of letters in support of the passage of Bill 2. One is from the Alberta School Councils' Association, saying that this is a very solid piece of legislation that needs to be passed.

Another one is a media availability release by ASBA, urging the passage of Bill 2, the Education Act.

Another one is from the Public School Boards' Association of Alberta, their release as well.

The last one is from the Alberta Teachers' Association, urging all members of this Assembly to work collaboratively and pass the bill.

Thank you.

Mr. Hehr: Well, my first tabling is for the Leader of the Official Opposition. It's regarding his question in question period, and it's an article from the CBC where Alberta colleges and universities made illegal donations to the Tories. I have the requisite number of copies here.

I also have some tablings in regard to my question regarding the practice of families being chased down by bill collectors regarding unpaid school fees. I have reports from the Wetaskiwin regional public schools, Buffalo Trail public schools, Grande Yellowhead public school division, Elk Island public schools, and Parkland school division, all of which outline that practice, which has been in play for 10 years in this province.

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

Mr. Chase: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm tabling a further 20 e-mails, out of the hundreds I've received, from the following individuals who are seeking the preservation of the Castle wilderness and who believe that clear-cutting will damage the ecology, watershed, wildlife, and natural species and must be

prohibited at all costs: Katherine Massam, Carl French, Maggie McBride, Sondra Oppedisano, Marc Barrette, William Prouten, Eric Burr, Peter J. Gauthier, Nicholas Read, Andrew Furlong, John Mynott, Randall White, Christine McLaughlin, Beth Ross, Lynn Shauinger, Mary Kelly, Alex O'Neil, Wendy Dionne, Cate May Burton, and Richard Clemens.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

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

Mr. MacDonald: Yes. Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I have two tablings today. The first series of tablings is the order in council that was discussed at the Members' Services Committee yesterday. This order in council rescinds Order in Council 240/2008 and Order in Council 606/2009, and they are regarding cabinet policy committees.

The second tabling that I have is some more information on the AIMCo Christmas party. This is the fourth annual magical holiday extravaganza, and I would urge all hon. members to have a squint through this.

Thank you.

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

Ms Notley: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I have five tablings today. First, we have a bill from Wanda Webster of Stettler. For January 2012 her electricity energy charges were \$730.72.

My second tabling is from Patricia Withers of Calgary, who also sent in her Enmax bill from January 2012, where her charges were \$298.12.

My third is from Irene Froese of Camrose county. She had an electricity bill in the amount of \$338 in February 2012.

Finally, my fourth is from Andre Gelineau of Berwyn, who had electricity charges in January 2012 in the amount of \$203.91.

In addition, Mr. Speaker, I would like to table a compilation and the appropriate number of copies of 180 additional electricity bills, including 18 e-mails and 17 letters.

Thank you.

Tablings to the Clerk

The Clerk: I wish to advise the House that the following documents were deposited with the office of the Clerk. On behalf of the hon. Mr. VanderBurg, Minister of Seniors, responses to questions raised by Mr. Chase, hon. Member for Calgary-Varsity, Mrs. Forsyth, hon. Member for Calgary-Fish Creek, and Ms Notley, hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona, on February 21, 2012, Department of Seniors main estimates debate.

On behalf of the hon. Mr. Denis, Solicitor General and Minister of Public Security, responses to questions raised by Mr. MacDonald, hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar, and Mrs. Forsyth, hon. Member for Calgary-Fish Creek, on March 5, 2012, Department of Solicitor General and Public Security main estimates debate.

On behalf of the hon. Dr. Morton, Minister of Energy, responses to questions raised by Mr. Hehr, hon. Member for Calgary-Buffalo, Mr. Mason, hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands-Norwood, and Mr. Hinman, hon. Member for Calgary-Glenmore, on February 22, 2012, Department of Energy main estimates debate.

The Speaker: Hon. members, yesterday the hon. Deputy Speaker was in the chair when a purported question of privilege was raised in the Assembly and a debate ensued with it. I am going to remove myself from the chair at this point in time and invite the hon.

Deputy Speaker to come forward and provide his ruling on this matter.

[The Deputy Speaker in the chair]

Privilege

Obstructing a Member in Performance of Duty

The Deputy Speaker: Well, as the Speaker said, yesterday afternoon while I chaired the Assembly, there was a question of privilege raised. I allowed several members representing each party to bring their points forward on the subject matter. I listened to those points attentively and at length. Today as the chair I am prepared to rule on the purported question of privilege raised by the hon. Member for Airdrie-Chestermere yesterday, March 20, 2012.

To put it briefly, the purported question of privilege is that the hon. Minister of Education interfered with the member's ability to perform his duties or interfered with his ability to perform his parliamentary work by making certain comments during a telephone conference with people other than the member on March 19, 2012.

The hon. Member for Airdrie-Chestermere provided notice to the Speaker's office at 11:22 yesterday morning before he raised the matter in the Assembly, so the requirements of Standing Order 15(2) were met.

3:10

The hon. member raising the purported question of privilege read in the Assembly yesterday the exchange that the hon. minister had with an individual in a March 19 teleconference, as found on page 677 of *Alberta Hansard*. The minister's statement was:

You know what? I'm really itching to say it, so I will, even though I know I shouldn't, but the first thing you can do is, actually, in Airdrie call your MLA and ask him not to oppose me in the Legislature every day on considering new ways for funding infrastructure because, you know, that really is the problem.

In his comments the hon. Minister of Education referred to a later part of the conversation with the same person. The minister indicated, at page 680 of the March 20 *Alberta Hansard*, that the parent asked how the minister's relationship with the Member for Airdrie-Chestermere affected parents in the community and the need for extra schools, to which the minister responded: "Not at all."

In his argument yesterday the hon. Member for Airdrie-Chestermere cited the *House of Commons Procedure and Practice*, 2nd edition, page 108, where it states: "Speakers have consistently upheld the right of the House to the services of its Members free from intimidation, obstruction and interference." Speakers of the Canadian House of Commons have said in this regard that it is necessary to review the effect the incident or event had on the member's ability to fulfill his or her parliamentary responsibilities. As stated on page 111 of the same book: "If, in the Speaker's view, the Member was not obstructed in the performance of his or her parliamentary duties and functions, then a prima facie breach of privilege cannot be found." Page 109 of the same text states: "While frequently noting that Members raising such matters have legitimate grievances, Speakers have consistently concluded that Members have not been prevented from carrying out their parliamentary duties."

Hon. members may also wish to refer to a December 13, 2011, ruling by the Speaker of the Canadian House of Commons concerning possible interference in a member's duties by an

organized telephone campaign survey concerning an impending by-election that was not actually planned. This ruling is found at pages 4396 to 4398 of the *Commons Debates* for that day. Speaker Scheer quoted his predecessor in finding that there was no prima facie question of privilege. In this regard he quoted Speaker Fraser at page 4397, who stated:

Past precedents are highly restrictive . . . and generally require that clear evidence of obstruction or interference with a Member in the exercise of his or her duty be demonstrated in order to form the basis for a claim of a breach of privilege.

In this case in our Assembly, strictly on the context of parliamentary work of our members, the chair cannot see how the minister's comments would constitute a clear threat to the member performing his parliamentary duties so as to constitute intimidation or molestation. The minister never indicated that the constituency would be deprived of funding should the member continue asking questions. The chair does not even find that there was a threat made and, certainly, no threat to the member.

Accordingly, the chair finds that the member's ability to fulfill his parliamentary duties has not been interfered with and, therefore, there is no prima facie question of privilege. That concludes this matter.

Orders of the Day Government Bills and Orders Committee of the Whole

[Mr. Cao in the chair]

The Chair: The chair shall now call the committee to order.

Bill 2 Education Act

The Chair: The committee will continue on amendment A6 of Bill 2, the Education Act. The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona.

Ms Notley: Okay. I just wanted a chance to get up on this briefly. I'm not going to belabour this point because I think this discussion has been worked through at some length. However, when I saw this particular amendment, I needed an opportunity to rise and to articulate my concern with this amendment and what I think may be being attempted through this amendment.

What this amendment proposes to do is to amend section 16 of the Education Act and to remove from it reference to the Charter and reference to the human rights code. It's been my view all along or my suspicion, I guess – either/or – that really what was going on with the use of the references to the Charter and to the human rights code in section 16 was that it was an ease of drafting, for lack of a better term, by the people that wrote the legislation. In particular, rather than enumerating the particular grounds through which everyone believes they should have access to equal treatment, we would just make it simpler, and we would reference the principles of the Charter and reference the principles of the human rights code, and then the idea is that we would honour and respect them.

It doesn't mean that suddenly the Charter and all its various and sundry processes and enforcement mechanisms would suddenly fall into the Education Act because, of course, the provincial piece of legislation has no ability to amend a federal constitutional statute. It also doesn't mean that the human rights code would suddenly be amended by virtue of a different piece of legislation simply because it says that we're going to honour and respect it.

Rather, they were simply trying to incorporate all those principles which are reflected in those two very important and worthwhile documents.

The amendment that's being provided here is to very much limit the principles that are otherwise included in those two documents, the Charter and the human rights code. So this amendment would suggest that, of course, we would have education programs offered and instructional materials used in schools that would do the following: they would not promote racial or ethnic superiority or persecution – well, that's great – they wouldn't promote religious intolerance or persecution, and they wouldn't promote social change through violent action or disobedience of laws.

What, of course, is excluded from that is promotion of, say, superiority on the basis of gender. We don't include in that the protection from education that would promote superiority on the basis of sexual orientation. We don't include in that the notion that we would ensure that our kids understood that people should be free from persecution on the basis of someone's view of superiority on the basis of disability.

There are some serious grounds, some serious concepts included in the human rights code and the Charter which ought to be included as something that we would honour and respect in our Education Act, which are included in the current version of the act, which are not included in this section. It's quite a significant attempt to exclude a number of very important issues. I have some concerns about that, Mr. Chairman, and I'm not quite sure why the member, who's typically, you know, fairly able to read the legislation, would want to exclude all those other important grounds from being honoured and respected in the course of administering the Education Act.

3:20

Now, I'd like to read a couple of comments that were sent to me, Mr. Chairman, by a constituent of mine. I hope that you'll allow me the opportunity to do that. It's a letter, and it's a rather long letter. I'm going to try and take the principle excerpts from it. Sort of a little ways into it, it commences with:

The Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms is enforceable against the government only. Any argument that a vague statement in a provincial piece of legislation (to "honour & respect the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms") would alter this is ridiculous. Both the Meech Lake and Charlottetown accords attempted to amend the Charter and were unsuccessful. This is because the formula for amending it is very difficult to meet. No province, even if it stated it outright, would be able to change the Charter. Therefore, the Charter of Rights and Freedoms is only used to protect individuals from the actions of the government – not the other way around! The Charter of Rights and Freedoms protects individuals' freedom of expression, freedom of religion and equality rights (to name a few). I don't have a problem teaching these basic & fundamental values to my children. As well, despite these homeschoolers' complaints about the Charter, ironically, if any school board interfered with a homeschooling parent's freedom of religion, that same parent could make a complaint for protection under the Charter.

The Alberta Human Rights Act protects individuals from discrimination during employment (both while employed and when looking for a job), discrimination when obtaining goods and services (like sitting down to a meal in a restaurant), discrimination when trying to find a place to live, and from discriminatory signs and posters. I believe that all human beings have a right to be free from discrimination and I have no problem including these values in our home. My daughter, Aisling, is reading "Claudette Colvin: Twice Toward Justice", a book about a black teenager in the southern United States who

fought for the right to sit at the front of the bus . . . At no time has the government proposed amending the Human Rights Act to include more instances than [those] outlined above. To suggest that the Education Act can somehow change another piece of legislation by a vague statement is again, ridiculous.

The letter goes on, Mr. Chairman, to say:

Frankly, I can see no further powers given by this section. In fact, I think school boards have always had the power to interfere with parents homeschooling their children and they still have these rights. I do not see anything new [here]. If a parent is teaching a child racism and hatred, I don't have a problem with a school board intervening.

Finally, she concludes:

We should not blindly believe what they are saying is true just because they push it under the banner of "Homeschoolers' Rights." I, for one, am embarrassed by the reaction of some homeschoolers to object to abiding by the basic and fundamental rights and freedoms that are the foundation of our democracy and what make Canada a decent place to live.

Mr. Chairman, this letter came to me from a constituent, Jacqueline Devlin, who has a law degree, is a legal studies professor, is a home-schooler, and is, in fact, the president of the Home-based Learning Society of Alberta.

She really very much wanted me to read this letter because she wanted people to understand that the positions that have been advocated and the interpretations around the Education Act are not ones that are widely held by the majority of the home-schooling community and that, in fact, most home-schoolers are quite concerned that people would suggest that they would object to teaching the principles found in our human rights code and in our Charter of Rights and Freedoms to their children because they see those as two fundamental documents which outline values that all Canadians believe in and that we find as a source of commonality while at the same time respecting diversity of opinion and beliefs. We know that there are some very fundamental beliefs that we share.

I really felt that it was important to put that on the record so that people understand that there is diversity, indeed, within the home-schooling community, and there's a diversity of opinion on this act. There's also a strong diversity of opinion about the alleged implications of the language in this act. Quite frankly, I've found a lot of the discussion around this up to now to be somewhat surreal and, really, a bit ridiculous because, certainly, my view from the very beginning was exactly like that of Ms Devlin's.

You cannot use a provincial education act to change another act without stating so specifically. Both the human rights code and the Charter of Rights have very specific applications and specific implications, and you can't change that without changing them. All this act does is that it says that we're going to honour and respect the following concepts, the following ideas. The statement "honour and respect" is simply a statement. It is not an enforcement mechanism. It is not a criteria upon which somebody comes in and scoops your kids away from you and forces them to go into school. It's nothing like that. It's simply a motherhood statement, and it's a motherhood statement that was made with reference to two documents that presumably the vast majority of Canadians automatically hold to be true and care about and believe that it's almost a given that we would want these to govern the way we conduct ourselves day in and day out. I think that's an important point to make.

On the amendment itself, as I've said, the very act of replacing the language that is in there now, the reference to the code, the reference to the Charter with the much, much, much more limited grounds that are proposed cause me some concern because there are very significant – significant – grounds upon which people

need to be treated equally that are not included in the listing that is provided in this amendment. I think that their absence speaks volumes. We should be very concerned about that. Under no circumstances would I ever see supporting an amendment that would replace the statement that we should honour and respect the principles included in our human rights code and our Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms and replace that with a much, much more limited set of principles that are included in this amendment.

On behalf of the NDP caucus we will not be supporting this amendment. We do otherwise support the inclusion and maintenance of section 16 in the act as it currently reads.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Calgary-Varsity.

Mr. Chase: Thank you very much for this opportunity to discuss amendment A6 that deals with section 16. I'll just read it into the record for those of us who have just seen it for the first time. My hon. colleague from Airdrie-Chestermere moves that Bill 2, the Education Act, be amended by striking out section 16 and substituting the following:

Respect

16 Education programs offered and instructional materials used in schools must not promote or foster doctrines of racial or ethnic superiority or persecution, religious intolerance or persecution, social change through violent action or disobedience of laws.

I very much appreciate what the hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona said with regard to the number of potentially allowable persecution situations such as the persecution of transgendered individuals. Also, the limitation in schools: we heard today in question period and previously in statements that the Education minister has said that parents have the right to teach whatever, whenever, regardless of the Alberta curriculum. This respect limits the notion of respect to just the school circumstance.

In other words, even though it's a selected few areas that schools must not promote or foster, it doesn't suggest that these are universal values. In other words, is it acceptable, then, to "promote or foster doctrines of racial or ethnic superiority or persecution, religious intolerance or persecution, social change through violent action or disobedience of laws" at home? Is this a parent's right to bring up a little Aryan, for example, that has no respect for other individuals' beliefs?

I respect parental rights, Mr. Chair, but when I listened to Global News covering the rally that was held on the steps of this Legislature and a child being interviewed expressing fear that she was going to be ripped out of her home and forced into a public school education system, it brought back the whole concern of residential schools. I sure hope we've learned our lesson about going after a minority group – in this case it was First Nations – possibly with the best of intentions but unfortunately with heavy religious overtones, trying to force them into a larger perspective.

3:30

Now, for home-schoolers I hope that we learned our lesson about going after minorities and trying to force them to conform, actually sending out police forces to capture their children and force them into residential schools, where for a great extent cultural genocide was the order of the day. Their braids were cut. There was an attempt to turn them into little white kids. If home-schoolers in 2012 believe that the government or the public system or the police forces are going to kick down their doors and instruct what they are to teach and potentially how they are to

interpret other pieces of literature such as the Bible, the Quran, or any other document that they hold dear, then that's a bigger worry than what either Bill 2, the Education Act, or this very limiting amendment addresses.

This amendment would suggest to me that while schools are not to promote or foster, there's nothing in it that says that schools can't tolerate it. They may not initiate the discussion of bullying on the basis of superiority, or they may not have written doctrines that foster one group being superior to another, but there is an expectation, particularly in the public schools, I would suggest, that automatically would, based on higher forms of legislation, as the hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona pointed out, whether it's the United Nations universal declaration of human rights, whether it's our Charter of Rights, or our provincial Charter. So to try and best those well-established universal principles by a short addition such as amendment A6, which limits the type of persecution that is tolerable and talks about it only in a school setting, doesn't achieve the needs that I see in terms of protecting human rights.

Now, where I'm concerned, too – and it's funny. I think it was the hon. Minister of Education or a government individual who said that if so many groups are opposed to this legislation, then we probably got it right. Well, I don't believe in the worst-of-averaging principles. Home-schoolers are afraid that their rights are going to be interrupted, interfered with. How that would happen, I'm not sure. As far as I know, we haven't reached the George Orwellian state of *1984*, where we have children tattle on their parents as to what they're being taught and then the parents are subsequently arrested.

I realize that we have cameras that indicate traffic flows and so on. But as far as I'm aware, parents shouldn't have to worry about that light pole out in front of their house having a camera that not only peers into their house to determine what they're teaching but records their comments. I mean, if we're at that state of paranoia, as I've argued earlier on, then these little amendments aren't going to give parents the security they need to feel the rights of freedom of assembly, the freedom of religion, the freedom of expression. It's those fears that have to be dealt with.

Then, Mr. Chair, on the other end of this are fears that I've expressed, having been a public school teacher for 34 years, that a student might pop up in the midst of an impromptu discussion and cause that discussion to come to a rather quick halt because it had to do with sexual orientation, sexual education, or it could potentially be interpreted as having a religious overtone.

Now, Mr. Chair, these are potentially two opposite extremes, but because there is worry from the public school system and there is worry from the home-schoolers, neither of these groups' concerns, no matter whether it's the minority of home-schoolers or the majority of public school parents and students, have been effectively addressed within Bill 2, the Education Act.

The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre pointed out the confusion associated with Bill 44 and trying to overlap a bill that talked about human rights and including it in the Education Act. She offered an amendment that would have at least attempted to clarify what forms of discrimination were intolerable and, in the last clause, the business about impromptu discussions being exempt. But at the heart of these matters, whether it's from a public school perspective or from a home-school perspective, is concern over human rights tribunals. As long as human rights tribunals with quasi-judicial powers exist, in theory to protect and uphold human rights, then the individuals who are most worried about having their human rights encroached upon are going to continue to have a concern. The proper place for human rights to be upheld and promoted beyond a doubt is in the public school

system, but it's the courts that should be enforcing it, not quasi-judicial human rights tribunals. This is at the heart of the matter that is causing such concern and cannot be resolved within the Education Act.

Thank you, Mr. Chair, for allowing me to participate in the debate over amendment A6, which in itself is limited in the type of bullying that is not being promoted or fostered, limited in the location of the type of prejudicial activities that are not being allowed or promoted. Attempting to rewrite the Charter of Rights and to create a little précis, or summary, in the form of A6 has obviously failed, and I think you will see that in this House it fails as well.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Airdrie-Chestermere.

Mr. Anderson: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair. I look forward to the discussion today. I want to say up front that it is the intention of the Wildrose caucus today to see this bill passed in Committee of the Whole and to vote on these amendments and others and, hopefully, tonight pass third reading of the Education Act. There are a lot of very good things in this act, a lot of fantastic improvements with regard to bullying but also with regard to charter schools and other very good issues that are dealt with in this act.

I'm going to on behalf of our caucus give a few remarks on this amendment, and then, hopefully, we can move on quickly. We have another amendment that I'd speak to briefly, and I know that there's another member here with another couple of amendments. But I hope that the hon. members across the way will support us in making sure that this bill has passed Committee of the Whole today and third reading tonight so that we can get this act into force and effect.

3:40

Now, of course, there are several issues and problems with this act. That's why we're bringing amendments. A Wildrose government, if elected after the next election, will ensure that these amendments or ones that essentially do the exact same thing will be brought forward immediately upon taking office if that is the case. But we see no reason to delay further the good parts of this bill, which are, you know, 95 per cent or 99 per cent of it, which is good. So let's pass this, and then we can come back after, and should the people of Alberta give some different folks an opportunity to govern this province, then that is our commitment to the people of Alberta.

There have been some interesting things said. You know, one of the things I had an opportunity to do, obviously, was to go to law school. I was a baby lawyer when I became an MLA. I had only practised for about a year, actually, so it was an interesting experience. It was a very interesting experience also in law school. I think I was just a pretty average student, but one subject that I absolutely loved was constitutional law. In fact, the one and only academic highlight of my career in law school was that I was able to receive the Merv Leitch scholarship for having the top grade in the University of Alberta constitutional class. That was something I worked very hard for. The reason that I did is because of a passion that I feel for the Charter of Rights and Freedoms and for those liberties and protections that are afforded there. I loved it. I loved talking about it. I loved researching it, debating it. It's a fascinating document, you know.

Although I don't agree with every interpretation of everything that's ever been said by the Supreme Court on the subject, I found that the vast majority of their rulings have strengthened the Charter, with a few exceptions. So I'm a huge fan of the Charter

of Rights and Freedoms, and I think every Albertan should be a huge fan of that document and, of course, also the Alberta Bill of Rights, which is essentially, you know, not as supreme as the Charter of Rights and Freedoms, but it's the same ideas that are a part of it.

Now, we must be very careful not to get things confused here. The Charter of Rights and Freedoms and the Alberta Bill of Rights are fantastic documents that we in the Wildrose and I'm sure everyone in this House completely support and are happier there. As has been mentioned, many of our rights are in there and are protected. Parental rights, for example, are in the Human Rights Act, something that I had a small hand in helping out with to make sure that they got in there a couple of years ago. So it's something that I very much support, a lot of what's in that act; in fact, most of what's in that act.

I'll talk about section 3 a little bit. I don't support section 3 of the Human Rights Act – of course, that's been debated hotly – because I think it's an infringement on free speech, but that's debatable and so forth. But the body of the document, most of the document, I'm in complete agreement with and want to see those rights completely upheld.

The problem that we have over here on this side of the House is not with the Charter of Rights and, certainly, not with the Alberta Bill of Rights. The problem we have over here is with how portions of the Alberta Bill of Rights have been interpreted by the Alberta human rights tribunals and how they have been adjudicated, how issues of human rights have been adjudicated in these human rights tribunals. That is the issue that we have, not the Bill of Rights, not the Charter of Rights, but how certain things have been interpreted by the human rights tribunals.

As the Member for Edmonton-Strathcona has said earlier, every document that we pass as a government is subject to scrutiny under the Charter of Rights. It's already under scrutiny. But that's not what this act says. Let's review what this act says.

Ms Notley: The human rights tribunal has no jurisdiction in this.

Mr. Anderson: I said the Charter of Rights. [interjection] She's very distracting sometimes, that member.

In Bill 2 there are a couple of provisions. Obviously, there's section 16, which we're talking about here, which says:

All courses or programs of study offered and instructional materials used in a school must reflect the diverse nature and heritage of society in Alberta, promote understanding and respect for others and honour and respect the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms and the Alberta Human Rights Act.

There are some interpretations of certain clauses in the Alberta Human Rights Act and in the Charter that are not universally accepted. I know that's amazing to think, but some interpretations have not been universally accepted by all Canadians. There are Canadians out there that have differences and disagreements with some of the rulings that the Supreme Court and human rights tribunals, especially, have found on interpreting some of these rights. That's normal in a democracy, and it's okay. In fact, even the Supreme Court believes that's normal, and they protect it.

I've said numerous times that under the protections of free speech and freedom of religion, they allow for that and they accept it as part of what they're doing. They know that there are different views about how they've ruled on certain things. That doesn't take away from the binding force of the law, of course, when they make a ruling on interpreting a Charter right. But the members of the Supreme Court would be the very first people in line to say that they would never think to impress upon other individuals their interpretation of the Charter of Rights and

Freedoms. Other people are able to disagree with them and think and feel in opposition to what they've said and so forth. And some people do. I wouldn't say a majority do, but some people do with certain interpretations of the Charter, and certainly the tribunals under the Alberta Human Rights Act have varying opinions. And that's okay. That's been stated on the other side. Everyone knows that.

Here lies the problem. In this act it says under section 16 that all courses or programs of study offered and these materials, et cetera, must reflect the nature and promote understanding and respect for these two documents. This is the fear. I'm expressing the fear of parents. They fear that there are people out there in the educational fields that will use this as a way to impose their way of thinking or impose a certain agenda on them, something that goes against their faith, something that goes against their beliefs. That's the fear. That's what they fear.

We can all stand here and say: oh, you've got nothing to fear. I don't necessarily fear that myself, but I'm not speaking for myself right now. I'm speaking for thousands of Albertans that are scared about this. We did not bring these concerns up in the Wildrose. We didn't. We were reading the act and we just, kind of: that looks good. But thousands of Albertans across the province wrote, e-mailed, phoned, and they said, "You know, we have a real concern here," so we started looking into it. And you know what? There is a way to interpret this in the way that they fear. I'm not saying that the government ever will, but there is a way to interpret it.

Mr. Chair, how much time do I have left, 10 minutes?

In section 29 under private schools – for example, we have a great private school, AKCS. It's the Airdrie Koinonia Christian school, a great private school. It's a nonprofit private school. Parents make tremendous sacrifices to keep their kids in that school because they believe in a faith-based education.

