

Legislative Assembly of Alberta

Title: **Wednesday, May 25, 1994**

8:00 p.m.

Date: 94/05/25

[Mr. Deputy Speaker in the Chair]

MR. DEPUTY SPEAKER: Please be seated.

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

head: **Government Bills and Orders**

head: **Committee of the Whole**

[Mr. Tannas in the Chair]

MR. CHAIRMAN: I'll call the committee to order. The first item is: may we revert briefly to Introduction of Guests? All those in favour, please say aye.

HON. MEMBERS: Aye.

MR. CHAIRMAN: Opposed, please say no.
The hon. Member for Lac La Biche-St. Paul.

head: **Introduction of Guests**

MR. LANGEVIN: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. It is my pleasure this evening to introduce to you and to the members of the Assembly a young lady that worked for me in my constituency office last summer, and she's now a student at the University of Alberta, Miss Larissa Holomis. She is accompanied this evening by my wife, Juliette. Would you please rise and receive the applause.

Bill 20 Regional Health Authorities Act

MR. CHAIRMAN: The committee is reminded that we have under consideration Bill 20, Regional Health Authorities Act. If memory serves us correctly, we had some amendments to consider.

The hon. Member for Edmonton-McClung.

MR. MITCHELL: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I'm speaking to the package of amendments that were moved by my colleague from Edmonton-Glenora last night. These amendments serve to strengthen . . .

MR. CHAIRMAN: Hon. member, the Table is embarrassed by the fact that we do not appear to have a copy of those amendments. So it's going to be rather difficult for us to move on. However, the hon. Justice minister has supplied us with them, and we can proceed.

Again, the hon. Member for Edmonton-McClung.

MR. MITCHELL: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. These amendments serve to rectify certain weaknesses in Bill 20, weaknesses that we feel serve to render Bill 20 inappropriate at this time without proper changes.

The first amendment requires that there be public hearings into the health region boundaries. While many of the boundaries appear to have been accepted by the residents of the regions which will fall within them, there is a good deal of reason that there

should be a public hearings process into these boundaries. In fact, one of the reasons why people may actually think they've accepted these boundaries is that they haven't been widely described and publicized to the public, and it is very, very likely that many people, if not most people in this province, simply don't know what the boundaries to their particular region are.

It's interesting to note that in a recent poll published in a local newspaper two things were very, very clear. One, Albertans, 61 percent of them, were not happy with the way in which the government was finding its way to a balanced budget, or the way in which they are construing that they are doing that. And the people of Alberta indicated that they want to be consulted. There are, perhaps, few issues that are of such significance to Albertans as is health care. Health care goes beyond the categorization as an issue. It is in fact a value. The manner in which we deliver health care in this province is one of those things that makes this province and this country special around the world, and what Albertans have asked for is the chance to be consulted.

It is not too much to ask that there should be an efficient, not overly lengthy but effective public hearings process into the regional boundaries. What's interesting, Mr. Chairman, is that in some areas at least the boundaries are not supported by a majority of residents, and in no areas do we know whether a majority of the residents in fact support the boundaries, because they have not been consulted. In St. Albert there is general dissatisfaction with the boundaries as they have been drawn, but there is absolutely no formal mechanism by which the public can influence these decisions. In fact, it is almost as though the government does not want a formal mechanism for those decisions to be influenced by the public, which of course is a great hypocrisy on the part of a government which wants to construe itself as being open and accessible and a government that would argue that it listens to the people of this province.

In fact, there is grave concern in the St. Albert case that the regional health boundaries may well have been politically motivated. There are two powerful cabinet ministers just to the northwest of the city whose areas might be served by this kind of drawing of the boundaries. It has raised some serious reservations not only on the part of Albertans but in fact, we note, on the part of many of the private members in this government caucus. In fact, they too are concerned with the manner in which these two particular ministers have wielded their power over the years. Most recently in fact: not all that long ago there was concern expressed by private members in this very caucus, that Conservative caucus, about the manner in which the Westlock hospital was built, \$10 million, outside a reasoned and responsible decision-making process. There are shades of that kind of occurrence evident in the manner in which St. Albert has been treated in the drawing of boundaries. We argued that there must be a public hearings process to address such problems, and this, Mr. Chairman, is in fact an amendment which would serve to achieve that.

Our second amendment addresses the issue of whether the members of the regional health authority should be elected or should be appointed. Every member in this Legislature would argue that they have campaigned on the basis of enhancing the democratic process. The irony is, Mr. Chairman, that this Bill along with other initiatives taken recently by this government really belies that as an objective, as a value, as a principle which is upheld by this government. In fact, the manner in which the government wants to appoint members of the regional health authority is really a step backwards, because to this point in this province many health authorities have in fact been elected, not all,

and there is evidence, studies that underline that in fact there is no particular indicated difference in the outcome of decisions by an elected or an appointed board. It is easy and I think logical to argue, therefore, that everything else being equal, these people should be elected. If the outcomes won't in fact change, evidence would suggest, then, that they should be elected, because there can in fact be no downside if they won't change, and there certainly is an obvious commitment to a more open and democratic process by electing.

8:10

There is also the advantage, Mr. Chairman, of overcoming this problem, which I think may verge on a discrimination against certain people in this province, of saying that some people can be appointed to these boards and others who don't meet these criteria or others who happen to be employed now in the health care industry can't be. Now, nobody wants regional health authorities that are monopolized by people who are employed in the health care industry. At the same time, it would be difficult to understand how you could exclude such people properly, legitimately, and not somehow erode or diminish the ultimate potential of these regional health authorities.

Well, all those board members shouldn't be people with that experience. Clearly, one would think it wouldn't hurt to have some of them. The problem is that if you're appointing, how would you ever determine the balance? In exactly trying to determine the balance, you begin to create imbalance. Elections solve that problem because they put the decision in the hands of the people of Alberta. They can decide in their wisdom what should be the makeup of their regional health authorities. It solves that problem. It serves democracy. It emphasizes democracy. It opens the process. There can be no better process. It will demonstrate not only that in fact the process is democratic but that in every appearance it will be democratic. It will allow government to rise above any suggestion of patronage or political appointment or political manipulation of regional health authorities. [interjection] The Minister of Municipal Affairs agrees with me, and I would expect that he'll stand and vote in support of this amendment. In fact, Mr. Chairman, we will call for a standing vote so he can proudly have his name on the list of people who would be supporting this particular amendment.

The problem, Mr. Chairman, is that any government that wants to restructure health care – and health care in this province certainly needs to be restructured – must understand that any suggestion, any taint, any tinge of political interference with these regional health authorities will greatly diminish the credibility with which they will be able to operate. It makes eminent sense that we should recognize with confidence the ability of the people of Alberta to make these decisions. Not to elect is to communicate a profound arrogance about the manner in which this government operates.

There is of course a tremendous irony, Mr. Chairman. Underlying all this is this central government's desire to control. This is a government that wants to control regional health authorities, a government that would believe somehow implicitly that it will be able to manage those authorities better than the local people, the regional health authorities themselves could possibly do that. This of course is an irony coming from a government that has given us nine consecutive deficit budgets, each one of which has been voted on by the members of that front bench over the years, most of the members, and which continues to demonstrate, in fact with this Bill itself, that they are not planning properly and that they have not prepared for the transition from

the kind of health care system that we have to the kind of health care system that we need and can afford.

Mr. Chairman, the third amendment is really to supplement the second, and that is to allow for appointments immediately to the boards, because there is no time for elections to be established, for people to consider running, to mount their campaigns, to organize, to do that effectively, to create the proper debate that would surround proper elections. We therefore have specified in our amendments that the appointments should be simply for a maximum period of two years, after which time there could be elections and after which time the advantages that I have outlined could therefore be achieved.

Our fourth amendment is a very, very critical amendment. It addresses a very important principle that we believe should be at the root and underlines health care values in this province. The concern that many health care providers, many recipients of health care in this province, students of it as well have with this regional structure is that it will be driven by acute care institutional perspectives, that it will be driven by the high-tech side of medicine, that the most powerful vested interest in medicine will tend to win over.

Chairman's Ruling Decorum

MR. CHAIRMAN: Hon. members, the fact that the Rangers are leading 3 to 2 is not reason for everyone to talk. [interjection] Even if it's 4 to 2, it's no reason.

Hon. members, we're here tonight to hear for the first little while the hon. Member for Edmonton-McClung. Let's hear him out.

MR. MITCHELL: I'm actually concerned, Mr. Chairman, that the member over there would know the score of the Rangers/Devils game, which might suggest that he hasn't been listening to what I've been saying for the last 15 minutes. Now, how would that work?

MR. CHAIRMAN: The hon. Member for Calgary-Shaw rising on a point of order.

MR. HAVELOCK: Yes, Mr. Chairman, citation *Beauchesne* 459.

MR. CHAIRMAN: That's not a proper citation, hon. member.

MR. HAVELOCK: Well, I'm just concerned that the Member for Edmonton-McClung didn't know who the Rangers were playing.

MR. CHAIRMAN: That is not a point of order.

MR. MITCHELL: I know for a fact the Flames aren't playing.

MR. HAVELOCK: Nor are the Oilers.

DR. PERCY: Well, they are but in New York uniforms.

MR. MITCHELL: Yeah, the Oilers are playing. They're playing for the New York Rangers. That's more than you can say for any Flames. Anyway, the Flames are a wonderful hockey team.

Debate Continued

MR. MITCHELL: Mr. Chairman, we are very concerned that what public health brings to the health care system by way of

wellness orientation, by health promotion, by an emphasis on preventative health will be lost under these regional health structures, which can so easily be overwhelmed by an acute care hospital orientation. This of course has a major implication for what it is that this government and a responsible government at the same time would want to do with health care. It means that the more we emphasize acute care, the less we will be able to reduce health care costs. Health care cost reduction is one of the objectives that has to be implicit in everything we do with health care policy.

On the other hand, it means that we will also reduce our opportunities to enhance the quality of health care in this province, because I think most of us understand implicitly that quality health care will not be promoted ultimately through acute care hospitals. But wellness promotion, preventative health care, lifestyle changes, environmental considerations, social relationships in the home, and so on are things that are emphasized through a public health orientation. Everything that many, many health care professionals have been trying to do in this province for a long time with health care comes down to that focus, that orientation in health care. Well, in one fell swoop without a proper emphasis on preventative health care, without a proper emphasis on public health, Mr. Chairman, we can lose all those cost-cutting advantages and health care promotion advantages that are essential if we are to be successful in restructuring our health care system.

8:20

What we call for in our fourth amendment is that there will be a specified amount directed to each regional health authority for public health, an amount which these authorities will not be able to shift and have overwhelmed by other health care priorities – well, perceived priorities. What we want to have happen, Mr. Chairman, is to continue the orientation which emerged under this very government: an emphasis on public health. Why would the Minister of Municipal Affairs now renege so clearly and be so clearly hypocritical about an orientation that his governments over the years and his very own health care minister have said they believe in? In fact, they've actually amended this Bill in a general way to achieve some of that. All I'm saying is that the wording changes they put in that specified somehow the mandate of regional health authorities and emphasized in that mandate a better emphasis on community health and public health simply aren't enough. We have to put some teeth into it to make it work.

We also are asking, Mr. Chairman, that section 19(1)(i) be struck out. We are very, very concerned with this particular section, because this section is one of two key indicators that the government can be establishing the edge of a slippery slope for the erosion of our public health care system. What they are calling for in section 19(1)(i) is a voucher system. The minister has been unable to define that specifically, but to the extent that she has defined it, it is very, very disconcerting. What she says are things like: people would be given money to buy their own health care service. I don't know how we determine when they would be given it and when they wouldn't be given it, but one of the things that that of course can lead to is for people to go out and shop around. Well, once that begins, what we will begin to see is greater privatization, greater commercialization of our health care system. In fact, I think the minister's example – I may be wrong – was physiotherapy. Imagine if somebody was given money, \$3,500 for a heart operation. Where would they go? Would they begin to shop outside the province? How would

that be determined? How would it be stopped? Would that erode our health care system? I would suggest that it would. Would it encourage some doctors to opt out and set up private hospitals which would progressively become more and more available only to the rich? We are concerned that in fact that might occur.

The second edge of the slippery slope is that these regional health authorities will be given under the Act, section 20(k), which we are amending to have struck out, the power to charge user fees for goods and services they provide. Now, let's take the voucher system and let's take the ability of these regional authorities to provide user fees and let's put that in the broader context, Mr. Chairman, of the evolution of health care away from acute care facilities, which are covered by the Canada Health Act and all of the principles and provisions that sustain our health care system in that regard, and move more and more from acute care hospitals to community-based health care systems.

What that means is that we are moving away from the purview of the Canada Health Act into an area that is not governed by the Canada Health Act. So more and more services that once were provided equally, fairly, universally to all Albertans and all Canadians will become more and more vulnerable to erosion by voucher systems and user fees.

These particular sections, 20(k) and 19(1)(i), absolutely allow the government to in turn allow this to occur surreptitiously. They won't be able to control it. There will be no inventory of who's charging what in what regional authority. There will be no way of assessing whether health care delivery is equal and even in each of these regional authorities, and what we will find, Mr. Chairman, is surely and inexorably the creation of a two, a three – who knows how many – tiered health care system for which there will be one element in common, and that will be lack of equality underlined by a lack of fairness.

Mr. Chairman, anybody in this Legislature who believes in fairness and who believes in the value that health care system is to us in this province will not contemplate those two sections and will agree with our amendments to section 19(1)(i) and section 20(k).

I thank you, Mr. Chairman, and ask the Members of the Legislative Assembly to support these truly remarkable amendments.

MR. CHAIRMAN: Okay. Before I recognize you for the moment, just a reminder to all hon. members that we have a set of six amendments that were moved last night by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Glenora, and we're taking them as one.

The hon. Member for Edmonton-Whitemud.

DR. PERCY: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I rise to speak in favour of the amendments. [interjections]

MR. CHAIRMAN: If you'll indulge in the frailties of the judgment of the Chairman. Normally we go back and forth, and I didn't turn far enough to the government side to recognize the hon. minister without portfolio.

MRS. MIROSH: Thank you, Mr. Chairman, for giving me a turn. I know it's difficult for you to see me.

I rise to make some comments based on the opposite member's whining, as they usually carry on whining. It really irks me when I hear comments with regard to public consultation. There has been more public consultation in health than in any other portfolio

in this government. Mr. Chairman, what the members opposite forget is that prior to 1993 . . .

**Point of Order
Abusive Language**

MR. MITCHELL: Point of order, Mr. Chairman, under Standing Order 23(j).

MR. CHAIRMAN: Standing Order 23(j). Edmonton-McClung rising on a point of order.

MR. MITCHELL: Imputing motives. I'm really tired of the member suggesting that we were whining. It is absolutely uncalled for, Mr. Chairman, when you consider that the government has so many times said: "Please offer us amendments. Please give us the changes, and we will contemplate and we will consider them." The fact of the matter is . . .

MR. CHAIRMAN: The hon. Member for Edmonton-McClung has mentioned that it is point of order Standing Order 23(j): "uses abusive or insulting language of a nature likely to create disorder." Whining might be in that category.

MRS. MIROSH: Well, Mr. Chairman, I'll change it to complaining. They complain and complain and complain. [interjection] I've listened to the hon. member speak. Now he could have the courtesy to sit down and listen to what in fact happened. [interjection]

**Point of Order
Factual Accuracy**

MR. MITCHELL: Point of order.

MR. CHAIRMAN: Hon. Member for Edmonton-McClung, are you rising on a new point of order?

