

Legislative Assembly of Alberta

Title: **Tuesday, March 29, 1994** 1:30 p.m.
Date: 94/03/29
[Mr. Speaker in the Chair]

head: Prayers

MR. SPEAKER: Let us pray.

Our Father, keep us mindful of the special and unique opportunity we have to work for our constituents and our province, and in that work give us strength and wisdom.

Amen.

head: Introduction of Visitors

MRS. McCLELLAN: Mr. Speaker, it is certainly an honour and a pleasure to introduce to you and through you to members of the Assembly a very special guest who is seated in your gallery. The Hon. Diane Marleau, Minister of Health for Canada and Member of Parliament for Sudbury, is visiting our province today. She has a series of meetings, and we've had the opportunity to have a very productive meeting to talk about health restructuring in Alberta and a number of items of mutual interest. I would ask that all members of this Assembly give Mrs. Marleau and the group accompanying her a very warm welcome to our Assembly.

head: Presenting Petitions

MR. SPEAKER: The hon. Leader of the Opposition.

MR. DECORE: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I wish to table two petitions, a petition signed firstly by 28 individuals at Wild Rose Manor in Grande Prairie and the second signed by 53 individuals at the Golden Age Centre in Grande Prairie. Both petitions urge the government to ensure that consultation takes place with seniors and that no changes be made until seniors agree to those changes.
Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

MR. SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands-Beverly.

MS HANSON: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I am pleased to present a petition from 3,081 Calgaryians who urge the government of Alberta to "raise the minimum wage . . . to conform to the Statistics Canada poverty line," to increase the amount of assistance the clients of Family and Social Services receive, to conform with two-thirds of the Statistics Canada poverty line, and to end the ministry's practice of selectively denying assistance to those in need.

MR. SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

MRS. HEWES: Thanks, Mr. Speaker. I beg leave to present a petition from 52 residents of Edmonton-Gold Bar urging the Government not to alter funding arrangements for . . . Seniors Lodges and . . . Subsidized Apartments until Seniors have been consulted and have agreed to any revisions.

MR. SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods.

DR. MASSEY: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I beg leave to present a petition on behalf of over 2,000 residents of southeast Edmonton and surrounding area asking that the Grey Nuns remain an active treatment hospital.

MR. SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

MR. HENRY: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I would beg your leave to table a petition signed by 120 residents of my constituency near Prince Rupert in the north end; for those that don't know, the municipal airport area. They are urging the Legislative Assembly to ask the government not to proceed with any reductions in support to seniors' programs prior to seniors' consultation and agreement being achieved.

Thank you.

head: Reading and Receiving Petitions

MR. SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Edmonton-McClung.

MR. MITCHELL: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I would ask that the petition I presented recently be read and received. This petition concerns the Misericordia hospital remaining open as an acute care, full treatment facility.

CLERK:

We the undersigned petition the Legislative Assembly to urge the government to maintain the Misericordia Hospital as a Full-Service, Active Hospital and continue to serve the West-end of Edmonton and surrounding area.

MR. SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona.

MR. ZARIWNY: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I would now ask that the petition I presented on March 21 be read and received.

CLERK:

We, the undersigned, feel that Advanced Education is essential to all Albertans, and petition the Assembly to urge the government to reconsider its proposed cuts to Advanced Education.

MR. SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

MR. HENRY: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I would ask that the petition I presented on March 10 on behalf of the residents of Manoir St. Joachim in my riding regarding privatization of seniors' lodges now be read and received.

CLERK:

We, the undersigned, petition the Legislative Assembly of Alberta to urge the Government not to alter funding arrangements for Alberta's Seniors Lodges and Seniors Subsidized Apartments until Seniors have been consulted and have agreed to any revisions to funding arrangements.

MR. SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Calgary-North West.

MR. BRUSEKER: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I would ask that the petition I tabled on March 16 regarding the education cuts and proposed education restructuring be now read and received.

CLERK:

We, the undersigned residents of Alberta petition the Legislative Assembly to urge the Government of Alberta not to implement the plan to restructure the educational system in Alberta, as proposed by the Minister of Education.

We also request the Assembly to urge the Government of Alberta to ensure that every Albertan will have the opportunity for input and involvement in future plans to restructure the educational system in Alberta.

head: Notices of Motions

MR. SPEAKER: The hon. Deputy Government House Leader.

MRS. BLACK: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Pursuant to Standing Order 34(2)(a) I am giving notice that tomorrow I will be moving that written questions do stand and retain their places on the Order Paper with the exception of written questions 178, 179, and 185.

As well, I'm giving notice that I will be moving that motions for returns stand and retain their places with the exception of 181, 182, 183, 184, and 186.

head: Tabling Returns and Reports

MR. SPEAKER: The hon. Minister of Environmental Protection.

MR. EVANS: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased today to table four copies of the annual report for the Department of Environmental Protection for the year ended March 31, 1993.

head: Introduction of Guests

MR. TANNAS: Mr. Speaker, it's my pleasure today to introduce to you and through you to members of the House Mr. John Williams, who is the MP for St. Albert. He'll be meeting later on with our Premier. He's joined today by his sons, Munro and Allan, and I would ask them to stand in the members' gallery and receive the warm traditional welcome of the Assembly.

MR. SPEAKER: The hon. Member for West Yellowhead.

MR. VAN BINSBERGEN: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm delighted to introduce to you and to the members of this House a lady from Hinton by the name of Louise Gale. Louise was the constituency manager for my predecessor, and she did such a good job that I asked her to stay on. It was a very wise decision. I ask her to rise and receive the warm welcome of this House.

MR. SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Glenora.

MR. SAPERS: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure today to introduce to you and to all members of the Assembly two remarkable, young women from the constituency of Edmonton-Glenora. Seated in the public gallery are Rebecca Dolgoy and her sister Leah Dolgoy, and I would ask them to stand and receive the welcome of this Assembly.

MR. SPEAKER: The hon. Member for St. Albert.

MR. BRACKO: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm delighted to present to you and through you to the Members of the Legislative Assembly my office manager, Sheila Roy. She does an excellent job for the constituents of St. Albert. I'd ask her to rise - she's in the public gallery - and receive the warm welcome of the Legislative Assembly.

MR. SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Lethbridge-East.

DR. NICOL: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'd like to introduce to you and through you to the members of the Assembly two people from Lethbridge. They work in my constituency office: Susan Giffen and Char-Lene Merkl. I'd ask that they rise and receive the warm welcome of the Legislature.

MR. SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Sherwood Park.

MR. COLLINGWOOD: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's indeed a pleasure today to introduce to you and through you to members of the Assembly representatives of the Strathcona County Youth Council. We often hear about difficulties that youth face, and I'm so delighted to be able to introduce to you members of the youth council that are very active, very involved, and very concerned with their community and their futures. The group is represented today by the group leader, Gerald Bara, by chairman, Rob Kelly, and by vice-chairman, Trevor Stefishen. I'd also mention that this council won the Premier's Council in Support of Alberta Families award this year. Nine members of the council are here today seated in the public gallery. I'd ask that they rise and receive the warm welcome of the House.

1:40

MR. SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Grande Prairie-Wapiti.

MR. JACQUES: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It is my pleasure to introduce to you and through you to Members of this Legislative Assembly a person who is involved in many projects and community groups in the city of Grande Prairie. She is my best friend and my lover of the last 33 years. I would ask that you welcome my wife, Myrna. Please stand.

MR. KIRKLAND: Mr. Speaker, it's my pleasure this afternoon to introduce to you and through you to the rest of the Assembly a lady that in fact is the glue that holds together Spruce Grove-Sturgeon-St. Albert. I would share her last name with you, but unfortunately I just met her an hour ago. I only know her as Marilyn. I would ask that she rise and receive the warm welcome of the Assembly.

MR. SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Meadowlark.

MS LEIBOVICI: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'd like to introduce through you and to you three constituents of mine. They are Shannon, Haley, and Jeremy Sapers. Their husband and father is well known in this Assembly, and he frequently reminds me that he is a constituent of mine as well. I'd like them to receive the warm welcome of the House. Will you please rise.

MR. SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Clover Bar-Fort Saskatchewan.

MRS. ABDURAHMAN: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'd like through you to acknowledge to the House a constituent of mine: Ron Hodgins. I'd ask Ron to stand and receive the warm welcome of this House.

head: Oral Question Period**Millar Western Pulp Ltd.**

MR. DECORE: Mr. Speaker, Millar Western received a \$120 million loan from the Alberta heritage fund, and to date \$86 million has accrued on this loan. The most recent entries in the heritage fund statements show that the government has written down the loan from \$120 million to \$74 million. Finally we know that the Deputy Premier personally helped in the financial restructuring of Millar Western. My first question is to the Treasurer. Why would you say that Albertans could get their investment back in spades on Millar Western when your own financial statements show that you've written down the loan from \$120 million to \$74 million?

MR. DINNING: Well, Mr. Speaker, the government of the day made a decision to invest in Millar Western Pulp Ltd, and it's in the heritage fund annual report, which I filed in the Assembly late last year, which describes that

the Heritage Fund holds a \$120 million participating debenture with a 10 percent interest rate. Interest is payable to the extent of available project cash flow, and unpaid amounts are accrued and capitalized but not recorded on the Heritage Fund books. Interest continues to compound on all unpaid balances. All principal is due by [the year] 2004.

So the government of the day chose to invest in this kind of a project in the belief that there was and there is and there remains a future in the pulp industry in this province. The heritage fund continues to hold that investment. Millar Western continues to have a \$120 million plus accrued and accruing interest obligation to the provincial government, and we are of the belief that they will be able to live up to their financial obligations.

MR. DECORE: Well, Mr. Speaker, I don't think the Treasurer heard the question because he's not given any kind of an answer that resembles the question. The question again, if you didn't hear it, Mr. Treasurer, is: why would you tell Albertans that their investment will be repaid in spades when you and your government have written down this loan from \$120 million to \$74 million? That's pretty clear.

MR. DINNING: Mr. Speaker, we on this side of the House have confidence in Alberta, and we have confidence in Albertans. The member across the way laughs in his typical way and scoffs in his typical way about the future of Alberta. He's chosen to take that typically negative approach. What we're saying, quite consistent with the recommendations of the Auditor General, is that when there is a concessionary loan – this one it's acknowledged was a concessionary loan – that be written down accordingly in our books. In fact, the obligation that Millar Western continues to have to this provincial government in repaying that \$120 million plus interest to the heritage savings trust fund continues. It does not change, and we're confident that the payment will be made.

MR. DECORE: It doesn't sound very convincing, Mr. Treasurer.

My next question is to the Deputy Premier. Explain why you were so generous with taxpayers' assets when you allowed taxpayers' moneys to take a secondary position to the \$30 million CIBC loan.

MR. KOWALSKI: Mr. Speaker, the economic situation in terms of the pulp and paper industry has not been a healthy one and not a very good one. When we were looking at this particular portfolio when it was addressed to us, in fact Millar Western had come to the province and asked for additional loans. The province said no. The province was not in a position to do that. This heritage savings trust fund loan that went back to 1987 was there. As I indicated yesterday, we were not in a position to do that. So in essence we basically talked to other lenders, including the principal lender that has dealt with Millar Western, and they were prepared to put additional dollars into it.

The fact of the matter is that if the pulp industry prices were not to recover, there would be a very difficult time getting any of the dollars back. That was part of the restructuring alternative. The options were very, very clear as far as I could understand at the time, that you either put Millar Western into receivership and forsake the incredible number of jobs that have occurred in the province of Alberta, the new technology that has been developed with respect to that – in fact, the province is not out anything.

The province has a loan that Millar Western owes, the loan plus the interest. That is a fact. That's the basic reason why it was done: to make sure that this particular company did not go into receivership. There's not been one additional penny of government money put into this project in terms of the restructuring. [interjections] I hear all the Liberals yelling. I want the Liberals also to know that I am probably the only one . . . [interjections] I hear all the yapping over there. I have never, ever had a ride in Millar Western's aircraft, unlike some of the Liberal leadership.

MR. DECORE: Mr. Speaker, going to school with one of the . . .

MR. SPEAKER: Second main question.

MR. DECORE: Mr. Speaker, yesterday the Deputy Premier informed this House that the pulp industry was financially depressed. Currently the government has \$196 million of heritage moneys in Al-Pac and loan guarantees to other pulp firms of \$536 million. If you throw in Millar Western, the total is \$850 million. My questions are to the Deputy Premier. You've been pretty generous to Millar Western in restructuring, Mr. Deputy Premier. Are you offering the same advantages in restructuring to these other government backed enterprises?

1:50

MR. KOWALSKI: No, Mr. Speaker. Nothing has been requested. I want to repeat again the situation with Millar Western in the community of Whitecourt. Some 370-plus jobs are associated with it. It was very clear. In the fall of 1993 Millar Western came to the government and basically said: will you lend us more money? We said: no, we will not; we will not put an additional penny of government money into this. So it's a question of putting Millar Western into receivership. Part of what we're doing is trying to restructure the economy of Alberta to make sure there is an economy going and to make sure in fact that we're going to have more jobs like the 250 that were added to the Edmonton economy the other day with the opening of Aikenhead's here in the province of Alberta and in Calgary later in April the similar thing, like the announcement that was made in Grande Prairie just a few days ago with respect to the Grande Prairie timber development area with no government loans, guarantees, or subsidies.

MR. DECORE: Mr. Speaker, the Deputy Premier gave a tremendous advantage to Millar Western. Will the Deputy Premier assure Albertans that these advantages won't be given to other companies, that he'll allow the marketplace to work as it should, and they'll solve their problems?

MR. KOWALSKI: Well, Mr. Speaker, I answered the question in the first part. There's never been any request made of me and to my knowledge no request made of the government by any other firm in the province of Alberta. We are not in a position of giving loans, grants, subsidies. This was a restructuring, a refinancing. We lost not one penny. We put not one penny of government dollars or taxpayer dollars into this restructuring, none whatsoever, and there's been no write-down either. In fact, as the Provincial Treasurer pointed out, this loan has to be repaid. The loan bears an interest rate, and that interest will accumulate, and there is a payout at a certain time in the future, which for all intents and purposes should occur.

MR. DECORE: Mr. Speaker, the loan to Millar Western has been written down by \$46 million. Those are your own financial statements this year. Assure Albertans that the \$850 million in

loans or backup won't be jeopardized, that we'll be getting all of our moneys back.

MR. KOWALSKI: Well, Mr. Speaker, I thought I had done that yesterday in question period. It certainly is in the *Hansard* of March 28, 1994, and I would certainly refer the hon. member to a reading of *Hansard*, but I will repeat it again today. In terms of the so-called write-downs and the like, please remember that there is a revised Financial Administration Act. As I recall, I think even this Legislature perhaps looked at it in 1992 or 1993. And as the heritage savings trust fund annual report clearly points out on page 18,

the loan to Millar Western falls under the new accounting policy for loans with concessionary terms. The expected income from the loan . . . was made in 1987. To recognize the value of the concession, the book value of the investment has been retroactively reduced from its face value of \$120 million.

It does not take away the liability that Millar Western has to the taxpayers of the province of Alberta. This is one of these accounting principles that I do not profess to be conversant in to the ultimate degree. The fact of the matter is: Millar Western still owes the Alberta heritage savings trust fund \$120 million.

MR. SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

Programs for Children

MR. HENRY: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The provincial and federal governments have announced funding under the Brighter Futures program for a variety of preschool intervention programs, and that's a good move. But it's important to note that this is part of a federal package which was started with the UN convention on the rights of the child, which has been ratified by this country. I'd like to ask the Minister of Health why she was so quick to grab the federal money, while her government is the only government in Canada that has not ratified the UN convention on the rights of the child. Why the contradiction?

MRS. McCLELLAN: Mr. Speaker, we are very pleased to participate in the Brighter Futures program. This government is very concerned about children, and certainly I would invite my colleague the Minister of Family and Social Services to respond as he was the minister who participated this morning in the very positive announcement of those programs being in effect in Alberta.