In section 29 it says:

(4) The Minister may cancel or suspend the registration or accreditation of a private school . . . including AKCS,

(d) if the person responsible for the operation of the private school permits courses, programs of study or instructional materials that do not comply with section 16.

Okay. So what if in a Catholic school or in a private school or in a home-schooling setting there is a parent or a teacher that gives a faith-based or, say, Biblical interpretation of a subject that the Supreme Court or the human rights tribunals have found a different interpretation of, and they say: "We disagree with that interpretation completely; we believe that our faith, what we believe, is the right way," and they teach that to their kids? There is a fear by them that this act could be used, that you could have some overzealous individual with an agenda say: "You know what? You guys in that school can't teach that. You can't teach your faith. You can't teach the morals that you want to permeate the curriculum" or whatever it is. "You can't do that because that doesn't conform with what the Supreme Court has said in X decision or the human rights tribunal has said in Y decision." That's the fear.

3:50

Am I saying that the Minister of Education has any feeling that he wants to do that? No, I'm not. But this is kind of like with landowners. These parents feel scared that down the road this could be used as a sword rather than its intent, which I think is more of a shield. It could be used as a sword to force individuals to teach things that they do not believe, that are bona fide religious

beliefs. I think that that is a reasonable fear to have because when you read it, it does sound like that's a possibility.

Do we and do these parents, mind you, support the Charter of Rights and Freedoms, these parents that are writing, these thousands of parents, 2,000 protesting and many thousands more writing? Do they not believe in the Charter of Rights and Freedoms? Do they not believe in the Bill of Rights for Alberta? Of course they do. They feel passionately about it. In fact, they're saying: "Look, protect our freedom of speech and conscience and religion. Protect that." I think that that's a reasonable thing for them to do. They love their rights under the Charter. They love their rights protected under the Bill of Rights. What they're scared of is that these sections will be used as a sword to bring interpretations that they don't agree with on the Charter and on the Bill of Rights into their homes, into their faith-based education systems, and so forth.

We just had an example today. The Grande Prairie Catholic board is going to be protesting Bill 2 on these grounds. So it's not just home-schoolers. It's Catholic boards, and it's certainly independent schools, not all independent schools, but there are many, many, many independent schools that do not want this section passed.

With regard quickly to the – people say, "What is the problem with these human rights tribunals; why do you want section 3 taken out of the Human Rights Act," and so forth. People get confused. They see it on its surface, and they say: "Well, that makes sense. Nobody wants discrimination." Of course nobody wants discrimination. But the problem is that when you don't word things properly and you open them up to broad interpretations, pretty soon that turns into a real problem if you get some activist individual that tries to use that language to make it broader than what it was intended to be. That's been the problem with the human rights tribunals.

I'm going to quote very quickly from the *Calgary Herald*, Marco Navarro-Genie. This is from the *Calgary Herald*, March 16.

It isn't only that [the Premier] would be trampling parental rights in pursuit of . . . votes. The crucial issue is that the act subordinates education to the soft totalitarianism of the Alberta Human Rights Commission.

It is difficult to imagine a greater public policy fiasco and a state branch in greater disrepute than human rights commissions. Human rights are essential, but their enforcement by commissions has an appalling record of violating religious liberty, censoring the press and abusing fundamental legal rights of Canadians. Numerous legal malformations afflict the commissions. They lack definition of the terms they use to prosecute citizens; they offer no presumption of innocence; they don't require their investigators to behave ethically and legally; they don't prohibit third-party accusations; they welcome double jeopardy; they don't require speedy procedures; they grant no right to cross-examine accusers; and they provide no procedural safe guards regarding the collection of evidence, entrapment, hearsay and self-incrimination.

While these afflictions alone should be enough to shut human rights commissions down, some people find them politically useful.

That's the problem. These human rights commissions have been used to make interpretations of human rights law that are unconscionable. How can you haul up Bishop Fred Henry and investigate him and rack up tens of thousands in legal bills because he had the audacity to give a sermon to his congregates on Biblical teachings of marriage? Are you kidding me? What do you expect a bishop in the Catholic church to teach? I'm not Catholic. What do you expect him to teach? Of course, he's going

to teach the Biblical interpretation. That's his job. That's what he believes in. The Human Rights Commission persecutes this man? Tens of thousands of dollars in legal bills defending him in a kangaroo court? That's the problem, and that's what people are scared of.

We've made our point in the Wildrose, I think, on this issue. We've heard from the Liberals. We've heard from the NDP. We've heard from the PCs. We're more than happy to move on on this. There are four parties in here that could form the government. If we are so lucky to be given that mandate, a Wildrose government would immediately alter the Education Act to protect those fundamental freedoms: freedom of religion and so forth, freedom of conscience and speech. We would do that immediately. But I don't think there's any purpose in debating it longer from our end. We've made ourselves clear.

With that, I hope we can get to calling the question, moving on, and passing a bill that is 99 per cent good. Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Any other hon. member on amendment A6?

Seeing none, the chair shall now call the question.

[Motion on amendment A6 lost]

The Chair: We shall go back to the bill. The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona.

Ms Notley: Thank you. It's a pleasure to be able to rise and speak to the Education Act as a whole. A few general comments that I'd like to make and then a couple of specific issues that I'd like to see us address if at all possible. There are certainly some positive things within the bill, which I suspect will go forward and pass this evening. There are some things, however, that I would have liked to have seen that are not fully addressed that I'd just simply like to point out.

First of all, there's good language in here around the issue of bullying. Certainly, the improvement that was made as a result of the amendment that was passed a couple of days ago makes that language even better, so that's good. The concern that I have around the bullying language is that, you know, as with the point that we made earlier today about the elimination of racism, it's all fine to make laws, but you need to provide adequate resources to enforce them.

One of the concerns that I have around this bullying language in the act – well, I don't have a concern; it's good. It's good that it's in the act. But one of the concerns that I hear about from families in the school system as well as with teachers is that the real meat and potatoes around ensuring that we can eliminate and discourage and distract and otherwise refocus kids in the schools away from bullying activity, the real issue there is ensuring that we have adequate resources in our schools to do that work.

If parents are being asked to volunteer their time to oversee what's going on in the school ground during recess and lunch hour, then we cannot expect them to really be able to necessarily always engage in the best practices around keeping children active so that they don't engage in bullying behaviour. In some schools, depending on the nature of the student population, bullying may be more or less likely, and based on the nature of the student population, strategies around preventing bullying will be more or less complex.

They will need additional resources, whether it be additional activities run and managed by teachers and other staff or whether it be just simply oversight. To say that we're going to take care of bullying by putting this principle into the act but then not following it up with adequate resources – adequate teaching resources, adequate staffing resources – it really is another one of

these things that the government is famous for: grand statements of intent that lack the adequate resources to follow it up.

That's the little bit of the warning that I would attach to this part of the act. Good intentions, good language, but if we do not provide our teachers and our school staff with the resources to really follow it up and to do the work that's necessary, then it will end up being meaningless.

4:00

Another concern that we have is that the act doesn't deal specifically with school fees. Instead, what we're asked to do is simply wait until after the election. Of course, there's a list as long as my arm, Mr. Chairman, of the number of things that we need to wait for to be addressed by this government after the election, and this is yet one more of those items.

The minister promises us that we'll review school fees. Well, that's great, but there's really no indication of where that's going to end up. All that we know in the meantime is that school fees are growing, and some families can't keep up with them, and children suffer as a result. The equity of our public school system starts to be jeopardized. There ought to be stronger language about that issue in this legislation.

As well, we would have liked to have seen the government move immediately on the issue of full-day kindergarten. We've heard the explanation from the Education minister about the ability to have kindergarten in the building capacity that we have right now. It may well be that in some cases it's not possible immediately, but there's nothing to stop us from phasing it in in those communities that do have the capacity. We heard the minister talk about how the Edmonton public school board has enough capacity to fit the whole Catholic school board inside it – I think that was the language – so clearly in Edmonton, for instance, there is the space. Why are we not perhaps moving forward in September in the places that do have the space? It's not happening, and it's not guaranteed in the act.

School lunches, again, probably not something you'd find in the act but critically important. It would have been nice to have seen some statement in the act as to the understanding that our kids come to school with different resources at their disposal and that in a public education system it's our obligation to ensure that when they sit down at their desk to learn that day, they're all given the same capacity to learn. Just like with the school fees, that is not the case.

One of the big issues that we have spent a lot of time talking about in this Legislature is the issue of public dollars going to private schools. I want to be clear that the NDP is not in support of public dollars going to private schools. I just don't think that that is an appropriate use of our resources.

Now, I would say that what we need to do is phase it out. We shouldn't sever it immediately. We need to phase it out. I do believe that there are some private schools that are receiving public funding that offer special-needs programs and that parents do in some cases struggle mightily to pay the fees for those particular programs. They want to do the best for their kids, and they know that with what's been happening with special-needs funding in our public system, their kids are not going to get the education they need in the public system.

What I would like to see us do is phase it out, phase out public funding of private schools, but make sure that as we're doing that, we are providing the adequate support within the public system, particularly for our special-needs kids. I know that that is a growing area now, private school attendance, because we are not holding up the ball on that issue in our public system as well as we

should be, and responsibility for that comes immediately to rest at the government's feet because it's a funding issue.

Finally, there are a couple of changes in this act that we will be proposing amendments on. One of the changes is that the process around closing schools has been amended to essentially ensure that it happens with less oversight and more frequently. It involves the government trying to distance itself from that process because they know that it's an incredibly disruptive and upsetting process for communities across our province. What they want to do is just download all responsibility onto the school boards, but I don't think that should be allowed.

The fact of the matter is that every time a school closes, 85 per cent of the factors that go into that decision for a school to close are factors that are controlled by this provincial government, and they arise as a result of decisions and choices made by this provincial government. Whether we're talking Municipal Affairs, Infrastructure, or Education and whether we're talking about the rights and responsibilities of other levels of government, the provincial government ultimately is the primary decision-maker, so they must retain primary responsibility. We're not happy with the proposal here to download that and make it easier for school boards to react to government decisions that way.

Finally, there's an issue with respect to charter schools, Mr. Chairman. We have some serious concerns around charter schools.

I'm wondering: could you tell me how much time I have left at this point?

The Chair: You have 12 minutes.

Ms Notley: I think what I'm going to do at this point is propose an amendment to Bill 2 that relates to the issue of charter schools, and then I will talk a little bit about some of my concerns in that regard. I'll just sit down for a moment while the amendment is distributed.

The Chair: Yes. We will pause for the distribution of the amendment.

Hon. members, the amendment shall be known as amendment A7.

Hon. member, please continue.

Ms Notley: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. The amendment that I'm proposing is as follows, that Bill 2, the Education Act, be amended by adding the following after section 24(1). It would read as follows:

(1.1) An application may be made to the Minister only if the board of the district or division in which the school is to be established refuses to establish an alternative program under section 19 as requested by the board, person, society or company.

What this amendment is proposing to do is to ensure that this bill retains in it what is often referred to as the right of first refusal by school boards when we're looking at the establishment of charter schools.

Let me just talk a little bit, first of all, about some of the concerns that we have around charter schools, Mr. Chairman. In theory the idea around charter schools was that they were going to be a very unique program that was offered in very limited circumstances to provide education that was innovative and offered up sort of a research/pilot project kind of scenario, and where that research and that pilot project ended up with positive results, the theory was that those teaching methods would be or could be incorporated into the public school system.

What this act does through a variety of different strategies is that it broadens the application and the existence of charter schools. Now, in general, while this principle or this theory around charter schools is potentially laudable, there are concerns around charter schools, Mr. Chairman, that we have seen in other jurisdictions.

First of all, public schools are accountable to the public through their elected school boards, so it's a very open, democratic, transparent process. Any member of the public can attend the vast majority of school board meetings and all that kind of stuff. Charter schools don't have these kinds of boards, so they don't have the same structure of public accountability, yet they are a hundred per cent funded by public dollars. That is a concern.

One of the other things that's going on in this act, that we may not get a chance to address, is simply that charter schools currently have a limited period of time that they can exist without the minister having to extend it. What they're going to do is that they're going to offer these charter schools greater permanence through this new act. My question would be: why do we need to offer them greater permanence? If they're worth while, if it's working, why would we not in fact even give it back to the public or separate school board?

Another issue with charter schools that makes you question whether it's necessary for them to proliferate all over the place is the question: well, if they are supposed to be centres of research and school improvement, why is it that we've just cut the Alberta initiative for school improvement fund by \$40 million? On one hand we've pulled back a whole bunch of school improvement funds from the public system, and on the other hand we're going to allow for more charter schools to be set up without consultation with the public school system that will then get public funding.

You know, we're shifting the way we engage in research and innovation, and we're making it less accountable to the public either through the decisions that the provincial government makes or through the school board. That really makes no sense to me.

4:10

With charter schools, since their teachers are not members of the ATA and because the ATA plays a role as a professional body and as a professional compliance body, there are concerns around the professional standards and the policing of professional standards, for lack of a better term, of teachers that work in charter schools. Not to say that there aren't many dedicated teachers working in the charter school system – I would never want to say that – but there's a reason why we have professional associations, with the various mechanisms that are attached to them, and the fact that these teachers are not associated with that should give one some cause for concern.

A 2009 study of charter schools shows that their students on average will perform slightly less successfully than students in public schools.

Then we have the issues around the exclusivity of charter schools. Charter schools receive a hundred per cent of funding, but charter schools tend to have lower numbers of children with special needs and lower numbers of ESL children.

Again, given this background why do we want to massively increase the number of charter schools in our province? It fragments and Americanizes our public school system. In our view, one way to avoid this and to at least keep some ever-so-remote connection to what was the original purpose behind charter schools, when people told us that we ought to give them some consideration, is that we need to keep the role of the charter school connected and linked up to the public school system. This is why the NDP is proposing this amendment, to ensure that the public

school boards continue to have the right of first refusal before a charter school is approved by the minister. In that way we ensure the greatest consistency in terms of our overall educational objectives and the overall educational planning that we're engaging in. That's what this would achieve.

We would also ensure that we don't get into a situation where charter schools begin to compete with public schools. That's what we've seen happen in the U.S. There's been a grand proliferation of charter schools. Not only do we lose the consistency of educational objectives and policy and planning, but we actually find that they start to confound each other as they compete with each other for really minor, not-well-thought-out reasons, and there can be a broad variety of them.

We should not be disconnecting the establishment of charter schools from the public school system's ability to exercise a right of first refusal. There can be cases, there may be cases in some situations where public school boards seem to be saying no to charter schools in a way that does not seem to be justifiable, and in those cases the charter school might be appropriate, but you always need to give the public school system the right of first refusal. At the end of the day the public school system is what we are basing the vast majority of the educational resources and investments that we are making as a government into education on. We value our public school system. We value our elected school boards. We value their democracy. We value their accountability. We value their equality. We value their equity. Why would we undercut it by having a proliferation of charter schools? It makes no sense.

I urge members of this Legislature to vote in favour of this amendment so that we reconnect the establishment of charter schools to the rights of school boards to have right of first refusal before a charter school can be established.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

The Chair: The hon. minister.

Mr. Denis: Yes. I just wanted to get a few words in on the hon. member's speech on Bill 2, particularly on the amendment that she would have to 24(1) with (1.1), specifically about charter schools. Now, I believe the cornerstone of education in this province is the aspect of choice. Parents, obviously, have the paramount right over their children. There are many different types of children, and as such there also are many different types of education. We have public schools, we have private schools, we have charter schools, we have home-schoolers, and the list goes on. I'm sure I've missed many, but the point is brought.

In my riding there is a charter school, Foundations for the Future Charter Academy. I have attended it many times, and I'm very happy with their particular level of education. They have music programs. They have contextual programs. They have a program every year in which I have had the privilege of participating every November 11 or recently theretofore where they bring veterans in from the local Legion. I'm very impressed with the quality of education there.

I would say to all members of this Assembly that we cannot and should not ever prefer one form of education or another. There are many different types of children, many different types of education, and that is the cornerstone as to why our system is, in fact, so successful.

In dealing with this amendment dealing with charter schools, I don't think charter schools are a bad thing. I don't think charter schools are anything to be feared. Apparently, neither do parents because the wait-lists for some of these charter schools are so significant. If it was a one-size-fits-all approach that, in fact,

worked, well, what I would say to members of this Assembly, Mr. Chair, is that then you wouldn't have a wait-list for these particular charter schools.

I think that we are leading the country if not the whole western world in dealing with education. Specifically, as charter schools have seen, they have been an excellent addition to this whole program. I would say to every member here: when you're voting for this amendment, we have to tread very carefully because the charter school experiment here has succeeded. The Minister of Education has mentioned to me many times his proposal, which I fully support, to allow for a 15-year charter. I think that we have a good thing going here. We probably should not tinker with it that significantly.

Those are just my brief comments on this amendment, Mr. Chair. Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister of Public Security.

The hon. Member for Calgary-Varsity first.

Mr. Chase: Yes. Thank you very much. I do want to point out what this amendment is offering. The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona, who put forward amendment A7, is talking about the first right of refusal. Now, the hon. Solicitor General talked about treading very carefully. What this amendment recognizes is that possibly all needs aren't necessarily being met, and in those cases where they're not being met, then the various groups could ask to have a charter created.

There is a tremendous difference, for example, historically in the Edmonton public and the Edmonton separate school boards and in the Calgary public board of education, that I had my 34 years of teaching experience with. Edmonton public, not necessarily at the beginning but I would suggest certainly in the '70s, recognized that parents were looking for different types of emphases within their schools. Edmonton was probably a leader in the nation for having a variety of schools: schools for the arts, science schools, and so on. So Edmonton public created those niche schools that parents were willing to pay the extra transportation cost to attend.

Now, Calgary was late into the race, and because it was late into the race, there were a number of organizations that did not feel that their specific emphases or needs were being met, and therefore we see a much greater proliferation of charter schools in Calgary. To a significant extent, despite the hon. Solicitor General's comments about waiting lists, which are accurate within the charter school circumstance, Calgary public schools has almost in a reverse osmosis process created a number of niche-type schools to provide parents with those choices.

4:20

One of the niches that I'm most proud of and I've been connected with, most frequently through Remembrance Day, November 11, ceremonies, is Juno Beach Academy. Now, Juno Beach Academy is a full public school that emphasizes the proud military history of the Canadian forces. Those young men and women do a phenomenal job of recognizing their backgrounds in teaching, recognizing the discipline, recognizing the standing up for democratic rights, especially on November 11. Of course, it's not limited to that day, but I have never been to a better organized school assembly, including a number of ones that I've organized myself at a variety of junior highs I've attended, than is put on by the Juno Beach Academy. So Calgary, as I say, is sort of catching up with the niche markets.

There is always a danger of repetition in following members such as the hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona, but when the points being made are such that they require echoing, require emphasizing then I hope hon. members of this Assembly will permit me a degree of emphasizing or repetition.

The hon. member talked about rights not only of the students attending the various schools but also of teachers' rights. In the charter schools teachers cannot be full members of the Alberta Teachers' Association and be covered in those charter schools to the extent that they are covered in either the public, the separate, or the francophone school systems, where they have full membership rights. Therefore, organizations that have previously been mentioned by the hon. Solicitor General: I have had individual teachers come to my constituency office and talk about circumstances where their contracts were not renewed for some very questionable reasons. They went through the Alberta Teachers' Association. The discriminatory practices were noted, but the ATA was only able to provide legal counsel to a certain degree because of the fact that they weren't full members of the organization.

Now, as the hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona pointed out, charter schools can get away with exclusionary practices. They can exclude individuals based on their IQ. They can exclude individuals based on their language proficiency in English. They can exclude students for ethnic reasons. They can exclude children for religious reasons. Yet the government of Alberta allows these exclusionary schools to receive the 100 per cent funding, per-pupil grant funding, that established public education schools receive. They do it under what I would call the guise of choice. The idea that we would allow schools to discriminate in the negative sense of the word and then pay them the full per-pupil fee to discriminate is not acceptable to me in this province.

As the hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona pointed out, if the public system is reaching out and capturing the various needs required, then it's a kind of self-fulfilling prophecy that these charter schools won't gain a footing. But just because every individual who thinks that they have an alternative in mind and proposes a school that reflects that particular alternative and then receives funding with parents only being members of the board – there's no election process; there's no public accountability – get the full funding, then I have a tremendous difficulty with it.

Part of that difficulty, Mr. Chair, comes from the fragmenting of the public system. The public system is held to a higher standard of expectation in terms of academic performances, in terms of inclusionary practices, including special-needs students, English as a second language students. Then what happens is that choice becomes a two-tiered, preferential school system, and the public system's expectations are not equal with the public schools' rights. Their rights are undermined by these exclusionary school practices.

The public system in Calgary, the Calgary board of education did not want to get into fragmenting based on narrow interpretations of religious practices. As a result, the public school system in Calgary would not permit a couple of religious schools to operate in the umbrella of a public school system as a charter school. As a result, what happened was that the Chinook division, that was as much looking for the funding as it was for offering an alternative, has the trusteeship of a couple of geographically based Calgary schools. That's just another example of what happens when the main system has difficulties with exclusionary practices. Those students who receive a hundred per cent of the funding but do not have to follow the same practices of a public system now get the out of being under the Chinook school board.

We have a number of schools that are charter schools. They get the full benefit of the hundred per cent per-pupil grant, and then they're allowed on top of that to charge extra school fees, whether they be school fees or tuition fees. That is tolerated, again, under the guise of choice by this government. If people wish to have alternatives, then I believe they should pay for them.

The parents, when they indicate which school system they support, have their taxes go either to the public or to the separate school. I believe there's obviously a provision for parents whose children go to the francophone system, which is basically the French version of a public school system. I don't have problems with that. But when they get the full funding of per-pupil grants, and then they're permitted to exclude, and then they're permitted to charge fees on top of what a public system would receive, then I have a problem.

People say that mathematically my argument is flawed because if these children, for example, in the private school system were to attend the public school system, then instead of the 75 per cent per-pupil grant, they would be receiving a hundred per cent student grant funding. While that makes sense mathematically, it doesn't make sense in terms of providing a universal education system where all values are recognized and the size of your wallet doesn't determine the size of your class. That has to be taken into account. However, that is not a part of A7, and I certainly don't want to be called on relevance with regard to this amendment.

4:30

I'll conclude, Mr. Chair, by indicating that I believe in the primacy of the public school system. I believe that the same expectations in terms of the rules under which a school is conducted should be applied universally and that charter schools should not be able to have separate charters that basically exclude and discriminate and yet receive the full funding.

I thank the hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona for allowing that choice, if it's not provided somehow within a local area, to apply for a charter, but I want to emphasize that the public system historically has reached out, has not put in filters or barriers, and every time an alternative is made easier, with less expectation than a public system, then the public system is eroded.

Thank you, Mr. Chair, for this opportunity to speak on A7, which I will be supporting and which I believe would make the Education Act, Bill 2, more acceptable to a much larger number of individuals.

The Chair: The hon. Minister of Finance on amendment A7.

Mr. Liepert: Thank you, Mr. Chair. There are – I don't know – four or five former ministers of Education sitting in this House. I can't help but believe that each one of them would like to stand up and speak after listening to that particular member. There were so many inaccuracies in what he just said that I'm going to try and address a couple of them, and then I think probably the current minister or one of the former ministers would be happy to continue to ensure that the facts are straight.

As I said, I had the opportunity to be a Minister of Education for a short period of time, and one of things that I was the most proud of was the fact that we had one of the most outstanding education systems in the world, and we continue to have one of the most outstanding education systems. I fundamentally believe the reason that is today is because of the policies that have been in place for, well, several decades now, Mr. Chairman.

I know that this particular member has probably reminded us in this House in the course of his seven and a half years of being elected I'd guess well over a hundred times about his 30-some years as a teacher.

Mr. Chase: Thirty-four.

Mr. Liepert: Thirty-four. That's the number. I was thinking it was 39, but I didn't want to give him too much credit or too much pensionable time. He's reminded us about his 34 years. I often, when I hear that, wonder whether that particular member is standing in this House advocating for education or whether he's advocating for the environment that he taught in for 34 years – I feel that because of the restrictions around our public education system and the role that the ATA plays in the delivery of education – or who he's exactly advocating for, Mr. Chairman.

One of the reasons why this province has such a successful and great education system is because we have allowed choice, and we have encouraged things like the charter school system, which, by the way, is a fully funded part of the public school system and does not discriminate as that member tries to leave that impression on the floor of this House, Mr. Chairman. If, in fact, a student qualifies within the charter of that school, that school must accept that student. So he is wrong. He is leaving the wrong impression when it comes charter schools. He is purposely trying to, I would say – and I don't want to use an unparliamentary term – leave the wrong impression. He's trying to leave the impression that charter schools are private schools, and that's not the right impression to be left on the floor of this House.

You know, at the time I was the minister, I gave an address at the charter schools annual convention, and it still resonates today. I said: the experiment is over. The changes that the Minister of Education has brought forward relative to the 15-year charters demonstrate that this government has recognized that the experiment of charter schools is over. They are a fundamental part of our education system.

I want to listen to the debate, Mr. Chairman, because I'm having difficulty with whether to support this amendment or not. The availability of the charter school has forced the public school system to do things better, but they don't and aren't always going to do everything. I've seen examples in Calgary where the public school system, in order to avoid having a charter school come into the public school system, will try its best to ensure that they deliver that service. It's not always easy to deliver the service. I think in many cases a charter service should be delivered by a charter school, not by the bureaucratic public school system. If we pass this amendment, I see situations where a public school board, unable to deliver what the charter school could deliver as well as the charter school could, will simply say, "Yes, we can deliver that," and will try and will deliver an inferior product.

As my colleague the Solicitor General pointed out, there's a reason why there's a lineup to get into charter schools. It's not, as this member tried to say, because they can discriminate, because they can do this, because they can do that. Charter schools are fully funded. He knows that. But he continues to try and leave the impression that that's not the case, Mr. Chairman.

I'm really a little bit reluctant to give the public school system, the one that has the largely union-dominated teachers' union within the public school system, Mr. Chairman – ensure that we don't have the ability to have charter schools operate within our system.