MR. MITCHELL: I am on a new point of order. "Whining" is bad. "Complaining" is no better. What I want the minister to understand, Mr. Chairman, is that we have presented responsible amendments, and they have asked us to have amendments. Now, the low point in their acceptance of our amendments was the House leader ripping up one of our education Bill amendments before he even read it. This from a government led by a Premier who says: give us the ideas. We've given her the ideas. They're not complaints. They're responsible, and I want her to consider them in that way.

MR. CHAIRMAN: Okay. Hon. member, your original point of order did have some merit, but now that you're into the second one, you seem to be more into a matter of debate than strict adherence to the point of order.

If we could get back to the hon. minister without portfolio.

Debate Continued

MRS. MIROSH: Mr. Chairman, I've listened to the member opposite for weeks and weeks and weeks on debate. Now we're speaking to amendments. I want to bring honesty to this Table. When I listen to the member opposite, who participated in absolutely no public debate that started about five years ago with the Rainbow Report, the development of the Rainbow Report that suggested regional boundaries and even suggested a map of regional boundaries, nine regional boundaries – again, following

the Rainbow Report, there was more and more open consultation in constituencies all over the province with regards to regional boundaries. Regional boundaries were very popular. People endorsed regional boundaries. Mr. Chairman, there wasn't a Liberal that paid any attention to any of the public consultation that went on while I was on the road for 10 weeks. There were literally 5,000 people who participated in . . .

MR. MITCHELL: Mr. Chairman, that is not true. It is not true. I can't have her saying those things.

8:30

MR. CHAIRMAN: Hon. Member for Edmonton-McClung, you have to be recognized first before you start talking. Now, hon. Member for Edmonton-McClung, are you rising on a point of order?

MR. MITCHELL: I made my point then, Mr. Chairman.

MR. CHAIRMAN: There's no point of order.

MRS. MIROSH: Now, Mr. Chairman, I want to bring up to the member opposite the amount of consultation. He has not paid any attention. He doesn't have a clue about health. He's never known about health. He makes up stories about health. I've been involved in health for 30 years, and I feel that I can stand up here and honestly – and I know; I can tell you the number of consultation processes that went on and even name the people who attended, and you, hon. member, did not attend any of them. The Rainbow Report: Our Vision for Health, our Agenda for Action, the report of the Advisory Committee on the Utilization of Medical Services, the emergency services utilization, and it goes on and on and on.

Now you suggest in these amendments that we should go to the public and we should have open public meetings and spend more and more of taxpayers' dollars. We have evidence right before you and documentation of the amount of public consultation. People are saying to us now, Albertans are saying: get on with it. By members opposite putting forward these amendments, you're stalling the process. People want to get on with the business. In fact, they want regionalization. The only reason that St. Albert is having a problem with the boundaries is because – and they told me this at a chamber meeting. Directly to me they said, "We don't want to be annexed by Edmonton, and this is the reason why we don't want to be in the boundaries." That has nothing to do with health, absolutely nothing to do with the delivery of the system.

MR. BRACKO: That's not true.

MRS. MIROSH: It is so true, hon. member. I was there, and the question came directly to me. I can tell you this: if we look at the system without the politics of the council members, the mayor, and everyone else in St. Albert and look at the delivery of the system the way it should be delivered, you will find out, hon. member, that in fact we're looking at health and quality health. We're looking at absolute, total, open consultation, the wellness orientation. Read Starting Points; it's in there. Five thousand people . . . [interjections] Listen to me, hon. member. You turn your back because you don't know health. You stand up there like a doctor. What do you know? You don't have any training in the thing. You don't even come to any of the meetings; I looked for you. Only one member, from West Yellowhead,

attended any of the roundtable meetings in a constructive manner. The Member for Lethbridge-East also came to two. He took the time to come to two. There wasn't one other Liberal member at any one of those public consultation meetings.

Point of Order

Factual Accuracy

MR. GERMAIN: A point of order.

MR. CHAIRMAN: Hon. minister, the hon. Member for Fort McMurray is rising on a point of order.

MR. GERMAIN: Yes. I want the Assembly to understand in relation to that member's last comment . . .

MR. CHAIRMAN: Can you give us a citation for this point of order?

MR. GERMAIN: Imputing false motives, 23(j); certifying facts that are not true.

MR. CHAIRMAN: Well, 23(j) does not have anything to do with facts; it's insulting or abusive language.

MR. GERMAIN: The member, Mr. Chairman, indicated that no member except for the Member for West Yellowhead came to any particular meetings. I want it known that every meeting on health that I was able to attend in Fort McMurray I attended. They didn't have any roundtable meetings up in Fort McMurray, but the community had their own, and I was there. It's wrong for this minister to suggest otherwise.

Debate Continued

MRS. MIROSH: Mr. Chairman, the people from Fort McMurray came to Slave Lake, and the Member for Lesser Slave Lake can attest to it. There were 500 people who attended in Slave Lake, and I can tell you their names. They were happy with the consultation process. They came up to the mike, and it's all recorded if you'd like to hear all the recordings. It's absolutely, totally on tape, word for word. Members from Fort McMurray were there in abundant numbers, particularly the people who were specifically related to health provision, to providing health, the board members. They were also invited. People from Fort McMurray and everywhere else were invited. It was an open invitation, and they participated, but the Liberal members chose not to come. So now they woke up, and they're talking about public hearings, more public hearings, "Let's stall the process; let's cost the public more money." I can't believe it: consultation, open public hearings. Money, money, money; spend, spend, spend.

We're getting on with it, Mr. Chairman. Thousands, literally thousands of Albertans – the hon. Member for Rocky Mountain House also has had open consultation with his committee with regards to the boundaries. People have come to him. They've participated in an open, absolutely totally open manner with regards to boundaries, and I want to commend the Member for Rocky Mountain House and the Member for Bow Valley, who worked many, many hours on boundaries. There have been hours and hours and hours and hours of public consultation. We can even give you the names of the people who participated.

[Mr. Clegg in the Chair]

You know, I can't even believe that the Liberals have the nerve to put amendments on this table that are embarrassing. They're embarrassing. People in the health care field will laugh at you; they'll laugh at you. I can tell you who they are, absolutely. Every single MLA in this building talks to people about health care every time they go back to their constituencies. You are embarrassing because there isn't one member over there that knows anything about health, not one member. You stand up there and you carry on and carry on about public consultation, wellness orientation, heart transplants, and so on. None of you, not one of you even knows what you're talking about. People come to us, we sit down, we talk to them, we listen to them, and we react. These amendments, Mr. Chairman, should be thrown off the table, thrown in the garbage, and I absolutely am appalled by what I see.

Thank you.

MR. DEPUTY CHAIRMAN: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Whitemud.

DR. PERCY: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Well, certainly I rise to support the amendments, and let me explain why. They're being considered as a package. First of all, the issue of appointed versus elected is fundamental to the extent, I think, that all members in this House, both sides, think that you get the greatest degree of accountability by having government that's most responsive. You get that through the electoral process and having services at the level closest to the population. For me that has always meant, then, local elections.

Now, the issue, though, is one of transition, and there I'm very sympathetic to the fact that you can't have a green board in place as you're moving from the existing structure to these large boards. So I believe there has to be a transition mechanism. It does make sense to make appointments, but once the transition is over, I am not comfortable with the notion that you in fact can appoint members.

Two reasons why I'm not comfortable. Philosophically I like elections, even if they're messy, even if in fact special interest groups are out there, because everybody is part of a special interest group. Everybody is running for something, and the issue is, you know, your special interest group is another person's democratic representative. So the one issue is: how do you distinguish who's a special interest group and who's just representative?

The second issue is one that came up over the past two weeks. The hon. Member for Clover Bar-Fort Saskatchewan – members on the opposite side have said: "Well, look, hon. member; you were appointed to the hospital board. That was a patronage appointment. You got it because you were a PC." I heard that today, Mr. Chairman. Now the bottom line is – it's on the record; it's in *Hansard* – that hospital appointments are patronage appointments. Now, we're expected to believe that there will be some appointment process that's open and transparent, when it's on record in terms of exchanges across this floor: naturally you were appointed, because you were a Conservative. Well, that certainly doesn't lead me to believe that this is going to be a process that is open and transparent, nor have I heard any statement to the effect that this process will go through the process set aside for significant appointments, that the credentials will be examined, and that it will not be political affiliation that counts. What I'd much prefer to hear would be: what you know, your contribution to the community, and your understanding of health needs, not only the provision of acute care or medical services but

your knowledge of preventative health care, your knowledge of community health care.

So I guess, Mr. Chairman, I am concerned, then, on those two grounds: the acknowledgment by members on that side of the House that appointments to hospital boards are patronage given to Conservatives and the fact that there is no assurance then as we go from the transition to the next stage that we're going to see appointments, if they should be made, on the basis of ability rather than colour of political card. So I think that these amendments that have been proposed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-McClung are consistent with this side's commitment to accountability, this side's commitment to the fact that democracy works and that you have to respect it.

8:40

On this side we don't believe in top-down government. We believe in the electoral process and ensuring that local institutions are responsive to local needs. Certainly we want to be on record in that regard, and this is what these amendments stand for. One hon. member has argued that they're frivolous. Well, we don't believe democracy is frivolous. We believe that one should invest in democracy and ensure that you can be heard, that if you don't like a hospital board, you can not elect them. An appointed board doesn't give you that luxury. You can only get at an appointed board by throwing the government of the day out, and you may have to wait for some length of time to get at it, Mr. Chairman. So these amendments, amendment 1 and amendment 2, that have been brought forward are consistent with our commitment both to regionalization and to accountability and a high regard for local institutions.

The other amendments that have been brought forward put a limit on the transition period of two years, which is reasonable. I mean, there are going to be a lot of shakedown problems in that period of time. All this does is put a limit on what that transition is. So we acknowledge that there is a transition. We acknowledge that there may well be the need for appointed hospital board officials to make this transition, but we certainly do not abdicate any commitment to an elected hospital board. That's what these amendments do, Mr. Chairman.

The remaining amendments, Mr. Chairman, reflect our commitment, then, to no wedges for the emergence of a two-tiered health care system, our commitment to ensure that people have access to health care in the region that they live in. So this is a package, from our perspective, which is consistent with the platform that we ran on, consistent with our commitment to regionalization, consistent with our commitment to universality, and consistent with our belief that accountable government is elected government and that it is a government that is closest to the population.

So all six of these amendments that have been brought forward are, I believe, principled. They enhance the Bill. They do not detract from its merits. They ensure a set of regional health boards that will be accountable. They allow this transition to occur. They rule out the possibility of an emerging two-tiered health care system, and they make the system responsive to local needs. Most importantly, they ensure that there's a commitment here to preventative health care, and they ensure commitment to community health care and public health care. They ensure that we don't get caught in the trap that we've been in since 1971 of a health care system that is driven by acute care facilities.

So with those comments, Mr. Chairman, I will conclude. Thank you.

MR. DEPUTY CHAIRMAN: The hon. Member for Fort McMurray.

MR. GERMAIN: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. The minister without portfolio has managed to succeed in galvanizing the debate and bringing up if not the level of debate certainly the heat in the Chamber and rhetoric.

Now, I want to pick up the challenge that the minister left with. She looked over her nose at the members in the Official Opposition and said: what do you know about health care? Well, these amendments that we're debating tonight, Mr. Chairman, have much to do about health care in the sense that they apply specifically to legislation on health care, but they are abstract concepts, and they deal with the abstract concept of democracy. Country after country has found that democracy is an elusive, an illusory concept. It's a bit like good health, since we're talking about health. It's a bit like the song: you don't know what you've had till it's gone. What the members have brought forward tonight is a package of well-reasoned, well-articulated amendments to attempt to put some skid on the ideology of the health regions legislation. This has nothing to do with balancing the budget and cutting a hundred million dollars off health care.

Now, I want to take up the minister's challenge. I don't like to speak personally or speak of personal anecdotes in this particular Assembly, but I have to tell the Assembly that I grew up in a very poor background. I was raised by my father, who also raised two sisters. The student loan program was very fragile at that time. It was the early part of the '60s. Also, the economy was a little bit slow, and people were concerned about paying back student loans. So the way I got through university, four years bachelor of science with honours in microbiology and biochemistry, was by working a 3 to 11 shift as an orderly in a full-service hospital in a major urban city. I worked five nights a week. I took Tuesday and Wednesday off because I had lab exams those days. I worked Friday night. I worked Saturday night. I worked Sunday night.

Now, I earned enough money to get to university, but I'd like to think – and I remember those experiences well, working in the cancer clinic and participating in the most menial of health care tasks. I learned something about humility, and I learned something about courage. I learned about humility that even the strongest among us is sometimes flat down on his knees and sometimes desperate for help and desperate for care. I saw grown men cry at the troubles of their other family members, and I saw people close their eyes and slip away quietly into the night. I remember spending some time with an elderly woman who lost her husband in the dark night of the hospital. I want to tell you that I walked by in a routine way. You could see that the man had lapsed into the end. His wife of over 50 years grabbed my hand in a deathlike vise and said: "Please don't tell anybody now. Let me have a little more time with him."

I learned about humility, and I also learned that we have in this country a caring and dedicated health system that has provided decent value for many people at their time of greatest need. Now, does that make me an expert in health? No, it doesn't, but it does mean that I spent some time on the business end of a bedpan, and I resent looking-down-the-nose comments about: what do we know about health? I resent, frankly, on behalf of my colleague from Edmonton when he gets fingered in the Legislative Assembly – I don't mean it in an obscene way – pointed at and saying: you're not a doctor. Well, he doesn't have to be a doctor to understand democracy and to understand when democracy is slipping away.

Now I want to leave the past, Mr. Chairman. I want to leave those nights as an orderly in a full-service hospital, and I want to come back to the present. I want to come back, if I might, to today and to these amendments. I had the honour today of addressing the northeast region health conference that was held in Fort McMurray. It started at 4 this afternoon, and it will go on tomorrow. As the MLA for the constituency in which the matter was held, I had the honour in the invitation to address the assembly. What could I as a practising lawyer say to all of these health professionals? Well, I told them the one thing they wanted to know. You know what they wanted to know? These are health professionals in the field. They wanted to know what the state of this legislation was. They wanted to know where in the progress it was.

People from the Athabasca hospital in Athabasca, the Fort McMurray hospital in Fort McMurray, the Wainwright hospital, the Bonnyville hospital. Here it was on Wednesday afternoon. They did not know that the amendments introduced by the hon. Member for Rocky Mountain House in the afternoon last Thursday had already become, subject to third reading, the law of the land, that the amendments had been debated in this House and passed and they didn't have copies in the field. Can you imagine? They had a technical expert there to explain the Bill to them, and they were astounded that Bill 20 had undergone a metamorphosis and was now double its size. They were astounded.

8:50

Now, it may well be that those people who have come to jeer about the errors in this health care Bill will stay to cheer, Mr. Chairman. It may well be that the hon. Member for Rocky Mountain House in this legislation is correct. It may well be that the hon. minister without portfolio is correct. It may be that the Minister of Health is correct. Only time and history will tell. Certain members of this Legislative Assembly and certain members sitting over there also do not believe that this is good legislation. They won't stand up and admit that, but there are members over there that do not believe it. I have waited patiently for the medically trained and the health trained over there to get on their feet and speak out and tell me why this is a good Bill, tell me why my friend from Edmonton here, who is not a doctor but still understands democracy, is wrong when he says that these amendments should be supported tonight.