MR. SPEAKER: The hon. Minister of Family and Social Services.

MR. CARDINAL: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. As you're aware, there were 12 projects announced in Alberta again. These projects are designed by the community and will be delivered by the community. That's why these programs will be very successful. There will be \$11,269,000 spent over four years for a total of \$17.4 million in a four-year period.

MR. HENRY: Mr. Speaker, this caucus may think the rights of children are funny, but this caucus on this side will stand up for the rights of children over and over and over again. This is the only province that does not have ratification. [interjections] Settle down.

I'd like to ask the Minister of Education why six months ago he signed the agreement that put into place a protocol and then six months later cut the very funding to preschool programs such as kindergarten.

MR. JONSON: Mr. Speaker, I think it's important for the House and the hon. member to remember that we have kept our programming for special-needs students and for socioeconomically disadvantaged students. We are committing somewhere in the neighbourhood of \$30.7 million in that area out of our Education budget. I welcome the initiative contained in the Brighter Futures project because certainly this complements what we're doing in the province, and I think it is a good development. But I'd like to emphasize that we have recognized the need for funding in that area and we continue with it.

MR. HENRY: Mr. Speaker, all children need ECS in this province.

The minister continues to say that he's on solid ground in cutting funding. I'd like to ask the minister specifically what percentage of the 17,000-odd submissions he received advocated funding to ECS programs in this province.

MR. JONSON: Mr. Speaker, certainly the submissions that were received that dealt with early childhood services indicated that ECS, early childhood services, was an important program. That is acknowledged. However, we have taken the view that with a reduced number of hours we can still meet the goals of the early childhood services program. As I've mentioned, with respect to our special-needs and high-needs students, we have continued those particular grants.

MR. SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Calgary-Currie.

Kindergarten Programs

MRS. BURGNER: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. To the Minister of Education. I would like to pick up on the theme we've just been addressing in that the reduction to ECS funding has generated a number of discussions on the reported merits and the research out there with respect to ECS. Quite frankly, in Calgary-Currie, Mr. Minister, my constituents are concerned about what is available to them in the ECS program. In Calgary-Currie we have academic programs, cultural opportunities, and quite frankly I would like to know whether the Minister of Education is prepared to revisit the curriculum of the ECS program so that our students may be more academically prepared for grade 1 in light of the reduced hours.

MR. JONSON: Mr. Speaker, with respect to the program and the goals for early childhood services, which date from 1984 in terms of their last major statement, we will be reviewing those goals, those goals dealing with self-esteem and physical health and so forth, and we will be looking at the program with respect to more direction in achieving those goals and making sure the goals of ECS are closely linked to entry into the regular school program.

MR. SPEAKER: Supplemental question.

MRS. BURGNER: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Could the minister please identify for parents what the process of evaluation will be for students who will enter ECS who have the 200 hours in respect to the students who may have 400 hours. How will that be evaluated at the grade 1 level?

MR. JONSON: Mr. Speaker, we will be designing a monitoring procedure, call it an evaluation procedure if you will, to monitor the progress of ECS students as they move into the regular school system. This is an initiative which I think is important, and we will be undertaking that.

MR. SPEAKER: Final supplemental.

MRS. BURGNER: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. That's encouraging news.

Will that evaluation, Mr. Minister, be made available to the parents and the school community or just to the boards?

MR. JONSON: Mr. Speaker, when this evaluation proceeds and there is available a document or results to report which will be constructive and will help us in terms of the overall direction for education in the early grades in this province, certainly we'll make it available to the general public.

MR. SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands-Beverly.

2:00 Child Welfare

MS HANSON: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. First, it was liquor stores, then corporate registries, and possibly jails. Now we hear that the government is musing about possible privatization of the child welfare system. My question is to the Minister of Family and Social Services. Will the minister allow segments of child welfare services to be turned over to for-profit agencies as was recently speculated by the new children's commissioner?

MR. CARDINAL: Of course, Mr. Speaker, as I mentioned before in this House, we are reviewing the whole process of the child welfare issue, but I've personally never heard any indication that anyone was going to privatize child welfare.

MS HANSON: Mr. Speaker, since we know the plan is to decentralize child welfare, how will the minister retain accountability and responsibility if control and delivery of services is handed over to community or private agencies?

MR. CARDINAL: Mr. Speaker, there are two separate issues there we need to identify. The person asking the question, of course, mentioned community agencies. There are a great number of community agencies out there, nonprofit agencies, doing an excellent job in the area of child welfare, and that will continue.

The second question that was asked, Mr. Speaker, of course was answered already in my first answer.

MS HANSON: Will the minister release all the results from the working groups who are now looking at restructuring the delivery service system for child welfare?

MR. CARDINAL: Mr. Speaker, I've indicated to this Assembly before that I will on an ongoing basis do a progress report to this Assembly, and I will do that.

MR. SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Olds-Didsbury.

Prescription Drugs

MR. BRASSARD: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. As part of the three-year plan for the Department of Health the minister has recommended a flat dispensing fee of \$9.70 to replace the copay portion of drugs obtained through the Blue Cross plan. Even though this fixed cost is designed to protect people, in particular seniors, against the escalating cost of medication, the seniors at my constituency meetings felt that this new proposal would have just the opposite effect and would significantly disadvantage the

lower cost prescription. To the Minister of Health: will you reconsider this proposal in light of the concerns that have been expressed?

MRS. McCLELLAN: Mr. Speaker, there are two points I want to make. I am very concerned about the cost of drugs to seniors. While a number of seniors may indeed use lower cost drugs, there are a significant number of seniors who are faced with very high drug costs which can cost them up to \$100 or more a month under our present copay system. The minister responsible for seniors is traveling around the province right now listening to seniors on this issue and others, and I have met with the pharmacy association to discuss this as well. I am certainly prepared to listen, to work with seniors and with the association. However, my primary concern will continue to be protecting seniors from the very high-cost drugs that they may face. Some of these drugs are very, very important to quality of life for a senior, and we're very concerned about that. So, yes, I am willing to listen to suggestions that will accommodate that concern of rising drug costs and also accommodate our concern on overall drug costs in our budget.

MR. BRASSARD: While it is true, Mr. Speaker, that many of the medications are increasing in cost, it is also true that a number of my seniors are on a number of medications, and this has an accumulative effect. Has the minister taken into consideration this accumulative effect on seniors particularly?

MRS. McCLELLAN: Yes, Mr. Speaker, I have. Again I would say that the minister responsible for seniors is hearing from seniors on this issue, as I have directly. I would remind hon. members that under the proposal on the dispensing fee it was up to a maximum of \$9.70 per prescription. So this obviously could be addressed by a lower cost per prescription, which was allowed. However, I will repeat that I am certainly open to hearing suggestions that will address the concern of the high-cost drugs to a very significant number of seniors in this province. I'm very concerned about that.

MR. BRASSARD: Since most pharmacists, particularly in smaller communities, dispense professional advice and assistance as well as the prescriptions, will the minister commit to a plan that is fair to the pharmacist as well as the customer?

MRS. McCLELLAN: Mr. Speaker, the Minister of Health in this government very much appreciates the very proactive role that the pharmacists in this province have taken in drug education, in being a partner in the Great Drug Round-up, which occurs every spring in this province for the safety of all Albertans, and certainly we will work with the pharmacists as we have in the past. As I indicated, I have met with the pharmacists. They have given me some suggestions that they believe would meet my concerns on high drug costs. As I say, I value the work the pharmacists do with us in this province on these issues, and I will continue to work with them.

MR. SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Meadowlark.

Alberta Hospital Edmonton

MS LEBOVICI: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Alberta Hospital Edmonton is being put in financial jeopardy as a result of recent management decisions. Disregarding the Labour Relations Board award, it appears that housekeeping and security companies are still interviewing for new staff while current employees are being terminated. To add insult to injury, 32 management employees

will be receiving a \$1.5 million golden handshake as of April 1, 1994. My question is to the Minister of Health. How can you continue to condone this blatant breach of employee rights by your appointed board?

MRS. McCLELLAN: Mr. Speaker, I believe I have made it very clear in this Legislature practically on a daily basis recently, one, that there is a board in place at Alberta Hospital Edmonton and, two, that the Minister of Health has no place in the collective bargaining process in this province. There is a process in place to look after those concerns. I believe they are being dealt with most appropriately. I do not believe that either the employers or the employees wish the minister to interfere in the collective bargaining process. I respect that process.

MR. SPEAKER: Supplemental question.

MS LEIBOVICI: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'll try something different. How can the minister justify a \$1.5 million golden handshake when the hospital is closing beds?

MRS. McCLELLAN: Again, Mr. Speaker, there is a board in place that is charged with the responsibility of dealing with the management of Alberta Hospital Edmonton, as is the case with the autonomy of the boards in this province. I believe that boards have a responsibility to carry out those duties, and I expect them to do that in the way that they have been charged with that responsibility.

2:10

MR. SPEAKER: Final supplemental.

MS LEIBOVICI: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I think it's time we cut through the fluff. When are you going to take action?

MRS. McCLELLAN: Mr. Speaker, I believe that we have a hearing problem. There are two things I want to make very clear. Boards in this province are charged with the responsibility of managing the affairs of the institutions they have under their responsibility. I believe that the people in this province support the boards doing that. I do not believe they wish to have selective interference by the minister.

Now, there may be a philosophical difference here, I will agree. I do not believe in state control. I do believe in autonomy. The autonomy of those boards is there today, Mr. Speaker, and I expect them to carry out the duties they were appointed to do. Again, if there are problems within those boards between the employers and the employees, there is a process in this province to deal with that. I respect that process.

MR. SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Little Bow.

Federal Budget

MR. McFARLAND: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Frequently constituents of Little Bow tell me that the government is doing the right thing. How others view Alberta determines how well this province and this country is received in the international financial market. It's been five weeks since the Provincial Treasurer and the federal Finance minister brought down their respective budgets, and my constituents have asked me to ask the Provincial Treasurer: what is the response of the bond rating agencies in regards to these two budgets?

MR. DINNING: Well, Mr. Speaker, in response to the member's question as it relates to Alberta, Alberta has found that the Moody's rating agency has confirmed our double A rating. The Dominion Bond Rating Service and the Canadian Bond Rating Service have both confirmed our double A credit rating and moved our outlook from a negative outlook to a stable outlook. On the other hand, the federal Liberals have found that their budget met some resistance in markets. While Standard and Poor's has confirmed their triple A rating and the Dominion Bond Rating Service again confirmed their triple A rating on the Canadian dollar currency, on their foreign currency the Dominion Bond Rating agency is losing confidence in the Liberals' approach to getting their financial house in order, and they've moved their bond rating from triple A down to double A. That's a significant drop in the confidence of an important rating institution in this country.

MR. SPEAKER: Supplemental question.

MR. McFARLAND: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Would the Provincial Treasurer please tell me what impact this has on the response of Canada's and Alberta's ability to borrow money to fund our overspending, at least on the federal side of things?

MR. DINNING: Well, Mr. Speaker, what a lower credit rating does, especially on foreign markets where Canada is so heavily reliant, is raise the cost of borrowing money, and the fact is that today, with interest rates in the order of 6 to 7 percent, for every dollar that Ottawa must borrow, that's 7 cents less they have to spend next year.

The sad part of it is, Mr. Speaker, that we're coming out of a recession. Canadians have paid dearly for this recession across the country, and just as we are doing so, Canadian businesspeople, Canadian homeowners are finding interest rates going up. Why are interest rates going up? Because markets across this country and around this world are literally rolling their eyes at the federal government's approach to balancing its budget and getting its financial house in order. That is not something that this province, that this government is willing to force Albertans to pay, so we're taking a vastly different approach than the federal government is in trying to get our financial house in order.

MR. SPEAKER: Final supplemental.

MR. McFARLAND: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I know that my constituents ask how we're going to fare when we have our house in order and the rest of the provinces don't. So in order to ask that question of the minister, could the Provincial Treasurer respond to the Liberal claim that Alberta's budgeting process is short term and not thinking about the longer haul?

MR. DINNING: Well, the tragedy, Mr. Speaker, is that the Liberals are taking very much a short-term approach, promising good things down the road and then effectively handing taxpayers the bill. They're raising their taxes. Over the next three years \$100 billion of overspending by the Liberal government in Ottawa is going to take place, and while that may be just borrowing today, that is a form of deferred taxation that not only will this generation have to pay for but all future Canadians. Our young children in school today will have to pay the taxes that are required to pay off that \$100 billion of excess spending, which I'm sorry to say is typical of Liberals in this country.

MR. SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Clover Bar-Fort Saskatchewan.

Machinery and Equipment Tax

MRS. ABDURAHMAN: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Over the past 15 years the machinery and equipment tax has been studied and studied and studied, and still the government continues to drag its feet on making a decision on whether it should be retained or phased out. This is creating uncertainty and apprehension. [interjection] Continue to dig, Mr. Provincial Treasurer. My question is to the Provincial Treasurer. Will the Treasurer tell Albertans when this government will get off the fence and make a decision on machinery and equipment?

MR. DINNING: Mr. Speaker, consistent with the Premier's commitment to do an overall review of the competitiveness of Alberta's taxation system, we launched late last year the Alberta Tax Reform Commission, under the chairmanship of Mr. Jack Donald of Red Deer. That commission traveled this province, listened to Albertans, and came back to us in early February with what I say is an exceptionally fine report. They have addressed the matter of machinery and equipment taxation, which I know grips the attention of all members of caucuses on both sides of the Assembly. I think they've come up with some excellent solutions in addressing the machinery and equipment taxation problem, and I look forward to discussing this matter not only with my colleagues but having representatives of our caucus go out and listen to Albertans and bring back to us the final steps we should take to implement this very valuable report.

MRS. ABDURAHMAN: To the Provincial Treasurer: how do you expect small businesses in Fort Saskatchewan, Strathcona country, and indeed municipalities all over the province to hire new employees and continue to invest in Alberta when they're facing the uncertainty of what their business taxes are going to be? We need decisions.

MR. DINNING: Well, Mr. Speaker, I know that the representatives of the county of Strathcona, the folks of Fort Saskatchewan, the very people this member has spoken of, have said: don't rush into any speedy decisions on this report, because this has an impact on the livelihood of the people of Sherwood Park, on the people of Fort Saskatchewan, indeed the people across this province. They realize that this is a comprehensive report that requires careful study by members of the government. They want to have their final say. People from Fort Saskatchewan and Sherwood Park want to have their final say before we take these important steps. I believe that the solution that the Tax Reform Commission comes up with makes sense. It's fair to all Albertans when it comes to machinery and equipment, and I for one am anxious to see how this recommendation on machinery and equipment taxation could be properly implemented.

MRS. ABDURAHMAN: To the Provincial Treasurer: could the Treasurer explain how this continued government indecision on machinery and equipment contributes to, and I quote, a "stable, predictable and efficient" tax regime, which the Alberta Tax Reform Commission stated in the January report?

2:20

MR. DINNING: Well, Mr. Speaker, I will simply allow the exceptionally fine work of this group of people to stand for itself. I believe that they have been far reaching, far thinking down the

road, not just thinking in a short-term sort of way. Even the people of Fort Saskatchewan and Sherwood Park and others such as my colleague from Rocky Mountain House have expressed concern about the need for constant reinvestment. What happens to the machinery and equipment tax base is that it depreciates on an annual basis. How do we protect those tax bases not just for today, not just for the next one or two or three years? How do we ensure that they have access to a stable, predictable kind of tax base that's going to enable them to deliver the kind of services that their constituents expect them to deliver?

Senior Citizens' Programs

MR. TANNAS: In recent days we've had a number of seniors' meetings in Highwood to provide information about the new proposed Alberta seniors' benefit. We even had the minister responsible for seniors and members of his department come and speak to seniors to provide information, to solicit input and comments from seniors and answer their questions. Mr. Speaker, I'd like to direct my questions today to the chairman of the Seniors Advisory Council for Alberta. A number of concerns centred around the idea of the single-senior couple where one spouse is over the age of 65 and the other is under the age of 65. Have the chairman and the council considered the cost of changing the criteria for a nonsenior spouse?