I would like to also make a few comments because I don't have the opportunity to answer the questions that our good friend the Minister of Education has to answer from our equally good friend from Calgary-Buffalo. I know the Member for Edmonton-Strathcona has the same view because their parties are very, very similar in philosophical beliefs and in attacks and a spend kind of approach to public policy.

You know, the private schools play a very important role in the education system as well. Yes, there is a role for a private school system. This member keeps asking the question: why do we partially fund private schools? Well, I'll tell you that one of the reasons we fund private schools is because it saves the system money. If all of these private schools were to shut their doors tomorrow, the total cost to this government because those children would have to be educated in the public system would be in the hundreds of millions of dollars. That has to go on the record, Mr. Chairman.

I am really not sure that I can support this particular amendment. I know that it's part of what the Member for Edmonton-Strathcona believes. I think her background was as legal counsel for – I can't remember – the ATA or the UNA or one of the unions, Mr. Chairman. Of course, she has some real personal interest in this. I'm interested in hearing the debate. I would like to ensure that we give every educational opportunity in this province. I don't think we should have to give somebody who is maybe not having the best interests of the children at heart the right to veto the approval of a charter school. In this province we have a limit to the number of charters that can be issued. Why can't we say that if it's within the limit, why does it need the approval of the public or the separate school board?

I think we need to think that one through, Mr. Chairman. I will take my seat and try and be convinced otherwise.

4:40

The Chair: The hon. Member for Calgary-Buffalo first.

Mr. Hehr: Well, it's always a privilege to get up and speak in this House. It is always interesting when we have differences of opinion, and that's a good thing, Mr. Chairman, because when we all think alike, no one thinks very much. I'll address this amendment, and then, hopefully, I'll address some of the comments made by the hon. Finance minister and possibly add a few comments of my own if I could.

I guess it's evident from question period and some of my comments that I am concerned about the fracturing of the education system. I don't find it particularly helpful if we have segmented groups or pockets of our population attending a multitude of different schools. If you look at, I believe, the experience of other jurisdictions who see a tremendous amount of fracturing in their education system, this has proven to be detrimental to the overall goals of societal advancement, of teaching in the main the electorate's children. In the vast majority you want to get them as well educated as you can as best you can, which is what the government should try to do.

I also like the fact that in this amendment that the hon. member has put forward, we are trying to enable the public school boards to address the sort of issues that parents may want addressed within the public system. It gives school boards the opportunity to work with a group of parents to see whether this choice can be accommodated because in many cases, in fact, my view is that a public education system that is properly funded, properly structured can provide practically all kinds of choice under the sun. If that were the case, then there would be no need for a private or a charter school. In fact, a public school system could and should and does offer choice.

I do also take some disagreement with some of the comments made. It seems like an awful lot of credit to the success of the Alberta education system as a result of charter and private schools, when, in fact, in the overarching main this credit has to go to our public education system as well as its partners, the teachers, and, yes, the Alberta Teachers' Association. I will remind the hon.

Minister of Finance that 95 per cent of our students attend these institutions and that in large part they're taught by ATA, or union, teachers that provide the bulk of results to, I guess, organizations that evaluate our student body. I think the overarching success of our students as a result of these testing procedures has to be attributed to both our students and our teachers in the public system. It's a misnomer to credit this to a choice system as alleged by the hon. Minister of Finance. I think that has to be clear on the record.

I also find his argument somewhat specious that there isn't going to be a cost savings as a result of private schools shutting down. To believe the hon. minister's supposition, one has to believe that all of the students who currently go to private schools would upon the government ceasing to fund these organizations return to the public system. If you look at that, that is simply not the case. That's not believable in almost any circumstance that you see out there. I'll point out the example, off the top of my head, of Strathcona-Tweedsmuir. The average income for parents sending their child to that school is \$374,000. Okay? At \$374,000 are they going to have no impetus in keeping their private school going and trotting along as usual and continuing to go forward? So to trot that out as an actual argument is, I think, ludicrous at best.

Furthermore, you know, just because a person is a taxpayer does not entitle your every whim and fancy to be funded. Let's take this case. If a person goes down to the United States and wishes to get medical care, we do not fund that choice to operate outside of our public parameters. That is their choice. This is government accommodation. Okay?

Besides that, the Supreme Court has stated in *Adler* that because you opt out of the public education system, there is no corresponding right or relationship to the government then sponsoring your select program. So I think the arguments given on cost savings by the hon. minister are specious at best and suspect. Besides, as the current hon. Minister of Education duly noted – and I respect him deeply for this – education is an investment. We should always look at it as an investment and not as a cost, like the hon. Minister of Finance has just done. Trotting out the argument “because it saves money,” if that were a valid case, simply makes no sense in the context of education. Education is an investment by our society, so trotting out an argument on cost savings in regard to that is simply ludicrous at best.

I would like to congratulate the Alberta Teachers' Association, our public teachers, and our public students for providing 95 per cent of the results to have us recognized as an excellent school system. I appreciate them for doing so and recognize them as the largest contributors to this success.

Turning back to the exact amendment, I believe that this is a good amendment. I believe it allows the public school system and our locally elected officials to try and accommodate unique student opportunities that may be out there if they can fit within that system. It keeps people within the public system, which I believe serves the greatest good for our society going forward, and it doesn't fracture our population unnecessarily on the basis of wealth or other arbitrary features that have really, in my view, not a lot of need for government support in the first place.

I thank you for the opportunity to speak on this bill, and I will be supporting the amendment. Thank you.

The Chair: The hon. Minister of Education.

Mr. Lukaszuk: Well, thank you, Mr. Chairman. A pleasure listening to both sides of the dialogue, one furthered by our Minister of Finance and then both members from the Liberal opposition. I have to tell you that as I'm listening to these debates,

what we are discussing is something that has existed in this province for dozens of years. This amendment, that the Member for Edmonton-Strathcona brought forward, actually has the exact wording of the previous School Act from 1988, so actually adopting this amendment would mean no change. The status quo from the School Act of 1988 would prevail.

4:50

As I hear these debates, it often seems that we are debating something new, something unconventional, something that's never happened, and something that can cause a lot of hardship to either one side or another. I'm noticing one thing as we continue doing this. I'm hearing from more and more stakeholders in the province saying: "Well, wait a minute. What is it that you're doing? Are you introducing something new? We're concerned around here." The fact is that it becomes abundantly obvious that those who should know this bill verbatim, it appears, may not have read it because, judging from the correspondence and the quantity of it that I'm getting from those who actually should be tasking themselves with knowing what's in this bill and were actually a part of drafting this bill, now they're surprised.

I have to tell you that when I hear the Minister of Finance raising concerns and then the members bringing in information that in some cases, when I speak about the Member for Calgary-Varsity, is nonfactual, I can just hear the printers in my office printing out letters from Albertans saying: "Oh, my God. Now, you're trying something new, something I didn't know about."

Let me speak to this amendment more directly. As all members should know in this House, in the old education act it was agreed that in order for a group of parents to file an application to the Minister of Education's office for a charter, their idea or proposed program had to be dismissed by a local resident public school. So the process looked like this. A group of parents would decide that they want a certain specialized program. That could be focused on a heritage language, it could be focused on arts, it could be focused on culture, it could be focused on science, or it could be focused on mathematics, any aspect of academia. The list goes on and on.

Under the 1988 current legislation, the School Act, that group of parents would have to approach a local school board and say: "There are enough of us to form a program. We would like you to accommodate us and have that program within the public school, be it Catholic or nondenominational." That school board was then given the opportunity and reasonable time to review the proposal to look at the demographics, look at the number of children, look at the viability of the program, look at the costs associated, whatever the case may be, and the board was given an opportunity to decide whether they want to encapsulate that program within the provision of public education in that school board or not. If the school board said yes, then that meant they would develop a local program, often with assistance from Alberta Education if required, and then they would retain the staff that was required to instruct that particular program, with the expertise that the program required, and life would go on. Children would receive that type of education in a public setting.

A good example, Mr. Chairman, would be certain language programs in both Edmonton and Calgary, for example, that I'm very familiar with, where a number of parents approached a school board and said: "We would like you to offer 30 per cent of curriculum instruction in a given language. Could you accommodate us? There are enough children in this town that we can actually keep your school filled, and maybe some other cultural aspects could be implemented into the curriculum." The school board approves it. Recently I attended a 30-year

anniversary with the Edmonton public school board of the Arabic program in Edmonton, that is enjoying great success in a number of schools within the Edmonton public school board.

Now, if the decision of the Edmonton public school board or any other school board, for that matter, was, "No; we don't see value in this program" or "We don't have the resources to offer the program" or "We don't see that you have enough students to make the program viable" or "We don't have the expertise within our staffing component to be able to develop and instruct that program" – the list may go on and on – then that school board would provide a letter of rejection and say that, no, they are not interested in accommodating your particular request. That letter of rejection would trigger, would allow that group of parents, if they choose to – they don't have to do it – to apply to the Minister of Education and ask for a charter.

Now, the department would also look at the viability of the program, whether they have a business case to run that charter. We look at facilities and other aspects of it. But if, indeed, it turns out to be a viable program and as a stand-alone program it can exist, a charter would be issued to that school.

Mr. Chairman, I have to thank the Member for Edmonton-Strathcona. We spent some time discussing this, and this amendment brings us back to the way things were when they seemed to work very well. We didn't have issues. School boards always were given the first opportunity of refusal. They always had the ability to provide a program within their own means. Where they didn't, parents successfully have been granted charters.

At the end of the day it's a small number of charter schools that we have, and they have a limited number of students that they can accommodate within a charter. We have recently, as you know, Mr. Chairman, actually expanded their ability relative to their permanence because they used to have to reapply every five years and convince the minister's office that, indeed, it still is a viable program. Now they will only have to do this once every 15 years. We have also allowed them to grow into space because some charters simply allowed fewer students in the charter than the school building would actually accommodate, so we allowed them to grow into the space. Some charter schools actually have quite extensive waiting lists. They tend to be popular among some parents in certain programs.

Now, if we were to adopt this bill, we would revert to 1988. We would allow parents to formulate charters but only – only – if they were refused by a local resident public school, giving public schools the first right of refusal. Why do we do that? I know that some parents in the charter schools now might be saying: "Oh, my gosh. Our right and ability to formulate charters will somehow be diminished." No. It'll be exactly the same as it was. But it is important for us, for Albertans, who are big supporters of public education, to give public school boards the first right of refusal and to support public education that way and allow school boards, elected school board trustees, to have the ability to implement a program.

Mr. Chairman, I want to reassure all those who are listening to our debate right now and are prospectively typing up letters saying, "Please do not (a) open the season on charter schools or (b) get rid of charter schools" that none of that is happening.

This debate on this particular amendment is only about the fact that the Member for Edmonton-Strathcona wishes to preserve the status quo relative to charter schools. She wants charter schools to exist in the format that they have, where public school boards are given the first right of refusal. I strongly support adopting this particular amendment and voting in favour of it and passing it.

Thank you very much.

The Chair: The hon. President of the Treasury Board.

Mr. Horner: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I rise because it's one of the first opportunities that I've had to speak on the bill and also that I have had a lot of discussions with my constituents over this bill. As I see it, this is the first time I've seen this amendment.

Mr. Chairman, I want to start off by saying that I'm a big supporter of the public school system – I went to a public school; my kids went to a public school – but I'm also a big supporter of the charter system, the private system, and the choice that we have within our system for parents to make that choice. I was very pleased with the change in the amendment to the preamble that

recognizes that parents have a right to choose the religious and ethical traditions in which their children are raised;

That's very important to me.

that a child's education begins in the home;

That is very important to me.

that parents play a foundational role in the moral and spiritual formation of their children;

I think it goes without saying.

and that these principles are reflected in the commitment of the Government of Alberta to provide parents with choice in education, including public schools, separate schools, Francophone schools, charter schools, private schools and home education programs.

I'm going to make a few comments, and I'd ask the hon. member that if she has an opportunity to respond, perhaps with answers, it may change the way I'm going to vote on the amendment.

I actually have before me the old act, which in section 31(2) says, "An application may be made to the Minister only if the board of the district or division in which the school is to be established refuses to establish an alternative program under section 21." Your amendment basically mirrors that, I believe, more or less. It was there, obviously, for a purpose before. It was there to ensure that we weren't doing a lot of duplication, as has been brought up in the House already. It was there to ensure that our funding mechanisms are fair to all taxpayers and to all concerned.

Then I read what is in the current act, which is:

- (1) A board, person, society or company may apply to the Minister for the establishment of a charter school.
- (2) An application must be in the form and contain the information prescribed by the regulations.

I see that in the old act. Again, 31(3) is:

An application must be in the form and contain the information prescribed by the regulations.

5:00

Then there's section 32, which talks a lot about that the school should have

- (a) . . . significant support from the community in which it is to be located,
- (b) the program to be offered by the school will potentially improve the learning of students as it is measured . . .
- (c) the program to be offered by the school is not already being offered.

I'm actually thinking, Mr. Chairman, about a number of places where I know of schools that, perhaps, might be on a military base: very, very focused on the families of our military personnel serving overseas. You know, there's a special situation for children of our military personnel because they do move around a fair bit. They are almost a family unto themselves in terms of the support network for the families when their moms and dads are away and overseas. I think it does work very well.

As we saw today, actually, I think, in the Assembly, we had members of military families from one of the schools on the base here. Now, that school is in the public system, but again it's centred around what they're doing on the base. That's a good thing. I think, Mr. Chairman, that there may be charter school opportunities down the road that are centred around those kinds of issues.

I understand what the hon. member is talking about when she says that, you know, the public sector or the public vision must get first right of refusal, if you will. I understand what the hon. minister was talking about in terms of trying to find that balance. In truth, in much of the legislation that we do, we're always trying to find the balance that best serves Albertans across the board. In this case we're talking about the application of charter schools. We're talking about the balance of parents being able to choose to go there and, then, also to establish that charter.

I guess to the hon. member's position on this, when I look at sections 31 and 32 of the old act and the conditions that were around that and I look at the conditions under 25(1) in the new act, "The minister may issue a charter," which are fairly significant, you know, in terms of what the charter schools can do and how they're going to have to operate, there are a lot of conditions there. I'm kind of wondering if that doesn't already do what the hon. member is trying to accomplish by way of the conditions that are in the act as opposed to saying that the application much be first approved by the board, actually, as opposed to being approved through these conditions that the minister sets out.

I would hope that the hon. member would be able to clarify that for me. As I said, Mr. Chairman, it may actually lead to my looking at where my vote might go on this particular amendment. With that, I'll take my seat.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Creek.

Mr. Zwozdesky: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. I rise to speak probably in favour of this particular amendment brought forward by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona, which would amend section 24(1) of the act that we're debating, the Education Act. I do this because in studying the section in question, it talks about charter schools, and it says:

Application to establish charter school

24(1) A board, person, society or company may apply to the Minister for the establishment of a charter school.

The amendment would actually add another small section right after that, and it would read as the amendment reads:

(1.1) An application may be made to the Minister only if the board of the district or division in which the school is to be established refuses to establish an alternative program under section 19 as requested by the board, person, society or company.

As I read this amendment – I hope I'm on the right amendment, Mr. Chair. Yes?

The Chair: Yes.

Mr. Zwozdesky: This is it? It's got a number, A7?

The Chair: Yes.

Mr. Zwozdesky: Thank you.

As I read this particular amendment, I have to first of all make it clear as to what an alternative program really is because I sense from some of the comments made by one or two members that they may not be as up to speed on what the alternative programs are.

Now, alternative programs are, actually, specially designed, specially created programs that give students an opportunity to excel in one particular area. In other words, it channels their interest into an area which they might feel passionate about or which they might have some expertise in or perhaps they're just curious about, and it gives them a chance to just hone in on that. There are hockey programs. There are numerous other sports programs. There might be fine arts programs that help students to develop those particular talents.

We also have other programs that focus on languages. We have bilingual programs that give students a skill which helps them grow not only within that particular language group but as citizens of the world. It gives them a unique opportunity. In Edmonton, for example, we have Ukrainian bilingual programs. We have German bilingual programs. We have Japanese bilingual programs. We have some Spanish programs. In my riding, for example, we have Chinese in two languages, and so on. It's remarkable to me that these language programs, which are language schools, are all one form or another of alternative programming.

Think where we would be if we hadn't started to introduce those. Those points came about as a result of innovation that drove the system toward exploring other ways of delivering education or other ways of expanding a child's educational opportunities. This year, for example, the Chinese community is proudly celebrating the 30th anniversary. I think the Ukrainian community will soon be celebrating the 40th or so anniversary of those programs. So we have some of those types of programs that have come about. I mean, there are other programs. I believe there's the Logos program, the Cogito program. There are religious programs. There are a number of things.

What drives me to make these comments, Mr. Chairman, with relation to this amendment is that there are a number of different people living in our province that have different points of view who need a chance to express those views and to have them taught to their children. This is at no expense whatsoever to the public system or the Catholic system. As everyone here knows, I'm a strong supporter of our public system. In fact, when I was Minister of Education, I presided over some important innovations that we as a government and as a caucus had brought in. People will remember the Alberta Commission on Learning report. There were a lot of items in that report that talked very specifically about innovative new approaches to teaching and learning.

Charter schools are, of course, one of those success stories. Today we have a number of these charter schools, and all of them are performing very, very well. That is why you see lineups to get into them. But that's not at the expense of the public or the Catholic system, as some members here would allege.

You have to understand why charter schools were created in the first place. They were created to fill a perceived void, which is now proven, in the system in one case and, on the other hand, to allow for innovative, creative, new ways of teaching to occur and, hence, of learning to occur as well. That's why this particular section that's being amended goes on to describe here that charter schools focus on new and different learning styles. You have to have a place where they can be brought to bear, but they only come into action if the public system doesn't already offer them.

In fact, when charter schools first came about, they came about so as to help drive innovation in the public system, and that's why this amendment is of great interest to me. We know that there are great ideas that have come about from charter schools, some of which, Mr. Chairman, may well have already been adopted and incorporated into the public system, some of which maybe are still being studied.

The charter schools are one of our great success stories in this province and, again I stress, not at the expense of any other system because we pride ourselves in the options that we have. Those options that we have, Mr. Chairman, which is what the charter schools are all part of, have driven us to great fame on the national scene as well as on the international scene. How else would you know it to prove itself other than to look at the results of our education system in Alberta?

Let's be darn proud that in 2010 Alberta's grade 8 students achieved the highest marks in Canada in science, the second-highest marks in reading, and the third-highest marks in mathematics. In 2009 our students were second in the world, Mr. Chair, in reading and in scientific literacy, and eighth in the world in mathematical literacy. They were motivated to achieve that because we weren't afraid to look at innovative, creative new ways of delivering education.

5:10

You have to thank the teachers who were behind all of this. The teachers have done an outstanding job. During my tour of the province while being Minister of Education, I held well over 1,000 meetings with school boards, with teachers, and with parent groups, and I can tell you that they appreciate the options and the choices that we provide. It doesn't matter if it's charter schools or public school boards or Catholic boards or home-schooling or alternative school programs or immersion schools or whatever they might have been called. There is great innovation happening on many, many fronts.

The final couple of things that I just wanted to mention here with this amendment – one part that particularly appeals to me is that the applications for charter schools must follow a guideline, and that guideline, as the amendment says, suggests that only after an alternative program has been reviewed and, perhaps, not endorsed by a public system can a charter be granted. I think that's a good rule. It's a good rule because it allows the public system to still have a look at some of these ideas, but it doesn't curtail innovation, creativity to come forward. I'm quite supportive of what I see here on first blush.

The other part of allowing this particular type of amendment to succeed goes to the area of the rights and privileges that we enjoy as Albertans to make choices with and for our children. I get frustrated sometimes when I hear some members championing the rights and privileges that we ought to have in this province, and then when we present an opportunity for some of them to be exercised, they seem to speak against them. Well, you can't have it both ways, Mr. Chair.

I am of the opinion that we have a free society here and that charter schools have a very important role to play in that, but it should never be interpreted as being in competition with or against public education. That's simply not true. We as a government are providing the largest amount of money ever for public education in the history of this province, in total about \$6.8 billion this year. When you couple that with a guaranteed funding scenario of three years where better planning and predictable planning can occur, you can see already that there will be even greater improvements to come.

Why else would we be attracting people from all over the world who are coming here to study our particular education system? We have a uniform curriculum that people can use, choose, adapt, or suit as a guideline for their own learning purposes. We have the greatest number and variety of choices in the programming, including charter schools, which is what this amendment is all about, and it includes some of the most creative teachers in the world right here in our province. We should be darn proud of that.

So I have no problem supporting this particular amendment that the Member for Edmonton-Strathcona has brought forward because I think it helps move us in the right direction while providing the safeties that perhaps others might be looking for.

With that, Mr. Chair, unless I hear something to the contrary, I will be able to support this particular amendment. Thank you.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Calgary-North West.

Mr. Blakett: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's a pleasure for me to stand today and talk to this amendment. I know a lot has been said. A lot of the comments I agree with; some I disagree with. The most important thing for me is the fact that we're talking about children.

We're talking about their education. We're talking about their future. We're not talking about numbers. We're not talking about a statistic. We're talking about young lives and the training of those young minds to be our future leaders, our future teachers, our future geophysicists, our future engineers, our future farmers, all the future leaders, the people who are going to run our businesses, keep our communities, and make sure that we have a better quality of life. Hopefully, 20 years down the road when we're going to need all those other services, they're able to take care of us and provide some of those.

This isn't about, as is mentioned repeatedly, a choice of one versus another. I happen to have two children in the Catholic school system in Calgary, and they're in a French immersion program. But often, as their mother and I have discussions, we look at different choices, and we're blessed, and part of the reason we were attracted to come to Alberta 12 years ago was because you have choice. Part of that choice was fostered by the creation of charter schools.

I remember living in Ontario and reading probably 15 years ago that there was a charter school that actually ran 12 months of the year. They actually utilized that building 12 months of the year in three different semesters. Students took their vacations at different intervals of the year, but they ran it year-round. I thought to myself: wow, what a unique way to get value for money, by utilizing that building that you have to pay for for 12 months anyway, operating and using it year-round. That's innovation. That's a fantastic idea. The more and more I read about them, the more and more I got attracted to that idea, and I realized that Alberta is the place that created them.

Alberta is known for innovation. Alberta is known to be a leader. We're known also for our education system, which is second to none in the western world. Part of that is the choice we have, whether you want to have public education, whether you want to have a Catholic education, if you want to have a charter school, if you want to home-school, if you want to have private school.

I really do take issue with the Member for Calgary-Buffalo, who decided to start taking a shot at a group of people, those students from Strathcona-Tweedsmuir, and discriminate against them, that just because their parents happen to be hard-working people who have been successful, somehow they should be denigrated and shouldn't be given the same opportunities as everybody else. We don't care what their income level is. We don't care which part of the province they live in. Every child in this province has the right to an education in the K to 12 system, and we as a government and we as a society have the duty to make sure that we give them that.

In this amendment I like the fact that we're going to preserve the ability for the school boards to have that right of first refusal. They may decide they want to create another entity that's similar

to what the charter school has, but they have a constriction on the amount of finances they have. Our Calgary board of education, for instance: a billion-dollar budget. It seems like a lot of money, but that is in a city where our population is continuously growing. They have to always focus on the core competency and be able to maintain the level of education for the students that they have. They may not have the wherewithal to be able to try to teach some other things such as a different sports program, whether it's hockey or gymnastics or golf or whatever that is. They may not have the wherewithal to have a particular type of language training program, whether it's French immersion or Spanish immersion or whether it's Cantonese or German or Mandarin. They may be an arts immersion program or a science school, and they maybe want to have that in a certain quadrant of the city because it makes more sense.

Because they have the choice, if parents, those same people who ultimately we allow and we support and who should make the decision on their children's education, decide that they want a particular program and if that school board is not able to provide that, they should be able to establish a charter school. Because of that choice and because of where we live, they are able to do that. We have some of the smartest people being created because of the great work of our teachers, the great work of our staff at our different schools, because of the principals and the whole organization – the school boards, the parent councils – that supports them to make them what they are, and we need to continue to do that.

Not only is it important that we look at this choice and this ability because it's what helps us with our students and those kids, that are ultimately important for the future of this province and ourselves, but it's important because of the context of what that does for our ability to attract those people. Yes, we create geophysicists, and, yes, we create surgeons. We create nurses, and we create bricklayers and all those other things, but because we live in the booming province that Alberta is and we're going to be short some 114,000 jobs, we've got to attract people to our province.

5:20

We've got to attract people in a multitude of disciplines, and when those hard-working, high-income people, those people that have great talents and specific talents, those \$374,000-a-year people that we'd love to have here and that every other jurisdiction in the world would love to have in their jurisdiction decide to come, well – guess what? – they come with a family. They want to know that what they're going to get in Alberta is going to be second to none. They want to know that they don't have to give up anything when they move here for the benefit of their family. They want to know that they're going to provide their children with the best possible education, the best possible chance at life, and be in an economy, in a place where they're going to get a job and be able to move forward and support their own family.

I can tell you that I know from the people at Imperial Oil, when they were looking at moving their headquarters from Toronto to Calgary, they looked and they realized that the salary is going to stay the same, and that wasn't the driver. The drivers were: am I going to have to give up my theatre tickets, and am I going to give up my hockey tickets? I dare say that the Calgary Flames are a bit better hockey team than the Toronto Maple Leafs, but I digress. The other part is that they didn't want to have to forgo the education. From the private school that they gave up in Toronto, were they going to have to take a step back and go for something substandard here in Alberta? They didn't. What they realized was that not only were they as good, but in many cases they were

better. The choices that they had were incredible, all the different choices that have been mentioned, and I don't have to list them again.

But it is imperative for us to be a leader, to maintain our stature, to maintain our standard of living. Not only do we invest in education, but we let the world know that we believe in education and that we believe in choice. Charter schools have helped our public education system become more innovative. Competition sometimes does that. They're providing spaces that our public schools couldn't necessarily provide.

You know, if we build 50 more public schools in Calgary alone and if we build another 10 in Edmonton, we would fill them quickly. We don't have that ability today. We're forced to look at being more innovative, and I believe our charter schools have helped us do that immensely.