So even if the Bill is good, every one of those people – and there were over a hundred of them, dedicated, caring health care professionals – was embarrassed that a major impact on their lives had already become technically the law and they hadn't even known about it. By golly, they had to hand out – heaven forbid; hang on over there – copies of Official Opposition Caucus News that I had faxed to the Fort McMurray regional hospital as a courtesy. They had to hand out all of that material to those trustees from Wainwright, to those trustees from Athabasca, because they did not have in their possession the amendments.

Now, maybe the hon. minister without portfolio will stand up and speak again and say: "That's nonsense, Member for Fort McMurray. They all had copies there." But I must tell you, Mr. Chairman, I've been doing public speaking for a long time, and I know when an audience is astounded, and I know when an audience doesn't comprehend the urgency, and I know when an audience wishes that things would slow down a little bit and they would have a little more time. I understand all of these even though, as the minister without portfolio may allege, I have no experience in health care. It is true that I am not a registered nurse. It is true that I have no learned letters in health care. I

remind the minister – and she will see it in *Hansard* again – that I did spend those four summers, those four years getting a science degree, paying my own way, spending every Friday, Saturday, Sunday, and Monday night, taking Tuesday and Wednesday off to do the labs I talked about earlier, and returning on Thursday: five days a week each week every week working as an orderly in a full-service hospital and paying my way through university. Now, it may not make me an expert, but I did learn something about health care, and I learned how important it was in people's lives.

These are important concepts, Mr. Chairman. Health care is important to people. They are going to reach out and clutch it, and they are going to preserve it, and they are going to want to hang onto it. Should we as a Legislative Assembly do any less honour to their names than by debating the thing fully and properly and honestly and openly so that the Member for Fort McMurray doesn't have to go to a health conference in Fort McMurray with representatives from Wainwright and from the Athabasca hospital and from the Bonnyville hospital and have them astounded by the speed at which amendments have taken place?

Now let's return specifically to the amendments, because of course I recognize we are talking about them. It is sometimes said in this Legislative Assembly – and I do believe and the minister without portfolio can correct me if I'm wrong, but she even suggested that there was time wasted in this quality debate. Well, how can that be when the amendments were just tabled on May 18 relating to the health care Act? In fact, the government should be sending thank you cards over here, because they needed the time to try and correct what was obviously bad legislation.

Now, if the hon. Member for Rocky Mountain House was prepared to stand up in the House here and admit and acknowledge that the Bill was so flawed that he needed as many amendments as there were sections in the Bill, a first for the Alberta Legislature, then surely he and all other members of his caucus should be prepared to stand up and say, "These amendments make good sense." There's a transition period here so that the minister can appoint people to a regional board to get through the transition, but then let's have democracy. Let's have elections. Why, just yesterday we voted to determine that we would have a \$3 million plebiscite on an issue that we have no control over, and we are ashamed to have open and forthright elections for regional health care facilities. It is the election, it is the democratic process that gives those people on the board the authority and the ability to make the hard decisions. Do not take away from the people of Alberta who serve in these capacities the credential by which they can make the hard and carefully thought out solutions. Do not take that right away from them.

Why don't all of us as a Legislative Assembly, as we move into the dying days of this session, turn the page on the acrimony that has existed in here over the last few weeks and vote for these amendments and stand up and vote for democracy? You do not need to know anything about health care to do that. All you have to know is that democracy is illusory and fleeting and hard to get back when you've lost it. It's like a patient to a nurse, a client to a doctor, a client to a veterinarian. It is very, very hard to get back what you've lost. So let's stand up here in a few minutes and vote for democracy and put this to bed.

Let's also at the same time put to bed any argument that there is time wasted in this debate, because if you wanted to see time wasted, we could have been voting on each and every one of these amendments and voting on an independent basis. The fact that this package comes to you in a united one-package form indicates

a level of good faith here, and I urge all members of this Assembly to reach out and grab that level of good faith and to vote for these changes. How can you go wrong? How can you go wrong going back to Vegreville, how can you go wrong going back to Airdrie, how can you go wrong going back to Calgary and saying, "I voted for an amendment that put democracy back in the regional health care Act."

Those are my comments on this set of amendments, Mr. Chairman. Thank you.

MR. DEPUTY CHAIRMAN: Before I call the hon. Member for Rocky Mountain House, could we have unanimous consent to introduce guests?

HON. MEMBERS: Agreed.

MR. DEPUTY CHAIRMAN: Opposed, if any? Carried.
The hon. Member for Calgary-Cross.

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

MRS. FRITZ: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I'd like to introduce to you and through you to the Members of the Legislative Assembly a friend, Mr. Willie Mensch. I just happened for the first time to be sitting on the other side of the House and was pleased to see that Mr. Mensch was here this evening. He's an active volunteer in the Calgary-Cross constituency. Willie is here working in Edmonton for a short time and has just stopped to see what it is we do in the late hours of the evening. So can I ask that he please rise and that we give him the warm welcome of the Assembly.

Bill 20
Regional Health Authorities Act
(*continued*)

MR. DEPUTY CHAIRMAN: The hon. Member for Lethbridge-East.

DR. NICOL: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I just have a few comments that I'd like to make on the amendments. I recognize as well as many of the others that I'm not a specialist in health care, but I have taken time to visit with an awful lot of the people involved in the administration of health care in the Lethbridge area. I'd like to relate a little history of the Lethbridge issues as I build into these and build a framework for my comments on the amendments.

Lethbridge basically has had experience over the past two years of the frustrations and the problems and the joys of dealing with trying to plan health care at a regional level. They had to make decisions. They had to make tough decisions about changes in the way their health care services were offered. They put together a volunteer group following some of the structures that were recommended out of the previous reports such as The Rainbow Report, and they began to have information meetings to listen to each other's concerns, to listen to suggestions from each other. Effectively the same kind of structure has ended up being the basis for the southwest region health care authority now, which is going to be centred around the Lethbridge regional hospital and the St. Mike's long-term care facility. This also includes a lot of the small towns in the area. So they've had a real chance to address the issues, to look at the problems that are associated with coming together and trying to make tough decisions about the

needs of the health care system in their area. They took a broad-based approach to it in the beginning. They included the health units. They included the professional associations. They included the physical institutions that were involved. They've basically developed now into a very good regional authority that is able to sit down and talk until it comes to the idea of how to convert this into a permanent decision-making body. The good working relations that they had developed in this regional board began to break down as they started smaller meetings, as they started interest group pressure to deal with how elected or appointed members should be recognized to come on the board.

9:00

I've had a lot of conversations with the groups and with members that are serving in the groups individually, both within Lethbridge and the surrounding area, and one of the things that comes out very quickly is their concern about their community getting their interests looked after in terms of the board. They're very concerned about the idea of appointed members. They're very concerned that these appointed members won't reflect the needs of their community. Basically this comes back to the idea that we've got special interest groups looking out for their own needs.

When you sit down and very seriously talk to them about how they can overcome some of their fears, how they can overcome some of the jealousies that are going on between the different institutions, between the different regions, they all conclude that if they could vote openly for the people who would represent them on this board, they would be voting for people whom they had a choice to review their credentials, a choice to review their objectivity. Then they would be willing to trust those people to make the decisions that are necessary to provide them with health care service in the region.

This is why I think it's really important that we deal with the issues that are addressed in the second amendment that's proposed. This is one of the ways that we have of allowing these regions, of allowing both the communities in terms of municipal governance and the interest groups – like the physicians, the nurses, the support staff, all of the other service groups that are involved in the health care units – to get a feeling of comfort with the people who are going to make decisions controlling their future and their relationship to the health care system. Mr. Chairman, that's why I think it's important that we look very seriously at amendment 2 and deal with the idea that these people are appointed. This is the view coming from the people who are involved in health care either as a patient or as a provider.

Another point comes up when I start to deal with them from the view of the provision that sits within the regional authorities Bill, Bill 20, to deal with taxation. They are extremely concerned that they are going to be subject to taxation at their municipal level, imposed by an authority that's not elected by the members of their municipality. What we're going to have, then, is appointed members controlling the tax burden of the people in each of these municipalities. This is another issue that they bring up and another argument that they give to support a desire for the eventual transition to elected boards. They would like this to occur as quickly as possible so that they can make sure that the people who are on these boards are in a position to reflect the interests of the community and the trusts of the community.

Basically, then, these are the comments that I'd like to bring out relative to the creation of the boards, the way they're put together, the way they operate. I think a change to the idea of elected representation on there is really important.

Reverting just briefly to the first amendment, I indicated how the southwest region formed itself, got together, and brought in the people on a voluntary basis. What we need here potentially is to deal with looking at the option for communities to vote and change from one region to another until we establish a satisfactory pattern. This may take into account and look at situations like the St. Albert community, which would like to be in a different region than what they've been put in. We get different views that are coming from different constituents within that. If we really believe in democracy, let's let them vote and decide which one they want to go into. In the discussions we've heard about the Bill in terms of the transferability of services, it's not going to make that much difference in terms of the provision of service which authority they're in. It's as long as they're comfortable in the communities, that's the most important part if we want them to buy in and accept this as a good program for health care in Alberta.

Now, the next amendment basically deals with the maximum period, trying to get elected members in in a very expeditious manner without too long of a time period where we rely on the appointed board members. I think this is one that we can all support, trying to get elected representation in as quickly as possible as soon as the boards are operational.

The fourth amendment here basically I think is a matter of the need to make sure that the regional authorities recognize that public health is an important part of their mandate. This is done by putting in a specified amount, or maybe we want to change that to a negotiated amount and make sure that the mandate clearly stipulates that this regional health authority has to deal with the total health of the community: the public health components that are now handled by the health units, the wellness concepts that are handled by the community health proponents, the consumer groups that are involved in trying to promote prevention as opposed to the acute care recovery.

The public health aspect of inspection and regulation we spoke on in addressing the Bill. It was quite lacking, and I think this needs to be brought out again and emphasized a little more, that we have to deal with this. The health aspects of community safety are very important, and we need to deal with this.

In looking at the final two amendments, Mr. Chairman, they basically deal with issues directly. This is a matter of interpretation on how the options exist for the provision of health care, whether it's done for fees or whether it's done through a voucher system. This is the kind of thing that the regulations will have to bring out, the options that'll have to be put. We want to be sure that user fees are not put in place in any way that would violate the Canada Health Act.

On that basis, I think the main issues I support in terms of this package of amendments. It would be much nicer if they were broken out into six separate amendments. Then we could deal with them individually, and up and down on some of them. But given that they're a package, I would encourage all the members to vote in favour of this package, because it's got some very important parts in there in terms of the representation and the make-up of the regional authorities.

Thank you.

MR. DEPUTY CHAIRMAN: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona.

9:10

MR. ZARIWNY: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I stand to speak in support of the entire package of amendments presented by my

colleague from Edmonton-McClung. I would like to particularly deal with amendment 2 as it relates to accountability. It is my belief that Bill 20 does not deal with that concept at all. Election of regional boards I believe is a requisite for accountability. Accountability can be enforced through a variety of procedures, but the most effective one is election. The most obvious example of responsibility and accountability is the electoral process. For example, we as elected MLAs have vested in us authority and power to achieve those goals that we campaigned for, and I believe accountability of that form can be achieved by regional boards.

I believe that before an authority as contemplated by this Bill reflects the needs of a community and its stakeholders, it must represent the various interests of the community at large. How else can it be informed of issues and problems? The method proposed by Bill 20 is not adequate enough, doesn't go far enough without the amendment. A body with varied interests, rather than with the interests of appointments by the minister, can keep in touch better with the local opinions and needs. A board appointed on a purely partisan basis satisfies a very, very narrow interest, not a broad interest.

It seems to me that the boards are walking a tightrope, trying to compromise between the demands of the interests they claim to represent and the demands and the controls of the minister. The Bill makes a mockery of accountability, flying directly in the face of the Auditor General's report. He recommended that

a board, as a whole, should be able to demonstrate that it has members who understand the organization's business and that it has the mix of skills and experience necessary to set direction and measure and report on performance.

Bill 20, I believe, without this amendment, does not meet this test. If on the other hand the Bill would make accountability more meaningful, I would consider supporting it. Accountability of this nature can provide, Mr. Chairman, more opportunities for public direction in the area of health care. Election of regional boards will enhance the Bill by making public bodies more responsive to the problems of communities.

[Mr. Herard in the Chair]

There's another problem here, though, which the Bill seems to neglect and support, and that is the concept of pork-barreling. I thought that patronage had lost some of its usefulness as a means of getting objectives accomplished according to the whims and wishes of government. I also believe this Bill is going to be introducing a very disturbing effect in communities; that is, patronage and bribery. As one of our great leaders – his name is Grattan O'Leary – had indicated some time ago: pork-barreling dispensed with equal rapacity by all parties and governments since Confederation, has been the worst penalty of our Canadian democracy. It has been the chief source of whatever corruption has degraded our public life.

This Bill can be used to garner party favours and support in communities. How? By adapting the party to the government, by bringing community residents closer to the Conservative Party and its organization and its poll organization. This is patronage, I submit, at its worst. It seems to me that this Bill abides by the adage that the list is long and the public purse is deep.

Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman.

MR. ACTING CHAIRMAN: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Avonmore.

MR. ZWOZDESKY: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I rise to speak in favour of these amendments brought forward by the Liberal opposition in response to Bill 20. These are extremely responsible amendments which have been very well thought out. They're carefully researched, and most importantly they reflect what our constituents and members of the Alberta community in even some of the government constituencies have been telling us. It is also important to note that over the last several months the members opposite have frequently called on our Liberal opposition to bring forward amendments, to bring forward some suggestions, to bring forward some ideas, so through this exercise, we are doing exactly that.

What is it that the people want then? What is that the people have been telling us that they would like this government to in fact do in response to health care in Alberta? Well, specifically they wanted to see some openness and some accountability as we seek to correct some of the mess left behind by previous Tory administrations, and in the end Albertans want an affordable, accessible health care system designed on the basis of need and designed, hopefully, with some degree of logic and common sense.

So with those few parameters, I set about reviewing this Bill and found that there were several good things about the restructuring model as advocated. In essence, the very word "regionalization" itself is something that I embrace very warmly because there is a need for us to look at regionalization as some form of salvation for the very flawed system that we've been living under for so long. However, having said that, I see a lot of shortcomings here, and I want to address some of them.

In regard to the first amendment, all that we're asking for here, Mr. Chairman, is that as these health regions become constructed or get designed across the province, a little more care and concern be taken and that all we would like to see here is a series of true public hearings take place, not in the same fashion as the so-called roundtables that occurred last summer and last fall. It was a process that I personally witnessed a little bit of, at least in Red Deer. Although I wasn't invited, I happened to be in Red Deer on some other matters, and I dropped in on some of these meetings to get a feel for how they were going. Needless to say, I was not embraced warmly and asked to leave one of them, but the point here is that when you go about doing those kinds of consultations, I think it's important to not just work from an exclusive guest list. I think there should be more openness.

The minister without portfolio indicated earlier that it would have been nice to have had more Liberals at some of these meetings. Well, I'll tell you, it would have been darn nice to have been invited to some of them, to be given full participation. That did not happen. At least it didn't happen until after some of the so-called privileged roundtables had occurred, and that's not good. We'd like to correct that, because I know that members opposite want very hard to try and deliver on their campaign promises of an open, honest, accountable government based on the he cares, he listens model. Well, here's an opportunity to do that. All we're saying is stop and take a look at this aspect of section 2(1) of this Bill, which simply says, "Open the process up a little more than you have done." Not to do that, Mr. Chairman, would be to see the same possible fiasco take place as we've seen with regard to the education Bill, where we have a Bill of 14 or 15 pages, and as a result of the many flaws it contained, suddenly we saw the ushering in of nine full pages of amendments to cover up what would otherwise have been accomplished had the process been properly done in the first place. I'm trying to be helpful here to point the government in a direction that will in the long

run save some time and some money and most importantly will serve Albertans' needs much more squarely.