MR. SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Calgary-Currie.

MRS. BURGNER: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The hon. Member for Highwood has raised a very interesting point that is consistently discussed in the consultation process. Quite frankly, the Member for Edmonton-Beverly-Belmont and I were at a meeting with seniors this morning in Edmonton, and it was raised again there. At this time, while we're still in process of discussion, we have not done a cost analysis on this change, but it is something that the seniors have asked us to look into.

MR. TANNAS: Again to the chairman: has your council considered a change in the age criterion from 64 to 60 or some other range?

MR. SPEAKER: The hon. member.

MRS. BURGNER: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. What you're talking about is in terms of a change in the range of age. What has been identified here is that 65 is the number by which Canadians become seniors and become entitled to a number of these benefits. At this point in time there is no movement to change that particular target number. However, what is coming out in the discussions is the range of life-styles and opportunities that our typical senior enjoys. We are not looking at a group of seniors who only marry elderly people. Many seniors have younger spouses; they have younger families; they have different commitments. At this time to extend benefits beyond the age of 65 down to 45, 50, wherever, would not be appropriate.

MR. SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Sherwood Park.

Paddle River Dam

MR. COLLINGWOOD: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. After months of a trial and sworn evidence the courts have ruled that the department of the environment was deceitful and fraudulent in dealing with Opron Construction on the building of the Paddle River dam. Last week the Premier accepted the ruling and called

for an independent inquiry into the scandal. This week the Minister of Environmental Protection rejected the ruling and suggested that a lengthy and costly appeal is the way to go. Of course an appeal would not be an inquiry into the conduct of government staff. My question to the Minister of Environmental Protection: why would the minister deliberately undermine the Premier's decision to hold an inquiry by talking about appealing the court's ruling?

MR. SPEAKER: The hon. Minister of Environmental Protection.

MR. EVANS: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm happy to set the record straight. Yesterday I had an opportunity really at some length to discuss this matter with members of the media from the city of Edmonton. In no way, shape, or form did I ever say that a decision had been made to appeal the decision of the hon. justice who heard this case. In point of fact, I said that my department, certainly the Minister of Justice for Alberta, and in fact our entire cabinet would be reviewing the decision in great detail and that we would be doing so in the context of the request by the Premier of this province that the province of Saskatchewan, through the Minister of Justice there, review the management practices of people who were in a position of authority in the department of the environment during the period of 1982 to '85. That's a very important review, and it's important that we have the information from that review. In point of fact, I mentioned that one of our alternatives may well be that after the judgment is filed and served on government, we may well make an application to the court for an extension in the time for filing an appeal until we have the review completed and the results made public from this investigation by the province of Saskatchewan.

MR. SPEAKER: Supplemental question.

MR. COLLINGWOOD: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. Then in light of that answer, perhaps the minister can answer this question: in light of the judge's ruling and his language, why is the minister now trying to protect staff or previous government members responsible for dealing with Opron during that period of time?

MR. EVANS: Well, Mr. Speaker, I'd like to know what the hon. member opposite is referring to. Certainly a decision has been made by a respected justice of our Alberta courts. We take that decision very seriously. There are comments in the reasons for judgment, which are preliminary to the judgment itself being filed, reasons for judgment in excess of 300 pages that talk about actions on the part of people from the department of the environment and actions as well on the part of Opron, the plaintiff in this case. We, again, are examining this, and we are going to make a decision as to which way to proceed. Then the appropriate actions will be taken, all in the context, again, of the investigation that the Premier has requested to fully and very transparently review this issue and get to the bottom of it so that the people of the province of Alberta will know all the answers.

MR. SPEAKER: Final supplemental.

MR. COLLINGWOOD: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Then in light of that answer, my supplementary question to the Minister of Justice: will the minister table in this House the terms of reference of this inquiry being conducted by Saskatchewan so we can see just how sincere the Premier is in terms of the transparency of this whole issue?

MR. ROSTAD: Mr. Speaker, I don't think that's any problem at all. I want to make it very, very clear that the Minister of Justice in Saskatchewan and his department are looking at the entire judgment to find out what the words "fraudulent" and "deceitful" were predicated on. If in fact there's room for criminal action or criminal investigation, that will be done, and it will be done by Saskatchewan so that there are no allegations that we might be tainted in Alberta. I don't think there's any problem in tabling the letter of transmittal. I want to make it very clear that it's not a public inquiry. In fact, a court case that went through the courts for literally years has gone through in intimate detail every factor of this case. We now will look at it and see if there are criminal allegations. There's no problem tabling that letter.

MR. SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Rocky Mountain House.

Health Services Restructuring

MR. LUND: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. All across Canada there are restructuring initiatives in the delivery of health care, and some of the constituents in the Rocky Mountain House constituency are really concerned that our changes are going beyond what's happening in other provinces. Now, earlier today the Minister of Health met with the federal minister, Diane Marleau, and I want to ask the provincial minister if in fact there was any discussion with the federal minister relative to restructuring in our province as it relates to other provinces.

MRS. McCLELLAN: Mr. Speaker, I did have the opportunity to spend some time with the federal minister today, and I was most appreciative of that opportunity. We did have an opportunity to outline to the federal minister our restructuring plans and the progress on the restructuring process. We did discuss plans that are under way or that have occurred in other provinces. What is common to all provinces in Canada is the need to restructure the health system. I would say that that goal is common across Canada. There are some differences in the way to achieve the goal. We have taken the approach in Alberta of a very wide consultation process of ensuring that people are participants in the process each step of the way. That may not be common in all provinces, but indeed the federal minister did indicate that all provinces are looking at how they deliver health services, and I think she's most appreciative of the fact that all provinces are working towards ensuring high-quality health care within the resources we have. Certainly the federal government is aware of fiscal restraint, as we are.

2:30

MR. SPEAKER: Supplemental question.

MR. LUND: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. To the same minister: did the federal minister express any concern about the involvement of the private sector in the delivery of health care services?

MRS. McCLELLAN: The federal minister made it quite clear that her concern is that provinces work within the Canada Health Act. We assured her that Alberta is committed to the five principles of the Canada Health Act. Certainly my understanding is that the minister does not have a concern with any activities in Alberta at this time. I have made a commitment to her that when we receive the information from the report on private facilities that we asked for, I would be happy to share that information with her.

MR. LUND: To the same minister: was there any discussion relative to what services would be provided?

MRS. McCLELLAN: We did have a very short discussion on definition of health services, and I think the agreement was that that should be a subject that is discussed at a future provincial/federal/territorial ministers' meeting. The Canada Health Act defines medically-required services, and I guess we want to ensure that that's still appropriate.

MR. SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Glenora.

Cornea Transplants

MR. SAPERS: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The Minister of Health just reconfirmed this province's supposed commitment to the Canada Health Act, which of course guarantees free access to essential medical services, yet the Lions Eye Bank in Calgary is being driven to consider charging for eye-restoring tissue. Now, certainly everybody in this Assembly would agree that cornea transplants are an essential medical service. My question: how could the Minister of Health allow this situation in Calgary to reach the point where the solution risks not only violating the Canada Health Act but provincial law as well?

MRS. McCLELLAN: Mr. Speaker, the Minister of Health is not allowing the situation to develop. I am quite prepared to discuss with the Lions Eye Bank any concerns they have. We have a process for allocating our budget dollars in this province to the priorities and health needs of this province. It's a very valuable program, and I would look forward to a discussion with the people involved in it at any time.

MR. SPEAKER: Supplemental question?

MR. SAPERS: Yes. Mr. Speaker, will the minister guarantee that no Albertan will be denied this essential medical service at any public or private health care facility just because they can't afford it?

MRS. McCLELLAN: Mr. Speaker, I do not know of any incident in this province where any Albertan is denied medically-required treatment because of an inability to pay. I do not believe that is the case today, nor will it be in the future.

MR. SAPERS: Why is it, Mr. Speaker, that the government funds cornea transplants in Edmonton but expects the Lions Eye Bank in Calgary to fund the exact same services from fees and donations?

MRS. McCLELLAN: Mr. Speaker, as I indicated earlier, I would be quite prepared to sit down with the Lions group. I want to say how much we appreciate the work that the Lions Clubs in Alberta and in other provinces and, I believe, internationally have done in the area of sight and initiatives to improve those opportunities for people in this country and in the world. It's a renowned program. If the Lions group would like to meet with the Minister of Health to discuss their initiatives, I am available.

head: Members' Statements Health Services Restructuring

MRS. ABDURAHMAN: Mr. Speaker, yes, health care must be restructured, but restructuring must be done in a well thought out

and rationally planned manner. We must move to a provincial health care delivery system and stop this parochial, destructive, divisive urban and rural division. For the last 15 years past and present Conservative governments have been lobbied, with very little success, to shift the focus of health care from a sickness system to a wellness model. Let's get on with the job. Health care restructuring must be based on sound ethical, clinical evidence. Mortality and morbidity statistics must be utilized in the planning process.

Upon examining the annual report of Alberta Health, some questions come to mind. We see an increase in Campylobacter infection, and we know that there is a correlation between that and the sale of unpasteurized milk. Mr. Speaker, what is Alberta agriculture doing about this? There appears to be no information on autoimmune diseases within this document, yet there seems to be a perceived increase in the number of such diseases. Many of these diseases are life threatening, debilitating, and very costly not only to the families but also to the health care system. We must be proactive in analyzing the present health status of Albertans to ensure that we're using the most up-to-date information possible in directing expenditures within the health care system.

Another area, Mr. Speaker, is the ongoing inequitable funding for the mentally ill. We are witnessing the premature downsizing of Alberta Hospital Edmonton prior to adequate and appropriate community support systems being in place. We know that many unfortunate Albertans with mental illness are presently wrongly placed within the correctional system. This injustice must be corrected immediately. What Albertans are seeing today is not the restructuring of health care but the dismantling of our much-valued health care system.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

MR. SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Calgary-Currie.

MRS. BURGNER: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'd like to bring to the attention of this House some information on the national advisory council on aging workshop that I attended in Ottawa last week at the request of the federal Minister of Health and NACA. Ladies and gentlemen, the federal Minister of Health, the Hon. Diane Marleau, has asked us to look at what are essential services in health care, because there is a real belief that we can have and maintain our affordable health care system by looking at what is essential and then taking it one step further and looking at the priorities of what are essential health care services. It was our responsibility to provide the minister with advice on the principles on how to allocate these resources through the health care system.

While the discussions focused on three levels – the government system as reflecting on health care, the various institutions which provide it, and the last one, the patient – and quite frankly I wasn't pleased with the order and priority myself, out of those discussions did emerge some significant principles. Those who attended the workshop were other advisory council chairpersons as well as a number of stakeholders from across the country. The issues of wellness and advocacy on health care within the community and public education on health care concerns were a primary focus with respect to seniors. In addition, the removal of the medical model to a wellness model was something that they felt was appropriate.

We were very pleased to bring to the attention of the national advisory council the ventures in independence program proposal, which is a demonstration of new models of providing long-term care, an initiative that has been developed within the province of Alberta and addresses some of the serious concerns about long-term care that have been raised by Albertans. One of the issues

that we were able to focus on is the wide range of residential models and individual services that would be available under this new model: autonomy and decision-making, the integration of residential facilities within a community, and the shift to a more residential model of instruction.

Ladies and gentlemen, I would be pleased to tell you that this process was valuable to Albertans and that the model of restructuring in long-term care was very well received by all Canadians.

Thank you.

2:40

MR. SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Glenora.

MR. SAPERS: Thanks, Mr. Speaker. The introduction to the Department of Health's three-year business plan begins. For some years there has been a growing recognition of the need to restructure the health system. Now, I couldn't agree more. There is a need to restructure but not to dismantle. Under the current regime we face the prospect of our health system being so radically altered that it will no longer resemble the compassionate system that we are so proudly known for throughout the world.

Our system is based on the principles of the Canada Health Act, the federal legislation which has as its heart the notion that every one of us deserves equal access to health care regardless of age or ability to pay. The five principles of the Act are accessibility, universality, portability, comprehensiveness, and public administration. These principles, Mr. Speaker, are coequal. They must be read in unison and protected as a whole. One must not be put ahead of another. Yet in Alberta the goal of debt reduction is being held out as paramount, of more importance than any other health issue or goal. The Klein government is attempting to reform health care without principles. They are creating strategies to save dollars, and while that in itself is an important goal, it is not the only goal. Not all strategies are created equal. When it comes to the health of our families, the ends don't justify the means if the damage done along the way is too great. Once a health service is denied, it may be too late to reconsider.

If the Premier is to be believed when he commits to the Canada Health Act, then he must put the brakes on the slash and burn approach being taken to health reform. The speed at which he is forcing changes guarantees that dangerous mistakes will be made. I am not willing to stand by and let that happen, Mr. Speaker, and neither should the Premier.

head: **Orders of the Day**

head: **Public Bills and Orders Other than**

head: **Government Bills and Orders**

head: **Second Reading**

Bill 207

Adult Adoption Act

[Adjourned debate March 23: Mr. Day]

MR. SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Rutherford.

MR. WICKMAN: Well, if you will let me speak again, Mr. Speaker, I will be glad to do it.

MR. SPEAKER: Oh. No. The hon. member has already participated.

Is the Assembly ready for the question?

The hon. Member for Leduc.

MR. KIRKLAND: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I would stand in support of this Bill. I had the pleasure of working on this committee with the hon. Member for Medicine Hat. I think what he brings to that committee is a good integrity, and I think when I look at the Bill, it also has a considerable amount of integrity with it. In my discussions with the hon. Member for Calgary-Buffalo I understand that the hon. Member for Medicine Hat is considering amendments to it. That indicates that in fact there's an openmindedness there that we all should embrace in this particular House. I would ask all to look very closely at that Bill.

I have sat on that committee for, I guess, two terms, and I would apologize for not sitting as regularly as I should on that particular committee. It has been brought to the Assembly's attention time and time again that in fact it is very much an intrusion into the people's lives. As we say, we question, and as tenderly as we attempt to phrase those questions, it's very difficult to actually ask them without feeling that you're intruding very much into their inner lives. It's uncomfortable for the questioner, and I would suggest it's also very uncomfortable for the individuals that are receiving the questions. We certainly do good work on the committee, but I would suggest that if the committee were to hand over the private adoptions aspect of its mandate as proposed in this Bill, it would be moving in the correct direction. Certainly the courts of this particular province are very capable and able to handle that particular situation. I think it also has a tendency to put the adoption Act itself in a more accessible position for one and all. As it is, to travel to the city of Edmonton: there is a considerable expense associated with that, and we can assist by removing that, Mr. Speaker.

I would commend the hon. member for bringing forth the Bill. I would commend him for being open-minded about the amendments. They are forthcoming and, as I understand it, well founded, well thought out, and well received. That is particularly warming to one and all. I would ask all in this House to ensure that they support this particular Bill. It is progress.

MR. SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

MR. HENRY: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I would like to speak very briefly to this Bill and congratulate the Member for Medicine Hat for bringing it forward.

Mr. Speaker, from my point of view, having sat in the House for less than a year, I think what this Bill speaks to is a very fundamental principle about what our role is as legislators. When I decided to run for public office I understood that our role as legislators in this Legislative Assembly was to try to identify problems or issues or concerns out in our communities, to come to this Legislature not to tell person A or person B what to do but to establish a framework of laws through legislation, establish legislation, and work on policies that then would be implemented by professionals who are employed and spend their lives training for that particular profession or that particular occupation. I don't think there is any member on either side of the Assembly that would claim to be the expert in education as well as the expert in health care as well as the expert in environmental protection. What we are here to do is to represent our constituents' concerns and viewpoints, draft the legislation in consultation with people outside this Assembly, both community members and professionals in the field, and then come back to this Legislative Assembly, pass the legislation, discuss the regulations, and then allow those who have the competence in those very specific areas to implement those.