I would support this amendment. I would support the great principle that we have here in Alberta of not only being first but also promoting choice and having the charter schools, which allow our whole education system, our publicly funded education system, which is second to none in the world, to continue to be great. It's not important that we do that just now for 2012. It's as important to have that in 2022, 2032, and for years to come to maintain our status as one of the greatest places to live in the world.

Thank you.

The Chair: The hon. Minister of Tourism, Parks and Recreation.

Mr. Hayden: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. To the hon. member: I would like to support you. I would like some clarification, though, from you on your amendment. I base this on my experience with the public system as a former trustee and a former school board chair.

I believe the public system offers a wonderful option. In the amendment I see that we're talking about the opportunity to give the public system an opportunity to offer, if I read this correctly, what parents, the society, or the group are coming forward with as a proposal, giving the public system the opportunity to offer that.

I have to say, though, Mr. Chairman, that because of my experience in the business – on school boards and as a school board chair – the determination of whether that full offering is going to be there or not is the area where I do have some reservation. Coming from the community that I come from, this amendment actually adds another area because the public system has been so supportive of my family and my children. It was able to respond in a remote and rural community to their needs. But as I've watched the systems develop and charter systems develop, I've seen opportunities put out there for students that haven't been available in other instances.

I've seen people, Mr. Chair, for the charter option being very much in favour of what we're offering in this province by curriculum, and I'll give an example. The Northwest Territories have adopted the curriculum of Alberta. Why have they done that? They've done that because we always rate within the top five in the world for our education system and most recently in the top three. When they've had the selection of all other curriculums across the entire nation, they've picked up ours.

To add to that, I know of a student that is now thinking and considering with their family to actually relocate in Alberta because of an opportunity that is available in a charter environment that will meet the needs of this student, meet not just the needs but meet the interests, and take it that extra step and take it beyond where the public system now offers programs.

I go back to the amendment and the clarification that I need. The thing that concerns me a little bit is that between the offering in the public system, that's available in two schools in our province, and what the charter school offers, there are some differences. This family is going to have to make a decision whether that charter option is the one that is actually going to be the best for that student.

There are some expense implications also because of the location of the school and the different costs for them to attend and the advantages that the charter option has. I think that what my concern is and what I'm going to need an answer on is: who makes the determination that the offering of a public system is what that group wants? In effect, does it go far enough? Does it meet for those students and that family or that group what their expectation is? Does it meet what they believe is possible for them to go forward with and put together in a program that is going to offer the kinds of things that they require?

Mr. Chairman, I think that we've got a great deal to be proud of in this province. I don't think it would have been possible for us to have achieved the type of excellence that we have in Alberta for our students had it not been for the fact that there are choices out there. While I believe that public schools have responded wonderfully to most of those situations, I think the charter school operations that are taking place in the province right now are positive proof that we can step outside of that.

I also think, Mr. Chair, that the things that we teach now and the opportunities that are there for students are there all over the world. We're in an enlightened society now. People are very mobile, especially professionals. There's availability of work all over the world for these people. If we do not offer the options that they request and require, they can easily go shopping at the airport. That is the suggestion that I make. You can go to the airport, climb on a plane, and get anything you want in the world, including a variety of educational opportunities. It's important that we don't limit those opportunities for the citizens of this province. It's those opportunities that have made our provincial system as strong as it has been. That competitive edge has never hurt in anything, really.

What I would like to ask the hon. member – when they get an opportunity, if they can respond – is if they have an idea, when a group comes forward and says, "This is what we want to offer," how far the public system will have to go in offering that before we would refuse a charter the opportunity to do that.

With those concerns, I'm supportive. I want to support the amendment, but I want to hear who's going to be the judge and jury on whether the public system is actually going to offer what these people are trying to accomplish. Maybe the member could clarify that. I do want to support the member on their amendment.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Calgary-Bow.

Ms DeLong: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair. I did rise last week and talked a little bit about public education and how incredibly successful our public education is in the world. The last couple of speeches have been essentially about that issue and how it's through competition that the public system has really outdone itself and become better and better every year, and our children are the ones who have really been benefiting from this.

5:30

Regarding this particular amendment around charter schools, it does bring to mind the situation that the public board is in in terms of one of their biggest advantages, which charter schools have not

really caught onto yet, and that is that the public system has schools in many neighbourhoods.

I think that sometimes they just look at it as: "Oh, well. You know, we've got all these schools in all these communities." Sometimes those schools are not full. Those schools are not full because of all of this competition, all of these charter schools and private schools out there and the special programs that they themselves have set up.

They are sometimes not realizing the gems that they do have when it comes to having a neighbourhood school. When they have a neighbourhood school, they have an opportunity to bring those parents in as a community, to use that neighbourhood school as a community resource, and to really become part of the community.

I know that some of my schools have been doing an excellent job of this. Bowness high provides all of these services to the surrounding businesses. They are actually a valuable technology centre for the whole community. They provide services to the businesses. They teach seniors how to use computers. So they are very much becoming an integrated part of the community.

Yeah, this is wonderful for the community, but it's also wonderful for the students. They start feeling really connected. They feel a part of the community. They feel that they are a valuable resource to the community, and so their sense of abilities and their sense of who they are become much stronger.

This is one of the strengths that, you know, what we call the public system has that they should be possibly taking more advantage of. At some point I expect that there is going to be someone who comes along and says: "Okay. I am a special charter that is for the local neighbourhood school. I am a special kind of charter that really fits right deep down into a community, and I'm going to start taking that on."

I think that at that point the public system is going to really realize the gems that they do have in all of these community schools and realize another strength that they can bring to the public school system in Alberta.

When it comes to this amendment, I'm hoping that this is going to be one of the things that really wakes them up to one of their strengths so that our schools really become a much more integrated part of our communities.

Thank you very much.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Calgary-Varsity.

Mr. Chase: Thank you. I find this a very bizarre circumstance, the government filibustering to potentially prevent their own bill from getting out of committee and into third and quickly being passed.

Mr. Hancock: Point of order.

Point of Order

Allegations against Members

Mr. Hancock: Under 23(h), (i), and (j), making allegations, the hon. member would suggest that members of this Assembly do not have the right to debate a bill and amendments before the House. Bill 2, the Education Act, is one of the most important bills, in my humble opinion, that this House might ever be able to address. Education of our children is extremely important.

An amendment has come forward to this bill to deal with charter schools. The hon. member knows even from his own comments earlier on in debate on this section that charter schools are fairly controversial even with members of this Legislature on any side of the House and particularly in our caucus. These are not

easy decisions that are made. These are decisions that are debated long and hard before we come forward with a bill.

An amendment has been brought forward. It's an amendment which strikes a chord because it's one of the key pieces of the establishment of a charter school. Do they have to get a refusal first from the local school board or not? That is a critical piece of the debate. For this hon. member to suggest that in order to pass this amendment quickly, members on this side of the House who have expressed viewpoints on this issue shouldn't get those views expressed on the record before we vote on it is absolutely untenable. It's absolutely untenable that he would suggest that anybody is filibustering, when people have every right to speak on an amendment, particularly one which triggers such a response in his own city, as he should well know.

The Chair: Hon. member, I heard the point of order, and I heard the statement from the Member for Calgary-Varsity that created the point of order, so I don't need to linger on this. Basically, I think you probably just continue, withdraw that imputing of the other hon. members here dragging on the bill, and so on. Just carry on.

Mr. Chase: By all means, if I impugned negativity, if I suggested in any way a halting of the democratic process, please, I apologize to all members of this House, and in my apology I call the question on the amendment unless, of course, there are other individuals at 25 minutes to 6, long after this amendment was first introduced, who wish to debate the importance of this amendment.

Thank you.

Debate Continued

The Chair: Get on with the amendment.

Mr. Chase: It's in the government's hands as they see fit.

The Chair: Thank you.

The Minister of Advanced Education and Technology on the amendment.

Mr. Weadick: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. After that discussion that we had, I will be very, very brief on this one. I was interested to see this because, oddly enough, in the early 1990s I had the privilege of going through this exact process, Mr. Chairman. In Lethbridge we had a lot of youth that didn't have the kind of services that we really needed, and we found youth on the street and not completing school. So we got together as a community group, and I had the privilege of working with a group and founding the Lethbridge Youth Foundation and 5th on 5th Youth Services. As part of that the project did work readiness and young parenting and work experience, youth employment, all those kinds of things. We also had an alternative education program within that and 2,500 young people per year would go through this centre.

When we tried to start our alternative education program, we went through exactly the process of trying to determine: can we work with our local school district? Can we get a charter? Mr. Chairman, these were the rules of the day, and so we put together an approach to school district No. 51. We approached them with our idea around an alternative school. We met with them, and it took some work because the school districts, of course, were concerned about the cost of alternative programs. Ultimately we worked with them, and they determined that if we could provide an alternative program working with them that didn't cost the district money, taking it away from other programming, they

would be willing to work with us. We worked with school district No. 51. We came up with a project they supported, and we had a wonderful relationship.

It worked through this process. Ultimately the school district did take on the alternative program, and this did work to help us. Having that relationship with the school district was very positive because they brought resources. They provided superintendency to us and some financial management support. Mr. Chairman, having your school district as part of your group can be incredibly helpful, especially in providing an education program. We managed that together for many, many years. Ultimately they moved the program to another location where they were able to manage it, but we still maintained an alternative program for hard-to-serve youth in Lethbridge.

5:40

Mr. Chairman, you know, this amendment, I think, does speak well to the partnership and the relationship with school districts in alternative programs. I'm sure there are opportunities or times where the only choice will be a charter school, but I think that if the district can offer it, that is the best option. I think that if we can work with community organizations in a relationship, if we can have community groups and schools working together, isn't that the best way to teach our kids?

From my perspective, Mr. Chairman, this is actually a positive amendment, and I'm happy to support it as well. I will be supporting this amendment.

The Chair: Any other hon. member wishing to speak on amendment A7?

Seeing none, the chair shall now call the question.

[Motion on amendment A7 carried]

The Chair: Back to the bill.

The hon. Government House Leader.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. In light of the hour I'd like to move that we rise to report progress and beg leave to sit again.

[Motion carried]

[The Deputy Speaker in the chair]

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Leduc-Beaumont-Devon.

Mr. Rogers: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The Committee of the Whole has had under consideration a certain bill. The committee reports progress on the following bill: Bill 2. I wish to table copies of all amendments considered by the Committee of the Whole on this date for the official records of the Assembly.

The Deputy Speaker: Does the Assembly concur in the report?

Hon. Members: Concur.

The Deputy Speaker: Opposed? So ordered.

The Government House Leader.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I would move that the Assembly adjourn until 1:30 p.m. tomorrow.

[Motion carried; the Assembly adjourned at 5:43 p.m. to Thursday at 1:30 p.m.]

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Province of Alberta

The 27th Legislature
Fifth Session

Alberta Hansard

Thursday, March 22, 2012

Issue 22

The Honourable Kenneth R. Kowalski, Speaker

Legislative Assembly of Alberta
The 27th Legislature

Fifth Session

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Legislative Assembly of Alberta

1:30 p.m.

Thursday, March 22, 2012

[The Speaker in the chair] [applause]

Prayers

The Speaker: Good afternoon.

Let us pray. As we conclude for this week our work in this Assembly, we renew our energies with thanks so that we may continue our work with the people in the constituencies we represent. Amen.

Please be seated.

Introduction of Visitors

The Speaker: In the Speaker's gallery today are some people special to me that I would like to introduce to you: first of all, my wife, Kristina; my son, Michael; and my daughter-in-law, Robyn; and, from 26 years in my office, Beverly; Jocelyn, who's been with me for 10 years; Audrey, who is back at the office; and Danielle.

Introduction of Guests

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Environment and Water.

Mrs. McQueen: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's a pleasure to rise today to introduce to you and through you to all Members of this Legislative Assembly some outstanding grade 6 students from St. Anthony school in my community of Drayton Valley. They're joined by their teachers, Mr. Leggo and Mrs. Haggerty, and also by Mrs. Sherri Gow and Samantha Williams. It's such an honour to have you students here today. They joined me in my office earlier, and we had a nice picture together. I would ask you all to please rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of this Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Intergovernmental, International and Aboriginal Relations.

Mr. Dallas: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure to introduce to you and through you a group from Westpark middle school in my constituency. These students are part of a bright, enthusiastic class here to tour the Legislature and participate in a mock Legislature and observe the members of the House. I hope this visit has been a beneficial learning experience for these young citizens as they learn more about the political traditions and processes of the Legislative Assembly of Alberta. The guests are seated in the members' gallery. I would like to invite them to please rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of the Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Transportation.

Mr. Danyluk: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I would like to introduce to you and through you to members of this Assembly two grade 6 classes from Glen Avon school in St. Paul. Fifty-two students made the two-and-a-half-hour trip to come to the Legislature. They are known as the Panthers, and they're very proud of their school and very proud of their community. They are here with the help of their bus drivers, Don and Christine Kriaski; teacher aides Debbie Rak, Val Gadowski, and Melissa Laurie; and teachers Shane Boyko, Karen Kendel, and Linda O'Neill, who, I

must add, is celebrating her birthday today with her students. They are seated in the members' gallery, and I would ask that everyone give them the traditional warm welcome. I'd ask them to stand, please.

The Speaker: The hon. the Premier.

Ms Redford: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure today to rise and introduce to you and through you to all hon. Members of this Legislative Assembly a group of students from the University of Alberta and Grant MacEwan Progressive Conservative associations: from the University of Alberta a very good friend of mine from Calgary, Aaron Pollock, who is the president of the group; Daniel Rose; Andrea Stempien; Shannon McLaughlin; Katarina Duke; and Steven Kwasny; and from Grant MacEwan Arundee Sandhu and Max Yuan. They are wonderful, passionate Albertans. They are seated in the public gallery, and I would ask them to rise and receive the warm welcome.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Municipal Affairs.

Mr. Griffiths: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It gives me great pleasure today to rise to introduce to you and through you to members of this Assembly a Public Affairs Bureau intern, Aura Juarez. Aura came here from Nicaragua with her family in 1988, settling in Medicine Hat for 18 years. After graduating from Mount Royal University's public relations program in 2010, she moved to Edmonton to pursue her desire to work within government. She currently works as a public affairs officer in our ministry's branch. She expressed a keen interest in the Municipal Affairs portfolio. I'm honoured that she's part of the team, and all of the people in our department have been very thankful to have Aura work with them over this time period. She's seated in the members' gallery, and I'd ask her to rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of this Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Grande Prairie-Wapiti.

Mr. Drysdale: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Today it is my pleasure to introduce to you and through to all members of this Legislature my constituents Dick and Joanne Barendregt. They have been home-educating parents for 25 years and have nine children and seven grandchildren and more on the way. I also believe they were former constituents of yours, hard-working constituents. They are seated in the members' gallery, and I'd ask them to please stand and receive the traditional warm welcome of this Assembly.

Ministerial Statements

The Speaker: The hon. the Premier.

Tribute to the Member for Barrhead-Morinville-Westlock

Ms Redford: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise today to thank the hon. Member for Barrhead-Morinville-Westlock for his many years of outstanding service to Albertans. The hon. member was first elected to this Assembly in 1979 and has held many positions during a distinguished career in the public service. These positions have included five different cabinet portfolios as well as chair and member of many standing and government committees. He was also Deputy Premier from 1992 to 1994, and he has served as Speaker of the Legislative Assembly since 1997.

I have the privilege to be the fifth Premier who has served this province during the time that he has been a member of this Assembly, and I am so happy to have had that opportunity. I

remember as a teenager with a group of PC Youth of Alberta students meeting the hon. member. He had overseen a number of portfolios at that time, and I welcomed the chance to talk with him and learn from him, as I do today.

He was always incredibly supportive, helpful, and generous with his time, never hesitating to offer me the wealth of his accumulated knowledge or encouragement, and I don't believe that my experience was unique. I speak for many in this Assembly who have had the privilege of serving with the hon. member when I say that he has always been willing to share his expertise and perspective with us, much to our benefit. He has unfailingly treated every member of this Assembly with fairness and respect.

His passion for the parliamentary system is also well known. He initiated *The Centennial Series*, highlighting democracy in Alberta from 1905 to 2006, and he initiated the School at the Legislature program, inviting students from across this province to come to the capital for a week of democracy, meeting their MLAs one-on-one and participating in mock parliaments, as well as the MLA for a Day program for high school students.

1:40

Mr. Speaker, you have served with exemplary grace and dignity, providing outstanding and effective service to your constituents. In your role as Speaker you have brought an incredible breadth of knowledge to the Assembly and applied it in the service of the people of this province for 33 years. Your focus and support through the Legislative Assembly Office has ensured that members are provided with the most efficient and modern array of services that they need to perform their duties.

Your legacy is unique, something that we will treasure and draw on in the future. More than just about anyone else, you helped to prepare our province for the 21st century even as you played a pivotal role in defending and preserving Alberta's way of life, and this Assembly will be the poorer for your absence.

I am tremendously proud that I have had the opportunity to serve alongside you. You will be truly missed. I wish you a happy retirement with your family and all the best in the years ahead. After your long and faithful service to Alberta, you deserve no less. [Standing ovation]

Dr. Sherman: Mr. Speaker, allow me to echo the congratulations and warm thoughts of the Premier.

My House leader has reminded me that when you and Grant Mitchell were the House leaders of government and Official Opposition caucuses, you worked together to change the standing orders so that MLAs would enjoy the freedom to deliver private members' statements. Today any MLA can stand in front of the House for two minutes and speak without fear of retribution on any subject he or she pleases, a great step forward for freedom of speech in the Legislature and for personal expression. I know that all MLAs in this House appreciate this bold initiative, and that's because of you, Mr. Speaker.

I'd also like to remind the Assembly of the Speaker's obvious care for the grounds and his efforts to forge a stronger bond between the Alberta Legislature and the community and the citizens that we serve and with citizens and leaders beyond our borders. Every day and every Canada Day our Speaker opens up this Chamber to all visitors, a rare privilege amongst parliamentary democracies. For that, thank you.

Nor should we ignore the fact that the Speaker is beloved by the people of his home constituency, who have elected and re-elected him to office since 1979. This is an impressive track record for any public servant and a measure of the esteem in which the people of Barrhead-Morinville-Westlock hold the Speaker.

Mr. Speaker, you're a courageous man. In the early days of democracy the men and women in your position often found themselves on the wrong end of an executioner's axe. We the Official Opposition are pleased that you displayed such courage in taking this position since 1979 and shall escape this Assembly with your head firmly affixed on your broad shoulders. As you have led all the members of this Assembly, you've been a teacher to all of us, you have been a peacemaker, and, Mr. Speaker, personally, you've been a confidante. When as an MLA I had questions and concerns or I needed someone to talk to or sometimes even a little hug, you've been there.

Mr. Speaker, thank you so much for what you and your family have done to serve this great province and this great Legislature to improve the democracy of Alberta. Thank you, and God bless you in your retirement. [applause]

The Speaker: I have received several notes that there may be additional members who would like to participate, so I ask this question with great trepidation. It needs a unanimous response from the Assembly. Does any member oppose additional members wanting to participate? If so, say no.

[Unanimous consent granted]

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Fort McMurray-Wood Buffalo.

Mr. Boutillier: Well, thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. When you said trepidation, I know that that was not aimed at me at all.

Indeed, what a pleasure it is to stand as an opposition member with the Wildrose caucus and say to you, with your former profession as a teacher, that there have clearly been many teachable moments in this Assembly. I know that all political parties thank you for those teachable moments. Truly, that teacher that is in you, in your DNA, you have shared with all Albertans in this Assembly. You are truly a great parliamentarian. That no one will ever, ever dispute.

But, most importantly, my observation has been this. I had the honour as a minister of the Crown to speak in your constituency many years ago – and it was an honour for me to speak about you – and what I observed that night in your constituency of Barrhead-Morinville-Westlock was an incredible respect for your bosses, which is something that you have never forgotten, that the people of Alberta are your boss and the people in your constituency have been and always will be your boss. I sincerely say that you have never forgotten that teachable moment, and I think it's something all of us will never forget.

Now, I will say, with a bit of humour, that Winston Churchill once said that if everyone was thinking the same, then no one would be thinking. I do know that sometimes you and I might not have been thinking on the same wavelength, but I do want to let you know that I have the utmost respect for your intellect in those teachable moments.

My father was a teacher. You have reminded me of my father on many occasions with your sternness. I do remember as a schoolchild occasionally being in the corner, and I thank you for never having put me in the corner.

That being the case, Mr. Speaker, I sincerely say that we wish you and your wonderful family the very best in this, your well-earned retirement. God bless you and your family. [applause]

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

Ms Notley: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. Like a cat with nine lives, the Speaker has effectively persuaded the electors of his constituency to send him here nine times since the 1979 by-

election. For 15 years of that time he has presided in this Chamber, providing us with unique interpretations of the British parliamentary democratic tradition, interpretations that have distinguished our province.

Now, during those years we've frequently been on the receiving end of the elocutionary style he perfected as a model of the schoolmaster during his years as a teacher at Barrhead high school. With colourful gesture and expression he has assisted us to understand the value of attending to his tutelage. He's admonished us for our juvenile immaturity in some cases, and he's advised us to remember the importance of being models of correct social behaviour. That being said, he's also tolerated our peccadilloes during these years, as schoolmasters traditionally do, and in his absence I'll say that it was mostly the peccadilloes of the Member for Edmonton-Highlands-Norwood.

He has put up with the knitting of sweaters, the visit of rubber duckies, napkins for speaking notes, and a singing member's statement. After spending more than a few moments instructing us on the rules of a talking stick, about how he had it and it was his and no one else was to talk when he had it, I was proud to be able to create an interrupting stick and to present him with a copy of the original, that we quietly advised we would hold on to. There was a grimace, but I can report that I still have the original, and I'm sure the Speaker will agree that he has tolerated a greater than average reliance on its use by our caucus.

Now, I can imagine that there have been many times when he has wished he was back coaching a championship *Reach for the Top* team and not trying to oversee the deliberations of the rambunctious residents of this House. Perhaps at times, sitting at the front of the House, he's even let his mind wander to fond memories of the golf course in his Barrhead-Morinville-Westlock part of the world. The question now is: when he's out on the golf course, will he enjoy fond memories of the theatrics and occasional good work accomplished here in this House? We hope so.

During his years of service, which are only slightly less than the median age of Albertans, 36 years, he has served in a wide range of positions, including several in cabinet. Over this period he has served with at least two generations of some families, including mine. Indeed, although it seems like I've been here forever, I realized today that the Speaker served longer with my father than with me.

1:50

So I join with colleagues here to say on behalf of the NDP opposition, that he so much likes to call the NDs, thank you for your service to Albertans over the last three and a half decades and please receive sincere congratulations and best wishes from the Member for Edmonton-Highlands-Norwood and myself.

Thank you. [applause]

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

Mr. Snelgrove: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I have been asked by a former colleague of ours, Mr. Richard Marz, the long-time MLA for Olds-Didsbury-Three Hills, to read a poem he wrote for you.

Back in '79 when he came to the dome
And said I'll call this my home
For the next 30 years or more
It would be hard to conclude
What this battle-scarred Dude
Would accomplish in that three-score

You can love him or hate him
But don't underrate him
'Cause his heart is loaded with fire

Many have tried but couldn't get by
His spirit, dedication and desire

I'm proud to call him my friend
Though it's hard to comprehend
When it all comes to an end
As we round the next bend
The retirement of the Legend –
"Kowalski"

On a personal note, Mr. Speaker, your common sense and your political intuition are greater than the sum of all the other people I've met. And I want to take a little different tack. Your representation of Alberta on the international stage and the national stage, both visiting and receiving guests to our fine province, has made us all proud. You and your staff have done an incredible job of not only receiving people but preparing all of us that travel on our government's behalf, and I think Albertans are very proud of the fact that we look professional, you act professional, and we present a very strong and wonderful province to them. I do have to lament that apparently your new neighbour down south may cause you to reflect for the good old days in the Leg., but I certainly hope not.

All the best, Mr. Speaker. [applause]

The Speaker: Hon. members, thank you very, very much. I very much appreciate this. I feel very, very humbled.

When I walked into this building on August 1, 1974, it was not in a capacity as an elected person, and when you go back to 1974, that's 38 years that I have been associated with this place. There may be remains of mine to be parked in this Assembly someplace in the future. I won't tell you where, but my spirit and my heart will always be here.

This is a wonderful democracy in the province of Alberta, and I want to thank all of the men and women, current and in the past, that I've had the privilege of working with. Alberta is very well served by its elected representatives. Albertans should be very, very proud of the quality of the people who have come to this Assembly, who are in this Assembly. Albertans should take, take with great interest and care, that despite what you may see in a clip here and a clip there, the civility and the decorum of this Assembly is second to none in the country of Canada. Albertans should expect that, and Albertans have it. So I want you to be very proud of who you are. I want to thank you very much for the support that you've given me and the comments today.

Madam Premier, from the young girl that you were a few years ago, younger girl that you were a few years ago, to the Member for Fort McMurray-Wood Buffalo, putting me in the same category as his father, that truly is a wide spectrum of respect and support. To you, Madam Premier, thank you very much for those very, very kind words. To you, Leader of the Official Opposition, thank you very much for your kind words. To the Member for Fort McMurray-Wood Buffalo, who I've known a long time, thank you for the kind words. To the imaginative comments and very kind words from the hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona, thank you. To my neighbour, my new neighbour in the south, the hon. Member for Vermilion-Lloydminster, thank you very much for your kind words, and to Mr. Marz as well.

To all of you, enough is enough. We've got a Routine to deal with. Thank you so much and the best of luck to all of you, always, always, always. [Standing ovation]

Oral Question Period

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

Long-term Care for Seniors

Dr. Sherman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It was reported today that AHS plans to cut 150 spaces with around-the-clock nursing, despite all the solutions we've offered to this government. Dr. Paul Parks says that he's baffled. He asks how we can eliminate bottlenecks in our hospitals with this move. He's afraid that we're on the cusp of yet another ER crisis, a crisis that leads to the cancellation of surgeries, longer wait times, more idle ambulances, and Albertans suffering needlessly. To the Premier. Premier, are you serious? Do you actually know what you're doing to our health care system?

Mr. Horne: Mr. Speaker, the government has no knowledge of the statement that the hon. member has made; therefore, I'm not in a position to reply. If he'd care to proffer the information to us, I'd be happy to get back to him.