The other part of this is we want to try and avoid the kind of fear that is being created, the kind of insecurity and uncertainty that Albertans are reeling from as a result of the dramatic changes that have been brought about so quickly. We don't want to see all the protests. We don't want to see all these marches and demonstrations. We don't want to see all the petitions and so on that are becoming the norm of the day. What we'd like to see is the government really stop and take a much more careful look at what it is that it's doing with regards to the reshaping of health care in this province.

This amendment 1 speaks directly to that. It allows the government that unique opportunity, Mr. Chairman, to involve people who are going to be actively using the system – and I should say that's all of us – in the process of restructuring something that is not just a want in Alberta but a human, fundamental, very basic need to all of us. This is one way that we can truly solicit the opinions of everybody, and I don't think there's any need to be fast-tracking it quite so quickly as the government is doing.

Albertans have indicated time and time again that they want to be actively consulted in the process, openly consulted. We've heard from members in St. Albert about the difficulties that they have there. We've heard about the problems in Lethbridge and in Calgary and elsewhere around the province. Surely the government should stop and pay heed to what people in those areas are having us, as their representatives, say to the government.

9:20

In this Bill – I read it carefully, Mr. Chairman, and I didn't see evidence of any provisions for taxpayers to in fact have a voice surrounding some of these changes that are taking place. So Bill 20 needs to be amended in section 2(1) to allow that, because I think people have to be given the opportunity to express how they want health care managed in this province. Why would any government allow something to be brought in which from a substantial portion of our population they know already doesn't work? It makes no sense.

The second amendment, which deals with the difference between appointing and electing members to the regional health authorities, is something very close to my heart because it's something that we addressed very carefully when we were reviewing earlier Bills of this government. One such Bill was Bill 2, which was the amalgamation of the Sport Council with the Rec, Parks and Wildlife Foundation. We talked about who should be appointed or how they should be appointed; can they be elected? All of those points we talked about, and I see the same possible danger happening here. So I would like to caution the government that here's one amendment that they can accept with no problem because what it does is effectively protect them from any further accusations of patronage. There would be no possible accusation coming forth from this side of the House if this amendment 2 were embraced, because then we would have truly elected board members for the regional authorities as opposed to appointed. So our second amendment is a cautionary one that would be of great help to the government should they choose to accept it.

To whom are these board members truly accountable if they are appointed? The answer, Mr. Chairman, as you know, is that they would then be accountable to the political process of appointments – in other words, to the government – as opposed to the elected process, which would be to the people whom they are serving. What is the real definition of open and accountable? I think here

in this amendment you see an opportunity for openness and accountability to the electorate, just like you and I are elected and all other members here. We're accountable to the people who put us here. That's how that system should stay. That's the true democratic model that we should be trying to embrace here as we're bringing in such profound changes.

So let's be clear. We favour the notion of regionalization, but there are a few aspects of it that could be improved. I would hope that some of these will in fact this time be embraced. I stood in this House when members opposite asked for amendments to be brought forward, meaningful ones from this side of the House, and I watched as one of my own amendments was torn up by the House leader from the government side without its even having been read. I have to tell you that that was quite an affront, a disappointment, and a huge insult, not just to me as the proposer of that amendment, Mr. Chairman, but to the entire process and the entire establishment for which we stand here and speak every day. I wouldn't like to see that happen here, and I would ask for support for the second amendment on that basis. We need healthy representation by people who won't feel threatened by a political process. I know that we've all been around politics for some time, and we know that when you are appointed by a government, you are beholden to that government first, second, and third, as opposed to the electorate.

The other point that comes to bear here is that this responsibility of being elected carries with it the further responsibility of dealing with large amounts of money in a very prudent, fair, and honest fashion, because there are millions of dollars involved here. These board members must be accountable to the people who put them there. There's a much different, a much more watchful eye, if you will, on expenditures and on general carriage of public funds when you're responsible to the people in the community, because they are your friends and neighbours and they are the ones who worked with you to elect you, to put you there. They're also the ones who will hold you most accountable. In Edmonton we're looking at upwards of 600 million; in Calgary, between 600 million and 700 million. The point here is that there are large, large amounts of taxpayer moneys at stake. Under this amendment 2 there's an opportunity, I think, for the government to make sure that those dollars are properly cared for by a duly elected board as opposed to an appointed one.

I do recognize, however, that to get the system up and running quickly, there's a need to have an appointment clause, and that's why in our third amendment, Mr. Chairman, we say after section 4(2) that it would be acceptable to us that an appointment be made "for a maximum time period of two years." What we're simply asking under the third amendment in order to allow some of this to proceed is that

the terms of office of the first members of a regional health authority continue for a maximum time period of two years until their successors are elected . . .

and we've taken out the word "appointed"

. . . in accordance with the regulations.

That is the essence of the third amendment, and I think that's a fair one for the government to take a look at accepting as well.

I guess I have a general concern here as we look at this restructuring model, Mr. Chairman, that we don't in the process compromise those parts of the health care system that we know already work as well as those particular established hospitals that we know work and work extremely well. I want to just refer briefly to the Grey Nuns hospital, which sort of touches in my area of Edmonton-Avonmore, because this in fact is one of the finest hospitals in all of Canada. It's only some seven years old,

but in every one of those years it has won at least one award for being the best teaching hospital in western Canada. Now, I think that says something, because there is constantly a waiting list for young interns to want to come to this hospital to be trained by the best people, by the best doctors, by the best specialists, with the best equipment, state-of-the-art equipment, and I want to speak in favour of us protecting that.

I think it should be noted here, Mr. Chairman, that this area of Mill Woods is served by the Grey Nuns hospital very well. We have something like 80,000 residents of Mill Woods who rely on it, not to mention another 35,000 or 40,000 people out of Sherwood Park who use it, not to mention another 18,000 or so from Fort Saskatchewan, and several thousand more from Leduc, and so on. If you took a synopsis of this, you would see a user rate of that hospital being something like over 50 percent from the non Mill Woods area. So why would we even think about changing it over to a psychiatric hospital or something else like that when it has a proven record of being a tremendously effective hospital just the way it sits, just the way it works as a full-service, acute care, active treatment hospital.

We must be careful when we talk about changes not only to the health care system but also to the health care institutions, because some of these things result in very dramatic changes, and people have a natural resistance to change. Why shouldn't we as legislators be very careful how we go about ushering in some of these changes?

Amendment 4 from the Liberal caucus, then, simply says that in section 16 we want to add the clause, "that will include a specified amount directed for the provision of public health," and here we're referring to assistance to the regional health authorities and specifically financial assistance. What we're talking about here is making sure that there's a provision within this restructuring model that allows for money to be spent in other areas by these boards and in particular on prevention and on education. Those two words work very much in tandem to help save us money in the long run. The health units do have a responsibility across the board to suffice the needs of the community that they serve, and this would be one way of ensuring that that gets done.

The fifth amendment that we're asked to consider here, Mr. Chairman, is with regard to section 19(1)(i), which we're advocating should be eliminated. The reason we're asking for that section to be eliminated is because section (i) authorizes

the Minister, a regional health authority or a community health council to make payments directly to an individual to enable the individual to acquire health services or health related services, and it goes on. This tends to be a paving of the way, as it were, for the introduction of a voucher system, and I don't think that's something here that we can afford to play with.

9:30

The final amendment is number 6, and that deals with section 20(k). We're advocating that section 20(k) be struck so that we don't see the entrenchment of user fees for health care services in Alberta. As I said at the outset of my comments, Mr. Chairman, we want to make sure that Albertans are given a health care system based on needs, and needs means when health care is needed. What it also means is that people have to have access to it in a fair and equitable way and it has to be affordable. We've talked about that as a universal health care policy for Albertans. So we want to be very careful, as we review this amendment, that we do not see the entrenchment of user fees for our health care services in the province.

Similarly, we want to make sure that we have the same level of health care throughout the province so there aren't privileged sections or privileged areas. I'm always baffled, at least a little bit, to note that hospitals such as Grey Nuns or the Mis in Edmonton or the Foothills in Calgary or whichever serve such a large number of people, yet it's only one hospital for such a large number of people. Then you take some of the other areas, such as in the Minister of Health's region. I know that this has been carefully done, but I question why it is that there are something like – what is it? – 15 or 10. I've just forgotten the exact number, but it's at least 10 hospitals in her one area. I again know that some of these hospitals are only nine miles apart, and I don't mean to speak against them, Mr. Chairman. I just think that as we look at that and those hospitals are tending to stay open, so too should we protect the hospitals in our cities and make sure they stay open, because they have proven themselves in terms of the need.

I don't want to see an American style of health care system brought in here, Mr. Chairman, and I will do everything on behalf of my constituents to fight and protect against that. We've heard terms like "two-tiered system." We've heard terms like "one for the rich, one for the poor." I find those totally obnoxious phrases, and I would fight very hard to ensure that they don't find their way into Alberta. In the long run, I think what we're going to see here, if we don't amend section 20(k) by striking it out, is the erosion or at least the possible erosion of our universal health care system, and that is something I would not like to see happen.

We have many people, especially in my area of Edmonton-Avonmore and in the surrounding areas of Ellerslie and Mill Woods, who rely, for example, on the good services of the Grey Nuns hospital, and many of these people. Mr. Chairman, are from a very low-income background. It would be tragic if they weren't allowed opportunities for a proper health care system as we know it and by which a good society is judged.

Thank you.

MR. ACTING CHAIRMAN: The hon. Member for St. Albert.

MR. BRACKO: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I am happy to have this opportunity to speak to the amendments, in support of the amendments on Bill 20 here. I guess I am especially thankful because my wife and I have greatly benefited from the health care system in Alberta. She had a heart operation, came through excellently, has twice the energy she used to have, and contributes greatly to the health care system and also to our economy. So I have an appreciation of the health care system.

As things change, we recognize there's a need for change, change in many areas to make it more efficient: to go from acute care delivery to the community health model, where you go from the doctor base to the team base in the community where the doctor works with the nurses, the therapists, the mental health people, the social worker in the complete team approach that is needed to have a healthy society, as well as working with local politicians for a healthy community through the way they build their community and maintain it. So I'm striving, of course, for the best health care system possible, and in making these amendments, we want to improve health care as asked. I know the minister of social services continually asks for ideas and suggestions, and this is one way that we felt we would be able to do it.

Also, Mr. Chairman, I have been involved in the health care system over the last 10 years, more concentrated over the last five years. I also served on the Sturgeon health unit in the region with

the Member for Vegreville-Viking as he also worked to improve the system. I was there when the former Minister of Health, Nancy Betkowski, started the regionalization process, something that the Conservatives took from our 1988 policy in the election campaign, and it was the right direction to go. Nancy did an excellent job. I was at a few meetings on the regionalization process. The leadership was there, the direction was given, and it was open to consultation from various parts of this province. This was ready to take place until the leadership campaign took place and stalled it, and we're now two to three years behind where we should have been if it had continued under the former minister. I want to thank her for the direction she did give, and she is greatly respected in St. Albert.

In the health unit the opportunities to do things differently and to save money were very important, and we had several opportunities to do this. We proceeded to want to establish a pilot project where your staff would use cell phones, lap computers, and work out of an office in their home so we wouldn't have to build more and more buildings, costly and a heavy burden on the taxpayer. So there were several other ideas that came forward.

St. Albert is known for leadership in various areas. People come from across the province to see what is happening and to share ideas. We learn from them and they learn from us, not only across Alberta but across Canada, and we are thankful for this. We learn and move forward and also gladly share the information we have with the Department of Health and the Minister of Health. In fact, I did request earlier, just shortly after the House was called into session last fall, to meet with the Minister of Health to discuss things, and this I felt would happen. I also wrote a letter to this effect, and I have not had a meeting yet. I guess it wasn't appropriate for whatever reasons. I wanted to share some of the concerns that we have in St. Albert and also some of the direction that we have followed. We have some of the best executive leaders or directors in St. Albert in the Sturgeon general hospital, in the Sturgeon Foundation, in the Youville home, people who are on the cutting edge of the direction we need to go to provide the health care services that are needed in this province and even to give leadership to the rest of Canada. The Sturgeon Foundation . . .

Chairman's Ruling Relevance

MR. ACTING CHAIRMAN: Hon. member, we are on the amendments to Bill 20, and while the problems in St. Albert may be interesting to some, I would ask you to please get back on the amendments, if you would.

MR. BRACKO: I am, Mr. Chairman. I am on amendment 1, and I want to give the information that's needed and correct the misinformation given by the minister without portfolio.

9:40

Debate Continued

AN HON. MEMBER: You should start again, Len.

MR. BRACKO: No, I don't want to start again because I figure it's important that they hear it.

The minister talked about the consultation process – now, this is what I was coming to – and St. Albert was not consulted. They were forced into a shotgun wedding with Edmonton. They tried to get out of it. They wanted to be with their own trading area where their clients come from, the families that come from the surrounding areas that may move into the seniors lodges in St.

Albert. That's very important. So consultation didn't take place. We were forced into a situation that we did not want. Speaking to the amendment, the consultations should be held even at this time to get the proper information.

I just want to clarify the chamber of commerce's position. They said that the only concern they had was annexation. I tabled four copies of a letter from the chamber of commerce earlier in the session, and I want to point out what the chamber has said. They support the regionalization, but they do not support the power to expropriate land and to requisition local residents for capital projects. Their reason is that they looked at the past, they see all the hospitals, the edifices that were built at tremendous cost to Alberta taxpayers – we'll be paying off for the next 15, 20 years – and they don't want this approach to continue. So they have difficulty with that, and they're not in agreement with local property tax being used to fund health care. They believe it should come from the province, because different regions can afford different levels and it could lead to a two-tiered system. They also consider the taking of local property taxes to fund health care "a downloading of health care costs to local communities and . . . another form of a hidden health care tax."

So this is what the chamber is saying, not annexation to Edmonton. That may be a concern, but that is not what their letter indicates. They also go on to talk about the health care regions, the referral patterns, the trading areas, the transportation routes which St. Albert is a part of to the north and to the various areas. They talk about family ties, and we know that family ties are very important. Families are a top priority with this party. We want to accommodate the parents who may live in St. Albert, with their families in the surrounding regions, who can have easier access to this and to improve the quality of life for the families. They conclude: "It therefore makes no sense to us . . . that the proposed health regions would separate" St. Albert from the surrounding area. And that, Mr. Chairman, is what the chamber had to say, the information that is needed to be considered.

Further, we asked the minister for information, to give us the evidence that shows St. Albert would be better off in Edmonton. There is no evidence. There is no information. That they wouldn't consult with St. Albert to get the facts and work with the facts is the reason why we have the disagreement and why St. Albert will be providing the facts, the information that has been gathered and is sitting there, to improve the situation.

The minister without portfolio said we were involved in consultation. Well, there's education consultation going on, and has one Liberal been invited to be on the committee? No. Why not? It would make it better. It would improve it and even make the government look better.

The Young Offender's Act: again, no invitation to the Liberals; strictly a government committee. Unfortunate. Appointments to the health boards: is there a Liberal member on the committee that will be working to make appointments to the health boards? No, of course not. The only thing we can suspect is that they want to appoint their own members to it, patronage appointments, and we know that doesn't work. We know that the best people should be on this committee. It will even make the government look better when the process in the health regions . . . [interjection] I am speaking to the appointments, number 2, Mr. Chairman. I can read it for you, if you'd like.