What we have with the Private Bills Committee, specifically with adult adoptions, is a situation whereby we as legislators are

put in an unfair situation and I think an untenable situation where we're asked not only to define the framework by which adult adoptions should happen, what is appropriate, and what is not appropriate, but we're also asked to meddle into the administration of that framework by determining that, yes, this particular adult adoption is appropriate given our societal norms and given that it operates in a framework that is consistent with the beliefs or the values that are held by our society. We all represent different parts of that. We cannot be expected to make those kinds of judgments when there are professionals out there, frankly, lawyers and judges – lawyers who've become judges, who are appointed – who are a step above, if I can put it that way, in terms of the fray, in terms of objectivity, and in terms of understanding of the legal precedents and understanding of the method, the way, the path that our society took in reaching this point where we allow adult adoptions under certain circumstances or given certain parameters.

So while I recognize and I know the hon. Member for Medicine Hat has recognized that there may be some technical problems with the Bill, and I understand, as the previous speaker has said, that we'll be seeing some amendments at committee stage probably from both sides of the House, I want to offer my full support for the principle of the Bill – we are at second reading – and indicate that I will be supporting it. I will be urging all of my colleagues on both sides of the House to vote for this Bill.

Again I commend the hon. Member for Medicine Hat for essentially talking himself out of a job, if I can put it that way, by bringing forth this legislation, putting these particular decisions in the proper context so that we're not as legislators being asked to do the job that we were not elected to do and in fact that we should leave to those who are best prepared to do.

With that, Mr. Speaker, I will take my place and give the floor to other members who may wish to speak. Thank you.

MR. SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Roper.

2:50

MR. CHADI: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I, too, am pleased to rise in this Assembly today to speak in support of Bill 207. I feel that Bill 207, particularly in this day and age, is a timely, timely Bill. I think we as legislators have been elected by the people of the province of Alberta to try and use our best efforts to reduce as much as we possibly can government's involvement in the lives of people, in the lives of Albertans.

I'm not sure what reasons there were initially when we as a Legislature first started to be the judges, if you will, or to be the court when it came to adult adoption. I'm sure there were good reasons at the time. Perhaps there were no reasons. Maybe they were looking for just an area or a forum to hold these adoptions in. The time has come to move that forum or that court to where it truly belongs – and it belongs, along with the other adoption court, being the child adoption court, in the Court of Queen's Bench – and leave it, as the hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre has stated, in the hands of the professionals, the people who understand it much, much better than we do. Obviously, I as an elected official couldn't possibly deal with a situation as well as a judge from the Court of Queen's Bench who has dealt with these matters on a daily basis. I mean, I couldn't possibly know. I know that members on this side of the House couldn't possibly know and understand it all, neither members on that side of the House, and, for that matter, Mr. Speaker, all members.

We were elected to ensure that fiscal responsibility was indeed endorsed in this Assembly. This is one small step forward, I think, when we start looking at ways to tighten up the system

within the Legislative Assembly. It's a move that I think is precedent for much more within the departments that we deal with every single day. I applaud the member for bringing it forward, and I, as well, will support this Bill and encourage all members of the Assembly to do the same. I can't imagine anyone in the Assembly now saying, "No, I cannot support this Bill" for whatever reasons there are when you know full well that what you're doing is taking the way that government functions and the government restrictions – and the way we operate here, it seems like it tightens up around an individual. So when we talk about taking and pulling the strings out and freeing something like this so that indeed adults can deal with it in a much freer environment, no one can argue with that, Mr. Speaker.

With those comments, I will allow other members to speak. Thank you.

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Question.

MR. SPEAKER: Is the Assembly ready for the question?

MR. N. TAYLOR: I'm sorry, Mr. Speaker.

MR. SPEAKER: Well, it's only going to be a very few seconds, hon. member.

MR. N. TAYLOR: I'm sorry. It's not often that you beat me to my feet, but all the same I congratulate you. I was sitting there examining something.

One of the things that bothered me a bit through the years – and it may be covered; I didn't get a good enough chance to go through the whole work. First of all, I'm congratulating the Member for Medicine Hat for trying to do the MLAs out of some of their work and shorten their workload. I'm not so sure that the public agrees with that anymore, and at the cost of lawyers and judges today I'm not so sure we're saving that much money, but it's worth a try to try to go outside the Legislature.

One of the things I've run across, Mr. Speaker, in my experience through the years is that the adoption is quite often used to try to jump the queue for immigration. I'm talking about adopting remote relatives or friends overseas. Sometimes those overseas are in such a situation that they will agree to, of course, anything, adoption or anything else, to come here. I've had some rather seamy cases to try to unravel.

MR. SPEAKER: I regret to interrupt the hon. Member for Redwater, but under Standing Order 8(5)(b) 120 minutes have now passed, and accordingly all questions must now be put.

All those in favour of second reading of Bill 207, Adult Adoption Act, as proposed by the hon. Member for Medicine Hat, will please say aye.

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Aye.

MR. SPEAKER: Those opposed, please say no.

SOME HON. MEMBERS: No.

MR. SPEAKER: Let the record show that the motion carries.

Call in the members.

[Several members rose calling for a division. The division bell was rung at 2:56 p.m.]

[Ten minutes having elapsed, the Assembly divided]

For the motion:

Abdurahman	Friedel	Mitchell
Ady	Fritz	Nicol
Amery	Gordon	Oberg
Beniuk	Hanson	Percy
Black	Havelock	Renner
Bracko	Henry	Rostad
Brassard	Herard	Sapers
Bruseker	Hewes	Sekulic
Burgener	Hierath	Severtson
Cardinal	Hlady	Smith
Carlson	Jacques	Sohal
Chadi	Kirkland	Tannas
Collingwood	Kowalski	Taylor, N.
Coutts	Laing	Van Binsbergen
Dalla-Longa	Leibovici	Vasseur
Decore	Lund	West
Dickson	Magnus	Wickman
Doerksen	Massey	Yankowsky
Dunford	McClellan	Zariwny
Evans	McFarland	Zwozdesky
Forsyth	Mirosh	

Against the motion:

Clegg	Fischer	Thurber
Day	Haley	Trynchy
Dinning	Jonson	Woloshyn
Totals:	For - 62	Against - 9

[Motion carried; Bill 207 read a second time]

3:10

Bill 208
Child Welfare Amendment Act, 1994

MS HANSON: Mr. Speaker, I move second reading of Bill 208, Child Welfare Amendment Act. This Bill strengthens the child protection provisions and changes the major principle of the Act from least intrusive to one that places the needs of the child first. These amendments are based on several of the recommendations in the Children's Advocate's report, *In Need of Protection: Children and Youth in Alberta*, which was released last summer.

Since first elected to the Assembly, the Liberal caucus has spoken out for major changes to the system of child welfare delivery. Every year there seems to be another child hurt because of an inefficient and weak system. On each tragic occasion we have called for an overhaul of the legislation and, more importantly, the department's enforcement of the legislation. Our caucus has been extremely supportive of the former advocate's report, and we have been critical of the government's total lack of response to the recommendations, especially those that speak to needed amendments. Not only did we take on the expense of ordering a second printing of the report, but we have at every opportunity admonished the minister in his refusal to take the advocate's report seriously and to introduce necessary legislation.

These amendments are needed because the government have failed miserably in their rather simple mandate: to keep children safe. As the former advocate noted in his report, the system is not meeting its protective mandate. The remarks and direction of senior officials that the mandate is related to available resources and may change accordingly confirm the underlying theme that the mandate is primarily driven by budgets rather than by law.

On page 312 of the advocate's report they say that the broader community and most professionals expect an adequately resourced

child welfare system regardless of administrative or departmental boundaries; in other words, identify the problems early and begin preventive measures rather than waiting for a crisis. To do that makes human and economic sense. We have been practising prevention in health care for years. Why not in child protection? I can't imagine that the prevailing public attitude would be that they want the government to protect our children as long as it doesn't cost too much.

The tragedies in child welfare seem endless. Each publicized case has been followed by an equally publicized review and the promise from the government that this time they will improve. Since the Catonio report and investigation in 1972, there have been a total of seven major reviews and recommendations, each outlining not only the problems with the department but also suggesting real solutions.

Mr. Speaker, the former advocate described in his report that despite the efforts of well-intentioned and committed individuals, the pattern and frequency of serious problems in child welfare has remained disturbingly consistent. By any public criteria such as the prevention of tragic and high-profile incidents in child protection, organizational responses appear to have failed miserably. Ultimately, accountability for this sad history must rest with the department and with the government.

Each of the reviews pointed out the same glaring shortcomings within the department: lack of resources, overloaded staff, inconsistencies in applying policies and regulation. We know that yet another review is now taking place and that the report is due in 18 months. Now, why would the minister do that again? Aren't seven reviews enough? This will delay changes, spend a lot of money, repeat the same exercise again. I truly hope this is not simply a delaying tactic, because statistics show that more children have come into care in the past few years, and we need to go after preventive strategies now.

Another example. Ten years ago Justice Cavanagh, having just completed a three-year investigation, stated that "it is apparent . . . there are still grave problems within the Department of Social Services." The system is mired in bureaucracy with little appreciation for the rights of the child, a system driven by power struggles and lack of support for the front-line workers. Cavanagh's comments could very well have been written by Bernd Walter, who wrote 10 years later that the analysis concludes that no effective, coherent, or comprehensive system of children's services currently exists in Alberta. He recommended a vigorous and radically reconstituted vision for the delivery and organization of child, youth, and family services in Alberta.

The minister's comment was to warn that he was going to make parents more accountable and responsible for their children's care. Curiously, the minister also stated at this time, and I quote: we don't need more studies; we need immediate action. But what we have is another study. Soon after the present minister released his reforms in a document called *Reshaping Child Welfare*, he expounded on his threat to blame parents and make them responsible by allowing parents convicted of abusing their children to remain at home instead of in jail, provided there is some kind of in-home support in place.

The report also established the vague position of children's commissioner, responsible for once again studying the problems in child welfare and developing a new plan. Information contained in a memo from the Edmonton regional response team last year revealed that the government was looking at ways not to help children rather than provide the protection required under the legislation. Two of the more disturbing cases classified as either not necessarily endangered or in need of protection are children who have come into care due to social assistance cutbacks -

without lights, without permanent address, or food – or babies born with drug habits.

The explicit and implicit intent of a [child welfare] system is to provide a comprehensive, coordinated and effective continuum of services and care with the following goals:

- (i) To protect children who have suffered or are at risk of suffering physical, sexual or emotional harm.
- (ii) To make reasonable efforts to remedy or alleviate the conditions which harm or pose risk to [children], so as to enable the child to live safely in his/her own home and with his/her own family.
- (iii) To secure permanent alternate placements, preferably in a context of stable, affectionate family relationships, for children who require removal from, and who cannot be safely reunited with their biological families.

These should be our goals as legislators.

The following are some of the more important changes contained in Bill 208. Our amendments begin with an expansion of the definition of "Indian" to include Metis and nonstatus. We believe that it is critical that the Act's responsibility include all aboriginal children. You only need to look at the statistics to understand. At least one-third of the provincial caseload of aboriginal children are of nonstatus or Metis descent. Aboriginal children, who represent 9 percent of the total Alberta child population, continue to be disproportionately overrepresented on the provincial child welfare caseloads: 37 percent of all children receiving protection services and 50 percent of children in foster care are of native ancestry. This lack of reference to Metis and nonstatus populations, although it may be addressed in policy, is a major shortcoming of the legislation.

Section 73 of the Act stipulates requirements for consultation between the reserve and the director whenever temporary or permanent guardianship orders are being considered for a band child. When the child is not a resident on a reserve, it allows for the child's guardian to decide whether or not consultation with the band may take place. However, these requirements apply only to status Indian children and band members as defined in the Indian Act. Since at least one-third of the provincial caseload of aboriginal children are of nonstatus Indian or Metis descent, we believe that it is imperative that the definition be expanded to ensure that we give these aboriginal children the same considerations for consultation.

We've expanded the definition of emotional injury for a child to include "at risk of emotional injury," believing that the current section basically says that the child has to endure substantial and very observable signs of emotional injury before child welfare steps in, reducing any chance for early intervention and prevention of further damage. Because of the vagueness of the wording in this section workers are often reluctant to respond even in cases where a child is receiving severe emotional injury such as that which results from constant exposure to family violence. It is these cases where action is often postponed until there are signs of actual physical abuse to the child. It goes without saying that this amendment will require strong efforts from the department to ensure child welfare workers receive proper training in linking the emotional injury to the satisfaction of the court. We would expect the department's help in providing the necessary experts and professionals to assist.

3:20

We also amend clause (g) that speaks to the circumstances where a child is in need of protective service if "the guardian of the child is unable or unwilling to protect the child from emotional injury." We expand it to include as well seeking necessary treatment required to help ease the injury that the child has

already suffered, again reinforcing the need for early intervention and prevention of damage to the child's mental health.

We also expand the Act to include the general issue of children's mental health, recognizing that support services need to be defined as being far more than just shelter or keeping a child physically free from abuse. We need to ensure that a child's mental health is just as crucial as their physical health and therefore must be protected.

The most significant changes we make are those to take place in section 2, "matters to be considered." Here the mandatory framework for standards and consideration for all decisions about children who have to be judged to be in need of protection are laid out. Each section deals with the judicial disposition, the casework decisions, and social work practice, as well as the choice of services which are offered to children and families. We caution members at this point that we are not in any way attempting to intervene on the autonomy or privacy rights of the family but that this section applies only to the method of intervention after it has been established that a child needs protection, and therefore the family privacy becomes secondary.

Our changes to section 2(a) where we strike out "the least invasion" of a family's privacy, et cetera, were developed as a result of communication we've received from a number of community groups including the former advocate who found the sections outlining the right to privacy and least intrusive intervention were being used to back away from investigating and providing protective services. Again we need to warn that this section kicks in after it has been determined that the child is in need of protection, and it already states that the child's best interests are paramount. We have been told that this section has been having a damaging effect and negative influence on the day-to-day practice of the child protection system. To quote from the former advocate's report:

There has for some time been considerable evidence that the principle of "least intrusion" is being used not to inform the nature of the protective services which are provided/offered, or the manner (i.e. voluntarily or coercively) in which they are offered; but rather that it is being inappropriately applied at the entry or investigation stage where it has no place. Considerations of intrusiveness are secondary to the child's protective needs. The question of intrusiveness is to be considered in relation to existing circumstances and its compatibility with the paramount objective of the child's "best interests," not as an objective in itself.

The former advocate found that

failure to clarify the meaning and intent of the concept is allowing it to be used to justify inadequate investigative response, or subsequently, to refuse needed service.

Even more damaging and alarming is the advocate's conclusion that

there is overwhelming concern on the part of respondents both internal and external to the child protection system, that management's single-minded preoccupation with financial matters is translating the concept of "least intrusion" into a systematic strategy to justify restricted access to a reduced array of services.

Therefore, if the minister feels compelled to object to this particular set of amendments, it is further proof that they are more concerned with the financial bottom line than helping children.

In section 2(k) we also recognize the need for a coherent plan which speaks to permanency and stability and the need to ensure that those are provided in the short- and in the long-term care of the child. We keep hearing again and again that lack of planning is a consistent problem in the child welfare services. We also add a number of important clauses whose range includes: making sure that the child's views and preferences are considered; ensuring that the child is kept informed; ensuring the child has an appropri-

ate independent advocate; ensuring when a child is taken from the home that appropriate placement and treatment will be made available immediately.

In subsection (t) we stress the importance of permanency planning, trying to avoid the endless shuffling of a child from foster home to foster home.

Our final amendment in the matters to be considered reinforces our belief that the family is the most nurturing and caring environment in which to raise a child by stating that the principles of family support and early intervention should be the focus of child welfare, that services of child welfare must be "available on request or on the basis of risk regardless of whether [or not] the child has been deemed to be in need of protection."

Another important addition is an amendment that calls on the advocate to conduct regular reviews of the Act and to provide the Minister of Family and Social Services with an evaluation of its effectiveness.