Dr. Sherman: Mr. Speaker, it's a well-known fact that we have fewer long-term care spaces today than we had a few years ago. Given that Bruce West, the executive director of the Alberta Continuing Care Association, says that the government seems determined to push seniors with complex needs into less expensive supportive living spaces, which may not have adequate levels of care, to the Premier: why won't you listen to the people who know more about the health care system than elected people do, and stop this madness?

Ms Redford: Mr. Speaker, I think that now I understand the hon. member's first question. It's with respect to a story that was reported in Calgary with respect to the reduction of long-term care beds, which is simply not true, and Alberta Health Services will be correcting that information today.

Just to set the record straight, Mr. Speaker, last year Alberta Health Services set a goal to increase the number of home-care clients by 3,000 by March 2012, and to date 4,400 new clients have been added. The reason that's important is because that is listening to Albertans. What Alberta's seniors have said to us is that they want to be able to stay in their own homes for longer than they've been able to in the past. We are investing in that because that's what Alberta's seniors want.

Dr. Sherman: Mr. Speaker, here is a fact: on PC letterhead the government promised 600 long-term care beds and 200 replacement beds. They built a long-term care facility with over 150 beds, and closed it. Given that Dr. Paul Parks, an ER doctor, and Bruce West, an expert in seniors' care, are both concerned that our vulnerable seniors will end up in acute-care beds because they don't get the care they need, to the Premier: do you understand that you are endangering the lives and safety of Albertans? Do you even care, Premier?

Ms Redford: Mr. Speaker, at this point in time I think there are an awful lot of people who are pretending to be experts in health care. I'll tell you what we know and what we've said to Albertans and what Albertans have said to us is that we can deliver health care in a way that gives Albertans choice, whether it's families or whether it's seniors. What we know is that Albertans have said that they want to have choice with respect to how they live and where they live, and we are providing the continuing care spaces with publicly funded health care to ensure that they have that choice.

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

Dr. Sherman: Mr. Speaker, emergency doctors and front-line staff make no apologies for being experts in health care.

Alberta Health Services Third-quarter Report

Dr. Sherman: Mr. Speaker, something stinks. The performance dashboard section of AHS's second-quarter report from December 2011 is abysmal. Heart bypass surgery wait times: fail. Hip and knee surgery wait times: fail. Radiation therapy access: fail. Placing our vulnerable in continuing care: fail. Physician and staff engagement: fail. Emergency wait times: fail. Now we hear that the third-quarter report is being delayed until May or June. To the Premier: why the cover-up?

Ms Redford: Well, this is the hon. member's interpretation of that quarterly report. What we've always said is that we will continue to strive to improve health care in this province. That is happening. There are some measures we are meeting, and there are some we need to work on, and we'll be completely honest with Albertans. But, Mr. Speaker, this Alberta health care system is not failing.

Dr. Sherman: Mr. Speaker, I'm a simple man. Green means good; yellow means not so good; red means fail. These were all red. Given that Cathy Roozen and her husband together donated \$27,000 to your leadership campaign and in return you rewarded her with the position of AHS board chair, to the Premier: do you honestly believe that you can delay the report until after the election and not have the integrity of AHS and your integrity called into question?

Ms Redford: Mr. Speaker, you know what? I'm going to say right now that we believe in transparency in this government. It was certainly information that was brought to the minister's attention with respect to this report. We are committed to ensuring that Albertans understand what's going on in the health care system. We will certainly ensure that that report is provided because we want Albertans to know what's going on. I would actually ask the hon. member to refer to the colour of his own tie.

2:00

Dr. Sherman: Mr. Speaker, given that the Premier's idea of transparency is receiving a big donation for her leadership campaign and rewarding that donation – there are three things in the world you can't hide: the sun, the moon, and the truth – Premier, why do you persist in trying to hide the truth about this government's abysmal failure on health care? Show us the report.

Ms Redford: Mr. Speaker, the question has been asked; the question has been answered.

I'll ask the minister of health to supplement this answer. He might have more information.

Mr. Horne: Well, Mr. Speaker, the third-quarter report for Alberta Health Services has not even been presented to me yet. I believe that Albertans expect me as their Minister of Health and Wellness to understand, to review, the data contained in the report, to talk about opportunities in the budget that was passed in the House this week, to apply new resources to improve performance in areas that are of concern, as well as celebrate our success.

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

Collection of School Fees

Dr. Sherman: Mr. Speaker, let's try something different. The

government's fudge-it budget promises unsustainable, inadequate underfunding of our public education system. School boards across the province have been forced to charge working families school fees, a regressive tax. A report in the *Calgary Beacon* mentions yet another school district which sends collection agencies after parents who can't afford to pay. To the Premier: why does your government allow school boards to sic collection agencies on working families for something that's supposed to be free, public education? Premier, why?

Ms Redford: Mr. Speaker, we have a fantastic education system in this province that we should all be proud of as Albertans. We have hard-working families and teachers that are making sure that our kids are getting educated well. We will always ensure that parents have choice. One of the choices that parents get to make is with respect to certain activities that they may want their children to be part of which are not included in our standard curriculum. It's entirely appropriate, if parents make those choices and they do choose to supplement, that they have the ability to do that. If they choose to make those agreements, then we expect them to honour the agreements.

Dr. Sherman: Mr. Speaker, the Premier is correct. We do have fantastic parents, teachers, and students. It's the government I'm talking about.

Given that Alberta children are not permitted to attend graduation ceremonies or purchase grad photos or a yearbook if their families can't afford these school fees, to the Premier: why does your PC government insist on wrecking graduation, the most important day in the lives of our young people, with collection agencies? Why, Premier?

Mr. Lukaszuk: Well, Mr. Speaker, here is a member who will blow out a candle just to prove that it's dark. One of the four best education systems in the world – fabulous parent satisfaction, kids performing better than children in most of the world and definitely outperforming any other Canadians, the most choice that any province offers in education – and this member will just find the negatives.

The fact of the matter is that our budget is growing from \$6.8 billion to \$7.1 billion. We are spending roughly \$35 million per school day. Mr. Speaker, this is a world-class education system.

Dr. Sherman: Mr. Speaker, I make no apologies for telling the truth and giving the facts, the facts that we have amongst the highest school noncompletion rates in the country and the lowest postsecondary participation rate in the country because of this government's failed policies. Given that our children are our greatest resource and our future, to the Premier: will you commit to doing the right thing? Will you say no to sending collection agencies to hound hard-working parents and say yes to ending school fees? Say yes, Premier. That's all you've got to do.

Ms Redford: Mr. Speaker, there was a pretty wonderful day in the province this week, and that was the day that this House passed the budget that provided sustainable funding for public education across this province on a three-year cycle. What that allows is for school boards to make the long-term decisions that they need to make to continue providing the highest quality of public education to children in this province so that they can continue to excel. That is something that we are very proud of as a government and will continue to support.

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

Municipal Funding

Mr. Hinman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Yesterday the Premier, in typical fearmongering fashion, with no regard for the facts, told the AAMD and C that the Wildrose was cutting funding to municipalities. If she had bothered to read our policy, she would have seen with our 10-10 municipal funding plan that it not only increases funding to municipalities but also removes the restrictive conditions this government places on the funds for their own political agendas. To the Premier: were you again being misinformed by those you picked to surround yourself with about the Wildrose municipal funding plan?

Ms Redford: Mr. Speaker, I read with great interest the fiscal plan that was put forward by this party, and what I see in that plan is a \$400 million reduction in transfers to municipalities. That's a fact. When you decide that you're going to cut infrastructure down to \$4 billion, you're going to cut infrastructure. It's not just infrastructure spending that you cut; it's infrastructure. That's schools, and that's hospitals, and that impacts municipalities, and we'll stand behind that.

Mr. Hinman: It's typical of this Premier. She only reads the first line, and she always misreads it.

Again to the Premier: is this the kind of campaign rhetoric Albertans can expect from you and your party given the distortion of the facts and the misinformation you declare about the Wildrose given that we've already seen it with your ridiculous statement about our municipal funding, our funding for front-line workers, and our priority for building the schools we need? Premier, are you so out of touch with the facts or are you so . . .*

Ms Redford: You know, Mr. Speaker, what Albertans are going to be able to expect from this Premier and our party in this election . . .

Mr. Hinman: Point of order.

Ms Redford: . . . is a vibrant discussion on policy, a vibrant discussion on defining what the future of this province will be that will not be based on fearmongering. There are other parties that do that. We're going to talk about what Alberta can be in the future, why we have faith and optimism in our children and in our families. That's going to be an exciting campaign.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Glenmore has the floor.

Mr. Hinman: I'd like my full 35 seconds if she had any respect.

Given the confusion and, according to you, the clear misunderstanding by Albertans as to where you stood on the judicial inquiry on intimidation of our health care providers and where you stood on stopping the overbuild of our power lines and what a fixed election date means to you versus Albertans, it's no wonder Albertans believe that their word is their bond, and they ask: is your bond any better than a Bre-X bond?

Ms Redford: Mr. Speaker, I'm certainly glad I waited for the full 35 seconds.

I'll tell you, Mr. Speaker, we are very clear on what an independent judicial inquiry looks like, and we called one. We promised to fix election periods, and we did. We have kept every commitment that we have made in this Legislature and outside of this Legislature. We are transparent, we are honest, and we can't wait to get to the polls.

*See page 763, right column, paragraph 14

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

Long-term Care for Seniors (continued)

Ms Notley: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Albertans have come to expect delay tactics from a Conservative government mired in scandal on the eve of an election. Perhaps the most disturbing is the Premier's tactic of deliberately withholding the most recent Alberta Health Services performance report, which is now due but will also not be released until after the election. Will this Premier stop gaming the system for political purposes, release this report, and take responsibility for her government's failed health care record?

Mr. Horne: Mr. Speaker, there is no delay tactic here. Alberta Health Services has yet to present the final version of the Q3 report to me. Our plan, which would be a responsible plan of a responsible government, is to sit down and discuss with them those results, highlight the areas we want to target for specific improvement, and then apply new resources that are available to the budget to do just that. That is what a reasonable, prudent government, knowledgeable about effective health care system performance, would do. That's what we're going to do.

Ms Notley: Well, Mr. Speaker, that's what a scared government would do on the eve of an election.

Now, given that this government hasn't increased long-term care since 2004, amounting to a 20 per cent cut in long-term care, while 473 people are currently occupying hospital beds waiting for care and given that this is one of the primary reasons for wait times in ER, why won't the Premier admit that freezing long-term care beds is not the way to solve the problems in our hospitals and come clean about the latest performance measures that AHS is withholding from the public?

Ms Redford: Mr. Speaker, there's been no freezing of long-term care beds. The fact that these sorts of suggestions are made, quote, on the eve of an election does not surprise me at all. This is a government that is committed to continuing care, to supporting families in their homes, to ensuring that we can have publicly funded health care for seniors who can have accommodation choices and are going to be able to live where they want to live. This is exactly the commitment that we did make, we have made, and we'll continue to make.

2:10

Ms Notley: Well, Mr. Speaker, I'd suggest that the Premier should read AHS's reports because those show a freeze.

Given that experts agree that replacing long-term care beds with supportive living beds will not meet the complex medical needs of our elderly and may in fact cause them to end up back in hospital more frequently and given that stats around ER wait times have not improved as a result of this failed strategy, will this Premier tell Albertans why she won't build new long-term care beds instead of waiting for her private developer funders to build inadequate supportive living?

Ms Redford: Mr. Speaker, what we are going to ensure that Alberta seniors have is an array of options. There are Alberta seniors that want to have choice with respect to where to live, and they want that accommodation to be supported by a publicly funded health care system. What we are talking about, what continuing care means is to give Albertans the option of being able to choose where they live with a cap maintained – so no fearmongering anymore about that – and to ensure that there are

public health care dollars that are appropriate to the level of care needed for every Alberta senior.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Red Deer-North, followed by the hon. Member for Calgary-Buffalo.

Assured Income for the Severely Handicapped

Mrs. Jablonski: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I've met many people throughout the province who receive AISH, assured income for the severely handicapped. They anxiously awaited Budget 2012. As part of Budget 2012 this government delivered on the Premier's promise to increase the AISH monthly benefit by \$400 per month and double the employment income exemptions. Many of the AISH clients in my constituency have been asking when they can expect to see the \$400 increase. My question to the Premier: will the cheques be delivered on time and soon?

Ms Redford: Mr. Speaker, it was a wonderful day in this province this week when this budget passed this House. What this budget did was it increased AISH recipients' benefits by \$400 a month effective April 1. The members on this side of the House supported that budget and supported that increase and are proud to have done it.

Mrs. Jablonski: Mr. Speaker, I just have one supplemental question for the Premier. Will AISH clients living in long-term care also receive the \$400 per month increase in benefits?

Ms Redford: Mr. Speaker, there are no qualifications to this. This is a commitment that I made as leader, it's a commitment we made as a government, and we passed it in the budget.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Buffalo, followed by the hon. Member for Strathcona.

Mr. Hehr: Mr. Speaker, I'd like to say what a true honour it has been to serve with both you and every single member in this honourable House over the course of the last four years.

Home-schooling

Mr. Hehr: Mr. Speaker, I also believe that home-schooling is a valid accommodation made by governments to provide unique learning environments for some of our children. That being said, I'm highly concerned that this minister is walking away from his responsibility to ensure that every child in Alberta has the skills they need to succeed. To the Minister of Education: why are home-schoolers explicitly exempted from the requirement to write standardized exams that apply to all other Alberta students?

Mr. Lukaszuk: Well, actually, I thank you for that pitch, a slow one. I'll try to get it out of the park. The reason, Mr. Speaker, is that every parent in the province of Alberta can exempt their child from writing a provincial achievement test. Why should it be any different for home-schooling parents? It's perhaps one of the best kept secrets, but parents do have the option to exempt their children from writing PATs in grade 3, 6, and 9.

Mr. Hehr: Are you telling me that all home-schoolers are regularly checked on their progress by this government to ensure that they're learning the curriculum and getting the skills that they need?

Mr. Lukaszuk: Mr. Speaker, home-schooling parents are affiliated with a liaison from Alberta Education, and it is made

certain that they follow the suggested teaching/learning plan for their children, but they can pick the resources that they utilize for implementing that plan at their own volition. They are affiliated with Alberta Education, and there is a parameter of what children have to be taught. But like any other parents they have the option to exempt their children from PATs.

Mr. Hehr: I'm just highly worried about these children's future and their ability to succeed. Does the minister feel comfortable with his current parameters and his checking and following up on the curriculum and whether they're learning in a proper, due, and responsible manner?

Mr. Lukaszuk: I know that this member is worried because I listened to the *Rutherford Show* today, and he's worried that these parents may be teaching these children about the Holocaust not taking place and many other scary things. I know Albertans are different. I know Albertans will teach their kids the right things. I know Albertans want their kids to succeed and be competitive in this economy. They're simply having a choice, and they're exercising their choice. They're choosing to teach their kids at home, and there's nothing wrong with that.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Strathcona, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

Seniors' Property Tax Deferral

Mr. Quest: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The Seniors' Property Tax Deferral Act has received royal assent, and as a government member and as an Albertan I still have some questions as to the benefit of this type of program. My first question is to the Premier. What is the seniors' property tax deferral program going to do to help Albertans in their senior years that many of our other programs aren't doing already?

Ms Redford: Well, Mr. Speaker, this government is committed to ensuring that seniors have as much flexibility with respect to the choices in their life as possible. The Seniors' Property Deferral Act will allow seniors to defer their property taxes, which, of course, will allow them more options with respect to their household expenses.

We know that seniors who are active and vibrant and living in our communities do best when they have the support to be able to live in their homes. They are our friends, they are our neighbours, they are our family, and we're very proud of this program, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Quest: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My first supplemental also to the Premier: what about low-income seniors who already face debts? We have many of these. I fear this program may encourage some seniors to accrue even more debt.

Ms Redford: Mr. Speaker, this is not going to be a program that we are going to simply launch without proper information and education. There will be an application process for this. The reason we want that is to ensure that people are making the right decisions and are not incurring debt. We know that many people who are living in their own homes and have invested well can make strong and proper decisions with respect to the way that they can supplement their income, and this is another option for those people. But as part of the work that we do in government, we'll be continuing to support public education campaigns that are going to

allow seniors to make those choices and have flexibility in their own lives.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Quest: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My second supplemental is also to the Premier. How is the interest rate going to be set?

Ms Redford: Well, Mr. Speaker, this program is designed to help senior homeowners to be more independent and take advantage of the increase in their home's value. I can assure you that the interest rate for the loan will be responsibly balanced so as not to be a deterrent for seniors. Plus, seniors who do take advantage of the program will only need to pay back the loan when they sell their home. We're doing our best to help seniors keep more of their own cash in their wallets.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Creek.

Sand and Gravel Extraction Management

Ms Blakeman: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Most people don't know the term "alluvial aquifer," but Albertans do know how vital groundwater is to every aspect of our lives, from industry to agricultural irrigation to drinking water. Alluvial aquifers are a central piece of this system, and they are our cleaners and our filters. They are also a source of gravel. Our groundwater is at risk by allowing gravel mining in aquifers across the province. To the minister of environment: why isn't the minister protecting these groundwater aquifers?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mrs. McQueen: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker, and thank you to the member for the question. Quite frankly, I've said it in the House before, and I'll say it again today. We're doing an excellent job in making sure that we are protecting the environment and water. We're doing groundwater mapping throughout this province. We've mapped from Edmonton to Calgary. We'll be mapping in the southern district beyond that, and within three to five years this entire province will have groundwater mapping completed.

Ms Blakeman: Mapping isn't protecting alluvial aquifers.

Back to the same minister: when gravel mining is known to cause channel instability and erosion in rivers and can seriously lower water tables over time, why won't the minister face the fact that gravel has far more value in our river basins than dug out of them?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mrs. McQueen: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. Quite frankly, gravel is something that we use as a resource in this province. When we take it out of the rivers and it renews itself, it's an important resource that we have. We use it for many different things in the province.

We do, though, have rules and regulations for when the extraction of gravel is happening. Those rules and regulations must take place. Quite frankly, our department monitors and evaluates that very well, the compliance, that that happens.

Ms Blakeman: No, Minister, gravel does not renew itself. Given that once the damage is done, no amount of reclamation will ever restore our riverbeds and aquifers, at what point will this minister

choose protection of our water and say “no more” to gravel mining on our rivers?

2:20

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mrs. McQueen: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Quite frankly, as I said, we have very strong regulations with regard to gravel mining within this province. We make sure that we do that. We continually monitor that. We make sure that regulations are in place. We will extract gravel in this province, but we will always do it in a very environmental and responsible manner.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Creek, followed by the hon. Member for Airdrie-Chestermere.

School Capital Construction

Mr. Zwozdesky: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Congratulations on your retirement, and our sincere thank you to you.

Alberta’s population is growing rapidly. In fact, the southeast corner of Edmonton is one the fastest-growing areas in Alberta. Thousands of new families have moved into this area, including the Meadows and Silver Berry, and they need a new school. My questions are to the Premier. What can you and our government do to ensure that schools are in fact being built or will be built in high-growth areas like Silver Berry and the Meadows?

Ms Redford: Well, Mr. Speaker, it’s very exciting to be able to talk about education. Budget 2012 has helped us to ensure that we can provide sustainable funding with respect to infrastructure and education programming for students. Mr. Speaker, currently there are 76 new schools and major renovations in various stages of planning, design, and construction in Alberta. We are looking ahead. We know that there need to be new schools in this province, and they’re being built.

Mr. Zwozdesky: Thank you, Madam Premier. My constituents will be pleased to know that.

Students in my area and elsewhere are sitting in school buses for very long periods of time, and they want to know what you and our government are doing to address this very important situation for our kids.

Ms Redford: Well, Mr. Speaker, the Minister of Education is working very hard on this. As part of our plan for education we are conducting two transportation trials now that are aimed at reducing bus ride times and enhancing the educational opportunities that students can have while they are travelling.

There’s no doubt that we need to take a look at every route every year to ensure that kids aren’t using time ineffectively on buses. Through co-operative transportation funding to school boards we are looking at getting fewer buses following each other through neighbourhoods and shorter rides for children on buses. Our education system is recognized as one of the best in the world, but we have to make sure kids get to it, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Zwozdesky: Thank you very much. Madam Premier, what additional support can you and our government provide to those children who have so-called extra needs or perhaps special needs? This is an extremely important issue for my residents in the Silver Berry, Meadows, and other areas.

Ms Redford: Mr. Speaker, it’s the future of our society to ensure

that all kids are able to learn and to excel to the best of their ability. This budget took a first step towards implementing a new funding model that supports inclusive practices in schools around this province. This funding model ensures that every school board has the flexibility to support in the classrooms the needs for each child as defined by the family. Funding will be used to provide the supports and services that parents and teachers have told us they need for learners. Together we are making sure that we are preparing our children not just for today but for tomorrow.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-McCall, followed by the hon. Member for Grande Prairie-Wapiti.

Residential Construction Standards

Mr. Kang: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I still have the note you sent me when I asked my first question. The note said: job well done. Although my legs were shaking, that was a great encouragement for me. Thank you very much, and congratulations on your retirement.

Coming back to business, the review of the Condominium Property Act has been ongoing for some time now. Last fall the review was supposed to allow for input from condo owners and renters as well. That didn’t happen. To the Minister of Service Alberta: when will the minister consult these owners and renters whose lives are directly impacted by the legislation?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Bhullar: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Allow me to take a moment to say thank you very much. I still have the note you sent me after my maiden speech. If I recall, it said that that was one of the best speeches you had heard in this Assembly in all your years of being here. [interjection] It’s not a form letter, sir. It’s appropriate for me at this point to also mention the fact that you, sir, were elected to this Assembly one year before God sent me onto this Earth. Thank you very much.

To the member, thank you very much for your question. He’s perhaps one of the most likable fellows in this Assembly. Sir, when we move forth with the next phase of consultation, you’ll be sure to be on the list. We will consult with all Albertans. We’ve composed, essentially, a white paper with industry experts, and the next phase is to consult with residents.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Kang: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. To the minister again: when will condo owners get legislation that will protect them from disasters such as the Penhorwood complex in Fort Mac and Bellavera Green in Leduc?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Bhullar: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I would invite the member to bring forth a motion to extend this period in the Legislative Assembly for a few more weeks, and perhaps we could do it now.

In all seriousness, the issues that the member brought forth with respect to Fort McMurray and Leduc are issues that involve structural components of the building, which are dealt with through Municipal Affairs. The issues that are dealt with through Service Alberta’s legislation are issues relating to condo board governance.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Kang: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I think we are open to that offer any time for a couple more weeks.

To the minister again. I'm not seeing the government walk the talk. What is the government doing that will actually strengthen consumer protection for condo owners?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Bhullar: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The fact is that we brought forth a group of industry experts, people representing every single stakeholder that has something to do with condo board governance. They've composed a paper, a white paper essentially, and the next phase is to go out and consult with the public on that paper. This will be happening in short order, I would hope within this particular year. I can assure the member that we're taking steps to ensure that condo owners are always protected. We were the first jurisdiction to have condo legislation, and I'm proud of that fact.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Airdrie-Chestermere.

Election Act Reports

Mr. Anderson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Today Elections Alberta announced it found at least 15 separate instances of illegal donations to political parties, with more ongoing. We can confirm that our party or CAs were not contacted, to my knowledge. We asked the CEO if he could share the details, but he can't. Why? Well, accordingly to the CEO, because of a law that this Premier passed as Justice minister that prohibits the Chief Electoral Officer from disclosing the findings of these illegal donations and these investigations. Why did you pass that law while you were Justice minister?

Ms Redford: Mr. Speaker, we have an Election Act in this province that was passed by this Legislature, that was vigorously debated in this Legislature, and ensured, most importantly, something this hon. member does not understand: the independence of officers of this Legislature.

We need to ensure that the Chief Electoral Officer has the ability to do the investigations that that office feels necessary. The amendments to the Election Act that were put forward in this House last time around were amendments that were recommended by the Chief Electoral Officer.

Mr. Anderson: Let me get this straight. Just confirm it for me. You passed a law, that until you were Justice minister was not the case, that bans the Chief Electoral Officer from disclosing the findings of investigations into illegal donations when they're found, illegal donations by political parties, probably by your political party. Why would you do that? Does that not look like a cover-up to you?

Ms Redford: He's making a suggestion and drawing a conclusion that is entirely inappropriate. First of all, there has been no suggestion today, as he stated in his preamble, that he can come to any conclusion with respect to what the Chief Electoral Officer is investigating at the moment. What we know the Chief Electoral Officer is continuing to do is to do his work independently and to ensure that he is able to make appropriate recommendations to prosecutors.

That election legislation, Mr. Speaker, allows the Chief Electoral Officer to do his work, to make recommendations to a prosecutor where appropriate, and where there are offences committed – and I reject the innuendo from this member that any

have actually been committed – it will actually allow for an appropriate independent prosecution.

Mr. Anderson: Someone is sure protesting.

I'll give you this challenge, then, Madam Premier. If you're so confident in how squeaky clean your party is on this matter, will you please commit today to allow the Chief Electoral Officer, through legislation if necessary, to be able, when illegal donations are found, to publish those findings and actually show Albertans that you're not part of this cover-up? It looks like you are at the centre of this cover-up.

Ms Redford: Mr. Speaker, the Chief Electoral Officer had the opportunity to bring forward recommendations with respect to the Election Act. That is what the Chief Electoral Officer did the last time we reviewed the act.

If this is a suggestion that this member would like to make and he somehow feels that he is an expert on the Election Act and has a better understanding as to how to administer elections in Alberta, then I would suggest that he introduce legislation.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Grande Prairie-Wapiti, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

2:30

Landowner Property Rights

Mr. Drysdale: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Property rights are very important to my constituents. They want to know that the government is going to respect their rights and follow through on the feedback the Property Rights Task Force received. My question is to the Premier. Is this government going to be respecting those rights and use the feedback going forward?