Mr. Mitchell to move the following amendments:
Amend Section 3(2) by striking out the following:
"appointed or"
Amend Section 4(2) by striking . . .

MR. ACTING CHAIRMAN: Hon. member, the hon. minister without portfolio is rising on a point of order.

Point of Order Relevance

MRS. MIROSH: Mr. Chairman, I think citation 24(h), on a point of relevance. With regards to invitations to Liberal members, when we have public hearings, they're open to anyone, even Liberals. As a matter of fact, two members – the Member for Lethbridge-East can attest to the fact that he was invited. I gave him an open invitation, and he chose not to come.

MR. BRACKO: According to the committees, they'll be coming up this spring.

MR. ACTING CHAIRMAN: On the point of order.

MR. BRACKO: On the point of order, I am clarifying the point I made. Thank you.

Continuing on, do you still want me to read the amendment so you know what I'm talking to?

MR. ACTING CHAIRMAN: Well, you're now speaking on the point of order raised by the hon. minister without portfolio, unless you don't wish to speak to the point of order.

MR. BRACKO: No, I made my point already, Mr. Chairman.

MR. ACTING CHAIRMAN: I think what we have here is a disagreement between members. Carry on, sir.

MR. BRACKO: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I appreciate your wisdom in that decision.

Debate Continued

MR. BRACKO: The amendment to Section 19(1)(d): by adding "are elected" after "regional health authorities." Mr. Chairman, this is what I'm speaking to, the appointment process. We should have a member on the health committee that would also be part of this, and we haven't been invited to have a member. I talked to the . . .

DR. L. TAYLOR: That's because we've been listening to your speeches so long.

MR. BRACKO: Thank you. Good thing you're listening. You may learn something.

We move on. Again if you appoint the wrong people to these boards, it can be very costly for all taxpayers, so it's important that these members are elected. It gets rid of any semblance of patronage. This is one of the things Albertans are very upset with: the patronage that has cost us a fortune.

Again we appreciate the decisions coming down more to the local level. That should be cost-efficient if it's done correctly. Again I would like to just emphasize that we need to look at these members being elected. They can stand up and if they make mistakes, they're responsible to the local constituents. If someone's appointed, who are they responsible to and how do we get rid of them if they're not doing the job that we know should be done?

I will also just mention again in conclusion the various municipalities, council members, reeves, mayors that support St. Albert

being removed. I ask that the minister again look at it and make the appropriate decision.

Thank you.

HON. MEMBERS: Question.

MR. ACTING CHAIRMAN: Are we ready for the question?

HON. MEMBERS: Yes.

MR. ACTING CHAIRMAN: Hon. members, we're voting on the amendments to Bill 20, as proposed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-McClung and the hon. Member for Edmonton-Glenora, and we're going to vote on these as a package. All those in favour of the amendments, please say aye.

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Aye.

MR. ACTING CHAIRMAN: Opposed.

SOME HON. MEMBERS: No.

MR. ACTING CHAIRMAN: Call in the members.

[Several members rose calling for a division. The division bell was rung at 9:50 p.m.]

[Ten minutes having elapsed, the Assembly divided]

For the motion:

Beniuk	Mitchell	Vasseur
Bracko	Nicol	Yankowsky
Collingwood	Percy	Zariwny
Germain	Sapers	Zwozdesky

Against the motion:

Amery	Forsyth	Paszkowski
Black	Fritz	Pham
Burgener	Haley	Rostad
Calahasen	Havelock	Smith
Cardinal	Hierath	Stelmach
Clegg	Jacques	Tannas
Coutts	Laing	Taylor, L.
Day	Lund	Trynchy
Dunford	Magnus	West
Evans	McFarland	Woloshyn
Fischer	Mirosh	

Totals: For - 12 Against - 32

[Motion on amendments lost]

HON. MEMBERS: Question.

MR. ACTING CHAIRMAN: The question has been called.

[Title and preamble agreed to]

[The sections of Bill 20 as amended agreed to]

MR. LUND: Mr. Chairman, I move that the Bill as amended be reported.

[Motion carried]

MRS. BLACK: Mr. Chairman, I move that the committee now rise and report.

[Motion carried]

[Mr. Deputy Speaker in the Chair]

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

MR. HERARD: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The Committee of the Whole has had under consideration certain Bills. The Committee reports Bill 20. Mr. Speaker, I wish to table copies of all amendments considered by the Committee of the Whole on this date for the official records of the Assembly.

MR. DEPUTY SPEAKER: Does the Assembly concur in this report?

HON. MEMBERS: Agreed.

MR. DEPUTY SPEAKER: Opposed? It is so ordered.

head: **Government Bills and Orders**
head: **Second Reading**

Bill 36
Teachers' Retirement Fund Amendment Act, 1994

MRS. BLACK: Mr. Speaker, I have the pleasure to move on behalf of the hon. Minister of Education Bill 36, the Teachers' Retirement Fund Amendment Act, 1994.

MR. DEPUTY SPEAKER: Comments?

MR. MITCHELL: Mr. Speaker, we will support this Bill. We believe that it is, by and large, a housekeeping Bill. It's nice to see, I should say, that after years of underfunding this particular pension plan the government is finally taking steps to get some of this problem in order and has, I should point out, responded and reacted to a very, very serious fiscal problem created by none other than this very government itself. So before they get too smug and cocky about things, they should remember what they brought this government to, what they brought the people of Alberta to. They have dug a huge fiscal hole, and this looks like something that at least indicates that they are addressing some of these problems.

I will say, as well, Mr. Speaker, that we have reservations about charter schools, and this affects the operation of charter schools. If charter schools are to operate in the way that they already operate, then this makes some sense, but as was so clearly, vividly indicated, this government simply doesn't know what it's going to do with charter schools. It keeps the ball in the air, as we can see, but when it comes to charter schools, even the Premier could never bring that charter school down to earth and describe it to the people of Alberta. I found that to be an extremely disconcerting scene in this Legislature: the Premier of Alberta running a 3 - well, now it's a \$4.5 billion . . .

MR. DEPUTY SPEAKER: Excuse the interruption. I'm sorry. The Chair has lost his place. I'm on Bill 36, the teachers' retirement fund. Am I wrong?

SOME HON. MEMBERS: No.

MR. MITCHELL: Mr. Speaker, I would never, never suggest that you have lost your place. I would rather direct your attention to the fact that this Bill allows access to the TRF for those people who are employed by charter schools.

Now this is quite a jump in logic, because the Premier of Alberta can't tell us what a charter school is. So how would it be that we'll know who is employed by one? What will be the criteria? Will they be properly educated and trained teachers? We simply don't know. The point I'm making, Mr. Speaker, is that we have some reluctance about this Bill because of this particular feature. How can it be that the Premier of Alberta, who is out in B.C. this very moment fly-fishing no less, wouldn't take a few moments . . .

**Point of Order
Relevance**

MR. DEPUTY SPEAKER: The hon. Deputy Government House Leader is rising on a point of order. Would you give us the citation.

MR. EVANS: *Beauchesne* 459, Mr. Speaker. Let's get back to the Bill; okay? We were trying to be as charitable as possible to the Opposition House Leader, giving him some flexibility in his comments on this Bill at second reading, but surely referring back to the past when the hon. Minister of Education introduced the concept of charter schools, and there was a concern raised by the hon. member that the Premier did not have all of the details on charter schools – come on now, we've dealt with this. The Premier himself has said: this is a concept that will come forward and will have some flesh on the bones as we consult with Albertans. We moved from there, Mr. Speaker, to then the hon. member talking about a fishing trip in British Columbia. It's totally irrelevant to Bill 36. So if we could kindly get back to Bill 36, I'm sure we would all find the debate much more relevant, much more interesting, and much more productive.

Thank you.

MR. DEPUTY SPEAKER: Thank you, hon. Deputy Government House Leader. I think we're venturing more into the debate as opposed to the point of relevance. However, I think in the earlier part of his speech he was on the point.

[Mr. Speaker in the Chair]

MR. MITCHELL: Speaking about that fishing trip, Mr. Speaker, it's clear that the minister took the bait hook, line, and sinker. [interjection] I will point out the point of my colleague from Bonnyville, who wanted to clarify the nature of that particular trip by saying that the Premier is fishing for sharks in the Paddle River. I enjoyed that.

10:10

Debate Continued

MR. MITCHELL: In any event, Mr. Speaker, we will support this Bill. We just want it on the record that we have some serious concerns about why a Premier would not be taking a quiet evening, as I'm sure he is spending tonight in British Columbia, to study what a charter school is so that he could explain it to the people of Alberta. What a novel idea that would be.

Thank you.

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

HON. MEMBERS: Question.

[Motion carried; Bill 36 read a second time]

Bill 37

Credit Union Amendment Act, 1994

MRS. BLACK: Mr. Speaker, I'm pleased to move second reading of Bill 37, the Credit Union Amendment Act, 1994.

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

DR. PERCY: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise to speak in support of this Bill. I think credit unions are certainly an integral part of the Alberta economy; there are at least 500,000 depositors. They are the type of financial institution I think governments want to encourage.

This Bill has a number of important provisions that we strongly support. Certainly it allows credit unions access to different forms of investment capital, and if the credit unions are to expand, they're going to have to broaden their sources of capital. So the Bill makes a significant step forward in that regard.

The Bill also provides a regulatory process for the credit unions so that decisions of the Credit Union Deposit Guarantee Corporation can be appealed. One has to realize, Mr. Speaker, that credit unions in this province are very heavily regulated. You only have to go through this Bill and look at the cross referencing to the Act itself, the Credit Union Act, to realize that there are a lot of strings on credit unions in this province. This Bill goes somewhat to at least allowing for a more market-driven response on the part of credit unions rather than the dead hand of regulatory constraints. Certainly it's a positive step in that regard.

The Bill also allows for a different method of calculating the capital adequacy. Instead of a flat rate of 5 percent it will now be based on a risk-weighted ratio, which will work to the benefit of the credit unions as well. Also, then, it provides a more level playing field, Mr. Speaker, in assessing the risk-weighted average of assets and allowing comparisons to other financial institutions.

One point I do want to make, Mr. Speaker, is that credit unions in this province and for that matter the Treasury Branches, as well, I think face significant competitive problems in that they do need additional powers. They need, for example, limited trustee powers so that they can enter the pension fund market. They need the ability to enter as insurance brokers. They do need the ability, I think, to enter into other financial markets, to sell auto, home, and life insurance products, because other financial institutions are active in those areas. The niche that is being left open to credit unions and certainly the niche that is being left open to the Treasury Branches in fact is narrowing and narrowing and narrowing. If we want credit unions to be a viable entity in this province in the longer term, they are going to have to be able to compete in a much broader array of financial markets than they presently do. So this Bill goes somewhat forward in providing a more competitive regulatory environment for credit unions, but I think there are significant problems that face them.

Now, one area that this Bill does not address directly, and it ought to, is the Credit Union Deposit Guarantee Corporation's guarantee assessment. Right now it's at .25 percent, Mr. Speaker. In other provinces like Saskatchewan I think it's one-seventh; in British Columbia it's one-twelfth. So if we want a level playing field, we have to try and ensure that the deposit

guarantee assessment that's levied on the credit unions is comparable to that levy, for example, on the Treasury Branches. Right now there's not a level playing field in that regard.

So we have some concerns, then, about the constraints that are still on the credit unions, but certainly we will support this Bill wholeheartedly. We hope that down the road there will be more efforts to ensure a less stringent regulatory hand on the credit unions in the province and more effort, then, to allow the individual credit unions to be more competitive and enter into different financial markets.

The one other point I would make about this Bill that I think is a provision that's worthy of note and is again positive is that it does allow and strengthen the provisions for consolidation and amalgamation. One thing that stands out about the credit unions in this province is the tremendous range in their size, some very large ones in Calgary and Edmonton to a number of very small ones that might consist of 50 to 75 members.

So I think this is a good piece of legislation, and I certainly would urge all members to support it.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

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

MR. ZARIWNY: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I stand in support of Bill 37 as well. I do that as a member of Capital City Savings & Credit Union and as a former director of that board of Capital City Savings. I'd like to compliment the Member for Medicine Hat for introducing the amendments which help to place credit unions on a more level playing field with other financial institutions. This is something that we as Liberals have been advocating for some time. The changes are long overdue. They enhance the ability of the system to attract investment and raise capital. As my Liberal colleague has indicated, Bill 37 will help establish a method of calculating capital requirements for credit unions.

Before I go on to say more about Bill 37, I would like to say something about the stakeholders, particularly Capital City Savings & Credit Union. Why do I say something about them? Because these individuals fought long and hard for the amendments that are being introduced today. The executive and the board of directors of this credit union work extremely well. The directors are democratically elected by members, and under the leadership of Harry Buddle, the chief executive officer . . .

Point of Order Clarification

MR. SPEAKER: The Member for Calgary-Egmont rising on a point of order.

MR. HERARD: Yes, Mr. Speaker. More on a point of clarification. I think the hon. member indicated that he is a director of a credit union, and I was wondering if there was a potential conflict of interest, just as a caution to the member.

MR. ZARIWNY: Just as a point of clarification, I am a former director, Mr. Speaker.

MR. SPEAKER: Thank you.

MRS. MIROSH: You didn't say that.

MR. ZARIWNY: I did. You weren't listening, Dianne, as usual. As usual, more mouth than brains.

10:20

Debate Continued

MR. ZARIWNY: Capital City Savings is doing well. It's growing, it's profitable, and it's expanding. The strength of Capital City Savings, as with all credit unions, is people as an employer.

I would like to point out that Capital City Savings also contributes significantly to the quality of life in Edmonton and the communities it serves in Edmonton. For example, in 1993 this credit union contributed its expertise to organizations such as the YWCA, Rotary. They served 15,000 cups of free hot chocolate at Edmonton's First Night Festival. As well, they've been strong supporters of Edmonton sports teams like the ringette teams in the southern part of Edmonton.

With credit unions like Capital City Savings it's absolutely essential that finally legislation like Bill 37 is being introduced to make it more competitive. The law for credit unions has not been changed, for the members on the other side, since 1989. In fact, it hasn't been changed since November of 1989. This Bill is the first change since that time, and it's high time that it was introduced to make the changes that are being brought forward today.

Credit unions of Alberta have played a significant role and continue to play a significant role in establishing and maintaining businesses in Alberta. I understand that there are 61 credit unions in Alberta, 89 branches in Alberta, with a total membership of 550,000 Albertans. That's 20 percent of all Albertans. The net income of credit unions in 1993 was \$12 million after tax and dividends.

I believe it would not hurt anyone to note that Bill 37 does recognize, belatedly unfortunately, that credit unions' capital requirements should be developed to allow competition with other financial institutions. Bill 37 is the first step that recognizes the value of the credit union. It is the first step in an ongoing process of consultation between government and credit unions to reduce the regulatory stranglehold that organizations like the Credit Union Deposit Guarantee Corporation have on them and as well ultimately the stranglehold that the Treasury Department has over credit unions.

So what's next? Like my colleague who preceded me, I think the Bill is deficient in a couple of areas, and I'd like to just mention those two. I am particularly disappointed, for example, that credit unions are prohibited from owning an agency or being a broker. I understand that the former Treasurer was going to allow credit unions to enter the insurance business but failed to do so. British Columbia credit unions can act as insurance agents; our credit unions can't.