The advocate's report stated that past systemic reviews of the child welfare system observed that child protection workers have an inadequate grasp or understanding of the scope of their guardianship responsibilities and that the departmental training and policies with respect to this issue were lacking. To help strengthen the Act's authority for preliminary intervention we made substantial changes to section 3 which refers to reporting abuse. Our amendments expand reporting to include those children who were previously abused but may not be necessarily in need of immediate protection.

Section 5 speaks to the director's responsibility for conducting an investigation. We also add an extra degree of protection in section 5(2) which allows the director, after an investigation has been completed, to refer a child and his family to a community resource. We add a necessary proviso that says that the director has to be first "satisfied that the community resource is able to address the needs of the child."

We made major amendments to those sections applying to aboriginal children. Not only do we expand the definition of "Indian" to include nonstatus and Metis native children; we also include an important amendment under section 73(2) by ensuring the director takes "steps to determine" background. Current legislation only requires that the director "has reason to believe" the child in question is an Indian.

Mr. Speaker, that concludes our remarks. Thank you.

MR. SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Calgary-Egmont.

MR. HERARD: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. As I rise to speak to Bill 208, I'd like to make it very clear that I have the highest respect for the presenter of this Bill, the Member for Edmonton-Highlands-Beverly. I know the hon. member has the welfare of children at heart when putting forth this legislation. I, too, share a common concern for child welfare. Indeed, when I first read this Bill, I was interested in the subject matter as a father of two. I'm concerned that children in Alberta, in Canada, and indeed globally grow up in a healthy, responsible, and loving environment. I can tell you that this government is very much committed to our children and continues to strive for raising these hopes for the future. Support from this government has been demonstrated in many ways.

Mr. Speaker, Albertans do not want vague legislation like what is being proposed in Bill 208. Rather, Albertans have and continue to look to new initiatives which prevent hardship for children.

MR. SPEAKER: The Chair reluctantly interrupts the hon. Member for Calgary-Egmont, but the time allotted for consideration of this matter has expired. We must move to the next order of business.

head: Motions Other than Government Motions

3:30 School Dropout Rate

508. Moved by Mr. Henry:

Be it resolved that the Legislative Assembly urge the government to take the following initiatives to address the student dropout rate in Alberta schools:

- (1) develop a data base which reports the number of students leaving school and the reasons for student departure,
- (2) establish a consultation process with parents, students, school boards, teachers, and the general community regarding problems that can feasibly be addressed by the government and school boards, and
- (3) consider implementing initiatives to improve the student dropout situation in Alberta's schools.

MR. SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

MR. HENRY: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Very briefly, I wanted to say that the motion urges the government to address the student dropout rate in Alberta schools by, number one, developing a data base so that we know exactly what the problem is or the magnitude of the problem; develop a consultation process, a true consultation process; and consider developing certain implementation strategies and develop certain approaches to addressing the student dropout rate.

Mr. Speaker, I'm hoping all members of the House will see this motion in the spirit in which it's presented and will choose to support this motion. I will dread if any member stands up and tells me they respect the presenter of the motion, because that's usually a prelude to the fact that they won't be supporting the actual motion, in response to the previous speaker.

Mr. Speaker, the dropout rate in Alberta is a serious issue in high schools, in the schools generally. One of the difficulties we have is that there are several studies around, including the Department of Education's, that will peg the dropout rate in high schools anywhere from 6 to 12 percent up to 30 to 35 percent. One of the difficulties is that we don't have an actual finger on exactly what the dropout rate is, and more specifically we don't know why students are dropping out. We have a lot of anecdotal evidence. We have a lot of theories, but we don't actually have any way of tracking exactly how many students are dropping out of our high school system and in fact why they're dropping out. We need to have that kind of information in a quantifiable way so that we can very seriously address the issues and, I would suggest, address the issues in a nonpartisan way, because I know that members from both sides of this House, both in debate in the House and in private conversation with myself, have indicated that they are worried about what happens to dropouts and they are worried about what the future holds for those dropouts.

Mr. Speaker, I looked at the policy plan, otherwise called the business plan, presented by the Alberta government for the Department of Education. There are goals and strategies for education, and there are nine such goals outlined for the Department of Education: from focusing on what students seem to learn, ensuring high standards are established, providing more choice and increased community and parental involvement, improving the co-ordination of services for children with special

needs, improving teaching, restructuring the governance and delivery – I'm going through them quickly – ensuring all school boards are adequately and equitably funded, reducing and restructuring Alberta education, ensuring the cost of education is reasonable and under control, and establishing a more accountable education system. Under each of these goals are strategies, and while there are some that skirt around the issue of the dropout rate, not one – not one – clearly addressed the need to establish what the dropout rate is, establish the reasons for that dropout rate, and establish strategies.

I'm one of those people who was fortunate in being offered, I believe, a quality education, being offered that opportunity and, frankly, Mr. Speaker, having whatever it takes in terms of environment and in terms of resources available to myself to be able to in fact achieve in that education system. Not everybody has that in the province. When we look at our education system, we have to be very clear that we want to provide education not just for those who achieve in the current education system but for those who, for whatever reason, don't achieve in our education system and drop out, perhaps sometimes temporarily.

Mr. Speaker, I know there are a number of members who do wish to speak on this particular motion, so I won't take a lot of time. It's a bit redundant perhaps for me to point out to all hon. members of the House that if we are serious about attempting to reduce the dropout rate in our schools, about identifying what that rate is, identifying the reasons again and finding ways for students to re-enter the system or finding another way to get an education or perhaps preventative strategies for not dropping out – by doing that, what we do in the long term, in a few years and in an intergenerational sense, is we address issues that are later facing the Minister of Justice and facing the Minister of Family and Social Services.

Mr. Speaker, I want to recognize that the government has done some work – and I don't see the assistant deputy minister responsible – in trying to develop better systems for collecting information, but we need to be clear that we need to collect the reasons why students drop out of our system, not only how many drop out.

We need to also collect information through consultation about some of the pilots that are happening. I not too long ago visited the Fresh Start program, which is an alternative learning program for those students who have dropped out and who have been out of the system for a few months and who are between the ages of 15 and 18 years. This is sponsored by the YMCA and the Edmonton Catholic school system, as well as having some funding indirectly through Alberta Education and the federal government. I know that I will be lobbying from my constituency's point of view the federal government to ensure that the Start program, which provides funding for programs such as this, is either renewed, replaced, or continued so that we don't abandon these young people. I know that the Minister of Education is wrestling in his own department with the specifics of the various funding arrangements that are going to happen and how various programs will be funded. I know his department has had some discussions with this particular program that I'm suggesting, being the Fresh Start program, and I'm hoping that we can find ways both provincially and federally and through the private sector to be able to ensure programs like this continue, but we need to have a consultation process in place. I would put to you, Mr. Speaker, that a consultation process is more comprehensive and more focused than what we've had in the past.

We also need to ensure that we are providing the kinds of education that respond to the individual student's needs. Mr. Speaker, I'm not one of those people that believes one size fits all. Believe me, experience tells me otherwise. Having learned

that, I know very clearly that if we can find out the reasons why children are dropping out of our school system, whatever that rate might be, we might gain a lot more clues as to how it is we can ensure that those students achieve an education and do become economically productive members of our society. By assuming that our current high school system, however good it may be – and the minister and I have certainly had different strategies on how to make that better, but I think we agree that overall our system is a good system.

I think there would be general agreement in this House – I hope there would be – that one system and one type of learning and one type of education will not serve everybody's needs. If we find out that students are dropping out because they don't feel that the curriculum is relevant to them or that they're perhaps ready for the work force earlier than other students are, perhaps we can find ways to tie some partnerships with business, with trades so that we can in a preventative strategy identify those students who are likely to drop out or are thinking of dropping out and provide them with an alternative form of education. So perhaps at the end of grade 12 or at the end of three years of high school they not only have significant credits or all the credits to grade 12, but they also have a certain amount – perhaps it might be a trade, a first-year apprenticeship, under their belt or even more than that so that we can provide those kinds of links. That might be a different kind of learning, and it may not happen directly in our schools. It may not happen in a typical high school but may happen in fact in the community, in the business environment, or in the work environment. I know that we've made some progress in the last few years towards those kinds of partnerships, but I think we need to be moving further and further in that direction.

Mr. Speaker, I think all members of this Assembly will agree that what we need to do is focus, number one, on: what is our problem; what's the magnitude, what's the nature of the problem with regard to dropouts?

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Order. Order.

3:40

MR. HENRY: Mr. Speaker, I hear members on the opposite side crying "order." I daresay that they're trying to tell you how to do your job. I will continue forth.

Anyway we not only find out what the magnitude of the problem is and what the nature of the problem is but ensure that we have an ongoing consultation process that does include all sectors. One that's been I think missing in the past does include meaningful consultation with those students who have dropped out of our system so we can find out why it is they're dropping out, what will work, because we very clearly know that the level of education is very directly linked to the potential job opportunities in the future, whether you're talking about somebody who completes grade 12, completes a trade, a technical school, or goes on to a university or postgraduate program. Whatever postsecondary education the research suggests to us and whatever increased level of education we provide a young person, the more likely they are to be employed for longer periods of time, even through work readjustments and economic changes in our society in the future.

Mr. Speaker, I know that we've visited this issue many times before. I'm not sure that we've always had an opportunity to debate it in the Legislature, and I'm not sure members previous to us have had the opportunity to fully debate this issue. I did want to put it on the floor, make sure that we did have an opportunity this time to actually debate it. I think it's a step in the right direction. I do want to acknowledge that the Minister of Education and his department have done some positive work in

terms of the collection of the data, but I want to point out that it should also include reasons for departure. I do want to see some continued and some more consultation. I think we need to reinforce consistently for all members in the Legislature that we need to be ensuring that programs that do address the dropout rate be supported fully, not only by this government but by all levels of government. I certainly will be, hopefully, joining the minister in lobbying the federal government to ensure that programs such as the Start program do receive ongoing and continued funding.

In closing, I encourage all members to support this. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

MR. DOERKSEN: Mr. Speaker, ensuring that Albertans get the best possible education is an important priority of this government. Whenever we make decisions regarding education, we must ask ourselves if it will provide the students of Alberta with the best possible education. We must ask ourselves if the best use of the available resources is being made. We must also ask ourselves which measurements are appropriate to give us information on how we are doing.

Is the dropout rate a critical measurement factor in the education system? I think there is little doubt that leaving school early is detrimental to success later on. Study after study has shown that school leavers do not fare as well in the real world as graduates. The advantages of a high school diploma are real and tangible. Graduation also provides a gateway to further education and advancement in the business world. It is obvious that staying in school is beneficial. It helps students realize their potential and sets them on the path to becoming productive, positive contributors in our society.

Mr. Speaker, there is a danger, though, in focusing only on the dropout rate as an indication of success. That danger translates into keeping students in school at all costs. It toys with the notion that self-esteem, if it could be measured, is more important than learning, is more important than achievement. It allows students to do what they want so long as they remain in school.

Mr. Speaker, regardless of whether this is in fact the case, we must clearly communicate to the students and to the community that education is the most important and critical factor to the success of the school system. We must communicate that education is so important to their future that we will not permit distractions to dissuade them from that course. We must set standards that all students, parents, and educators must accept. There should be well laid out expectations of behaviour, performance, and attendance. In cases where these expectations are ignored or where rules are broken, there must be clearly laid out consequences. Administrators must act fairly and honestly to ensure that students know what to expect and what is expected of them.

Mr. Speaker, the Red Deer public school district has recently released a report from an action team comprised of staff, students, and parents. It is entitled *Planning 2000: Expectations for Achievement, Attendance, Behaviour*. I have borrowed heavily from their ideas in the balance of my comments. The report proposes an action plan to make their school district one that concentrates on making the education of their students the best that it can possibly be. The action team believed that we must stop shortchanging the majority of students by spending an inordinate amount of time dealing with the problem cases. The emphasis must be on the many conscientious students. The classroom must be restored to its rightful place as the focal point for education. The classroom must be a place where there is respect for the teacher who wants to teach and for the student who wants to learn.

Mr. Speaker, surely we do not expect schools to solve every problem of contemporary society and educate students as well. The report claims that as much as 50 percent of teacher/administrator time is consumed by concerns not directly related to teaching. The minority of the student population, less than 10 percent, have behavioral or discipline problems. This system robs the 90-plus percent of the student population of the opportunity to gain the maximum benefit from their education. The main aspect of the system proposed in the *Planning 2000* report is a balance between rights and responsibilities. The current situation with a small number of students exhausting the greatest part of the resources must be publicly acknowledged, addressed, and remedied. This must be done now. Quoting from the report:

The basic premise underlying education should be as follows: "It is a privilege to be a student, to be a member of a classroom, and to receive an education which is a valuable gift from the community. It is the student's responsibility to conduct himself/herself according to the expectations of the classroom and the school, and to accept responsibility for his/her own actions."

There must be a balance between rights and responsibilities for all parties in public education. No individual has the right to destroy the orderly learning environment which is a necessary condition for the successful functioning of schools. Students have the right of access to quality education. However, this must be balanced with the responsibility to conduct themselves in a manner the community has deemed conducive to the orderly functioning of the classroom and school. This balance must be maintained because it is a right of students to get their education within a safe, positive, and disciplined learning environment.

The committee believed that discipline is not equivalent to punishment. Discipline is a recognizable, effective, and positive tool that can establish the balance that I just mentioned. We are not talking about making good soldiers. The goal is making good citizens. Identification of the concern as one of student responsibility in contrast to simple compliance is more than a semantic difference. This is done by including students in the process. Students, teachers, parents, and administrators should all help to create the policies. It is recognized that participation in establishing responsibilities results in ownership and a greater likelihood that the responsibilities will be accepted and acted upon.

Mr. Speaker, the plan that the action team came up with focuses on three basic areas: achievement, attendance, and behaviour. The primary purpose of schools is to educate students. Quality instruction and student achievement should be the primary focus of the school board. The board must recognize that teachers need time to teach well and must be allowed to focus on their primary responsibility, teaching. The board should endorse the value of team counseling for those students who are at risk. The team should consist of parents, students, and staff that will help provide ongoing support for students that require assistance.

3:50

The action team felt that any policy with regards to education must start with the overriding premise that attendance is a nonnegotiable issue at all levels, from the classroom to the board. It is the responsibility of the student and the parent to take ownership of the student's attendance. While it is a right to attend school, it is a waste of time, effort, and resources when they are expended on individuals that are not willing to take responsibility for their education. This is particularly true when it is at the expense of the rest of the student population.

Mr. Speaker, students and parents must remember that it is a privilege to continue in the classroom. Students and parents must take responsibility for their actions. Failure to comply with expectations must result in the use of a clear and fair system of

discipline. An example of such a system, called the mentor consequence system, is proposed in their document. It is a four-step system that has clear and concise consequences for both positive and negative behaviours. The system also includes the use of guidance and counseling to try to resolve the problem. However, it does not start with the premise that the only acceptable end is to keep the student in school. If the student will not accept the responsibility of remaining in the school system, other alternative methods of education must be explored.

Mr. Speaker, behaviour is a problem in the education system. Our permissive society has brought with it an acceptance of behaviours that should not be tolerated in any environment, let alone in schools. We must confront the problem by openly and publicly dealing with it. Simply forcing students to remain in school and allowing students that display inappropriate behaviour to remain in school does not educate them and likely contributed to the dramatic increase in violence throughout the school system.

Mr. Speaker, school boards must communicate to the public the critical importance of safe, orderly schools by setting specific expectations for students and communicating those clearly to parents, students, and educators. The conduct policy must be clear and concise. Consequences must be understandable and fair.

Finally, the enforcement of the policy must also be consistent, fair, and just. Any student who takes responsibility for their actions and follows the code of conduct outlined in the policy will have every right to all mainstream educational opportunities. A student who does not follow the code of conduct will have restricted or denied access to full educational opportunities. There must be a standard of behaviour which is expected and maintained. This is essential and integral to the learning environment. This should be the nonnegotiable, inalienable right of classroom participants, teachers, and students.