Ms Redford: Mr. Speaker, in 1972 Premier Lougheed introduced the Alberta Bill of Rights, which is enforced by a human rights commission, and it enshrined the security of property rights in this province. Now, 40 years on, this government, a Progressive Conservative government, is renewing that covenant with Albertans by passing new legislation that strengthens those protections and cannot be superseded. The feedback that we received was exactly why we passed the Property Rights Advocate Act. We have strengthened the ability of Albertans to have confidence in their property rights and provided resources to allow them to navigate the system if they have concerns.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Drysdale: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My first supplemental is also again to the Premier. What is the role of the property rights advocate?

Ms Redford: Mr. Speaker, the property rights advocate will be a one-stop source of impartial information on processes, compensation, and resolution mechanisms, including access to the courts. The advocate will be required to table an annual report on its office's business each year in this Legislature. Landowners told us that they wanted to be consulted, that they wanted to have these resources, and we put that in place.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Drysdale: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My final question is also to the Premier. What are the next steps that will be taken now that the advocate is in place?

Ms Redford: Mr. Speaker, we will be looking at how to improve engagement, reviewing all legislation associated with property rights in the province as well as the requirements for reclamation and remediation. Currently SRD is leading the review of the Expropriation Act and the Surface Rights Act, and that's going to be a good piece of public policy. We're looking forward to designing an engagement process that will meet the needs of Albertans and allow Albertans to express their concerns and issues with respect to this legislation.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar, followed by the hon. Member for Lesser Slave Lake.

Electricity Prices

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My first question is to the Premier. Given that over 650 megawatts of additional generation has been constructed in the last eight years in and around Fort McMurray and that this megawatt power is eligible for very generous tax and royalty concessions, how can this government continue to state that there are no subsidies here in Alberta for the construction of new electricity generation stations?

Dr. Morton: Mr. Speaker, the type of cogeneration that the hon. member is speaking of is part of our clean energy strategy. You're getting double use, double duty, out of every hydrocarbon that is burned. Just in the same way that we encourage wind, we're encouraging cogeneration.

Mr. MacDonald: It's a subsidy, and this government knows it.

Again to the Premier: given that electricity deregulation has forced consumers to pay over \$20 billion more than they should have paid on their powers bills . . .

An Hon. Member: How do you figure that?

Mr. MacDonald: I've got it calculated, hon. member.

. . . how can this government claim that consumers benefit from electricity deregulation when over the course of the last 12 years they have paid an additional \$20 billion on their power bills?

Dr. Morton: Mr. Speaker, I sort of bid farewell to the hon. member yesterday, but I'm glad he's back today. I'd look forward to seeing how he arrived at those numbers, I guess, outside of the Assembly.

I'll repeat what I've said before. Since we deregulated, there's been 6,600 megawatts of generation built here at a cost of \$11 billion, and none of that is on the consumer. It's all private sector.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Again to the Premier: if what the Minister of Energy has told us is true, how do you explain that \$1.5 billion in subsidies, after deregulation was approved by this government, was given to consumers? That's a subsidy. That's not true.

Dr. Morton: Did the hon. member just say subsidies to consumers? I think he did. I think he misspoke.

I'm simply very happy to repeat probably for the last time in this session that the average price of electricity per megawatt hour for the last five years has been 8 cents. Lo and behold, what's the average for the month of March? It's 8.3 cents. We have a system that's working quite well, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Lesser Slave Lake, followed by the hon. Member for Calgary-Varsity.

Slave Lake Family Care Clinic

Ms Calahasen: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. One of the family care pilot projects announced today will be located in Slave Lake, to be opened on April 16. Great news for our region, which was so devastated by last spring's wildfires. People have been so worried about health services, especially after losing many of our long-time doctors. My question is to the Premier. How will this family care clinic help address the physician shortage in Slave Lake?

Ms Redford: Well, Mr. Speaker, it's an exciting day because the family care clinic model will provide people in Slave Lake with a home in the health care system. What's really interesting about Slave Lake is that it's a tremendously diverse community that, unfortunately, does not have a primary care network. So this is an important step as the community continues to rebuild after last year's devastating fire. What's really important about the family care clinic model is that it responds to the services that are needed in the community, and the bulk of the services will be provided and can be provided by a team of health professionals: some doctors, some nurse practitioners. It's what the community needs.

Ms Calahasen: Mr. Speaker, that's correct. Our community needs many of those things. It gives me great hope. Again to the Premier: given the fact that we need these services, what services will be offered at the Slave Lake family care clinic? This is real life in Slave Lake.

Ms Redford: Mr. Speaker, the family care clinic in Slave Lake is quite unique because it's going to be able to offer comprehensive primary care such as advice, diagnosis, and treatment, which will be provided by and will include an emphasis on wellness, which when I was last visiting the community was terribly important in terms of dealing with the impacts on families as a result of some of the issues last year. Family care clinics will be open, this one in particular, from 7 in the morning to 9 at night seven days a week. That makes a difference for families, for moms and dads. As I mentioned, since Slave Lake does not have a primary care network, it will be the first time that they'll have an interdisciplinary team of people in their community.

Ms Calahasen: Thank you, Madam Premier. We all know that the Slave Lake region has unique needs and serves many northern and aboriginal communities. Could you please again tell the people of my constituency how the unique needs of our communities will be met through the new family care clinic?

Ms Redford: Mr. Speaker, before the family care clinic was established, there was a great deal of consultation that was undertaken with the community. There will be an emphasis on health promotion, chronic disease management, screening, disease and injury prevention, family planning and pregnancy counselling. This clinic is proximate to what we now see at the hospital so that there will be an opportunity for convenient exchange of services and supports. Having the ability to drop in for unscheduled appointments matters to people in Slave Lake. They're going to have that opportunity in family care clinics. This is a priority area of focus, particularly with respect to supporting the aboriginal population in Slave Lake.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Varsity, followed by the hon. Member for Calgary-Foothills.

Long-term Care Serious Incidents

Mr. Chase: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. For all of us concerned for the well-being of seniors and other vulnerable Albertans in this province's care facilities, the front page of yesterday's *Calgary Herald* was truly chilling. Over the past seven years, since Auditor General Fred Dunn released his scathing long-term care report, there have been more than 1,000 confirmed cases of abuse in such facilities, including 160 cases of bodily harm. To the Minister of Seniors: as horrifying as these figures are, are they just the tip of the iceberg? How many incidents of suspected abuse go unreported by family members out of fear that a loved one may suffer retaliation?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. VanderBurg: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I mean, it's hard to estimate what's unreported; I only have what's reported. Over the last seven years there have been, actually, 700 cases. Two years ago we had an updated act. Since then there have been about 80 per year reported. Of all the cases, less than 2 per cent are deemed criminal, and we immediately go right to the authorities for help.

2:40

Mr. Chase: According to the paper the average number of reportings was 500 per year. Quite a difference from 80.

Why doesn't the Protection for Persons in Care Act protect the anonymity of those reporting suspected cases of abuse in care facilities to ensure there is no retaliation?

Mr. VanderBurg: Mr. Speaker, there is absolutely no retaliation to anybody that makes a report of abuse. We all have an obligation, and I've said this very, very clearly. For anybody that suspects abuse, don't wait for the Legislature to open; pick up your phone, 1.888.357.9339. You have an obligation to report. It's the law.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Chase: Thank you. And enforcing that law is extremely important.

Will this government commit to inspecting all long-term care facilities annually and to publishing the results in a timely fashion to protect vulnerable Albertans?

Mr. VanderBurg: Mr. Speaker, it's very clear in my mandate. We need to make sure that we set the standards in all our long-term care facilities, and we must do inspections annually.

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

Provincial Tax Policy

Mr. Webber: Thank you. Mr. Speaker, it has been a true honour to serve with you in this Assembly.

Since the budget was first introduced, there has been a lot of talk that this government plans on raising taxes. Now that the budget has been passed, can the Premier explain what this government's intentions are with regard to taxes?

Ms Redford: Well, Mr. Speaker, as I've said all along, we're very proud of this budget. What this budget did was introduce no tax increases and no new taxes. Now Albertans can have confidence that that is the future. So no more of this pretending that something might happen. This budget is the budget of Alberta. It

has set a strong fiscal framework. Let's not forget the title of this budget, Investing in People. That's what this government will do.

Mr. Webber: Again to the Premier. Your revenue projections are optimistic, to say the least. How confident are you that we will achieve the surplus position forecast in this budget?

Ms Redford: Mr. Speaker, it's been really interesting in the last couple of weeks to see the commentary with respect to projections in this budget. This is a responsible budget. Three major Canadian banks and their assessments praised Alberta for having the strongest economic outlook in the country. You'll know that in every budget that we table, we include the comparisons. We're firmly in the middle with respect to those projections. Our oil price forecast is actually slightly below the average of private forecasts, and based on those forecasts, we are confident we will achieve a surplus of – please listen – \$5 billion by 2014.

Mr. Webber: Mr. Speaker, extensive polling to find out how our citizens are viewed by others in Canada showed there were considerable perceptions that Alberta was a conservative place and that compassion, open-mindedness, and tolerance were not always what they could or should be. To the Premier: does Budget 2012 support this view?

Ms Redford: Mr. Speaker, they were right about one thing: we are conservative. We are Progressive Conservative, and we are proud of it. I can tell you that Budget 2012 supports those sentiments. As I said, Budget 2012 is entitled Investing in People and is helping all Albertans reach their full potential and achieve their goals. Seventy-five per cent of this budget is being invested in people through core programs that provide Albertans with better access to health care, to education, and to the infrastructure that builds their communities. We are continuing to support vulnerable Albertans, and we're proud of it.

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

Infrastructure Funding

Mr. Bhardwaj: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. My questions are to the Premier. Alberta has had one of the fastest growing economies and populations in North America, and our province is set to thrive in the years ahead. What is this government doing to ensure that communities have the room and the resources to help Alberta reach its full potential?

Ms Redford: Well, Mr. Speaker, we are investing in Albertans, and we are investing in Alberta. My goal is to ensure that this province continues to be the best place to live and to work and to plan for your family's future. That includes meeting Alberta's needs in their communities with high-quality, well-designed hospitals and clinics, with schools and postsecondary learning institutions, with seniors' facilities, and with other public buildings. We have strong and safe communities that also require adequate, predictable funding that this government is committed to. Unlike other parties, we will not balance this budget on the backs of municipalities.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Bhardwaj: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. My next question, to the Premier again: how does Alberta compare to other jurisdictions when it comes to support for municipalities?

Ms Redford: One of the things that we're proud of on this side of

the House is our investment in infrastructure. There are other political parties that think we invest too much in infrastructure. Mr. Speaker, we invest to municipalities \$500 per person compared to a Canada-wide average of \$192. We do that because we believe that every community in this province matters. We know we need to invest in infrastructure to not just ensure that rural communities are sustainable but that they grow because that's the future of Alberta.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Bhardwaj: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. My final question, to the Premier again: Madam Premier, are you saying that this government will not slash funding to the municipalities for infrastructure?

Ms Redford: Mr. Speaker, this government is committed to continuing to support municipalities, to ensuring that we are putting funding in place that municipalities have asked for. You know, whether it's AUMA or AAMD and C, what we hear is that the municipal sustainability initiative matters to Albertans and that it matters to communities. We will continue to invest in infrastructure, and unlike other parties, we will not slash infrastructure spending.

The Speaker: Hon. members, 18 members participated today, 106 questions and responses, and I want you to know that I will never ever forget this last question period. [applause]

Members' Statements

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

New Democratic Party Election Choice

Ms Notley: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's four years since Albertans last elected people to make decisions that would deliver on the benefits of living in Alberta. Since then they have repeatedly disappointed. Some have been hurt; others are angry.

Alberta is prosperous in part because of diverse and gigantic natural resources, renewable and nonrenewable. That wealth belongs to all of us, not just to a few friends of the current government tied to corporate interests, wanting to make money for their owners instead of the people of Alberta. Government should make decisions to ensure prosperity benefits the real owners, the people of Alberta. Regardless of who sat in the Premier's chair, this government for four years has carried on the same old PC Party commitment to corporate friends.

Alberta is a prosperous place because of hard-working, innovative Albertans, but the government consistently ignores investments that will ensure life is safe, affordable, and healthy for them. Very low taxes for very wealthy people and low royalties on our bitumen have been this government's agenda. They have broken promises to build long-term care for seniors. They have underfunded education so that special needs and kindergarten have suffered, and school boards have been forced into difficult decisions to close neighbourhood schools. They've let costs for postsecondary education rise so that young people begin their working lives with tens of thousands of dollars of debt. They've ignored warnings from physicians about chaos in health care that is hurting ill Albertans.

This government has lost touch with the real lives and needs of ordinary Albertans. Worse, they have deliberately broken trust with them, Mr. Speaker. Their secret decisions have ensured that a

minority of their good friends benefit from Alberta, but behind closed doors they remain deaf to the needs of the rest of us.

We are days from an election, and the NDP offers hope to those Albertans who dream of receiving their fair share of our province's great wealth finally. The NDP is a political choice that believes that the prosperity of Alberta belongs to all of us. The NDP has practical proposals that will let all Albertans know they can have affordable utilities, seniors living in dignity, and young people making a good start in a clean environment.

Mr. Speaker, we are proud that we'll be offering these progressive choices to Albertans in every corner of the province.

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

Liberal Party Election Choice

Dr. Sherman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. We live in the greatest province in the greatest country in the world. It is not hyperbole to say that Alberta is blessed: blessed with a superabundance of natural resources, blessed with the most beautiful scenery in the world, and blessed with a great people, its best resource.

There is one challenge, however, facing Albertans today, a government which says no whenever Albertans express their desire for better access to publicly delivered health care, education, seniors' care. Albertans desire balanced budgets and desire trust in their leaders and good government and real change.

2:50

This government needs to be stopped. It was once a source of solutions and goodness for this province, but before you leave this Legislature, Mr. Speaker, please take them with you. It is time to remove this government. When Albertans ask for an independent public inquiry into our broken health care system and to fix our health care, what do they say? They say yes. When Albertans ask for our seniors to be treated with dignity, the answer should be yes. When Albertans ask for an end to school fees and for postsecondary education to be more affordable, the answer should be yes. When Albertans ask for an end to insanely high power bills, it's a no-brainer that the correct answer should be yes. When Albertans ask for an end to bullying of doctors, health care workers, and municipal councillors, the correct answer is yes. When Albertans say, "Will you please stop wasting our hard-earned tax dollars?" – one more time – the answer is yes. The Alberta government is allergic to the word "yes," and this is why Albertans have so many problems.

Mr. Speaker, it is time to return the Alberta Liberals to the Legislature, like we did in 1906. To that I say yes.

Tabling Returns and Reports

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Infrastructure.

Mr. Johnson: Yes. Mr. Speaker, I'd like to table the supplemental responses to Committee of Supply questions raised in Infrastructure's main estimates debate by the Member for Calgary-McCall and the Member for Calgary-Glenmore on March 6, 2012.

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

Mr. MacDonald: Yes. Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. You never ever did send me a note when I was first elected, and I'm so disappointed.

The Speaker: But I gave you a hug.

Mr. MacDonald: Not that I remember.

I have a tabling today which is a document that I received, and I'm grateful to have acquired it. It's from the PC Alberta Campaign College, that occurred in February, and it is the speaking notes and the responses and the backgrounders for the Alberta PC Party to try to defend electricity deregulation during the run-up to the election and, I can only assume, during the election. If you were to look for this in a library, Mr. Speaker, you'd have to go to the fiction section to find it.

Thank you.

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

Ms Blakeman: Thanks very much, Mr. Speaker. On behalf of my constituent Ms Wellsman I am tabling a letter in which she is putting out her concerns about the Alberta dental association and their fee schedule. The last fee schedule was in 1997, and she notes that this is of great concern in that the fees have increased. The dental plan administrators tend to use a newer fee, yet your insurers will only pay the older fee. Suggesting that people shop around for a competitive rate is just not possible in this day and age because there is no competitive rate, so she's asking for the necessary steps to be taken, that a dental association fee schedule be produced and maintained.

Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

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

Mr. Chase: Thank you. The hon. Speaker sent me several notes, primarily of the cautionary kind.

Mr. Speaker, my final tabling comes with a regret, that I have not had the sessional time to table hundreds of Albertans' letters expressing concerns over clear-cutting. However, the strategic placement of a single letter, X, on a ballot will end the clear-cutting practice.

I am tabling a further 20 letters, out of the hundreds I've received, from the following individuals, who are concerned about the proposed logging in the west Bragg Creek. They are requesting a complete, facilitated, and accessible public consultation: Sandy Westinghouse, Ada Casello, Greg Axelson, Esq., Jolayne Anderson, Laveryne Green, Mataya Allan, Erik Allan, Cheryl Cohen, Lorie D. Cooper, Jeremy and Chelsea Ciolli, Dr. Keith Allan, Angel Wilson, Christine McNalley, Sandy Lyndon, Simon Coward, Peggy Wedderburn, Lisa Walpole, David Blackwood, and Giles Parker.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker, for your time served.

The Speaker: Are there others? The hon. Leader of the Official Opposition.

Dr. Sherman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'd like to table five copies of an article written by Christopher Walsh of the *Calgary Beacon*. The article refers to "Alberta school boards shaking down parents with collection agencies." I wish to table five copies of this.

Mr. Speaker, I would like to thank you for your time served.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Municipal Affairs.

Mr. Griffiths: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased to table with the Assembly today five copies of the Capital Region Board's 2011 annual report. I'd like to commend the board for its continued work in the implementation of the growth plan for the capital region. The plan is going to be an invaluable tool for the region as we move forward, and it's a great example of the

collaborative work that many of Alberta's municipal leaders are undertaking to make their communities the best place in the world to live.

Thank you.

Tablings to the Clerk

The Clerk: I wish to advise the House that the following documents were deposited with the office of the Clerk. On behalf of the hon. Mr. Horne, Minister of Health and Wellness, pursuant to the Health Professions Act the Alberta College and Association of Chiropractors annual report to government 2010-11, the Alberta College of Occupational Therapists 2010-11 annual report, the Alberta College of Optometrists annual report to the government 2010, the College and Association of Respiratory Therapists of Alberta annual report 2011, the College of Alberta Dental Assistants annual report 2010-11, the College of Alberta Psychologists annual report 2010-11, the College of Dental Technologists of Alberta 2010 annual report, and the College of Registered Psychiatric Nurses of Alberta annual report 2011.

Projected Government Business

Ms Blakeman: Well, I'll be really interested to hear the answer to this. Under Standing Order 7(6) I'm going to ask the Government House Leader if he could share with us the projected government business for the week commencing April 2.

The Speaker: The hon. Government House Leader.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I would suggest to the House that in the event that we're here on April 2, we will be discussing the Education Act, Bill 2, and such other acts as may be placed on the Order Paper.

The Speaker: Okay. We've got two points of order that arose during the question period. The first one was by the hon. Member for Airdrie-Chestermere, but I'll deal with the second one first, by the hon. Member for Calgary-Glenmore.

Point of Order Speaking Time

The Speaker: I do believe the hon. Member for Calgary-Glenmore is going to rise on a point of order and say that he was interrupted, that he did not have an opportunity to conclude his question before the Premier responded, and he's right. The Premier showed a lot of enthusiasm, jumped into the question before the hon. member had completed his full 35-second allotment. There seems to be a lot of enthusiasm these days around this place and a lot of energy, and that clearly is a rightful point of order. The Premier should be advised that she should wait for the full 35 seconds before she overzealously . . .

Mr. Hinman: Can I read the question in?

The Speaker: Yes, I will allow you to read the question, but we need not go on to a further answer. We already have one. Yes, address your full question to the Assembly.

Mr. Hinman: Thank you.* Yesterday the Premier, in typical PC farm mongering fashion, with no regard to the facts, told the AAMD and C that the Wildrose cut funding to municipalities. If she had bothered to read our policy, Mr. Speaker, she would have seen that our 10-10 municipal funding plan not only increases funding to municipalities but also removes the restrictive

*See page 755, right column, paragraph 5

conditions this government places on funds for their own political agendas. To the Premier: were you again misinformed by those you picked to surround yourself with about the Wildrose municipal funding, or, even of more concern, are you knowingly misinforming Albertans for political gain?

The Speaker: Okay. Thank you.

The second one. Hon. Member for Airdrie-Chestermere, you rose on a point of order, something to do with a "That's a fact" statement.

Mr. Anderson: Mr. Speaker, you know what? In the interests of just celebrating your time here, I'm just going to withdraw that point of order and thank you for putting up with one hon. member who certainly at times gets very emotional and gets revved up in this House. You've dealt very well with that, I feel, and very patiently with that, and for that I thank you very much. Good luck in your retirement. You've done an amazing job as MLA for your community.

3:00

The Speaker: Thank you very much. There is nothing wrong with enthusiasm.

The hon. Government House Leader.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. At this time I would ask unanimous consent of the House to suspend standing orders 3(1) and 4(2) to extend the afternoon sitting until 6 p.m. to allow for further debate on Bill 2.

The Speaker: This request put forward by the hon. Government House Leader will require unanimous consent. Our standing order rules clearly indicate that on Thursdays we rise at 4:30 p.m. As I understand it, the request being made is to go beyond 4:30 to 6 o'clock. Is that correct, hon. Government House Leader? So this will require unanimous consent of all members.

[Unanimous consent denied]

Orders of the Day

Government Bills and Orders Committee of the Whole

[Mr. Zwozdesky in the chair]

Bill 2 Education Act

The Deputy Chair: Hon. members, are there any speakers? The hon. Minister of Education, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

Mr. Lukaszuk: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I am pleased to rise today and table an amendment, which I believe you will number as A8. I know that pages and the Clerk have copies of the amendment to Bill 2, the Education Act. If you allow me, I will sit down for half a minute to allow for distribution of the amendment.

The Deputy Chair: Thank you very much, hon. member. We will keep a copy here, the original, which we have now, thank you. I would ask the other copies to be circulated.

Hon. minister, if you would rise and read the amendment into the record while it's being circulated, that will speed things along.

Mr. Lukaszuk: Well, Mr. Speaker, as you are aware, we only have an hour and a half on the clock in order to deal with these

amendments and the bill. Hopefully, we will have full co-operation of all members in this House to do so. If not, that means that the Education Act will die on the Order Paper, and we will not be able to proceed with it further. So there we go.

This amendment has several clauses, so I will read each separately and then provide the rationale.

The following is added after section 24, related to charter schools:

Restriction on operator

25.1 The operator of a charter school must restrict its purposes to the operation of that charter school.

This section ensures that the focus of the operator of the charter school is the students that it serves.

Section 29(4)(e) is amended by striking out "the financial administration of the school is unstable and places the learning environment of the students at risk" and substituting "the financial situation of the school places the learning environment of the students at risk," so the word "unstable" is simply removed as it is an ambiguous word.

The Deputy Chair: Hon. minister, I hesitate to interrupt, but I thought in your opening comment you said section 24. Did you mean section 25?

Mr. Lukaszuk: The first one, Mr. Chair, was section 25, yes.

The Deputy Chair: My apologies. We're actually having to number these, so this one that refers to or begins with "The following is added after section 25" has now been circulated, and it will be known as amendment A8.

Mr. Lukaszuk: That's correct.

The Deputy Chair: So could I ask you to read that one into the record first as the pages complete circulating it?

Mr. Lukaszuk: Okay. This section would say:

25.1 The operator of a charter school must restrict its purposes to the operation of that charter school.

Is that fine, Mr. Chair?

The Deputy Chair: Carry on. The whole package will be known as A8.

Mr. Lukaszuk: That's right. It is introduced as one, and it can be separated later.

Section 112 is amended by striking out subsection (1) and substituting the following:

Establishment of school division

112(1) The Minister may, by order, establish a school division

- (a) consisting of 2 or more separate school districts or separate school divisions established under this Act, or
- (b) consisting of 2 or more public school districts or public . . . divisions established under this Act.

This amendment allays concerns that section 112 as it currently is worded allows the minister to at his own discretion create a school division composed of both separate and public school districts or divisions, which is not the intention of this minister. It is supported by the Alberta Catholic School Trustees' Association.

Section 135, Mr. Chair, is amended by striking out subsection (1)(a)(ii) and by striking out subsection (2)(a) and substituting the following:

- (a) is a Francophone,
- (a.1) is 18 years of age or older,
- (a.2) is a Canadian citizen,

- (a.3) has been a resident of Alberta for the 6 consecutive months immediately preceding nomination day and resides in the Francophone education region on election day.

This amendment removes the requirement for francophone school trustee candidates to have children in the francophone school system. This proposed amendment allows for better alignment with eligibility requirements for public and separate school systems while ensuring that minority language education rights, guaranteed under the Charter, are upheld. This amendment is supported by Fédération des Conseils Scolaires Francophones de l'Alberta, which represents the five Alberta francophone region authorities in the province.

Finally, Mr. Chairman, the last, section 192 is amended by striking out subsection (2). This amendment addresses concerns respecting the sharing of school spaces. Section 192(2) as it is currently worded would permit the minister to direct a separate school board to make space available to a public school board or vice versa. It is supported by the Alberta Catholic School Trustees' Association.

Mr. Chairman, I want to ensure that Bill 2 appropriately strikes a balance and addresses concerns that have been raised by many Albertans since the introduction of Bill 2 on this floor. Even more so, this is an important piece of legislation that will lay the foundation of education in our province for years to come. These amendments will help strengthen the legislation and address concerns expressed by stakeholders.

I stand today and I urge all members to vote in favour of these amendments and pass Bill 2 so it does not die on the Order Paper.

The Deputy Chair: Hon. members, there is limited time, so the chair will observe strict speaking order by those people who wish to speak. I'll keep a list, and we'll adhere to that rigidly.

Edmonton-Centre will go next, followed by Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Ms Blakeman: It's a point of order first, and then I'll speak.

The Deputy Chair: Please.

Point of Order Voting on Amendments

Ms Blakeman: The point of order is to request, as is the tradition of the House upon a request, that the multiple amendments put before us are voted separately. So we can debate them all at once, but they need to be voted separately.

The Deputy Chair: Thank you. We'll get the government member to respond.

Ms Blakeman: There's no response to that. They just do it.

The Deputy Chair: Please know that this is one amendment with five parts.

Ms Blakeman: Excuse me, Mr. Chair. The tradition of the House is not to ask permission.

The Deputy Chair: We'll ask the minister to clarify whether each part can be voted on individually.