As well, I understand that the Deputy Provincial Treasurer, who has the Alberta Treasury Branches reporting to him, is also one of the guarantors on the deposit corporation. The deposit corporation sets the rules for the basis points of all credit unions in Alberta, and I believe that's a conflict of interest, because here we have a senior civil servant responsible for legislation of the Alberta Treasury Branches as well as the credit union systems. I would hope that this is an area that the government would look at when it introduces the next amendments to the Credit Union Act.

With those remarks, Mr. Speaker, I'd like to conclude.

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

HON. MEMBERS: Question.

[Motion carried; Bill 37 read a second time]

24. Moved by Mrs. Black on behalf of Mr. Day:

Be it resolved that the debate on second reading of Bill 35, Seniors Benefit Act, shall not be further adjourned.

[Motion carried]

Bill 35
Seniors Benefit Act

[Adjourned debate May 18: Mrs. McClellan]

MR. SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Glenora wishes to participate in the debate?

MR. SAPERS: I certainly do, Mr. Speaker, and thank you for that. I just wanted an opportunity to go on record as saying that earlier the minister without portfolio was complaining that members on this side of the House just whine, that we don't support things that are supportable, and I'd like to note that in fact the last two Bills that came before the Assembly, 36 and 37, received the support of this side, with some concerns, because they were good legislation. Now we're faced with Bill 35, which is not good legislation, and it will not get the support of this side. Hon. Member for Calgary-Glenmore, get ready for some more complaining, because this Bill is worth complaining about.

Some members have said that debate in this Assembly costs too much, as though that wasn't the purpose of this Assembly: to discuss things and to get the concerns of Albertans on the record and to put before the Assembly those issues which deserve the consideration of those who've been elected to make the decisions about them. So I would hope all members will take an opportunity to participate in this debate.

Certainly the seniors of this province are counting on us. We are their last hope, because what the government is planning on doing to seniors is absolutely unacceptable. What we have to do in this Assembly is make sure that seniors are not damaged by a government that's absolutely out of control in the pursuit of its own Holy Grail, and that is balancing the budget at any cost. It doesn't matter, apparently, how much harm is caused in this pursuit just as long as they get there.

Now, Mr. Speaker, Bill 35 is a Bill that would give almost unprecedented power to a minister to control the lives of thousands of Albertans almost at whim. The proposed Alberta seniors' benefit program combines and collapses the assured income plan for seniors, the Alberta health care insurance premium exemption program, the property tax reduction program, and the senior citizens' renter assistance program. Now all of these programs will be income tested, and they will all be tested, I would submit, to the detriment of those they are supposedly in place to serve. Seniors who are homeowners will now have to pay the full amount of property tax after this year regardless of their income or the impact it will have on their ability to maintain their home. All seniors who rent a house or apartment will no longer receive a yearly cheque from the government providing them with some assistance, again putting them at some risk of having to go into another kind of supported house.

The extended health benefits for seniors – eyeglass and dental in particular – will apparently remain unchanged, at least until January of '95. Now, the Minister of Health will be left to determine how those benefits will accrue to seniors in the future. What comfort can seniors take from that? Very little indeed, because we know that this is just a temporary diversionary tactic on the part of the government. It will appear to give something

back, will appear to respond, but then it's totally left up to some new, unspecified consultation process as to how those benefits will be taken away. Rest assured, Mr. Speaker, those benefits will be gone soon.

All seniors except those with exceptionally low incomes will have to pay health care premiums. I think people have to question why health care premiums aren't being examined in the other direction, but that's for another debate.

Thresholds. It's true: the thresholds have been looked at; they've been reviewed by the government. Of course, the Liberal opposition brought forward to the people of Alberta and to the Assembly that the thresholds were set lower than the government was originally trying to pretend they were. It's commendable that the minister responsible took a look at that, but again it's: what he gives with one hand he takes away with the other. The envelope hasn't changed at all. In fact, what we've seen is very, very little realistic movement on those thresholds.

The seniors who are coming to us to bring their concerns forward about this Bill are dismayed; they're disheartened. Quite frankly, they just don't know what is left to them, because they now feel that the one institution in life that they felt they could always trust, their government, they can't trust. I don't blame them one bit, because in fact their trust has been breached. Seniors were told they'd be listened to. The Premier campaigned and said that he wouldn't make a change without consulting with them. Do you know what he did? He brought together 66 seniors in a room, and he called that consultation. Then when that didn't work, he appointed a commission. Those members that were handpicked on that commission gave a report that apparently fit with the minister's plan, but those three appointees . . .

10:30

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Neil Reimer.

MR. SAPERS: I hear the members calling out, "Neil Reimer, Neil Reimer." Well, let me tell you: Neil Reimer represents tens of thousands of seniors, and he was not picked by the government. He was picked by those seniors. Do you know what he said about this Bill? He said that it's an insult to seniors and it's an insult to the consultation process and it's an insult to democracy. So you're right. Thank you for bringing up Mr. Reimer, because he's got this Bill pegged and he's got this government pegged.

Mr. Speaker, what we have to do is start again on this process. Seniors deserve no less than that. They deserve that their elected representatives listen honestly to their concerns and pay attention when they say, "We can't take this hit." Seniors have been saying: "We want to be treated fairly. We'll pay our fair share. We'll pay our way. We'll pay what we can afford, no more, no less, and that would be fair." They say, "Treat us the same as everybody else." "Why are you hitting us," they ask, "with cuts deeper than those cuts that you're asking your civil service to take, your employees to take, than you've taken yourself?" They're saying: "Remember; we live on fixed incomes. We've already paid our taxes. We've already worked our shifts. We've already raised our children. We've already put our kids through school. Now we're living on fixed incomes, and you have the nerve to take away from us more than you're even asking those people who are still in the peak of their careers, those people who have the power to earn more."

Seniors don't have the capacity, Mr. Speaker, to go back and remake their lives. They can't do it over again. They've already made their plans. They thought they could trust their government to keep its word. They've put their finances in order. They've

made their savings. They've made their decisions, and they wanted to live the rest of their lives out in comfort and in peace. What happens? The government comes by and pulls the rug right out from under them, just says: "It doesn't matter what kinds of plans you've made. It doesn't matter what kinds of sacrifices you've made while you were raising your family. It doesn't matter what kinds of contributions you've made to this province, because now what we're going to do is we're just going to take a little bit more." It's not just that they're taking more away from them in terms of this program, but of course seniors are being unfairly impacted by the cutbacks in health care, they're being unfairly impacted by the cutbacks in social services, and for those seniors who are trying to assist their families in maintaining some quality of life and sending minor children to school, et cetera, seniors are now being leaned on heavily in terms of providing resources for that as well. So the government has let them down every way they turn.

Mr. Speaker, what we have in front of us is a Bill that cannot be justified. It just simply cannot be. It is based on a faulty consultation process. It is based on a set of political needs, not programmatic needs that meet the test that seniors would like to see applied. We have a Bill that has been, I think, properly characterized as an insult, a power grab, and antidemocratic. Certainly this Bill will not receive the support of this member, nor would I say of any members of this opposition. I would hope that every member of the government caucus as well who listens to seniors in their constituency, who cares about seniors in their constituency, who has bothered to meet with the seniors in their constituency on an individual basis will also stand and speak against this Bill and implore the government to start again, to rethink it, and to do it right this time, to put into place a set of programs and benefits for seniors that are fair, that are reasonable, and that treat seniors with dignity.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

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

MR. BENIUK: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise to speak against Bill 35. I regard this Bill to be one of the most negative Bills a government could bring in. The people that built this province, that built this country are now being forced to be in a position where they will not know what tomorrow brings. [interjections]

MR. SPEAKER: Order.

The hon. Member for Edmonton-Norwood.

MR. BENIUK: Thank you. Mr. Speaker, the question that has to be asked is: why would a government bring in closure on this Bill? When I look at this Bill, the thing that stands out is the massive transfer of power from the Legislature to a minister by way of regulation. The discussions that had taken place with seniors on the benefits that seniors should have become in many cases hypothetical, because under this Bill section 2 says:

In accordance with the regulations the Minister may pay a benefit in the amount determined in accordance with the regulations to every person who is eligible under the regulations.

So it will be the regulations that the minister, that the government will put together that will determine who will be eligible for any benefits.

Now, let's take a look at section 6. Section 6 says:

The Lieutenant Governor in Council may make regulations

(a) respecting eligibility for receipt of a benefit;

Not only will they determine who is eligible but also:

(b) respecting the amount of a benefit that may be paid.

We have here a transfer of power into the back rooms, if you want, away from the Legislature, away from open debate, where we will have the minister saying by regulation who is eligible for benefits as a senior in this province and what those benefits will be. And (c) of section 6 says, "respecting how benefits are paid under this Act." So even how the funds are paid comes under here, and if anybody disputes anything that the minister is doing, under (d) it says, "respecting appeals under section 3," will be determined by regulation.

Well, Mr. Speaker, section 3 says:

A person who is refused a benefit or wishes to appeal the amount of a benefit may appeal in accordance with the regulations.

So if anybody disputes what the minister is doing by regulation, they can appeal, and it's by regulation their case will be held. Total power in the hands of the minister to determine who benefits, the amount of benefits, and if anybody disputes what he's doing, the rules he has set by regulation, not by legislation but by regulation, will determine if a person will receive any benefits or even be eligible.

Mr. Speaker, this isn't exactly very democratic to have so much power shifted from this Legislature to one man who in turn will impact on the seniors of this province, and it goes without having to be said that everyone in this room will one day be a senior unless of course that person dies before reaching that age.

MR. SMITH: Thank you for that point of clarification, really astute.

MR. SPEAKER: Order.

10:40

MR. BENIUK: I didn't want the hon. member across the way saying that I was misleading by saying that everybody will be a senior, because some will not make it. I wanted to make sure there was no misunderstanding, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Speaker, we also have here information about a senior. Section 6(g) says,

respecting the provision of information about a person to the Minister of Health or a person who administers the Health Insurance Premiums Act, for the purposes of administering section 4 of that Act.

So by regulation the minister will determine what information is transferred to other agencies of government. That is done not through this Legislature but through regulation determined by the minister.

Section 7 says:

The Minister or a person employed in the administration of this Act and authorized by the Minister may provide information, other than information related to health services, about a person, but the information may only be provided in connection with the administration of the Seniors Benefit Act.

So if you look at section 6(g) and at section 7, the minister by regulation can determine what type of information is transferred, without the approval of a senior, to other people, and we are giving the minister the power to do that and determine the guidelines. This is a lot of power, Mr. Speaker, to be transferred to one person, and the impact on the seniors of this province will be enormous.

We can discuss the fact that the minister responsible for seniors had his great discussions with many seniors at times. He made some changes, but, Mr. Speaker, that goes back to the question: why are we going now through closure? What is it that the minister wants to bring in so quickly that he wants this Bill passed to give him the power to do things by regulation that he cannot

possibly wait a few weeks, a few days? He wants it today. He wants it immediately. What does he have in mind for seniors? The minute we give him that power, he can do it behind closed doors very quietly and not here in the Legislature, where every action is noted and recorded in *Hansard* and by observers in the gallery when they are here.

Mr. Speaker, the principle that I find very difficult to accept in this Bill is giving power to the minister, to the cabinet to do by regulation what I believe should be done in the open in this Legislature. The people of this province elected 83 people into this House to represent the interests of the people of Alberta. For us to give that power to a minister to carry out by regulation at his whim to do whatever he wants with the seniors of this province – as I've noted earlier, in the Bill it says that he will have the power to determine who gets benefits, what the benefits are, how they're paid, and also have total control over the information that he has on seniors. He can release it, keep it, or . . . [interjections] I hate to interrupt the Minister of Municipal Affairs if he's talking about welfare offices, but if you don't mind, can I carry on?

MR. SPEAKER: Yes, you may. Order please.

The hon. Member for Edmonton-Norwood.

MR. BENIUK: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I am trying to be brief, but I also want to make sure that it's noted that I find it very serious, that transfer of power by way of regulation to determine how people live in this province, the amount of money they receive, their benefits, et cetera.

My colleagues have noted some of the benefits that are being cut. My question is: how much more will be cut once we give the minister the power to do by regulation that which he cannot do now? What happens when the benefits are cut by half, by 10 percent, by 40 percent? What are we going to tell the people of this province? That we had faith in the minister and we just gave him the power to do whatever he wanted? This is absurd. We cannot do that, Mr. Speaker. Our responsibility is to make sure that the best laws possible are passed in this Legislature and the people are protected when we pass those laws. The laws are there for the benefit of the individuals of this province. They are not there for the benefit of the government. This regulation makes it so that it is for the benefit of the government, the benefit of the minister, and not for the benefit of the people of this province, the seniors of this province.

I find it impossible, absolutely impossible to support a Bill the main focus of which is the transfer of power. I see nothing else here, except giving the minister power to do that which he should not have the power to do without consent of the Legislature or to ensure that there will be by the laws of the province a guarantee that the seniors of this province will be fully consulted and would agree to whatever changes are going to take place, that the minister will bring in by regulation. This Bill does not protect seniors. It does not protect anybody in this province. It gives power to the minister, it gives power to the cabinet, and it takes away from the people of this province.

If I had some assurances that the benefits that seniors are now receiving would not be cut immediately after the Bill is passed, forced through by closure, I would be slightly more comfortable. I would be unhappy, but at least I would have some comfort knowing that massive changes cannot take place. This Bill gives the minister the power to fulfill massive changes in the benefits of the seniors. Who will benefit, who will qualify, and who will get information on the seniors that is confidential, that the minister

possesses? We are virtually giving him the power to do that by law, and this is totally unacceptable, Mr. Speaker.

Other Bills have come before this House, and I have objected very strongly to the fact that regulations are referred to and we never see these regulations. I think it would be great, wonderful if that minister would bring forth the regulations that he plans to introduce on each of these sections and show them to this Legislature so that we in this House will have an opportunity to know exactly what is in store for the seniors. I also think that he should show those regulations to the seniors before we pass this Bill so that the seniors will know exactly what is in store for them. This massive transfer of power – he will have more power than most dictators would have in this field in any place in the world.

I cannot support this Bill, and I urge everybody not to support it. I do hope that the minister will table the regulations that he plans to impose on the seniors of this province before this Bill goes through at least the Committee of the Whole reading.

Thank you.

MR. SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Spruce Grove-Sturgeon-St. Albert.

MRS. SOETAERT: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased to be able to speak against this Bill. I'm sure people are surprised, but I welcome the opportunity to defend our seniors. I think it's sad to pick on seniors because of the past mismanagement of this government . . .

DR. PERCY: How much?

10:50

MRS. SOETAERT: Thirty five billion I think was spent, so we're asking the seniors to pick up the slack when they've made this country the strong country it is. Now we're asking them to do it again.

You know, when we look at the average income of seniors, it's only about \$15,000, and though this government claims there's no poverty line, I'd like to beg that that must be pretty well below it or at it. So what we've done is hit a very vulnerable section of our population and asked them to pay once again. This program is not fair. It's been introduced in an unfair way, and now this government's pushing it through, though we're not surprised. It's becoming typical here. In fact, how many closures is that this session? Two? And 14 closures by this Premier? That's getting pretty bad, pretty bad.

Anyway, let's see here. I would say that at least the Liberals have heard the seniors' voices and are speaking against these drastic changes that are certainly going to affect their lives. You know, seniors, the ones who are homeowners, will now pay the full amount of their property taxes after this year, and those with low incomes will be expected to save the necessary amounts from their monthly provincial government cheques. So the game rules have changed in the middle of the game, and I'm going to make a comparison later that I'm sure everybody will be just so interested in hearing.