Mr. Speaker, our resources must be directed at the positive enhancement of the education system. The plan presented by the action team attacks the root of the problem. Students and parents must take responsibility for their education. It is our responsibility to ensure that every student who wants to be educated is given every opportunity to achieve the best results that they are capable of.

Thank you.

MR. SPEAKER: The hon. Member for West Yellowhead.

MR. VAN BINSBERGEN: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The previous speaker, the Member for Red Deer-South, has left us in a state of suspense here. We still don't know whether he's going to vote for the motion or against it. His remarks originally indicated that he was very much in favour, and I was surprised by the degree of moderation in his remarks as compared to the earlier advocacy of the burning of books. Then, of course, towards the end he descended more towards the negative side.

Point of Order Imputing Motives

MR. SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Red Deer-South is rising on a point of order.

MR. DOERKSEN: Mr. Speaker, in section 23(j) and in the terms of imputing motives, I think that if the gentleman reads clearly from my member's statement in the *Hansard*, he will see that his allegation is completely unfounded and incorrect, and I would ask him to withdraw it.

MR. VAN BINSBERGEN: Mr. Speaker, I said "burning of books." I think the member advocated a banning of certain books, so I will withdraw the "burning." I shall then continue. Thank you very much.

Debate Continued

MR. VAN BINSBERGEN: So back to this motion about which we are here to speak. There's a great need for the developing, I think, Mr. Speaker, of a comprehensive dropout data base, and as my colleague from Edmonton-Centre has already announced and has stated, the Department of Education has done some work in that regard. But there's a need to collect further data and to establish consultations to come up with initiatives to solve all these dropout problems. To simply hit them over the head and send them out of the school I don't think does much good, because the problem is very acute. I think we're all in agreement. It's costly to society in terms of money and in terms of emotional anguish to the dropouts themselves.

Mr. Speaker, I've been a high school administrator for many years, and I've dealt with many students who felt very badly about themselves because they couldn't follow the academic proceedings or they felt totally alienated or they just felt absolutely that the whole school program was irrelevant or they had domestic problems or there was a lack of financing, all kinds of problems. These people felt bad about themselves, and the system ended up essentially dropping them, and as a result, they became dependent on the government, on social services, et cetera, et cetera, in many cases of course even broke the law ultimately. These people ought to be caught and identified before they actually drop out. I think that what Motion 508 calls for would go a long way in that direction.

The direction that Bill 202 intended to go, which was the task force on education - unfortunately it was defeated, but that particular task force would have identified the direction that education in Alberta should go in for the next so many years, and it would have probably provided more of a relevance in programming for our students. It could have helped solve the problems of the dropouts, Mr. Speaker. It also could have provided coincidentally the government with a framework against which it could decide to restructure education. It might even have found some support for its present moves in that direction, such as the grabbing of all the taxes and the appointment of superintendents, et cetera, et cetera. Unfortunately, it went the way of all flesh, so now we're groping in darkness here. We're trying to kind of in a piecemeal way arrive at solutions to very complex problems.

[Mr. Deputy Speaker in the Chair]

Of course, it doesn't help that the government is in fact aggravating the problem of dropouts, because it has been established that at the ECS level, characteristics of likely dropouts can be identified at a very early age, in fact even before prekindergarten. Early intervention is needed, Mr. Speaker, and of course, the cutting of kindergarten programs in half certainly does not meet that objective.

Also, adult upgrading has been made impossible or rather costly, I might say, for students who have turned 19 or are older. Once they've dropped out and would like to return, instead of giving them a hand to finish their education at a very low cost, we are making it tougher on them. We cause them to turn to postsecondary institutions, which are far more costly, and of course there are no spaces for them because of all the cuts at that level as well. So we're ending up with these people on the streets as well.

I think, then, we have the problems of different cuts. We have the cuts that we have found in community schools. Funding for that has been totally eliminated, yet once again it has been established that there needs to be a far greater collaboration between the community and the schools in order to solve these problems. Furthermore, there have been cuts in vocational education to the tune of 7 and a half percent, which is again totally in the wrong direction because many of these potential dropouts would thrive in a vocational training setting.

4:00

One of the good things that this government has done and I'll give them credit for, Mr. Speaker, is the registered apprenticeship program, which is now in full force in my riding. In fact, it started in my old school while I was still there. That allows students at age 16 or older to spend half the time doing work as an apprentice tradesman, and the other half is spent in school. Those initiatives I think need to be announced, praised, published, and expanded, quite frankly.

So, in short, the 12.4 percent cut to funding in education in general of course also affects the quality of education, no matter what the government says, and it will increase classroom size, again no matter what the government says. Once you increase class size, what will happen to the potential dropout? There is an even greater risk, of course, to that person because far less attention will be paid to that person by the teacher. So those are moves that are detrimental to solving the problem of the dropout rate.

Well, Mr. Speaker, there are many people lined up behind me, I think, who would like to speak to this problem, so let me just in summary state that I will vote for this motion. I want the Member for Red Deer-South to know that I am declaring myself clearly and unequivocally. I hope that all members will vote for this motion, because, quite frankly, to vote against it I think would be akin to voting against motherhood.

Thank you very much.

MR. SOHAL: Mr. Speaker, the member across the floor has raised an issue that is very important to the future of this province. Addressing the student dropout rate is an important task that must be done. However, the fact is that much of what the member is proposing is either already in place or is currently being implemented.

Mr. Speaker, I think members from both sides of the House will agree that graduating from high school opens up a considerable number of doors to the young people of Alberta. Without a diploma today's youth face slim prospects with regard to long-term career employment.

Further education is also placed out of reach to those students who decide that they don't wish to finish school. The Statistics Canada school leavers survey of 1991 illustrates this fact. The survey shows that of the high school graduates 74 percent had either finished or were currently enrolled in advanced or further education. Only 24 percent had little or no additional education or training. On the other hand, over 83 percent of dropouts had little or no additional training. In today's job market further education is crucial. The dropout population is at an extreme disadvantage compared to those individuals who complete their education.

The survey also showed that school leavers were more likely than graduates to be unemployed. Thirty-four percent of male leavers were unemployed as compared to 23 percent of male graduates. The women fared slightly better, with 26 percent of leavers unemployed and only 18 percent of female graduates.

However, 24 percent of female leavers were not in the labour force as compared to 6 percent of graduates. This high number of women that were not in the work force maybe at least in part attributed to social problems like teenage pregnancy.

The good news, Mr. Speaker, is that Alberta is proud to hold the lowest dropout rate in the country. The percentage of Canadian 20 year olds who reported ever leaving school before graduating is only 16.2 percent in Alberta. That is compared with the national percentage of 23.7 percent. The western provinces all do better than the east and the far east; that is, the maritimes. Alberta is lower than her neighbours by at least a full percentage point. The trend over the past 10 years has also been rather positive for Alberta. The annual dropout rate has fallen from 12.4 percent in 1979 to 6 percent in 1991-92. The longitudinal rate has also fallen from 34 percent to 28 percent over the past 10 years. It would seem that the initiatives put in place by this government have been rather effective.

I think we should take a little time to discuss some of the programs and services that the Department of Education has initiated. These programs were developed to help potential high school dropouts stay in school as well as to benefit those students who have every intention of finishing their education. Schools offer various guidance and counseling services to help students deal with the stress of remaining in school. As well, there is the career and life management course. These programs help students deal with the problems and stresses associated with remaining in and finishing school. Mr. Speaker, schools also have programs that help students develop skills that may help place them into jobs after graduation. Co-operative education, work experience, practical arts, the district apprenticeship program, and career and technology studies all help to prepare students for the workplace. The programs can give students an edge in gaining employment after graduation.

It is an unfortunate truth that the native people of this province are at high risk of dropping out. The native education project provides support to school boards for native students. With this support, school boards will be able to offer our aboriginal students programs that will help to keep them in school.

The Department of Education has also put into place several programs to encourage school boards to deal with the dropout problem in their jurisdictions. The two-count system for grants provides incentive for a jurisdiction to encourage students to stay in school. As well, the new enhanced opportunities grant will be introduced in September of 1994 to provide programs for disadvantaged students in Edmonton and Calgary. Finally, the province works in co-operation with their federal counterparts to implement the start program, which focuses on keeping potential dropouts in school.

Mr. Speaker, Alberta Education has also cosponsored an interdepartmental task force on school dropouts with advanced education, Family and Social Services, Alberta Health, as well as Human Resources Development Canada. This task force has been studying the problem of student dropout since 1991 and is continually developing programs and services to combat the problem. The task force is currently preparing a package for distribution to schools and educational and other relevant stakeholders who can contribute to addressing the dropout issue. The package includes information about the dropout student in the province and examples of positive responses that schools, parents, community leaders, employers, government, and youth can apply.

The member across the way wanted consultation. Alberta Education conducts an annual survey of parents and various stakeholder groups to obtain feedback on the performance of the education system and suggestions for improvement. We want and

need this input to help make education responsive to the needs of Albertans.

I think, Mr. Speaker, the member from across the way has a genuine concern here. Dropping out of school is a dead-end street that must be rerouted. It is our responsibility as legislators to ensure that our students have the proper programs and services that they need. We must make school boards responsive to the needs of their students. The grant system of programs and services has been effective in reducing the dropout rate in Alberta. This success, coupled with the efforts of the task force on school dropouts, will help to ensure continued success in this area.

This motion is well meant, but this government has already carried out all the implementations and the initiatives that it suggests.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

4:10

MR. DEPUTY SPEAKER: Hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods.

DR. MASSEY: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I speak in support of the motion. The resolution has three important aspects: the creation of a data base, the institution of a consultation process, and introducing programs to stem students leaving schools before graduation.

So-called dropouts belong to a category of a much larger group of students, probably better called alienated. These are students who have become alienated from schools that should be serving them. In the most severe cases alienated students physically leave the school and become labeled "dropouts." Psychologically and emotionally most of them have left school many years earlier. They learn at levels far below their potential. Some are openly hostile to the system; others are sullen and withdrawn. Many have dismal attendance records. Others sit quietly and then seize the opportunity, when it's presented, to leave. These are the students who seemingly are more vulnerable and look for support and acceptance among their peers. We know that students who own cars do more poorly than those who don't. We know that students who work part-time do not do as well as students who don't. These are students who are at risk of becoming among the alienated.

Given this situation, it would seem that parts 2 and 3 of this motion propose action that might be of most benefit to students. It well may be that any data base considering identifying alienated students begin with that process as early as possible. This might shift the attention to early intervention and preventative measures as opposed to remedial programs for school leavers. We know that there are actions that can be taken to prevent students from becoming alienated.

We know much about what makes for success in high school. We know what helps students succeed. We know that students who come from supportive homes are most likely to be successful, particularly when that support takes the form of parental curiosity about school work, parental involvement in school assignments and in projects. We know that the attitude in the home is important. Students whose parents have completed high school or postsecondary institutions are more likely to complete those programs themselves. Students who see their parents read, who see their parents travel, who see their parents take part in cultural activities, whose parents discuss contemporary affairs, whose parents take part in civic life have a much better chance of succeeding than students whose parents don't.

Unfortunately, there are thousands of students to whom these conditions do not apply. They, more than others, run the risk of

becoming among the alienated. We know what works with alienated students. We know that they need mentors, mentors that can help those students establish realistic goals for themselves and standards that they are to reach. These students respond best to an environment that includes structured programs delivered in a personal way by teachers who care and who have clear-cut expectations. These students succeed when instruction is individualized, when there are low student/teacher ratios, and when the staff is caring and committed to student progress.

We know that there are actions that must be taken early to prevent students from becoming alienated. Head Start programs have proven their worth time and time again. Full kindergarten programs and other preschool programs promote conditions under which alienation will not occur. Parenting programs, homework help programs, guidance programs, and school reforms aimed at making school courses more relevant are a necessity if these students are not to become alienated.

In spite of our best efforts it's likely that a certain percentage of students will not succeed and will continue for one reason or another to leave school before they complete their programs. In good economic times the lure of high paying jobs requiring minimal training has always been attractive to these students and will probably continue to be in the future.

The needs of these students must be met. We must make it easy to re-enter schools at all levels. Multiple entry points: being able to start a school program when students feel it's necessary is crucial. The removal of financial barriers: making sure that finances don't keep students away from school programs. There must be a variety of program possibilities. We have to recognize that students come with a variety of interests and abilities, and the programs have to be matched and available to those students. There have to be a variety of delivery systems, systems that allow students to take summer courses, to study part-time, to work at their studies in the evening. A variety of their needs have to be met if they're to be enticed back into the education stream.

I would also argue that we would do well to identify as early as possible alienated or would-be alienated students. These students are not only potential dropouts but have become part of the drop-in phenomenon. Drop-in rates are rising as the job situation worsens or remains oblique. In 1992, for example, the number of full-time students aged 15 to 24 rose 4 percent, despite a drop in the population of that particular age group. According to Statistics Canada there is a trend at all levels for students to take longer to complete programs. They leave for a time and then return to studies.

The motion, if acted upon, will help us to come to grips with the problems alienated students face. We would finally begin to know who they are. We could begin to systematically address their needs. Most importantly, the motion holds the possibility of preventing alienation in the first place.

Thank you very much.

MR. DEPUTY SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Calgary-Currie.

MRS. BURGNER: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's indeed a pleasure to rise and speak in favour of the motion that's before us. I am an advocate of students being involved in their school system, and I'm concerned about the dropout rate, as are most of my colleagues in the House today.

Education is a priority of this government, ladies and gentlemen, but quite frankly the responsibility for education doesn't rest with government alone. While I'm excited about the initiatives in our business plan and within our various school jurisdictions to deal with dropout rates – a number of the strategies have been

spoken to this afternoon – I believe there is one inherent strategy that we as MLAs must take to the community and advocate on behalf of. That is the appreciation of education and that the gift of the community to our young people through the school system that we provide for them, through our tax dollars, really is a privilege.

I am concerned that while we have a lot of focus on the school-based opportunity to deal with dropouts, perhaps we also need to look at the social concern. I find it very intriguing that we have a number of phenomenally competent athletes in our community who manage to maintain very strong grades within their school system, but at the same time we have children who attend their soccer practices and go to their hockey games without having their homework done. I don't quite know where we developed that sense of priorities within our home, but I have a concern that unless we refocus that, we are going to be losing an opportunity to capitalize on the tremendous focus we have on the issue of dropouts. I think part of our site-based management model also must encompass some strong emphasis on the responsibility of parents.

But it goes further than that. I do think there is a responsibility that we have to give towards our students in encouraging them, and I'm not quite sure how you do that. One of the discussions we just heard included a variety of course material available for students, recognizing that they study in different ways. I have a concern that while we can offer them a broad range of subject material, until we have an attitudinal change within our society, that expense that we make available, a whole range of programming, may not necessarily have the same results, because a committed child, a child recognizing the value of his education, is going to pursue his subjects with a certain amount of diligence that may not exist if it wasn't pointed out to him.

We talk about provincial standards, and I don't shy away from that. In fact, it is the focus of most of my discussions on educational reform that we have to recognize that in order to be competitive not just in the economic sense that's viable for Canada but to produce the best results of the maturity of our young people, that great resource that we have, some set of standards is applicable. Those community standards can be interpreted when you go to a site-based model. Certain priorities might take place, and they might be phys ed; they might be health. We're not sure exactly what a community might determine would be the focus of that particular school system. But we cannot ever step away from the fact that as they work with their community priorities, we won't have them responding to provincial goals. If we're going to put Alberta on the map economically, we have to put it on with a work force that's well educated.

4:20

I have a concern that we travel across Canada as much as we do and we have displacement of families, but we have not yet determined how our children can transfer across that system and be adequately educated. Therefore, in our strategies affecting dropout, I will continue to advocate for the fact that we need serious attention to a national standard. Our children should not be at risk as we deal with the dropout situation. It would be a tragedy to work very hard on dropout and have a student move to another province and find a program that was more advanced than they were involved in or less advanced, causing a duplication or a repetition or the horror of boredom and the child leaves the school system.