The hon. minister on behalf.

Mr. Lukaszuk: I accept the authority of the member that this is the tradition of the House, and there is no objection whatsoever.

The Deputy Chair: So we have agreement on that. Thank you for raising it, hon. member.

Debate Continued

Ms Blakeman: Thank you very much. Now I am rising to speak to the amendment that's currently on the floor. This has been a vigorous debate with very high passion on all sides, which, frankly, I'm pleased to see. I know that conflict is often regarded as hostile, but in my world, which was the world of the theatre, you don't get a very good play unless you've got some conflict involved in it. I often find that you get a better . . .

Dr. Taft: What about comedy?

Ms Blakeman: Oh, yes. Comedy particularly has conflict. Just think of all those slamming doors and things not going right.

But conflict can also bring together many different minds trying to improve something. I had really hoped that that's what was going to happen with this education bill, and I still have hope that that will happen. It is no secret that I am passionate about public education. My parents were both teachers in the public system. They cannot stop teaching. Everything they do in their lives is about helping whoever is around them to learn something new. I once had a friend who asked my father to help him change the light in his car, and when he came back he said: you know, I just learned more about how my whole car works than I ever knew before, and that was by having your dad help me change one simple little light.

3:10

Education and the process of sharing education and those teachable moments in life are critically important to me, and I believe in public education so much. I really think it is the key to our future, that it's about our ability to create those knowledge-based economies, to move away from a resource-based economy, to make the best use that we can out of innovation and research and development. Yes, that requires oil sands and oil and gas, but it also requires brainpower, and that is nurtured by education.

I want every Alberta child to get the best possible K to 12 education that is possible, and that's why I've been so passionate about what we've had before us.

Now, I've spent a lot of time talking about rights and freedoms, and it's just a particular bee in my bonnet, if you'd like to put it that way, or perhaps you could see it as another passion of mine. We tend to throw around rights and freedoms very casually in North America and particularly in Canada. I'm trying to get people to understand that the freedoms and the rights that we do enjoy today are precious and that somebody thought long and hard and worked and negotiated with others to come to a point where we had a document that set those out for us.

That document, the Constitution, which includes the Charter, is a very important document to us. It guarantees those freedoms. It guarantees those rights. So I get right PO'd when people start throwing around the term "right." "I've got a right to out tonight, Mom and Dad. I've got a right to do this as the employee. I've got a right to have my housing paid for." No, you don't. Know what your rights are, and we'd all be a better society. So I'm always going to take issue when somebody starts to throw that around, and I've had the opportunity to talk about it quite a bit.

One of the things that we've seen in play during this discussion is the government underlining and enshrining what it sees as choices to parents in ways to educate their children. I would really prefer that we could educate all children inside of the public system. I really believe in that. I wonder why we have come to the point . . . [interjection] I'm getting lipped off there by the Energy minister. I'm sure that if he's got time, he's going to get up, but

my time is precious. With all due respect, Minister, direct your heckling somewhere else so I can get through this.

I wish that those options did not have to be written outside of the public system. I really would prefer that it's all... [interjection] There he goes again.

I really would prefer that it all happens inside of a public system. [interjection]

The Deputy Chair: I hate to interrupt the hon. member. Please, we have precious little time here, and I would ask that everybody cede the floor, as required, to the hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre. Please, let's keep the interjections to a minimum here. Thank you.

Ms Blakeman: Thanks. That's fine, Mr. Chair.

The government has been very careful to allow charter schools outside of the public system, private schools outside of the public system, and home-schooling outside of the private system. In Edmonton our charter schools are all inside of the public school system, and no one has shown me that that system isn't working as well as I think it does. I have a charter school as one of my schools, and it works really well. I'm very happy with it, and I wish everyone else would have followed that model. Wherever Mike Strembitsky is today, we owe him a deep vote of gratitude.

But other people didn't follow that system, and we have a situation where, you know, groups have approached the Calgary school board and asked to be a charter school under their system and were refused. What did we think was going to happen? Well, they're going to go on their own and say: "The act entitles us. We're going to create a charter school outside of the public system." Well, public system, I hope you're happy with the results because now what we've got is charter schools increasingly going outside of the public system. Again, I wish it didn't happen, but I understand why it is.

Home-schooling. You know, why would somebody want to home-school? Well, I know why they'd want to home-school. I've got a couple of people in my life, and I know why they home-school. I'm not going to talk about their personal choices here.

One of the things that I received a certain amount of feedback on was when I said that home-schooled children should have the same outcomes as children in the public system. I was taken to task by some people who said: "Really? There are studies out there that show that home-schooled children actually attain a better outcome than if they were in a public school."

Actually, from my experience with the people in my life I know that to be true. I think that if you've got, you know, an intelligent, well-educated parent who's going to spend that time with the kids and they get a lot of attention and they get taken out to the art gallery and the science centre and the ballet and taken through the fire station and all kinds of other life-learning situations, yeah, they will end up with a better all-around education than a child is going to get in an overcrowded classroom, which is what they're dealing with today. But there are also examples of home-schooled children who are simply left – their parents go off to work – and examples of home-schooled children who can't get into university or postsecondary because they don't know how to read.

My frustration with home-schooling is not about why people choose to home-school or how they home-school. My frustration is: are we going to end up with kids that are going to be able to move forward with our province at the end of this? For those that are able to come out of home-schooling on top of it, excellent. But for those that are not: what the heck are we going to do with them? How did we as legislators fail those kids? And we failed them; there's no two ways about it as far as I'm concerned.

I think we have a responsibility there to ensure that all home-schooled kids are going to end up at some level or above, and I'm perfectly willing to take above that level. But I don't feel it is appropriate for us to walk away from those kids that are not able to get to that level because they didn't have a good home-schooling experience. So I feel that in some case we've left those kids. I don't know how many there are in this province, but I've heard enough stories now to know that they certainly exist. I've heard as many of those stories as I've heard stories of kids that did very well under home-schooling. The fact that we don't test those kids at all I think is a huge failing of the system. I think we should be testing those kids. That, to me, is a failing of this act.

Now, am I willing to go with the act the way it is? You know what? It's better than where we were. There were a number of things that we needed to do to bring it into the 21st century. There were a number of things that the trustees and the school boards asked for that have been incorporated into this act. That is a good thing. I'm glad it's there.

I am deeply troubled by the inclusion of the preamble that was a government amendment and was added in. It troubles me deeply for the same reason. Lots of parents, most parents, are good parents. They do their best for their kids. But where they don't do their best for the kids, who is supposed to look after the children that don't get the best benefit of that? It's us. It's the state. It's the government services that come in. Where we leave children that don't get the full benefit, we have failed them, and that is my problem with what's happened with that preamble. Saying that parents can do whatever they want and they're the ultimate decider and the ultimate provider, everything that was in that particular preamble, I think for most parents that's fine. But those children that we fail: what are we going to do for them? We just let them go. We just say: "Oh, well. Too bad. Couldn't catch that one." I struggle with that.

By the government feeling that it needed to put that preamble in there despite all the other preambles that were in this act, the government, I think, caved to a group of very able lobbyists who wanted a particular change in there. They caved to them. They didn't need to. This was a good act. It had a lot of good stuff in it. Like, no act is perfect, but you do get into that argument about: is the glass half full, or is the glass half empty? Up until that amendment this glass was half full for me, and I would have gone there, but I am deeply troubled by what we end up with and how we fail those children who are left by putting that preamble in place. As I say, for most people it's not a problem; it's not a difference. But for those kids we fail, we've truly failed them. We've walked away and said: not our problem. Yet it will come to us.

3:20

This is all part of the amendments that we're looking at. The amendments that have been provided by the government have come out as more people got a chance to read through the act. The first amendment, amendment A1, is essentially saying that, you know, General Motors can't start a school and educate children to be General Motors robots. That's what it is about. It says that, you know, they're only supposed to be a charter school. They're not supposed to be going beyond that and creating ice cream makers for Baskin Robbins. There are systems in the world that do stream children very early into a particular outcome. We don't. This is to make sure that we're not using children for things beyond education.

The section talking about unstable funding: at this point in my lack-of-sleep giddiness it struck me as a little funny. To be perfectly reasonable about it, what is "unstable"? It's not a

measurable amount. Are you unstable if you have a debt? Not always. Are you unstable if, you know, you've got zero-based budgeting? Sometimes. So what is an unstable financial situation? It gives no information here. There's nothing to mark this by to be able to say that, yes, this is unstable or, no, it's not. I think it's appropriate that the language is taken out and we just talk about the fact that it places the students' learning environment at risk. Fair enough.

The blending of the Protestant and the Catholic school boards: I know this is really important. I really struggle with this one. Essentially, the act had morphed in these sections, and it did allow that they could be forced to do this by the minister if the minister so chose. There's a section later on where the minister could force them to blend the use of their school spaces or their schools. Both of those are adapted to make sure that they can't unless the school boards both agree and say, you know: yes, the Catholic board and, yes, the Protestant board agree that in this position we're going to come together. I think we have an example of that in St. Paul where they came to the minister and said: please do this; we ask you to. [interjection] Okay. Fair enough. I hear somebody clapping, so that must be right.

The same thing with the blended use of schools, at the very minimum of the central spaces like the library and the gymnasium. I have such respect for the Catholic school board, but I sure wish you guys could figure out a way to work this one. You are really, really straining resources and making it particularly difficult in situations. I don't think anybody takes your faith away from you. But man, oh man, when you stand tight and say that you absolutely cannot use this space, this has created hardship in some areas. It created hardship for those Morinville people, and it will create hardship in other places. I just wish you would be a bit more flexible. The rest of us have to be flexible. If I could put in a plea to all of you, please be more flexible on this one. I think you can still hang on to the icons of your faith even though you're sharing a school gymnasium.

But I see what you've asked the minister to do, and he's done it. I'm not wild about it. I don't have a brass band waiting outside to cheer on this one. I'm pretty clear, you guys. I'm struggling with that one.

The amendment for the francophone is a good amendment. To say that you couldn't be a trustee of a francophone school because you didn't have a child in the system takes away anybody who doesn't have children for whatever reason, and that could be a real punishment. What if you wanted to have children and couldn't but you were faithfully, you know, bringing all you could and volunteering in a francophone school? You cannot run to be a school board trustee? That's cruel, and there's no reason for it. It's prejudice against someone because of their ability to bear children or not bear children. Get off it. This is the 21st century. Sorry; that sounded meaner than I meant it. But you know what I mean.

So that's actually a good amendment, to say that, no, you don't have to have a child in the system, but you do have to adhere to the other requirements that are there, that you are a Canadian citizen over 18 and that you're a francophone. That's perfectly reasonable. But to say that you have to have a kid in the system, no. That takes all of the retired people, you know, out of the mix, the pool of people you could draw from. It's not a very large pool to begin with in Alberta, so I think we need to make the best of what we've got. So that was a perfectly acceptable amendment to me.

The blending of the school boards and the sharing of the space I'm struggling with, you know, but the rest of these amendments I think are fine.

So are we better off with this act than without it? Yes. Am I over the moon about everything that's in here? No. Am I struggling with how some children will be left unprotected and unidentified as needing help in schooling? Yes, because that will follow them the rest of their lives. You know, who does that fall back on in a much more expensive way? Society and the state.

I think we should have been more aggressive in the beginning in trying to accommodate people inside the public system, which is where we used to do it. I think we could still do it again, but because we didn't set the system up in a consistent way previously, it's now too fractured. It's too fractured to be able to draw everyone back in. So we're not going to be able to put those charter schools in the Calgary area under the public school board. They're not; they were created outside of it. That's what it is. We've got to move on and deal with the fact that you now have them inside the system in Edmonton and outside the system in Calgary. What are you going to do? You're going to try and give some consistency there.

I would really like to see a cap on the number of charter schools that there are in the province just so that everybody doesn't decide they don't like the way this or that is handled in a public education system and runs out and starts their own charter school. That really does not help us bring a diverse and respective and well-educated society to fruition. It doesn't. It just allows everybody to have their own little area that they fight to defend. It doesn't help us work together as a province to be as amazing and creative and well-educated as I know we could be. We will have to compete globally, and we're already falling behind. You know, India and China are way ahead of us and are moving in a direction so fast that we would have to run very fast right now to catch up to them. So the education and the ability of Albertans to move together in the same direction is very important.

The other thing about education, to me, is that it's the ultimate leveller. You can be a kid that comes from a poor family, from a family of colour. You could have a disability. You could be almost anything, and when you come into a public education system, you get an education. You work hard. You do well. You've got good teachers. You are going to come out on top. You can be a PhD. You can be a scientist. You can be a rocket scientist. You can be anything you want to be because education will get you there. It is the ultimate key to doing whatever you want to do with your life. It doesn't matter where you came from. If you can get into a public education system and it serves you well, it is the key to your future and to whatever you want to do. That's why I believe it has such amazing potential for us.

Back to where I started. We do have rights to educate children in certain ways – Catholic and Protestant, English and French – and to protect the minorities in both of those areas. The government has seen fit over the years to make accommodations to allow the option – I'm using the government language – of charter schools and of home-schooling. Those options still exist. I wish that we had been able to serve those people well enough in the public system that we didn't have them going outside of the public system, but that hasn't happened.

I think that there are some things where we need to be careful to be testing children, to be monitoring them and evaluating them all the way along. We don't do that, and I think that is where we can be failing children.

Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman.

The Deputy Chair: Thank you, hon. member.

The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar, followed by the hon. Member for Airdrie-Chestermere, followed by the hon.

Member for Calgary-Glenmore, barring any short questions that may be directed straight to the minister should he wish to respond.

Mr. MacDonald: Yes. Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. Certainly, I look at this amendment, and I look forward to it being divided into five separate amendments. That being said, I'm quite surprised that we would need amendments at this time from the government after the extensive consultation process that was done not only by this minister under this version of the Education Act but also with the previous Minister of Education. I think it was bill 16.

An Hon. Member: Bill 18.

Mr. MacDonald: Bill 18. I stand corrected. Thank you for that.

I certainly had considerable interest from constituents with the original Bill 18, from various groups, whether they were school trustees, whether they were home-schoolers, whether they were parents of children in the public or separate system or in the charter school system.

3:30

Certainly, I look at the first amendment here, the restriction on operator, and we're adding this after section 25. There is quite a list of rules or laws that charter schools will have to follow in the application of the act to charter schools. We have also, before that, an application to establish a charter school. But we're going to add after section 25: "The operator of a charter school must restrict its purposes to the operation of that charter school." My question, and hopefully we can get it answered in the course of debate: is this not the case now, Mr. Chairman?

I'm looking at last year's annual report for the Ministry of Education. There's \$65.8 million being spent for charter schools, and when we look at infrastructure and other initiatives, that ministry total jumps by another \$11 million, so in total there is \$76.6 million being spent on charter schools all over the province. Certainly, there's Westmount Charter School Society, Valhalla, Suzuki, New Horizons, Mother Earth's Children's Charter School, Foundations for the Future Charter Academy, the Centre for Academic and Personal Excellence Institute, Calgary Science School, Calgary Girls' School Society, Calgary Arts Academy Society, the Boyle Street Education Centre, the Aurora school, and Almadina school society. All told, 30 per cent of the money that was allocated is going to one charter, and that's Foundations for the Future Charter Academy. So they received \$25.7 million, or one-third, essentially, of the total allocation.

There has been a growth in charter schools. The public and the separate school system are going to have to be careful because if they continue to close good public schools in central neighbourhoods of both Edmonton and Calgary, then there's going to be more and more of a demand created or an interest in charter schools by parents. I can't fault or blame parents for looking at alternatives whenever good public schools are being closed. The parents, and I would certainly agree with them, feel that there's no valid reason for that.

With this amendment I would really like to know, during the course of debate, if there are examples of where an operator of a charter school has been violating the licence or the permit to operate as is suggested in this amendment. I certainly hope that's not the case. I know the Auditor General had, a number of years ago, a lot of questions and a lot of suggestions for the boards of charter schools because some charter schools, of course, had difficulty providing in a timely fashion accurate audited financial statements. As far as I know, that situation has been corrected.

Certainly, we need to keep a diligent eye on how the \$76 million that we are providing, Mr. Chairman, through the tax system to charter schools is being used and that it is being used correctly. It is my view that it certainly has been spent where it is budgeted, and that's fine.

I had a discussion, Mr. Chairman, with a constituent about the difference between private schools and charter schools. This was a couple who have their children in Holyrood elementary. I'm sure that the hon. member is very familiar with that school. That's a very good school. It has a long list of graduates who have gone on to bigger and better things. Yes. I took this question and I thought about it for a minute. I picked up not this annual report but the one from the previous year, and I explained to the public school parents that the details on how a charter school spends its money, that has been provided to it through the tax system, are publicly available. Not only are charter schools included in the schedule to financial statements in the annual report, but certainly you could in five minutes, for instance, go onto the Internet and find the previous financial statements for schools such as the Suzuki school of music. No problem. You would find that if you were interested as a taxpayer.

But whenever we look at private school funding, that's not the same. These public school parents, both of them also taxpayers through their personal income tax and their education property tax, were contributing to the provincial treasury, and of course that's where we get the money to fund schools. Now, I showed these parents, Mr. Chairman, the accredited private school support. If we go back a number of years – let's say we go back five years – we spent \$134 million on accredited private school support. That was for both the private schools and the private operators. Interestingly enough, that was overspent by 5 and a half million dollars. If we move forward to now, you can see where, of course, that has gone up. That's one of the problems that in the discussion of this bill people have issues with: this government's enthusiastic support for the funding of private schools, that now has gone up from \$134 million to over \$177 million.

That certainly is interesting, Mr. Chairman, because that offended the constituents who had come to see me to discuss the original format of this bill, Bill 18. They thought as taxpayers that this wasn't fair because there wasn't accountability.

Now, I could perhaps entertain accepting this bill and this amendment as it's written if there was some accountability towards private school operators. There is not, in my view, any accountability. They just get the money and that's it. They don't have to spell out, for instance, like the public school boards or the separate school boards do, how the money is spent and why. It may be of interest, but it certainly won't be in my time here. Maybe the current Minister of Energy will be chairman of Public Accounts after the next election. He could invite some of these private school operators to Public Accounts, and they could explain in detail how this sum of \$177 million is spent.

3:40

If the hon. Minister of Education was to not so much put restrictions on operators but put guidelines or recommendations on how private schools operate, instead of just picking on charter schools, then one would be more likely to support this amendment as presented.

Now, amendment B, Mr. Chairman, the second amendment, where section 29 is to be amended by striking out "the financial administration of the school is unstable and places the learning environment of the students at risk." This is regarding, oddly enough, private schools. I don't know why the word "unstable" was used in the first place, but it is interesting to note that,

obviously, some people somewhere found that insensitive or inappropriate and wanted it changed. As a result of that, we see the substitution of “the financial situation of the school places the learning environment of the students at risk.”

I guess that’s not nearly as offensive, but I still don’t understand why we can’t have it mandated that there be good, sound financial reporting from private schools, and I certainly don’t consider this section to adequately address what taxpayers want and need from private schools. The budget for private schools continues to go up and up and up, but there doesn’t seem to be an improvement in the accountability.

Certainly, the minister has had time to think about this. I’m sure there was a consultation process with these private school providers or marketers whenever the consultation process was going on. I don’t know if it was separate or whether it was together with the public relations exercise that happened up at the Northlands Expo Centre. It could have been. Maybe not, but certainly the minister can clarify that to the Assembly.

I am also interested in talking about amendment C, the proposed amendment of section 112. Section 112 is the creation, alteration, and dissolution of school divisions. Now, one would almost say that the Minister of Education is caving in to the Alberta Party. That’s the political party that seems to think that we don’t need separate boards and we don’t need public boards; we can consolidate them all into one. I would certainly disagree with that.

The hon. Minister of Transportation certainly knows the Constitution and, certainly, would recognize that separate school rights go back to the British North America Act, the northwest ordinance of, I believe, 1896 – I could stand corrected; it could be 1898 – and also the Alberta Act of 1905, which enshrined separate school rights.

I think we have to be respectful of the Catholic community and make sure that these rights continue. Some political parties may think that we can consolidate all these school boards, but I for one don’t think so. They make the argument that we’ll have fewer administration costs and we’ll have more efficiencies. Well, that argument was made by the Member for Calgary-West when he fired the nine regional health authorities and created the one health board right after the 2008 election. There was no talk of that. There was no political chat during the election of firing the regional health authorities and starting one superboard. We know what has happened with that. We can look at the budget of Health and Wellness. We can look at the budget of Alberta Health Services, and we can see that it’s gone up and up and up. We haven’t seen an improvement in service. We can’t even control our costs. So this is a caution that I would make when we are looking at amendment A8, section C here, which is the establishment of the school divisions, where

the Minister may, by order, establish a school division

- (a) consisting of 2 or more separate school districts or separate school divisions established under this Act, or
- (b) consisting of 2 or more public school districts or public school divisions established under this Act.

I would encourage all hon. members to reflect on what possibly could go on here. I don’t think it’s in the interests of local government. If there is a study that the Department of Education has on how all this will work, how it will save money and improve our education system, provide it, table it, make it public so that separate school supporters can see it and public school supporters can see it. I’m sure there are reports in there, but this government doesn’t have the political nerve to make them public.

I would caution hon. members that before we contemplate consolidating separate or public school boards, two or more, we

remember the lessons from Alberta Health Services, where all the promises were made. There was no public discussion. There was no cost-benefit analysis done, whether internally or externally by high-priced outside consultants. Nothing was done, and we see what has been created. So let’s be very, very careful about this. I know the minister is trying to clarify some things in section 112, but I don’t think this is the way to do it.

Now, certainly, section D is also of interest, and that has been discussed in the Gold Bar community. There was an individual who was contemplating running for the school board there, the francophone board, and this may satisfy them. This is an amendment, I think, that one could support.

The last amendment, section 192, by striking out that subsection – I have to find it here, Mr. Chairman. I looked at this with interest as the hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre was speaking. I’m curious about the origins of this. This would be the deletion of 192(2). “When, in the opinion of the Minister, space is available in a school building, the Minister may direct the board operating the school building to make that space available to another board.” Well, certainly, that seems to be going on now. I think the deletion of this is a good thing.

Thank you.

The Deputy Chair: Thank you, hon. member.

The chair recognizes the Member for Airdrie-Chestermere.

3:50

Mr. Anderson: Thank you, Mr. Chair. You know, I have to be honest. I’m just going over right now in a rush with our researchers this amendment. There’s a lot of information here, a lot of material here. I’ve got to say that I am amazed. Yesterday or the day before – I forget when it was – we were debating, obviously, Wildrose amendments on this. The Education minister at that time berated us for not bringing our amendments forward sooner so that he could take a look at them, so that he could evaluate them, whether they should be added. He said:

No criticism or no constructive suggestions [meaning to us] on what should be changed or how to amend this bill. Nothing. So as far as I’m concerned, the bill has met the standards of that particular caucus. That is why, hon. member, I was so shocked to find out that at the final line – it was in second reading – all of a sudden we have a whole array of amendments. Where were they before? It could have been done, but where were they before?

So here we are half an hour before the Legislature closes for probably an election call, and the minister brings four amendments and just expects us to pass these four amendments. Sorry. Five? There are five amendments.

The Deputy Chair: Five parts under one amendment, each to be voted separately.

Mr. Anderson: That’s right.

I just don’t understand this. Mr. Chair, we are on the record in *Hansard* for yesterday. We had finished all of the Wildrose amendments. There were two of them. We had finished them. The government had voted against them. We said that we supported the 99 per cent of Bill 2 that was there. Some very good things were in there: more local autonomy for school boards, raising the dropout age – you can go up and down; there were tons of good stuff – allowing charter schools to go forward with their charters for longer periods of time and giving them a more stable, predictable existence, all of these very good things.

We had, obviously, two problems with it, specifically section 16, specifically the preamble. It didn’t protect parental rights as

well as we would have liked. But we gave an olive branch to this government, and we said that we would be willing to pass this bill, that we would pass this bill. We sat down in our chairs, and we didn't speak again for the entire day and then watched in bemusement as nine members of the government got up one after the other and filibustered their own bill. Then to our complete amazement . . .

Mr. MacDonald: No session.

Mr. Anderson: Exactly. That's right. At the very end of it the House leader gets up and says that we're not going to have an evening session. Total shock. We were trying to figure out what's going on. We thought the bill was going to pass. We put out a press release saying that we support Bill 2. We're behind it minus section 16, the section 16 that we've been advocating to get out and replace, and we've had a long discussion about that. We said: "Besides that, we agree with the rest of the bill. Let's get it through."

Then the government comes back. After a couple of morning appointments I get into the office at noon today, and there are five new amendments sitting on my desk from the Education minister. No explanation. I heard that he did attempt to come earlier in the morning. I wasn't there. It's too bad we couldn't have met then. I think he came at about 10 or 11 – I don't know the exact time – and left these amendments with us at noon.

We have had exactly four hours to take four or five substantive amendments and research them and go back to our constituents and talk to them and ask them what they think about it, ask the stakeholders at the Catholic school boards, at the independent schools association, the home-schoolers, the public school boards, all of these folks. We had no chance to consult with them at all, and we're supposed to just trust the government that these amendments are good for the people of Alberta – "Just trust us" – when they sat there and berated us for a week when we brought our own amendments forward, saying: "How dare you guys? Why on earth would you bring these amendments now when you had so long before to bring those amendments?"

So we got through it. We voted on it, and we sat down in our chairs and didn't say another word. In fact, if the government had come and said, "You know what?" – now everything is up in the air. We've gotten calls from several organizations that are still studying this because we did ask: what do you guys think about these amendments? They're like: we haven't had a chance to look at them.

Now we're in a position where this government is asking us to participate and condone their sausage-making. We're not interested in the sausage-making. We're interested in a good bill. We're very interested in a good bill. We're glad the government has consulted on this. We're glad the former Minister of Education consulted on it. We're glad the current Minister of Education consulted on it. We're very happy about this. It's good. Consultation is good. Consultation with the Legislative Assembly is also good, I think.