Now, in the long term we know – we know – that seniors are better off in their own homes. They're happier; they're more adjusted. People feel more comfortable visiting them in their homes rather than in an institution. So what are we doing? We're making it harder for them to stay at home. Bad move. But then nothing's new. Now seniors who rent their homes or apartments will no longer receive renters assistance, and those

with low incomes will receive a monthly cheque. Once again we've changed the rules in the middle of the game, and that's not fair.

I'm pleased that the extended health benefits for dental and eyeglasses have been extended until January 1, and I would certainly urge the Minister of Health to continue these benefits after that.

You know, when you look at what we've done to seniors – they're mainly on a fixed income. They're retired. They know how much money's coming in. So what do we do? Well, changes to Blue Cross will mean more expensive medication. Changes to seniors lodges and apartments mean increased rental rates. Changes for home care services will increase. I doubt if their pensions – maybe they'll have to go back to their old jobs and say, "Do you think you could increase my pension?" Because this government – you can't say screwed them in the left ear again, can you? But I . . .

MR. GERMAIN: Affected them in the left ear.

MRS. SOETAERT: Affected them in the left ear.

Point of Order Relevance

MRS. BURGNER: Point of order.

MR. SPEAKER: Order. The hon. Member for Calgary-Currie is rising on a point of order.

MRS. BURGNER: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. *Beauchesne* 459, relevance. There are four elements in the Alberta Seniors Benefit Act that's in front of us. Pensions and home care are not included in it, and I would ask the hon. member to stay on topic.

MRS. SOETAERT: Mr. Speaker, this Bill drastically affects seniors, and I'm trying to help the government members understand the whole picture, because they tend to be down a straight and narrow path. We'll help them see the whole picture here so they get a good idea of how they are hurting our seniors quite callously.

Debate Continued

MRS. SOETAERT: You know, I heard a member opposite say: oh, those seniors are rich, and we should get them all. Well, she's dead wrong. When the average income is 15,000 bucks, that's below the poverty line.

I think if you look at accommodation charges in long-term care facilities, they've been increased, another thing affecting seniors. Municipal taxes will no longer be subsidized for many seniors. Again we're hitting our seniors. So what does this government do to help them? Puts a threshold that is pathetically low and I daresay insultingly low. Disposable income for our seniors has been eroded by this Bill, and their quality of life is threatened. So much of this Bill is the old cart before the horse syndrome with this government, where the regulations will soon follow. "Trust us on this one, opposition. Vote for the Bill. The regulations will make sense." 'Bulloney.' They don't.

SOME HON. MEMBERS: 'Bulloney?'

MRS. SOETAERT: 'Bulloney,' yes. That's that rural person talking.

Point of Order Questioning a Member

MR. HAVELOCK: Point of order.

MR. SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Calgary-Shaw is rising on a point of order.

MR. HAVELOCK: Thank you. Would the hon. member entertain a question during debate?

MRS. SOETAERT: No. I'm sure our debate over here is more important than his question. Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I know my partner beside me is very eloquent with questions, but you know, right now I'd like to finish a few more comments about seniors.

Debate Continued

MRS. SOETAERT: The other thing that is too bad – this government talks about open and accountable, but how many seniors would have known about the thresholds if the Liberals hadn't brought it forward and said: "Hey, you've got to give the seniors the straight goods here." Well, that came out after the fact. Terrible. Now, the threshold is too low. I wish the government would reconsider that. Drastically too low. I'd love to see some members opposite try to live at that threshold. Maybe someday they'll have to, and they'll be sorry about this. Seniors have to be protected. People living on an income which is below the poverty level should receive sufficient levels of assistance from government. [interjections]

MR. SPEAKER: Order. [interjection] Hon. Member for St. Albert. [interjection] Hon. Minister of Municipal Affairs, order. The hon. Member for Spruce Grove-Sturgeon-St. Albert.

MRS. SOETAERT: Thank you. You know, these seniors have worked hard for their pensions that they're trying live on – unlike other people who collect enormous, exorbitant pensions for running our province into debt – and this is how we treat them.

Anyway, I just want to end – and I know they're all happy to hear this – on a little analogy that I feel has happened to our seniors. I snuck away from the House for a couple of hours tonight, Mr. Speaker, to go to a ball game which I was playing in. At this ball game the rules were set, as in all ball games. Our seniors have lived their lives according to the rules. They've worked hard. They've contributed to our province, and they've planned the end of this game so they can play it according to the rules. That's the way this ball game was going tonight, and it was a good ball game. It was fairly close, though we were behind a bit. Finally, in the bottom of the sixth inning the score was 8 to 9, and we were behind by one run, coming back, you know, strong and powerful, just like this opposition. We'll be back, strong and powerful. In comparison the seniors near the end of their . . .

AN HON. MEMBER: Was this a nine-inning game?

MRS. SOETAERT: It's only a seven-inning game; it's women's fastball, just to clarify something for you. [interjections] I have the injuries to prove that I slid on third and went out, but that's an aside.

Anyway, I want to make this comparison. [interjections] It's a good story. So here we are, the bottom of the sixth, 8 to 9, when the umpire looks at the sky. A dark cloud has come over the ball field. I want you to know there's another game being

played in the diamond beside. This is just like the seniors, comparing this government to a dark cloud. The umpire – now I think he dates someone on the other team, Mr. Speaker – looked at the sky, and he said, "I'm going to call the game because it's too dark." We lost because they called the game in the last inning.

MR. SAPERS: That's like closure.

MRS. SOETAERT: That's like closure, and that's just what this government has done to our seniors.

Point of Order Relevance

MR. SPEAKER: Order please. The hon. Member for Calgary-Fish Creek is rising on a point of order, if hon. members would let her be heard.

MRS. FORSYTH: Mr. Speaker, I'm going to quote from *Beauchesne* 459. I really don't care about this hon. member's ball game. We're here to govern. We're getting paid to do some serious business here. Let's get on the subject, please.

MRS. SOETAERT: I know, Mr. Speaker, it's no point of order, because this is an excellent analogy of what this government has done to seniors.

Debate Continued

MRS. SOETAERT: Number one, you changed the rules in the middle of the game. It's exactly what you've done to seniors. You're the big dark cloud that brings in closure, that closes debate. To defend seniors on what is right and good and fair for them? No, this government won't do it. So, Mr. Speaker, on that great analogy, on my defence of seniors – and I know my dad, who is a senior, will be darned glad to see that at least I brought some semblance of meaningful debate into this to compare what we've done to seniors.

On that note I'd like to say that Bill 35 is disappointing and unfair. Thank you.

MR. SPEAKER: Order please. If the hon. Member for Edmonton-Whitemud will cast his mind back to May 18 at 10:56 in the evening, he will remember that he rose in his place and contributed to the debate on second reading.

11:00

MR. COLLINGWOOD: Mr. Speaker, how inappropriate for the Member for Edmonton-Whitemud to rise again at second reading on this particular Bill. In fact, it's their turn to rise and speak. The Member for Calgary-Shaw has had lots to say on the Bill, and I expect he's going to be rising now to speak. Calgary-Varsity has lots to say on the Bill. I expect he's now going to be rising to speak. Calgary-Fish Creek has lots to say on the Bill. I expect they're going to have something to say. It's their turn. I don't see anybody rising in their seat to speak to probably the poorest excuse . . . [interjections]

MR. SPEAKER: Order. [interjections] Order.
The hon. Member for Sherwood Park.

MR. COLLINGWOOD: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.
. . . to speak to probably the poorest excuse for a Bill that this or any other Assembly has ever seen brought forward.

MR. SMITH: Well, wait till you see what's coming next.

MR. COLLINGWOOD: I can't believe that a Bill could come forward that was any worse than Bill 35. However, Mr. Speaker, I accept Calgary-Varsity's position that in fact they might bring forward some legislation that's even worse than Bill 35. As incredible as it sounds, there could be legislation that's even worse than Bill 35. Pretty amazing.

Now, in its typical cowardly fashion the government introduces closure on a Bill, which quite frankly is astounding, Mr. Speaker, because as indicated by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Norwood, the Bill says absolutely nothing. The Bill simply says that all the power . . . [interjections]

MR. SPEAKER: Order.

MR. COLLINGWOOD: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

. . . that all the power that will be given with respect to seniors' benefit programs – how they will function, how they will operate, who is eligible – will simply become decisions of the minister responsible in Executive Council, who could change from time to time. What it constitutes is a complete transfer of power so that a particular minister, not even the Lieutenant Governor in Council but a particular minister, will have full, total, complete, ultimate power and control over the seniors in this province as to who will be entitled to benefit from the Alberta seniors' benefit program and how in fact those funds will be paid to those individuals. The message by this government to Alberta seniors is clear: you'll be beholden to us, and by God we'll make you pay for it. That's the message that this government is giving to all the seniors in the province of Alberta.

Now, we have to remember, of course, that the only seniors that are affected by this Bill are average Albertans. It doesn't affect the privileged. It doesn't affect the high-income seniors. It only affects average Albertans. So no wonder, Mr. Speaker, the government is entirely and totally indifferent to the seniors that are affected by this Bill. Those are only average Albertans. Well, I mean, we're not interested in average Albertans. We're only interested in those that are of the privileged few, so it really doesn't matter about average Albertans in the province of Alberta, the seniors that we have all heard from, that every member of this Assembly has heard from in meetings in their constituencies, who have come forward and said that the way this program is being restructured is unfair to seniors, it singles out seniors, and it seriously affects the quality of life seniors enjoy in this province today.

In fact, it doesn't matter what I believe, Mr. Speaker, and it doesn't matter what any other member of this Assembly believes. What seniors believe is that this government is putting its financial mismanagement on their backs. That's what seniors in this province believe, and in fact, Mr. Speaker, we have all heard those comments from seniors in our constituencies as we've traveled and listened to their concerns about the way the seniors' benefit program comes together.

Now, Mr. Speaker, as alluded to by other hon. members and in particular Edmonton-Norwood, the Bill simply says that all decisions are going to be made by regulation. We hear from members opposite: well, you know, we're going to go with an income test, but we're not going to go with a means test. Really? Where does it say in here that there's not going to be a means test? It doesn't say anything in the legislation that there's not going to be a means test. It says that ultimate, total, complete,

and absolute control rests with the minister. If the minister decides that the minister wants to bring in a means test, so be it; nobody's going to have anything to say about it because it's not going to come forward into this Assembly for debate. So as far as I'm concerned, there will be a means test. It's only a matter of time till the minister decides when a means test is going to come in. It's not excluded from the Bill, because the Bill says absolutely nothing. So in fact that's probably what's going to happen.

You know, Mr. Speaker, the hon. Member for Calgary-Currie has said: oh, well, you know you're going to have to trust us, and seniors are going to have to trust us; even though we're going to make these minute, tiny little changes to the Alberta seniors' benefit program, we're still going to consult with seniors. [interjections]

Point of Order

Factual Accuracy

MR. SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Calgary-Currie rising on a point of order.

MRS. BURGNER: Point of order, Mr. Speaker, *Beauchesne* 92 to 99, interfering with members. I never said the remarks that were attributed to me. I simply clarified that the seniors said they would not prefer a means test. It's excluded from the Bill at their request. I simply said that we listen and we care. The other comments were totally unwarranted.

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

MR. COLLINGWOOD: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I think the hon. member misunderstood. I was only referring to the means test, not as a comment attributable to the hon. member. In fact, I was moving on to another point about other things that the hon. member had said. I was speaking about the concept of a means test and the fact that it wasn't excluded from the Bill, which implicitly means it is included in the Bill. That was the only remark I was making. I was not attributing that comment to the hon. Member for Calgary-Currie. So my apologies if there was a misunderstanding as to the direction of those comments.

Debate Continued

MR. COLLINGWOOD: What I was referring to was the fact that the Member for Calgary-Currie had said: we will continue to consult with seniors on an ongoing basis. Do you know what, Mr. Speaker? You bet they're going to continue to consult with seniors, because in fact seniors are going to make sure you continue to consult with them. They're not going to sit back, and they're not going to put up with a Bill that says absolutely nothing, that simply gives total, complete, and absolute control to one minister, which does absolutely nothing to change the threshold levels, which simply leaves seniors in exactly the same position they were in before, this charade of a consultation process with seniors where we end up with virtually the same thing we ended up with before.

The hon. Member for Calgary-Fish Creek says: oh, we're wasting money left, right, and centre. Well, I'll tell you what, Mr. Speaker. That so-called consultation process with seniors was a big waste of money; that's for sure. It accomplished absolutely nothing. I can assure the hon. Member for Calgary-Currie that you'd better believe seniors are going to continue to consult with you, because they're not about to sit there and take this without getting back to the government about exactly what

kinds of changes these need. The fact of the matter is that what the seniors had asked for in terms of the changes in the seniors' benefit plan was not outrageous. It was not asking for . . . [interjections]

MR. SPEAKER: Order. [interjections] Order. [interjections] Please, hon. members. Order.

The hon. Member for Sherwood Park.

11:10

MR. COLLINGWOOD: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The fact is that what seniors had asked for in terms of the thresholds under this Bill was not exorbitant, was not outrageous, was not uncalled for. What seniors had asked for was a fair shake, a fair deal in the Alberta seniors' program as it was restructured from all the programs that we're under at this point in time into a consolidated form that provided to them some quality of life with some security that was reasonable and that was fair. That's all the seniors were asking for. The charade from the hon. minister responsible for seniors about, well, the envelope is full and we'll move a little money around and we'll give some of the decision-making back to the Minister of Health and she'll make a decision sometime – who knows when she's going to make a decision? Somebody sometime, somewhere, somehow might make a decision about something having to do with seniors. Big comfort. No big comfort in this Bill, because as I've indicated, it says nothing.

I also want to take the opportunity at this point to thank the seniors of my constituency who came out to meetings, who organized meetings, who brought seniors to meetings to explain that package that you couldn't understand about how the seniors' benefit program is going to work, about how the income thresholds were going to work for the payment of the Alberta health care premiums, and to those meetings that took place with representatives from the minister's office trying to explain to seniors to try and help them understand how these programs are going to work. I want to thank the seniors in my constituency and in particular Wilda Yuill and David Conroy who organized those meetings and who brought seniors out to the meetings. Albeit those seniors, after hearing staff members from the office of the hon. minister who's responsible for seniors, did leave extremely disappointed from that meeting – they gained nothing from the meeting about how this program was to work – more confused about exactly how it was going to impact on their particular lives. I believe, Mr. Speaker, that the seniors who took the time to organize those meetings and bring seniors together to help them understand the issues probably knew that all their comments and all the debate and all the discussion were going to fall on deaf ears anyway. They knew that that was going to be the case from the very beginning. Nonetheless they persevered and brought seniors together, and they involved themselves in community activities to try and help their neighbours and their fellow members in the community about how seniors are going to be impacted by this particular Bill.

So again, Mr. Speaker, I want to thank them for taking the effort. As my comment to the hon. Member for Calgary-Currie was with respect to the fact that seniors are going to continue to consult, I can assure her that certainly those particular seniors in my constituency will not let this matter die at this point simply because Bill 35 has been rammed down their throats through a closure motion. They will continue to consult with the government on this issue, and they will continue to have their voices heard.

MR. SMITH: Well, they won't consult with you guys anymore.

MR. SAPERS: Oh, yes, they will.

MR. HAVELOCK: Oh, no, they won't.

MR. SAPERS: Yes, they will.