We talk about the fact that business has to be involved in education, and I know a lot of people shy away from that. I've had the opportunity both in my responsibilities as public affairs co-ordinator at Canada Safeway, where I worked with their

partnership program with the school system, and also on the other side, as a trustee, in developing some of the models for partnerships. One of the most exciting experiences you can have is watching young children leave the classroom and go to work in a workplace. The thing that scares young people so much about growing up and having to go to work is that they think work is the same as school. It's kind of a nerve-wracking feeling to think that you're not only going to be doing this till you're 18, but you're going to be doing it for the rest of your life. When you come home from work and your children ask you, "Did you have a nice day?", they can't quite fathom how work could be something that they would enjoy.

When you take these partnership programs and you bring the children through your different places of employment, they can understand and see their own talents and translate them into their future lives. When we bring students through my husband's architectural practice and they see all the felt markers and the coloured pens and the drawings, those young students, who may not understand their math or may have trouble with their language but know how to colour – suddenly there's something that says to them: there's a place for what I'm doing when I'm sitting at my desk. Ladies and gentlemen, we have to find more opportunities to bring children into the work force as a participant, sharing. We do a lot of it now with manager of the day or whatever process the different partnerships do.

We have also, I find unique and a little scary, teachers coming into a work situation, and I've had teachers say to me, "I have never been in an office before." The routine of meeting people, handling mail, looking at invoices, cost analysis: those kinds of things that are part of the business side of a school community some of our teachers never have a chance to appreciate. So when they're teaching a business curriculum or they're trying to teach a component of math and make sense to the child, if they don't have that appreciation also, we miss the opportunity to put that spark in the child that what they're learning is of importance and is a key for them as they proceed through the school system.

I think that community initiative, whether it be through partnerships in business and technology, whether it's through job sharing or whatever, we have a serious . . .

MR. DEPUTY SPEAKER: I hesitate to interrupt the hon. Member for Calgary-Currie, but under Standing Order 8(4) I must put all questions to conclude debate on the motion under consideration, Motion 508, as proposed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

All members in favour of the motion, please say aye.

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Aye.

MR. DEPUTY SPEAKER: Those opposed, please say no.

SOME HON. MEMBERS: No.

MR. DEPUTY SPEAKER: The motion carries. Call in the members.

[Several members rose calling for a division. The division bell was rung at 4:26 p.m.]

[Ten minutes having elapsed, the Assembly divided]

For the motion:

Abdurahman	Doerksen	Massey
Ady	Forsyth	McClellan
Bracko	Fritz	Nicol

Brassard	Hanson	Sapers
Bruseker	Havelock	Sekulic
Burgener	Henry	Taylor, N.
Chadi	Hewes	Van Binsbergen
Collingwood	Hlady	Vasseur
Coutts	Jonson	Wickman
Decore	Kirkland	Zariwny
Dickson	Kowalski	Zwozdesky
Dinning	Leibovici	

Against the motion:

Amery	Haley	Renner
Black	Herard	Rostad
Cardinal	Hierath	Severtson
Clegg	Jacques	Smith
Day	Laing	Sohal
Dunford	Lund	Thurber
Evans	Magnus	Trynchy
Fischer	McFarland	West
Friedel	Mirosh	Woloshyn
Gordon	Oberg	
Totals:	For - 35	Against - 29

[Motion carried]

[On motion, the Assembly resolved itself into Committee of the Whole]

head: Government Bills and Orders

head: Committee of the Whole

4:40

[Mr. Tannas in the Chair]

MR. CHAIRMAN: I'll call the committee to order.

Bill 5

Oil and Gas Conservation Amendment Act, 1994

MR. CHAIRMAN: Are you ready for the question?

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Question.

**Chairman's Ruling
Decorum**

MR. CHAIRMAN: Sorry; we'll stop for a minute. One of the problems that we have been alluding to in the last few weeks is that it is difficult to tell who is wishing to speak if we move around and stand around. So we've been enforcing the rule: if you want to visit quietly with somebody, you do so in a sitting position, not standing. The only person standing is that person who wants to move from one place to another or to leave the Chamber or the one that is speaking.

Debate Continued

MR. CHAIRMAN: So are you ready for the question?
Redwater.

MR. N. TAYLOR: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. We've had some pretty good debate on Bill 5, but what continues to stick in many people's craw, I think, is the fact that the minister, as is often done with this government, is trying to wash her hands or divorce herself from total responsibility. An orphaned well, of course, has very little parentage, but the minister is exaggerating that even

more so by wanting to only adopt half the orphan and move the government in, and rightfully so, to correct something that could be of quite a little harm. That is the down-hole formations and what happens with rusty casings, fluid connections between the different reservoirs, and so on. That is the notable objective.

Also, Mr. Chairman, when you have an orphaned well, you also have a well that must have equipment and everything on the surface, because it's highly unlikely - because that has to be taken away first. After you've done something down hole, you can usually sell what's on the surface for some money, and most people would.

I've got an amendment now that I would like to pass out that was initialled yesterday, if we can get one of the pages to do it. It's handwritten, untouched by humans, not even me, so you'll be able to read it. It's kind of a double amendment. It amends section 2(c). The present section 2(c) says so on and so forth - stuff about abandoning, the costs, and that - but it says at the end: "but does not include the cost of surface reclamation."

Now, this really points to the fact that you can get the bottom plugged, but the surface reclamation - and this is important if there's a farmer, especially in the rural areas. Maybe the minister has shown her city bias: all there is to Alberta is what you can see from the top of the old Husky tower. There is really a lot more to Alberta than what she has been raised to believe. A great deal of rural people are out there, sitting there and trying to farm around these orphaned wells. Don't forget, chances are the landowner hasn't had any rent, because that's why it's called an orphan. That's why it's called an orphan: because the owner of the well has taken off for parts unknown. So there he or she is, the farm family, trying to get rid of this bunch of dirt and stink that's over in a corner, maybe three or four of them. All the government can come up with is saying, "Well, we'll go down and abandon the subsurface." The farmer could care less. I mean, here he's been going without rent, chances are, because that's why an orphan is an orphan: the company has moved or disappeared. After all, if there is some agent out there paying the rent, there's probably some agent that the government could force to abandon a well. So it's just axiomatic, or it follows as sure as night follows day, that the landowner is already being persecuted and pushed around by not receiving rent for the well.

A lot of surface owners and a lot of farmers and a lot of rural people are saying: "Well, this is a good Bill as far as looking after contamination of subsurface formations, but what about contamination of the surface? What about a surface that I'd like to go back and farm?" "I'm not receiving any rent from it," the surface owner says. Obviously, because the owners have taken off. Not receiving any rent, and the government, who is going to move in their bulldozer - and let's remember, Mr. Chairman, that when you abandon a well, you move almost the same equipment into that lease to abandon that well as you do to reclaim the lease. That's usually a bulldozer and an operator, because you have to doze out the cellar and around the thing. Admittedly, you have a service rig that runs down the hole and sets plugs and cement; that you don't need for reclamation. Then you dig out and cut off the well, usually five, six feet beneath the surface, and fill in some dirt. That is a reclaimed well, but that leaves the sump and the old tanks and the old equipment still sitting around so that the farmer cannot get at it.

It just does not make sense to me for a government to try to absolve themselves of the problem and say: "Don't worry, Mr. Farmer. That's the department of the environment's problem. They'll come in later, maybe some other year, with their dozers and clean up. But that dozer: now we're going to load it in the truck and take it back to the shop. Maybe somebody else in

bureaucracy will come out with a dozer next week or next year or the year afterwards." So to say, as the minister has said – and I'd like to get this on record. That's why we're making the motion, because there are a lot of rural people out there that don't like the idea of an orphaned well just being left as far as surface reclamation is concerned and being told, "Go see another department." How would you like to take your car in for repairs to fix it up, and they say: "Well, that's fine, but a couple of weeks or a month from now you go take it over to another garage. We're only doing this part now." I'll admit that there are specialists around, but this government in this case are not specialists. You use the same equipment to clean up a well down-hole as you do on the surface.

I notice the minister is now getting some advice from a mud salesman, which is very good because the mud salesmen are part of the people that contaminate the lease. There's usually an old pit full of mud there that some of us used to throw salesmen in in order to get them to sober up. Nevertheless, there's an old pit of abandoned mud sitting there usually that the farmer is afraid to go near; otherwise, his tractor disappears up to its eyeballs. So all this is going to be left on the surface, no money to the farmer, just because the minister wants to say, "Well, let the department of the environment do it."

This amendment very easily takes out that last bit that says, "does not include the cost of surface reclamation." We take that out, and it now would read, "including the cost of surface reclamation." A very simple amendment. It doesn't take any doctor's degree in law from Cambridge or Harvard to understand this. It's just as simple as possible. It's so simple that we might have little trouble with it, Mr. Chairman.

Thank you.

MR. CHAIRMAN: You moved the amendment; right?

MR. N. TAYLOR: I moved the amendment, yes. I'm sorry.

MR. CHAIRMAN: Thank you.

On the amendment, the Minister of Energy.

MRS. BLACK: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I'd have to encourage all hon. members to vote against this amendment. I appreciate the comments of the Member for Redwater, but I'd like to refocus you. We're dealing with orphaned wells. We are not dealing with wells where we know where the original licensee is. We're dealing with orphaned wells. Those are wells that it is not apparent as to where the owner is, if in fact they are in existence any longer.

Keep in mind, Mr. Chairman, that this amendment to the Oil and Gas Conservation Act deals with an industry that has said: "We will set up a fund to deal with down-hole orphaned wells. We'll fund that through the industry." Even though they've had quite likely absolutely no contact or no vested interest in these wells that are orphaned, they will go in and build a fund to go through the abandonment costs.

The second thing, Mr. Chairman, I think it is important to remember is that surface reclamation does not fall under the Ministry of Energy. It in fact falls under the ministry of the environment and is covered under the environmental protection Act in this province. There's also another group called the Surface Rights Board, which falls under the ministry of agriculture. This is not in the purview of my ministry, so I would like hon. members to please stay focused on the amendment to the Oil and Gas Conservation Act, which deals with orphaned wells.

So I would ask all hon. members to reject this amendment.

4:50

MR. CHAIRMAN: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Roper, on the amendment.

MR. CHADI: On the amendment. Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. You know, I appreciate what the minister has been saying, but I think the minister is missing the point as well. The fact is that an orphaned well is one that is labeled orphaned because you can't find the owner. Well, if you can't find the owner, why, then it's up to and includes in this Bill that the . . .

AN HON. MEMBER: Have you got a problem?

MR. CHADI: No, no problem.

The government would then step in under this fund and immediately reclaim the well. But, you see, you can't say on the one hand that the damage done to the surface is not my department, but any damage done to the subsurface is within my area. That's what we're trying to do here, reclaim that. So you can't mix the two. What you've got to do is deal with the thing as one package. Look at the whole picture, hon. minister.

I think this amendment is one that is a good amendment. It's an amendment that makes an awful lot of sense, and it's one that could see Bill 5 proceed without any further ado. I don't know what it is that the minister has under her saddle that just makes this so offensive. I can't believe that surface reclamation is something that cannot be included in this Bill. Mr. Chairman, it's not right that we would reclaim the hole in the ground but we wouldn't reclaim the surface.

The hon. Member for Redwater has commented with respect to things like heavy equipment that is going into fields. One can only imagine what happens when this equipment is going in to reclaim a well, Mr. Chairman, because you have equipment that is going to create probably ruts. It's going to leave a trail. I can imagine what it would be like for a farmer going into those fields and trying to farm his land and having to deal with something that was not his doing or not the responsibility of that particular person. So one thing that this amendment would do is see to it that in the process of the reclamation of an orphaned well, the damage caused at that point in time would also be dealt with at that time.

You know, it wasn't so long ago, Mr. Chairman, that there was an incident on the grounds of the Legislature where a pickup truck went on some grass. Why, it was just unbelievable, and there was only a minor, minor, minor track in the snow. Here we're worrying about reclaiming the surface, the reclamation of the surface here. Just unbelievable. On one hand, the hypocrisy of this government to suggest that we are going to have to reclaim the surface on . . . [interjections]

Mr. Chairman, please quieten this group down, particularly the Minister of Municipal Affairs. I can't hear myself. [interjections]

MR. CHAIRMAN: Order. [interjections] Order. Minister.

MR. CHADI: Name him, Mr. Chairman. Name him.

MR. CHAIRMAN: Thank you. I don't need direction. Order in the House.

MR. CHADI: It's the hypocrisy that I'm in total disagreement with here, Mr. Chairman. On one hand, you cannot be looking at saying that we're going to have to reclaim a surface that barely has any tracks to it, and then on the other hand . . .

Chairman's Ruling Parliamentary Language

MR. CHAIRMAN: Hon. member, the use of the word "hypocrisy" has a long tradition of being disallowed usually, so take care.

MR. CHADI: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I think in the context of my conversation the term was not meant to harm anyone. It was used in a good sense.

Debate Continued

MR. CHADI: Mr. Chairman, we can't have it both ways. We have to look at the overall picture. We have to see where there needs to be reclamation of the surface as a result of the damage that is done by the time the reclamation of the subsurface is taken care of. It doesn't necessarily only follow through to things like farmers' fields. In southern Alberta I would imagine that it can be a real problem. I know northern Alberta can be even a much greater problem, because once you start to get into those orphaned wells up in the north, in the bush particularly, where you've got to go in to clean up a site where growth is already 10, 12 feet high in most of the places, where you have those roads that were bulldozed through to get at that site in the first place – and it could be 25, 30 years old, Mr. Chairman. Perhaps maybe some of those poplars are already 30, 40 feet high. If that's the case, it would mean we've got to get in there and bulldoze our way through once again. Then once again we've got to also consider the reclamation of that surface, not only the subsurface but the surface.

I know that the forestry industry and the energy industry today, after much discussion – I recall debating the estimates of Energy in the last session whereby the minister made it clear that there were initiatives in place now where the industry, particularly forestry, was working with Energy to ensure that when wells or leases are going to be cleared for the purposes of drilling a well, the two get together and decide what areas must be logged, where the road is going to be, and where the well site is going to be. They get in there and do a fine job of clearing it and utilizing those logs. In the past, Mr. Chairman, the practice has been such that a bulldozer would just plow its way through and make the road. It could go on for maybe miles; who knows? In many instances it could go for five, 10 miles. The logs were just pushed onto the side of the road and sometimes even burnt, and it would be a terrible waste of our natural resources when we start looking at that. Then we go further, and in the lease area itself those logs were just piled in a brush pile and then burnt without any regard for the use of those trees. The north part of the province is a particular concern of mine.

When we talk about the surface reclamation, I want to make it perfectly clear, Mr. Chairman, that when we do go in to reclaim an orphaned well, there has to be, in my mind, some of the surface that is going to be destroyed once again. All we're saying in this amendment is to consider restoring that to where it was prior to going in to reclaim that orphaned well. Now, that's not a heck of a lot to ask for. I can't imagine why it should be so insulting to not want to add that into Bill 5.

The other section that is contemplated within this amendment is within the fund itself, the abandonment fund levy. That is by renumbering section 56.1(2)(c) as 56.1(2)(d), moving that one down, and coming in with just these words, Mr. Chairman, and that is "to pay for the costs of surface reclamation." So within the abandonment fund levy we would have the funds in place or the legislation in place to ensure that we indeed take care of the damages that are incurred when we go to reclaim the subsurface.

5:00

The difference between the subsurface and the surface, I think, is of grave importance here, Mr. Chairman. The subsurface is an area that is merely a hole in the ground. We can fill it with mud. You can fill it with cement. You can fill it with whatever it is. The fact of the matter is: the damage is the part that is up in the surface area. That is the real damage in my opinion. I don't know what damage a hole in the ground can do anyone once it's filled in. I know from my experience with things like water wells that it's a very difficult thing when you start to fill those in. You have a water well that's probably 40, 50 feet deep, and it's a two foot in diameter well. Sometimes when you start to fill that thing in, you don't get anymore than about a couple of buckets full with a bobcat and by golly you'd think this thing was all filled, but it really, truly isn't. I mean, it's probably got about six feet of dirt in the thing, and then you end up with a pile up on top and you say to yourself, "Well, good, this must be it; we've now filled in this well." And then in a few years time you find yourself where it's leveled off, and it may never, ever be another hole in the ground. This could be it. I mean, it could've leveled itself off.