We come here with this bill, and we give two amendments. Two amendments: that's it. Two small-in-words amendments, and they're apparently the end of the world and don't get passed. But we respect this Legislature's time enough to say: okay; let's vote on this now. Then the government filibusters their own bill and cancels the evening session and then comes back the next day and says: "Guess what? Surprise. Not only do we want to pass Bill 2, so take you up on your offer of last night, but we also want to introduce five new amendments. We know we berated you for bringing last-minute amendments a week ago, but we're going

bring last-hour, last-second amendments, and we expect you to pass them." If not, my guess is that they're going to go run around saying: "Oh, the Wildrose doesn't love education. Oh, look at this. They're trying to play politics with our kids."

What an embarrassment. We've talked with the Alberta School Boards Association about this, the independent school association. We've talked with dozens of trustees about this bill. They like parts of it, but they have concerns as well about certain parts of it and would like it to be improved. But, generally speaking, it's good.

We were willing to say: "You know what? Let's have an election on this issue surrounding section 16. We'll pass this bill, and then we'll come back after the election, and if it's a Wildrose government, we'll make some changes in that regard. If it's a PC government, well, then, obviously the people didn't care enough about that issue, and the government gets their way on it." That's why we fight elections. We were willing to do that and still get the 99 per cent of this thing passed so that it didn't have to get delayed a month or whatever.

Now, unfortunately, Mr. Chair, I think that the government has put us in a position where we have absolutely no choice but to wait and ask them to wait until we can go back to the stakeholder groups and go over these amendments and get their feedback and ask.

Mr. Lukaszuk: The bill dies on the Order Paper.

Mr. Anderson: That's right. The Minister of Education is rightfully pointing out right now that if we don't pass this bill today, it will die on the Order Paper. Well, you should have thought of that last night when you cancelled the night sitting, when the Wildrose was completely prepared to go ahead and pass this bill in its present form and then come back after the election and amend section 16 to get that very poorly worded section out of there. That was the plan.

Now we've got five new amendments, that we've barely seen, regarding charter schools, something very important, regarding different authorities under school divisions. Good grief, our researchers haven't even done a brief on this yet, for crying out loud. It's just beyond belief that we're expected to just trust the government and pass these without even doing any kind of substantive briefing on it. We've had no time. We've had virtually no time to do this, and there's no way that I in good conscience as a legislator can sit here and say: "Oh, well, that's okay. We'll just trust the government." I made that mistake once. Did you know that, Mr. Chairman? I made a mistake like that once. It was regarding a land-use bill. It was called Bill 36. People quote that a lot in here when they get mad at me. They never let me forget about it, and I like that. I like that they don't.

4:00

It was a fantastic lesson. The lesson was: never ever trust. You know what? Never trust anybody with your own vote. I don't care if they're in your party or they're in an opposite party. Never trust that you are getting the full bill of goods. I learned that the hard way on Bill 36 because I did not do my due diligence. I did not go back to my stakeholders like I should have done and say: are you sure about this bill? I didn't even have a property rights lawyer look it over and say: is there anything in here I should be worried about and so forth? I just blindly followed. And guess what? That was a big mistake and one I very much regret. So I am not prepared as a legislator to come in here and do the exact same thing out of political expediency.

Now, what does this mean for the bill? Well, it means it will die on the Order Paper if the election is called. We don't know when

the election will be called. The Premier was just quoted outside. They asked her: will you possibly be coming back after the constituency break; will you be resuming? She said maybe. The exact quote is – oh, shoot; I just got an e-mail, too. But she said that we might still do that. She hasn't decided. Okay? She said: when I drop the writ, you will know. You know, this is the person that promised fixed election dates during the leadership campaign.

Anyway, if that's the case and we're going to come back after, then all we're going to need, probably, is one or two more days max to get Bill 2 through. Maybe that's what the government should think about doing. Wait a couple more days. We'll go back for constituency week, hear out our constituents on this and other issues, and come back here for a couple of days. By then we will have had a week to go over the amendments. We will have had a week to go talk to stakeholders about those amendments and so forth. Then we can all come back here and finish off the debate and pass it.

Or, door 2, we can go to an election, and the Wildrose will be proposing that after the election we will be bringing forth this same Bill 2, the exact same as it's written, with a caveat that we're not sure about the five amendments. We'll have to do some research on that, as I said. But everything else will be essentially the same. Bring these five pieces and see if they're worth adding, and then take out section 16 of the act and replace it with what is there right now under the current act, that same section, because we think section 16 broadens the authority of school boards and the Ministry of Education to force parents to teach things that they don't believe in to their kids in home-school settings and threatens under section 29 of Bill 2. It could be used to take away the accreditation of faith-based schools or Catholic schools or any schools – section 29 deals with private schools, so that would be faith-based schools – that do not uphold the different rulings and interpretations of the Alberta human rights tribunals.

To me if you have a faith-based school that says, "No; we're going to teach our own interpretation of a certain moral issue," which certainly is their right under freedom of religion, there is something in the act that says that if they do that and that doesn't jibe with what the interpretation of human rights are by the suspect human rights tribunal that we have in this province, we are going to strip you of your rights. I'm not saying that's what the minister plans, but that is what the act allows for, and we can't agree with that.

Now, of course, we don't have a majority, Mr. Chairman, at all, as we're reminded every day. It's 67 – well, they're down to about 64 or 65 now, whatever it is – to 4, so we don't have that ability to stop the bill. We're going to have to eventually vote on Bill 2, and we agree with 99 per cent of the bill. But a Wildrose government, if we get in, will bring this exact bill forward with the changes to section 16 and the preamble as well to enshrine the rights of parents and make them paramount. That's what we are willing to do. That's what we've been willing to do the whole time, and I think it's important that that be on the record.

So that was the second door, Mr. Chair. We could wait for an election, come back, and if we have a Wildrose government, we pass it then.

Or, door 3, the PCs remain the government. Certainly, that could happen. Who knows? They've done it for 41 straight years. They could do it again. If they do it again, then they can bring their act and these amendments and everything forward, and they can call the Legislature back to pass it. You know, it won't take very long because it'll just be one bill on the Order Paper unless they want to add something else. So they'll have to reintroduce it. That's fine. They could have it done probably in a week. We're not talking about killing this bill for all time and eternity. We're

talking about delaying it a month, though, possibly just a week if it means that we're coming back after a constituency break. If they're going to call an election, yes, this will be delayed at least a month, probably a month and a half, thereabouts, at the government's discretion.

Mr. Chair, the Wildrose does not control the government agenda in this House. Clearly, we have no power or authority to control it. We cannot bring this to a vote. We cannot invoke closure. We cannot do anything of the sort. I have spoken to this bill maybe three times through all of the different readings. That's it. It's not like we've been filibustering this bill at all. We brought a couple of amendments. We spoke for about an hour or two hours, maybe, on both of those amendments, and we've pretty much shut up other than that. It's not like we've been sitting here till all hours of the morning debating this bill. We thought that because of that good faith and the fact that 99 per cent of the bill was good, we were going to go forward with it, have an election, and then come back and take section 16 out if we were Wildrose, or the government could just leave it if they were still the government, the PCs.

Now we don't have that option, and we're not going to do it. We're not going to allow the government to I think mock, frankly, the proceedings in this House by bringing five substantive amendments – these aren't just little word changes; these are substantive amendments that affect the bill – and expect us to just roll over and play dead. That certainly is not what we're willing to do, Mr. Chair. We expect that this government will do the right thing at this point.

You know, we'd be certainly willing to adjourn debate on this issue and go home if people want to do that, because we've got nothing else, apparently, to do. [interjection] Never mind; because the hon. Member for Calgary-Glenmore wants to speak as well.

We will say this, too. We support the ability of the government to bring amendments in Committee of the Whole. We have no problem with that at all. We think that's what Committee of the Whole is partially for as well as opposition amendments, but you can't give us an hour and a half to debate five amendments and say that you've done your due diligence or expect us to go back to our constituents and say, "Yes, we've done our due diligence," because that would be an out-and-out lie because we just got these. We're not going to do that.

Mr. Chair, I hope that we can all come back, do our due diligence on these five amendments, have an election, probably, talk a little bit about section 16 issues as well, and come back and pass a bill that works for all Albertans when we return to this House.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Deputy Chair: Thank you.

The hon. Member for Calgary-Glenmore.

Mr. Hinman: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I am grateful that I have this opportunity here to get up and address the amendment. Is it amendment A8 or A9? Where are we at? I didn't get it written down.

Anyway, Mr. Chair, there are a few things I want to clarify first before I get into the details of the amendment, and I think it's very important that we do this. I want to start off by quoting from *Hansard* from Tuesday evening, the Minister of Education.

... "Why is it that the Wildrose opposition raises concerns now and not earlier," she is right that on that particular amendment they didn't have an opportunity to raise it earlier because it was just a freshly tabled amendment on the floor of the Legislature, so they couldn't possibly have had the time to research it and to raise issues with it.

4:10

Then a little bit further down he goes on to say:

... not one visit to the office, not one communication of any sort, neither to my predecessor nor to myself, from that particular caucus on this bill. No criticism or no constructive suggestions on what should be changed or how to amend this bill. Nothing. So as far as I am concerned, the bill has met the standards of that particular caucus. That is why, hon. member, I was so shocked to find out that at the final line – it was [only] in second reading – all of a sudden we have a whole array of amendments.

A whole array of amendments. Two.

Where were they before? It could have been done, but where were they before?

Then I want to quote a little bit further down because this is the part that for me is particularly insulting to Albertans. The minister says:

That's fine.

It should be mentioned, Mr. Chairman, that bills 18 and 2 are one and the same. It's the same bill reintroduced. The only reason that the number changed, as you well know, is that every time we reintroduce a bill, it loses its placement order, and it just simply receives a different number. It's the same bill with a different number on the cover. But that's fine if they want to argue that.

Mr. Chair, that's the whole reason we can't trust these amendments coming in. They're saying: "That's the way it is. That's fine. Just trust us." They're not the same bills. Bill 18 and Bill 2 are not the same bills.

It's just a simple little word that they changed in this big, thick document. How many pages is it that we have here? We have 186 pages. One concern that many parents and many people and I myself have spoken on is that it's not just "parents"; they've inserted the words "informed parents." Thereby, I see an expert being able to come in and say: well, that parent has made that choice, but they're not informed, and we can change that. Even if that was the only change in this bill, for this minister to get up and say that it's the same bill is wrong. It's categorically wrong.

I can go through 22 other changes that I've got just in the first, I think, 20 pages. All of those tabs, Mr. Chair, are changes that are made from Bill 18 to Bill 2, yet this deceptive government and minister want to say that they're the exact same bills. They're absolutely, categorically not the same bills.

Again, I was in the office this morning when he came over. He wouldn't leave his amendments.

An Hon. Member: Oh. He came over.

Mr. Hinman: Oh, yes. He came over in a rush with these amendments. But he wouldn't leave them for even myself or our head researcher to be able to see. He took them back. I came out and said: well, where are they? He said: oh, he wouldn't leave them with me. This person won't even share them. They had them yesterday. How many times have we received things from this government that say, "Draft only"? They can say: draft only. They could have told us yesterday afternoon that they had, all of a sudden, this great need for an amendment. They berated us. They berated myself, saying how after 18 months – again, that was categorically wrong because Bill 2 just came in in February or whatever. It hasn't even been two months, yet he said: it's 18 months that you haven't done anything.

This bill is basically very good. It's very exciting for many people. But there are a few problems in here. After all of the arguments that he's had, Mr. Chair, at the last minute he brings in

five amendments to this bill and says that we've got to get them passed this afternoon.

Even more importantly – again maybe this is fate; this is what we all needed – the Premier knew this problem was going to happen. That's why she could never declare that the 26th of March was going to be the fixed election date. So now they have a legitimate out to come back on April 2, which, again, they haven't said yes or no to. The Premier says: oh, you'll know when I drop the writ. Isn't that nice? She tells us how it's important for Albertans to know when the writ is going to be. I still have seniors that want to go away on vacation, and they don't know. I mean, it's just wrong.

Mr. Chair, what we have here are five amendments. I must say that I finally did get briefed. Also, to think that at noon today we had nothing else on our plates, that we could all of a sudden just: let's not have question period. Let's not have anything else we need to deal with so that we can look at this for four hours. Let's give ourselves time to actually contact and verify. I mean, how many times have these people, this government, said one thing, and then when you go to verify it, it isn't so? It just isn't so. Yet they say: trust me. My goodness, I wouldn't trust a rattlesnake for fear that it's going to bite me. Why? Because it behaves that way. The behaviour, the past behaviour, of this government is indicative of why we can't trust them.

Ms Blakeman: A scorpion and a mouse.

Mr. Hinman: Yes.

Time and time again we find out that it isn't there. Again, I'm so disappointed because the process of bringing this forward in such short order is wrong. They know it; they've talked about it. They thought that what we were doing in bringing in amendments was wrong, yet here is their bill. Eighteen months. It's supposedly to them the same bill, but here is another change they want to make. What's really sad, Mr. Chair, is that this is purely playing politics. They think they're going to be cute and go out there and say: "Oh, Alberta doesn't have Bill 2 because of the Wildrose. They filibustered."

My good colleague from Airdrie-Chestermere talked yesterday about how they filibustered. We said: "You know what? You guys have the majority. We're ready to concede that we can't stop you on this. We know that section 16 is wrong, we know the preamble is wrong, but we'll go to the people, and we'll have an election. We can fix it after that if, in fact, that's what the people want." That's what the democratic process is about, and this government was saying that that's what they wanted to do. They were satisfied, and then all of a sudden there's this holy inspiration that has come across that we've got to get this in here and make an amendment.

It's comical, Mr. Chair. It's comical that this same minister can flip-flop. Well, that whole government seems to be able to flip-flop. They're definitely not fish because they're out of water and they're still alive, but we'll see how many are five weeks from now. They adapted very well, very quickly.

To go through here, again, it's very disappointing that they're playing politics. They want stability. They could have debated this. We could have gone forward. There's no reason not to.

There are two real reasons why this bill shouldn't pass, and that's because of parental rights and because of the fact that those parents want section 16. They want to go back to make sure that all people are respected, not a list. As my hon. colleague from Edmonton-Centre loves to get at – I totally agree with her – when you're in law and in legislation, once you start a list, that's a list of exclusion. We want all people to be protected equally under the

law, not a certain group, and we certainly don't want them subject to the Human Rights Act.

Ms Blakeman: Yes, we do.

Mr. Hinman: No. We need to fix that if we want to be subject to it.

Mr. Anderson: The legislation is already subject to it.

Mr. Hinman: Well, no, no. I mean that as Albertans you don't want to be subject to an act.

The Deputy Chair: Hon. members, the debate and discussion is through the chair and relevant to the five amendment sections under one amendment, A8, please.

Mr. Hinman: Let's go through a few of those amendments and look at them and see how the government could possibly, after all this consultation and stuff, be in a situation where they're desperate and need to in an hour and a half pass this very important bill, which mostly is good.

The first one: "The operator of a charter school must restrict its purposes to the operation of that charter school." Now, what could that possibly mean? Why did we need to change that? What it is, from what briefing I've gotten – but I want to go and verify that it is – is that right now it's a set of parents who come together and say: "You know what? We're not meeting the needs of our child, and we think that we need to set up this special charter school so that our children can get that special education they want." Maybe it's something to do with music and is not offered in the other schools. Maybe it's to do with . . .

Ms Blakeman: Muslim schools.

Mr. Hinman: Yeah, religious needs and wanting to start their own.

There are many reasons why parents might want to come together and say, "We need a charter school because we think this is in the best interests of our children" and go there. My understanding – and it seems plausible – is that the reason we need to change that is so that we don't have someone like a developer go and start a new area and as part of that development say, "I'm going to start a charter school." He could then draw people to a community or be able to set one up and say, "You know what; this community is going to sell" because he's using a charter school for that. I think all of us in here would agree that that's not right. We want parents to come together, not some business using the act to be able to say: we're going to start a charter school to get an area to go together.

On just a short, brief look at this for less than an hour I would say that, well, maybe that is good, but once again I want to go home. I want to do some consultation. I want to hear if it's okay.

4:20

The next one. Section 29(4)(e) is amended by striking out "the financial administration of the school is unstable and places the learning environment of the students at risk" and substituting "the financial situation of the school places the learning environment of the students at risk." Again, I think that this is a credible change, but why after all this time and all this consultation did we just get it this afternoon that this is what needs to be changed? If, in fact, they were pontificating how perfect this legislation was, that they've done all the consultation, it's hard to understand why it's brought forward in such last-minute debate and needing to go through.

Amendment C. Section 112 is amended by striking out subsection (1) and substituting the following:

Establishment of school division

112(1) The Minister may, by order, establish a school division

- (a) consisting of 2 or more separate school districts or separate school divisions established under this Act, or
- (b) consisting of 2 or more public school districts or public school divisions established under this Act.

Why do we need to change that all of a sudden?

Let's turn to 112 and read what was in there before and see how the government could possibly – possibly – have missed this and need to make an amendment. When we turn to section 112, we read: "The Minister may, by order, establish a school division consisting of any number of public school districts, separate school districts and school divisions established under this Act."

When it's pointed out, again it becomes quite obvious to me. I see that they're worried here because the written law is arbitrary enough that what they're afraid of – actually, the minister tried, and they've never used their authority before. It says in here that "the Minister may, by order" do this. They've always gone to these different schools and said, "Could we use part of this for a private school?" and negotiated, and it was always a good-will deal, but now what they're saying is that it's not going to be by order to, more importantly, "establish a school division consisting of any number of public school districts, separate school districts and school divisions."

What they're doing is that they're separating those because there's a concern that perhaps with a Catholic school board the minister would come in and say: "You know what? You need to take this wing out of there, and it becomes a public one." The minister could just order that. What they're clarifying here, their intent, is: "Okay. We'll take a charter school or a public school or a Catholic one, and we could combine them, but we won't force the three to come together."

Again, I think this looks like another credible one, but I'm sorry, Mr. Chair; I want the time to go back. I want to consult. One thing that's always amazing to me in my life is that just when you think you understand something, somebody brings in a new detail, and I say: "Wow. I never thought of that. That came out of left field, but you know what? It's right."

We've accepted some amendments. The most important one that we accepted in this one is that only students are subject to bullying, yet somehow we missed all of that. An amendment came forward to say, "No, no. It should be everybody. Everybody should be subject to bullying." We amended it unanimously, which is the way it should be.

It's always exciting in here when we have unanimous consent. I could go back and talk about the different ones where we've had unanimous consent, and all of them were exciting, where we came together, where we saw the need. So here we are with an amendment saying that we need to do that.

Mr. Chair, this is wrong. We shouldn't rush the process. We need to have the time to go back to consult, and I'm excited to think that the Premier has not called an election, that we can come back on April 2, that we can go through this properly. If she wants to put children first, let's come back April 2, let's pass this bill, let's make the proper amendments, and then go to election.

But I think she's only concerned about her party, their skin and their power, and they're going to run off and call an election here, which they wouldn't fix. They wouldn't even have the generosity to tell Albertans: this is when we want to go to our election. I have seniors that are upset. They've got planned vacations. They

wanted to be here but couldn't because this Premier wouldn't keep her word and say that the fixed election date is the 26th of March or that the fixed election date is the 2nd of May.

That's what we should be looking at, Mr. Chair. We shouldn't be rushing through some of these amendments. We have two more amendments there. Again, it would be great to be back here. I look forward to being back on April 2 to debate this, and we'll . . .

The Deputy Chair: Thank you, hon. member. I hesitate to interrupt, but as we all know, pursuant to Standing Order 4(3) I am compelled to interrupt the proceedings and call on the committee to now rise and report.

[Mr. Zwozdesky in the chair]

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Calder.

Mr. Elniski: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The Committee of the

Whole has had under consideration a certain bill. The committee reports progress on Bill 2. I wish to table copies of all amendments considered by the Committee of the Whole on this date for the official records of the Assembly.

Thank you.

The Acting Speaker: Thank you, hon. member.

Does the Assembly concur in the report? If you do, please say aye.

Hon. Members: Aye.

The Acting Speaker: Those opposed, please say no. Accordingly the report is accepted.

Mr. Hancock: Mr. Speaker, I would move that the Assembly adjourn until 1:30 p.m. on April 2.

[Motion carried; the Assembly adjourned at 4:26 p.m.]

Bill Status Report for the 27th Legislature - 5th Session (2012)

Activity to March 22, 2012

The Bill sponsor's name is in brackets following the Bill title. If it is a money Bill, (\$) will appear between the title and the sponsor's name. Numbers following each Reading refer to Hansard pages where the text of debates is found; dates for each Reading are in brackets following the page numbers. Bills numbered 200 or higher are Private Members' Public Bills. Bills with lower numbers are Government Bills. Bills numbered Pr1, etc., are Private Bills.

*An asterisk beside a Bill number indicates an amendment was passed to that Bill; the Committee line shows the precise date of the amendment.

The date a Bill comes into force is indicated in square brackets after the date of Royal Assent. If it comes into force "on proclamation," "with exceptions," or "on various dates," please contact Legislative Counsel for details at (780) 427-2217. The chapter number assigned to the Bill is entered immediately following the date the Bill comes into force. SA indicates Statutes of Alberta; this is followed by the year in which it is included in the statutes, and its chapter number. Please note, Private Bills are not assigned a chapter number until the conclusion of the fall sittings.

1 Results-based Budgeting Act (Redford)

First Reading -- 4 (Feb. 7 aft., passed)

Second Reading -- 31-38 (Feb. 8 aft.), 125-34 (Feb. 13 eve., passed)

Committee of the Whole -- 124-34 (Feb. 14 aft.), 160-61 (Feb. 15 aft., passed)

Third Reading -- 164-65 (Feb. 15 aft., passed)

Royal Assent -- (Mar. 5 outside of House sitting) [Comes into force March 5, 2012; SA 2012 cR-17.5]

2* Education Act (Lukaszuk)

First Reading -- 115 (Feb. 14 aft., passed)

Second Reading -- 152-59 (Feb. 15 aft.), 187-88 (Feb. 16 aft.), 182-85 (Feb. 16 aft.), 256-57 (Feb. 22 aft.), 405-11 (Mar. 8 aft., passed)

Committee of the Whole -- 500-01 (Mar. 13 eve.), 515-35 (Mar. 14 aft.), 537-71 (Mar. 14 eve., amendments passed), 706-18 (Mar. 20 eve.), 734-50 (Mar. 21 aft., amendment passed), 764-74 (Mar. 22 aft., adjourned, amendment introduced)

3 Appropriation (Supplementary Supply) Act, 2012 (\$) (Horner)

First Reading -- 115 (Feb. 14 aft., passed)

Second Reading -- 150-52 (Feb. 15 aft.), 161 (Feb. 15 aft., passed)

Committee of the Whole -- 185-86 (Feb. 16 aft., passed)

Third Reading -- 251-56 (Feb. 22 aft., passed)

Royal Assent -- (Mar. 5 outside of House sitting) [Comes into force March 5, 2012; SA 2012 c1]

4 St. Albert and Sturgeon Valley School Districts Establishment Act (Lukaszuk)

First Reading -- 236 (Feb. 22 aft., passed)

Second Reading -- 403-04 (Mar. 8 aft.), 480-88 (Mar. 13 eve., passed)

Committee of the Whole -- 633-35 (Mar. 19 eve., passed)

Third Reading -- 697-98 (Mar. 20 eve., passed)

Royal Assent -- (Mar. 21 outside of House sitting) [Comes into force on proclamation; SA 2012 cS-1.5]

5 Seniors' Property Tax Deferral Act (Jablonski)

First Reading -- 298 (Mar. 5 aft., passed)

Second Reading -- 403 (Mar. 8 aft.), 488-94 (Mar. 13 eve., passed)

Committee of the Whole -- 635-43 (Mar. 19 eve., passed)

Third Reading -- 698-701 (Mar. 20 eve., passed)

Royal Assent -- (Mar. 21 outside of House sitting) [Comes into force on proclamation; SA 2012 cS-7.2]

6 Property Rights Advocate Act (McQueen)

First Reading -- 236 (Feb. 22 aft., passed)

Second Reading -- 404-05 (Mar. 8 aft.), 494-500 (Mar. 13 eve., passed)

Committee of the Whole -- 643-45 (Mar. 19 eve.), 645-62 (Mar. 19 eve., passed)

Third Reading -- 701-02 (Mar. 20 eve., passed)

Royal Assent -- (Mar. 21 outside of House sitting) [Comes into force on proclamation; SA 2012 cP-26.5]

- 7 Appropriation Act, 2012 (\$) (Horner)**
First Reading -- 513 (Mar. 14 aft., passed)
Second Reading -- 586-95 (Mar. 15 aft., passed on division)
Committee of the Whole -- 627-33 (Mar. 19 eve., passed)
Third Reading -- 681-96 (Mar. 20 aft.), 703-06 (Mar. 20 eve., passed on division)
Royal Assent -- (Mar. 21 outside of House sitting) [Comes into force March 21, 2012; SA 2012 c3]
- 201 Alberta Bill of Rights (Property Rights Protection) Amendment Act, 2012 (Hinman)**
First Reading -- 69 (Feb. 13 aft., passed)
Second Reading -- 299-311 (Mar. 5 aft., defeated on division)
- 203* Tobacco Reduction (Protection of Children in Vehicles) Amendment Act, 2012 (Sherman)**
First Reading -- 69 (Feb. 13 aft., passed)
Second Reading -- 427-36 (Mar. 12 aft., passed on division)
Committee of the Whole -- 613-22 (Mar. 19 aft., passed with amendments)
Third Reading -- 623 (Mar. 19 aft., passed)
Royal Assent -- (Mar. 21 outside of House sitting)
- 204 Land Statutes (Abolition of Adverse Possession) Amendment Act, 2012 (Allred)**
First Reading -- 357 (Mar. 7 aft., passed)
Second Reading -- 436-38 (Mar. 12 aft., passed)
- 205 Scrap Metal Dealers and Recyclers Identification Act (Quest)**
First Reading -- 585 (Mar. 15 aft., passed)
Second Reading -- 623-24 (Mar. 19 aft., adjourned)
- 209 Homeowner Protection Act (Hehr)**
First Reading -- 585 (Mar. 15 aft., passed)
- 210 Early Childhood Learning and Child Care Act (Taylor)**
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2012 Alberta Hansard (27th Legislature, Fifth Session) Index

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