The area that concerns us and the reason that this amendment is in place is the fact that we would like to see the surface reclaimed to what it used to be. Now, the Member for Redwater has mentioned a number of times things like the reclamation of the surface by way of the removal of tanks and by way of the removal of the old iron wellheads or horses, whatever those are called. I think he's right. That has to be. I can't imagine why a farmer would want to leave those in their field, in any event. But once you start considering removing those items out of a field or even out of the bush for that matter, one can't help but think that there will be damage done to the surface. Therefore, Mr. Chairman, I would ask all members of this Assembly to think about that. If it can happen, if it is indeed the case, then vote for this amendment. Let us not just sit back and listen to someone who says, "No, this is not a good idea simply because these are orphan wells, and "orphan" means that we can't find the owner." Well, we know that, and that's precisely the point here. We know. That's why we are creating a fund called the abandonment fund. I mean, it's clearly because you can't find that owner.

So with those comments, Mr. Chairman, I would encourage all members to consider this amendment. Thank you.

MR. CHAIRMAN: Calgary-Buffalo.

MR. DICKSON: Thanks, Mr. Chairman. I'm sufficiently encouraged by my colleague's comments to not only vote for the amendment but also to share with members why I'm going to vote for the amendment introduced by the Member for Redwater. As a matter of first principles, the Oil and Gas Conservation Act sets out some purposes, and the purposes are set out in section 4. I think it's useful while we're dealing with this amendment to highlight some of those that I think we've lost sight of.

It's that purpose section in the Bill that really defines what the purpose, what the objective is of the Act itself and any amendments to it. So if we look at section 4(a), it talks about one of the purposes being "to effect the conservation of, and to prevent the waste of . . . resources." Section 4(b) talks about "the observance of safe and efficient practices," and part of that includes "operating and abandonment of wells and in operations for the production." Section 4(f) deals with controlling pollution, not just subsurface but pollution at the surface.

So if we look at sections 4(a), (b), and (f), it's clear that it is embraced by this statute. I know the minister has said to me that

the amendment raised by my colleague for Redwater belongs in another statute, but that can't be so, Mr. Chairman, and part of the reason is that the Minister of Labour, who sits immediately beside the Minister of Energy, the other day brought in a Bill that in effect involved extensive amendment in one Bill of matters under a second Bill. So it's a specious argument, I submit with respect, to say that this is a matter that doesn't belong here. In fact, there's no problem. We have no difficulty in terms of amending a second statute through this one. It may be that the minister may quibble over the way the matter is worded, but we can easily incorporate by reference an amendment of other statutes if it's done for a purpose and for a subject which is common to both statutes. So that's not, I think, a reasonable reason to defeat this particular amendment.

The other point I want to raise, Mr. Chairman, is that if you had an ordinary operator, if this wasn't an abandoned well, if you had an identified, responsible operator, that operator couldn't get an abandonment certificate. That operator couldn't walk away and shed responsibility for surface issues and surface concerns and say, "Well, we've cleaned up the subsurface problem, and therefore we want to walk away from it." They could not. The responsibility both at surface and subsurface is conjoined, and it's effectively, collectively a single responsibility for that ordinary operator. Now, why would we have, then, a lower standard if there isn't a regular operator involved and in fact we now have an abandoned well? That doesn't make sense to me.

The other thing I'd simply encourage members to consider is that we're not here as shills for an industry, as important as the industry may be. We have at least as large a responsibility for landowners, for the people that do have a stake in surface rights in this province, whether it's Crown properties or privately owned land. It seems to me that all members should be at least as concerned, Mr. Chairman, with the particular concerns of landowners as they should be with the interests of the oil and gas industry. I say that if the oil and gas industry have legitimate concerns, we should deal with them. Clearly we should listen to those concerns. But I don't think we have to be motivated in everything we do with their concerns only. The other part of the equation is the interest of the landowner.

So I think that this amendment, and one of the reasons I can vote in favour of it, does speak to the perspective of a landowner as well, and it speaks I think in a powerful way. You know, to say that there's no responsibility in the case of one of these abandoned orphaned wells - often there are problems with weeds. There are other kinds of problems that are real problems for the farmer or for the landowners. I think this amendment at least is not tacit. It's an expressed acknowledgment that there are those kinds of concerns, and they have to be dealt with.

So for those reasons, Mr. Chairman, I'm happy to urge all members to support the amendment sponsored by the Member for Redwater.

MR. CHAIRMAN: The hon. Member for Sherwood Park.

MR. COLLINGWOOD: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I'm rising to speak to the amendment. It's important, I think, that we deal with the issue of the surface reclamation of these abandoned wells as well as the down-hole reclamation. We have debated in this Assembly and we've debated in second reading the concerns that have been expressed by members here and in reply from the Minister of Energy about the inclusion of the cost of surface reclamation for these abandoned wells. Of course, we have to recognize that when we're talking about abandoned wells, we

don't know who the owner is and we're talking about the obligation and the responsibility for the cleanup of these particular sites.

5:10

I recognize of course, as the minister has indicated, that the abandonment fund would be a voluntary fund that would be funded by industry. So the question arises, then, as to whether or not it would be proper to call upon the industry to in fact participate in the funding for surface reclamation as well as for down-hole costs of reclamation. I think we have to recall, Mr. Chairman, that right now the cost of reclaiming the surface area is presently contained in legislation. It is in fact there, but it is presently located in the Environmental Protection and Enhancement Act. There are funds that would be made available to abandoned sites under that particular piece of legislation in that a department investigator would determine whether or not funds from the environmental protection and enhancement fund would be used for that surface reclamation. What we've now created in going this route, Mr. Chairman, is that we've created an extra level of bureaucracy for the reclamation of an abandoned well, because now we have one department of government dealing with the down-hole concerns and another department dealing with the surface reclamation concerns.

As I say, it is presently in legislation, but we need to streamline the process. It makes sense to myself and to other members on our side of the House that we deal with the surface reclamation issue within this particular area in terms of Bill 5 so that we can streamline the process and we can give greater certainty to the industry on their obligations and their funding of a fund that would deal with both the down hole and the surface reclamation.

I think it's appropriate that we include it in this section in this Bill, because presently the environmental protection and enhancement fund, as proposed by the Minister of Environmental Protection, would only include moneys that would come from stumpage fees, increases in gravel fees, increases in hunting and fishing licences, increases in water hydro rental fees, and the like. So we're asking those consumers and those industries to contribute to a fund that could then potentially be used for the reclamation of an abandoned oil well or an oil site, and I don't know that those participants and those consumers and those funding the environmental protection and enhancement fund will perceive their role as being the role of the reclaiming of abandoned oil wells. If the industry has said that they're prepared to fund an abandonment fund with dollars for down-hole reclamation, I don't think it would be a significant quantum leap to have the industry come forward and say, "Indeed, we're prepared to fund this fund, as well, for surface reclamation."

What I recognize, Mr. Chairman, is that there is presently legislation in place, that placing this amendment in the Bill at this point would cause some difficulty, but I think it would be clear enough that we could indeed fund the abandonment fund with this amendment and perhaps look at changing the Environmental Protection and Enhancement Act at a later date and deal with it that way. I don't think we'd cause confusion. I think, in fact, we'd clear up confusion. I think we can show the industry that we are intending to streamline the process. I think we can show the industry that the responsibility ought to be theirs even though it is an abandoned well, because if the industry and the landowner can't find those responsible, then I think an industry-funded fund should in fact be the source of funds that we use for that reclamation.

Again, Mr. Chairman, while I recognize that there are some legislative difficulties here, I don't think they are such high obstacles that they can't be overcome. I think we should all indeed support this, go back to the industry and show them our

commitment and our concern in having the responsibility leveled here, and move forward from that point.

So on those comments I would invite all members to support this amendment. Thank you.

MR. CHAIRMAN: Edmonton-Centre.

MR. HENRY: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I just want to speak briefly to the amendment so skillfully put by the Member for Redwater. Now, I speak as somebody who does not have a history in the oil and gas sector and who does not have a history in environmental protection in terms of professional. So I have some what may seem really simple questions, but I'm sure they would be questions put by my constituents.

Mr. Chairman, as I understand it, what Bill 5 does among other things is create a fund that allows for the recovering of the cost of dealing with abandoned wells or wells that are no longer productive, that have been abandoned by industry, by the oil and gas sector. It allows a fund to be created to essentially reclaim these wells or deal with the abandoned wells. Now, as I understand it . . . [interjection]

AN HON. MEMBER: Hold it, Mike.

MR. CHAIRMAN: Edmonton-Centre, to continue.

MR. HENRY: I note that the Member for Calgary-Varsity is much better versed in the oil and gas sector than perhaps I am, but I ask him to please just bear with me and I'll get through these questions.

As I understand it, wells have been abandoned because the company may have gone broke or for whatever other reasons. This fund that's going to be created is going to allow a pool of money that will allow us to essentially deal with the direct costs associated with that abandoned well. What I don't quite understand is why the minister would not have the surface reclamation associated with that well included in those costs.

Now, it seems to me that as a taxpayer in this province I essentially own those resources out there collectively with all the other taxpayers, as well as the resources above or below the ground. If a member from the private sector wishes to access those resources under the ground and goes in and that industry collectively leaves a situation that has to be dealt with, whether that situation be below the ground or above the ground, it doesn't seem to me to be fair or equitable to ask the general taxpayer to bear some of the cost of reclaiming that well.

It seems to me that to say that what's below the ground that's been caused by that exploration or that development of that well, if that is legitimately a cost that this fund should deal with, then certainly all the costs with regard to reclamation, including the surface costs – we certainly don't want to off-load that onto the tourist industry. We don't want the tourist industry to be saddled with having to clean up some abandoned wells. You don't want the tourist industry to have to deal with cleaning up those abandoned wells in order to create a scenic tour or to create the kind of landscape that Albertans would want to be able to invite people from the rest of the world to come to. I don't believe it's fair for the average taxpayer to have to subsidize that industry. Certainly I don't believe it's fair for the tourist industry to have to support that industry.

What happens if the abandoned well is on private land as opposed to just public land? Well, then surely somebody's got to pay for the reclamation. If this fund is going to pay for the subsurface reclamation, then who's going to be left with the

above-surface reclamation or restoration of that property to its original state? Surely we can't expect members in the agricultural sector or we can't expect other private landholders to have to fork over the money to accomplish that reclamation. It just doesn't seem to me to add up, and I know the Minister of Energy will want to provide me with some sort of rationale that I haven't heard yet in this House as to why it is that this artificial slice-off between aboveground and below-ground reclamation is taking place.

5:20

Now, I know that the hon. member who has proposed this amendment doesn't do so lightly and does so because he has a long and strong history in the oil and gas sector, as well as being a major proponent of the agricultural sector, which I can attest to from my years and years and years of association with the hon. member, a champion of private rights and a champion of private enterprise in our province. I don't think he would want the taxpayer or the tourist industry or the farmer to be unfairly put upon in terms of cost of reclaiming the surface of these abandoned wells, the surface costs related to those.

Mr. Chairman, I'm urging all members of the Legislature on both sides of the House, whom I know are attentively listening, to support this amendment. I think back to my days in central Alberta, living in the beautiful town of Lacombe. Lacombe has got to be one of the most beautiful parts of this province. Not far from Lacombe there are some gas and oil wells. I would hate to see that beautiful part of the province not being restored to its original condition because nobody seemed to have the responsibility or the funds available to actually go in and make that like it was at one point.

Certainly we applaud the energy sector for having created the great wealth that we've been able to enjoy in this province, but we want to work hand in hand with them to ensure that we not have one blinded view of the province, being the oil and gas sector only. We have to make sure that the agricultural sector and make sure that the beautiful landscape that is so vital to our tourism industry are in fact preserved and enhanced through appropriate reclamation.

I believe one of the things that the minister would want to achieve with this fund is to ensure a uniform standard so you don't have one county or one farmer that may have the money to reclaim the surface having two different standards. I'm sure that the minister would want there to be a broad standard throughout this province so that every community that has abandoned wells is treated equally and that we don't have this patchwork of various results.

MR. CHAIRMAN: I know that the dinner hour is coming soon, but could we just bring down the level so that we could hear the hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

MR. HENRY: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I could go on and on about the merits of this amendment. [interjection] I note that the hon. Member for Stony Plain wishes to continue all night with me, but I will take my place. I know that the hon. member who moved this amendment, the hon. Member for Redwater, will want to close debate on the amendment and provide us with a few thoughts of wisdom.

Thank you, sir.

MR. CHAIRMAN: Redwater.

MR. N. TAYLOR: Yeah. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. One thing is rather puzzling to me about the amendment and the

obvious reluctance of the minister to accept it. I really can't put it down to anything except – you know, like the velocity of a high-speed rifle, it gets hard to change it once they get addicted or going on a course. Addiction might be the wrong word for that. In the member's caucus there is a tremendous number of rural people. Certainly I think it's going to be interesting. I don't think they want to go back to the next election to tell the rural people, particularly around northern Alberta where there are many wells, that they were able to get down-hole abandonments through, that the government was going to do it, but as far as surface reclamation, that was another department.

Well, Mr. Chairman, if there are two departments, are the surface reclamation people going to come in first and then these others come along with their big bulldozers and everything else and do the down hole second? [interjection] All right. Now she says: well, come on. But who's going to do the co-ordinating? That's why it should be in the same Act. Obviously surface reclamation has to follow down-hole reclamation, number one.

Number two, the farmer, the surface owner – and I would remind all those who have farmers in their area who have surface rights that this area is an orphan well. Just as the minister pointed out, "orphan" means that they cannot locate the owner. If the owner's not around, the farmer has not been receiving any rentals or anything else. The place has probably been going to weeds. It's probably in sow thistle up to your hips. It's probably got dandelion up one side. Here's a guy trying to raise a crop of some sort, and it's covered with weeds and everything else because the surface has not been reclaimed. Finally, after two or three years of not receiving any rent, along comes the government with their trucks and bulldozers, and big smiles light up. There's joy and rejoicing in the kitchen. Mama runs out and tells dad: "Look; the government's arrived. They're going to clean up the well." After a little scratching around and digging up some ruts and everything else and the Christmas tree getting cut off, the trucks disappear again and leave a mess. Not only are the dandelions, sow thistle, and Canadian thistle there, but they've got some dual-wheel tracks and everything else through it. "Don't worry, old buddy. I'm talking to the minister of environment," she says as she whistles by driving the truck at full speed. Well, big deal. Big deal. What if we have another minister of environment?

Now, that's just looking at it from the farmer's point of view. [interjection] The hon. Member for Whitecourt-Ste. Anne may well have one of the worst areas. [interjections]

MRS. HEWES: Keep on going, Nick. You're not finished. [interjections]

MR. N. TAYLOR: No. It looks like 28, 29; it looks about the right time, don't you think? I'm in full flight. I hate to give them the whole bale of hay; just a forkful will do right now before dinner.

So I move that we rise and report to sit another day.

[Motion carried]

[Mr. Clegg in the Chair]

MR. TANNAS: Mr. Speaker, the Committee of the Whole has had under consideration certain Bills. The committee reports progress on Bill 5. I also wish to table copies of all amendments considered by the Committee of the Whole on this date for the official records of the Assembly.

MR. ACTING SPEAKER: Thank you, hon. member.
All in favour of the report?

HON. MEMBERS: Agreed.

MR. ACTING SPEAKER: Opposed, if any? Carried.
The hon. Deputy Government House Leader.

MRS. BLACK: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I move that we now adjourn until 8 o'clock tonight, when we will come back in Committee of Supply.

MR. ACTING SPEAKER: All in favour of the motion by the Deputy Government House Leader, say aye.

HON. MEMBERS: Aye.

MR. ACTING SPEAKER: Opposed, if any? Carried.

[The Assembly adjourned at 5:30 p.m.]