MR. HAVELOCK: No, they won't.

MR. SPEAKER: Order.

MR. COLLINGWOOD: Mr. Speaker, my apologies for interrupting the debate that may be going on not through the Chair, but I'm nonetheless interested in that debate as well.

Now, as I said at the opening of my remarks, I know that Calgary-Varsity is going to be the next to speak, and I know that very shortly after that Calgary-Shaw is going to be the next to speak. I'm extremely interested in hearing the comments they have to make about this particular Bill.

Mr. Speaker, it is simply inconceivable that members of this Assembly could support a Bill that says: we have no idea what we're doing; we'll pass it all to the minister, and he'll make some decisions somewhere along the way. That's all this Bill says. As I say, it is inconceivable that any member of this Assembly could stand or sit in this Assembly and vote in favour of a Bill that says that. It is a complete embarrassment to this government, and it simply cannot be supported.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker. [interjections]

MR. SPEAKER: Order.

The hon. Member for Vegreville-Viking.

MR. STELMACH: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Very briefly, just listening to the very impassioned speeches across the way from the "But" Party and especially as they related to property taxation and the amount of property taxes our seniors will pay and especially . . .

Point of Order Clarification

MR. COLLINGWOOD: Point of clarification, Mr. Speaker. I thought I heard the member say: the "But" Party. I'm sure I misheard the member. So just a point of clarification.

MR. STELMACH: Mr. Speaker, for your information and for the information of the hon. Member for Sherwood Park, it is the "But" Party. They come to this House and get up and say: we agree with the government legislation, but . . . They'll be a new party. It's no longer the Liberal Party.

Debate Continued

MR. STELMACH: Anyway, we get back to some of the comments made by the Member for Spruce Grove-Sturgeon-St. Albert. She was so concerned about the property taxes our seniors will be paying in the future. Well, I would like her to advise all those seniors out there that part of the property taxes they're paying presently and will be paying in the future go towards the teachers' retirement fund. That fund, Mr. Speaker, will be \$119 million this year to \$320 million five years from now. So let's put that as a matter of record. [interjections]

Point of Order Factual Accuracy

MR. SPEAKER: Order. The hon. Member for Spruce Grove-Sturgeon-St. Albert rising on a point of order.

MRS. SOETAERT: Yes. Thank you. Standing Order 23(j), Mr. Speaker. The hon. member across the way alluded to the fact that all our money is going to the teachers' retirement fund. The teachers have put into that fund, and because of the incompetence of this government, they're making them pay for their mistakes, because they've mismanaged money and not put into that fund. People who've worked for years deserve their retirement package. [interjections]

MR. SPEAKER: Order. [interjections] Order.

The Chair is looking forward to listening to the hon. Member for Vegreville-Viking, if the Chair could hear.

Debate Continued

MR. STELMACH: Mr. Speaker, before I was so rudely interrupted, there were some members here that didn't quite hear the exact figures that I tried to get across in this House, and that is the fact that presently property tax payers contribute \$119 million to the teachers' retirement fund. In five years that will be increasing to \$320 million. You've got it right? Fine. And the member across doesn't even know who is taking care of the fund, who is administering the fund. She's blaming the government. Well, little do you know. Get up and tell us who administers the fund in this particular House. It's got nothing to do with government.

The other thing, Mr. Speaker, when it comes to the \$30 billion of accumulated deficit, is that less than \$3 billion is due to government spending on loan guarantees. The other is all on program spending. The only way we're going to reduce and get back to a balanced budget is to reduce the activity. The hon. members across the way can go on and on and on about government overspending. It's only 10 percent – and we'll give them the liberal amount – of the accumulated deficit. And we're the only province that adds the pension liabilities to the debt. No other province is doing it.

11:20

Mr. Speaker, we had a number of seniors' meetings in the constituency of Vegreville-Viking. We all know that the constituency of Vegreville-Viking does have the highest percentage of seniors, and we are blessed and graced by that fact. The seniors that came out to the many meetings we had in the riding asked various questions about the program and how the program will be affecting them. I can assure you that at every meeting our seniors in Vegreville-Viking were responsible and said, "We will contribute towards balancing the Alberta budget as long as we share equally in the sacrifice that others are sharing in terms of balancing the budget." That's the message they left with us.

Thank you very much.

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

DR. NICOL: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'd like to rise to speak to the issues that are involved in Bill 35. I'd like to start with a kind of overview of how I see the Bill and the impact that it's going to have on the seniors' programs.

Bringing together a number of separate programs under one program, one administration, one type of program is a good strategy on behalf of the government. What we end up with, though, is a situation where, because of the way the Bill is put together – there are effectively six small sections that talk about the operation and how the program will be handled. We end up, then, with the government also concurrently releasing a set of regulations that are going to be used to support the Bill. When

the regulations are not accepted by the community, you end up trying to decide: how do you vote? Do you vote for a Bill that creates a good umbrella, or do you vote against the Bill because the regulations that are being put in place to implement that good umbrella are not acceptable and are not valid? So what we end up with is the problem of trying to decide the relationship between the administration and the structure and how it's going to be implemented through regulation.

What I'd like to suggest this evening is that I find basically the umbrella, the structure very acceptable, a very good Bill that could be properly used to create the efficiencies that the mandate of this government was given in the election. But what we now have is a problem of the way that this is being implemented, through the regulations. We see that as the regulations are being brought out, they're creating conflicts in basically three different areas that I'd like to discuss briefly. It's because of this that I find it very difficult to provide support in the form of a yes vote for the Bill, because what we're doing by condoning the Bill is condoning the regulations that are associated with it. If we could be given the opportunity to have a voice in the regulations, then we could deal with the Bill and the umbrella structure to implement those regulations in a different way. I think that would be an extremely good process to deal with in the future.

First of all, the threshold levels that are being set for triggering the different payment processes within the Bill need to be related somehow to the living style, the living standards of the target individuals in the seniors population, whether they be single, two-senior couples, or one-senior couples. This has to be dealt with in the context of their relationship to the standard of living that we as a society assume is acceptable. I would just like to suggest that the levels that are being targeted for the triggers in the regulations are significantly below what we would accept as standard poverty levels and that they should be revised and brought in line with a more acceptable level of living standard.

I'd like to relate just a small story that came out of the city of Lethbridge in the last week. The seniors had been basically waiting for the revised regulations or presentation of the potential regulations, which came out last week. I've been informed from some of the people that do advising to the seniors in the city that the expectations were such that a lot of them were really believing the government when they said that they were going to listen. They were expecting that they were going to be given a reasonable level of threshold for these cutoffs in the beginning.

Part of the problem was that there was so much information – it was almost like an information overload – that they didn't really understand what the meaning of the program was going to be. The fact that even some of the lower income levels would actually have higher support in total through the government programs was not really conveyed to the communities properly. What we had in the city of Lethbridge were reports of cases, two particular cases that I've been made aware of, where seniors have left notes and attempted suicide because they feel that now they cannot live subject to these new levels of government support. I think this is misinformation.

It's a situation where confusion has resulted because of the speed with which this program has had to be put in place and the information overload. The people don't really understand how the program is going to affect them. These individuals were very concerned. They didn't want to be a burden to their community. They didn't want to be a burden to their families, and they chose another route to get around this. Fortunately, both of them are

still in the hospital. They're both still alive, so maybe it'll work out in the end.

The other issue that I'd like to deal with in terms of the regulations comes from the definition of income. We've heard reference this evening already to the concept of means tests, means incomes. There's a lot of concern being expressed by many of the seniors that have come through my office. Their main concern is that a lot of the seniors in southern Alberta seem to be suspicious of others who, quote, are hiding income. Now, I don't know how they define that. I think the regulations need to be . . .

DR. WEST: They're all farmers.

DR. NICOL: Well, many of them are farmers, yes.

What they're doing is looking at ways to disguise their net worth and effectively influence the way they deal with the income measure. I think we need to have a review of the regulations which will allow for a much more concrete definition of the income levels and how these will be handled in terms of dealing with eligibility for the various seniors.

The other section I'd like to address just briefly is the idea of the appeal process. What we end up with here is a provision in the Bill – I think it was under section 3, where there's a process set out for appeal. Again, the conditions for the appeal are left to regulation, and many of the seniors here are concerned about how this will be handled and what the implications of appeals might be, whether or not they'll be eligible, whether or not certain conditions in terms of dependency, special disability, will be grounds for appeal. I think this needs to be clarified and really well defined within the regulations in order to make it acceptable to many of the seniors.

So what we end up with is basically a Bill that I would very much like to vote for in terms of the structure of the umbrella, but because of the regulations that we have been provided with, the levels of threshold, I find that I'm going to have to vote against the thresholds, even though the Bill seems to be extremely good.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

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

11:30

MR. ZWOZDESKY: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's a pleasure to be recognized by you as always. I rise to make just a few brief comments regarding Bill 35. In looking at it on the surface, I too thought I could support the umbrella, as my colleague from Lethbridge has just stated, but after I reviewed my notes and recollected many of the things that seniors in my constituency and elsewhere across the province had said to me, I found myself looking at it through a more critical set of spectacles, and as a result, I have some concerns to share with the House.

Mr. Speaker, as I'm sure everyone in this House was, I too was raised with the notion of respecting my elders and in particular those people in their most senior years. That may sound somewhat old fashioned. Nonetheless, it is reflective of how I grew up, and as a result, I tend to look at things that affect seniors through the benefit of that particular upbringing. I look at seniors who built this province and contributed so much to what we now take for granted and things that we enjoy, and I thought as I looked at the words "Alberta seniors' benefits" that maybe this would be one occasion through which we would properly see those seniors thanked. These are people who made their plans and made their dreams around a particular given set of circumstances. They worked all their lives to arrive at what had been

promised to them by the system, a system to which they contributed all their lives through taxes or hard work or whatever it might have been. Most of them arrived at a comfortable position, some perhaps not so comfortable, but having arrived at whatever their position is, they find now that suddenly these goalposts seem to have moved on them.

I'm sure it comes as no surprise that the major reason these goalposts have been moving and will continue to move for some time to come is as a result of some of the financial disasters that we have seen in the past. A lot of that is hinged on the fact that we saw a government that got a little bit carried away – in fact, I suppose, a lot carried away – with its power grab. I see a little bit of the same thing taking place here specifically with regard to Bill 35.

I look at this Bill and I see clear evidence that there is something seriously wrong with the way that we've gone about this entire process. I say "we" collectively, referring more specifically to the government opposite, because I remember the campaign promises made by Ralph Klein and other members when they used this brochure at the doors. They said that they would be consulting with seniors before they made these changes. In fact, I don't think that's what really took place. So this Bill clearly points out that lack of planning and follow-through.

What it does look more like to me and to the seniors who have called over the last several weeks and months is that this is yet another example of what we call management by rumour or management by trial ballooning, by spreading fear and then suddenly backing away from that and saying: "Well, gee whiz, we were just kidding. We really have more money than that. We just thought we would try and float this one by and see how far we could get with it." Well, that's not the kind of fair treatment and respect that I think we should be paying to our seniors.

There are realities that face seniors, and I'd like to just share some of those with you as they've been shared with me. We've heard earlier in tonight's debate that one of those realities is fixed incomes. Now, while costs go up for daily living expenses, seniors' fixed incomes do not go up proportionately. In fact, something like nearly 70 percent of all seniors in the province live on an annual fixed income of \$15,000 or less. Many of the seniors are parents. They have families that they still try and help and try and support, and one day I hope to be able to do the same for my children, Mr. Speaker, as I'm sure you're doing for yours. The fact is that we're facing some very difficult economic times, and we see a higher return rate of children going back to their family domiciles for some form of support, be it clothing, food, shelter, or whatever. So again who picks up that tab? Well, it's the seniors. So you'd think that by now we would have figured out a way to help ease that burden on them.

Seniors aren't in a position of being able to go out and find additional employment, certainly not at their age, and there's no ability for them to supplement this income. Many other seniors, as we all know, are in failing health, not even well enough to adequately express their discontent with some of the many flaws contained in this Bill. Many of them need home care service, and I've had the pleasure to visit a lot of these individuals in the privacy of their own homes. I'm speaking from that firsthand experience, Mr. Speaker, wherein the seniors have called for a greater amount of attention to what they term a quality of life or a dignity, a respect for what is really theirs. I think seniors only really ask to be treated fairly, with some dignity, respect, compassion, and yes, there are some seniors who have said to me, "I don't mind paying my fair share." I myself don't mind paying

my fair share to help cover up the mess that's been made here. But seniors don't like it when they're being taken advantage of. Seniors have said, "Yes, maybe 5 percent would be fair, if that's what everyone else is paying." But that's not what we see happening here. We see spreads from 5 to about 35 percent, and that's a bit large.

We've seen some of the same approach here with regard to the 5 percent smoothness that was foisted on the employees at the Alberta Hospital and also at the university hospital. They were told, "Well, just take a 5 percent cut and everything will be okay." What happens? They take the 5 percent cut, and a few short weeks thereafter they find that there are layoffs of 100 and 200 people respectively. So who are you going to believe here?

I think what seniors had in mind and were hoping to see when the campaign promises were being made by members of the Conservative Party was that there was going to be true, meaningful, very significant consultation with the seniors prior to any of these kinds of regulations and legislative matters being brought forward. We know that the Minister of Community Development, who is responsible for seniors in Alberta, started off by secretly releasing only portions of the Alberta seniors' benefits. It wasn't until the Liberal caucus revealed some additional information that suddenly we, the general public that is to say, caught on to what was really happening here. Therefore, it comes as no small surprise to me that when the minister and his entourage toured the province just recently soliciting input from other members of society that in some cases the Minister of Community Development was actually trumped out of the meetings. He wasn't allowed to even speak to some seniors in some. He was thrown out. I think that says something. I'm not gloating about that, and I know that the PC Party over there isn't either. It's a fact. The Minister of Community Development was asked to leave some of the meetings because the seniors were that mad.

Well, I'll tell you. The government, the way I see it, through this Bill, Mr. Speaker, as with many other Bills, is playing a dangerous game. It's called truth and consequences. The truth is that this government has yet to demonstrate its ability to do anything properly, to do anything fairly and squarely and aboveboard. The truth is that the seniors are feeling that they're getting attacked. They're vulnerable, and they're defenceless on a lot of this. The consequences of that are very simply this: the bastion of heritage Toryism, which as we all know is well supported or used to be well supported by the seniors, is dwindling and is dwindling rapidly.

So, again, I'm going to try and help this government, because there have been a few things along the way that they've done correctly over the years. I'm going to try to help the government here to save them some votes – I'm going back several years – so that they don't fall into this trap that they've set for themselves. The consequences are that they're just not going to get this vote from the seniors the next time around. This Bill is going to prove that out. Mr. Speaker, you know full well where I speak from. Seniors tell it like it is. This is a bad Bill and the seniors will see through that, and they'll prove it in the next election. I think there's going to be a rude awakening here, and that will be the consequence. You can't go through as a belligerent government attacking seniors at one end of the spectrum and kindergarten children at the other end and hope to get away with it.

11:40

So we'll watch for that, because the public is just not going to put up with this kind of manipulation of the so-called envelope of seniors' benefits. I don't see the kinds of benefits coming forward here that are anything the seniors are proud of. My mother is in

this category as are several other mothers of members present here, or grandparents or whatever. The one thing that we know for sure about seniors is that in addition to telling it like it is, seniors know politics. They've been around it. They've watched it, and they'll know how to express their emotion at the right time, and they will not forget.

So having said that, I'm very disappointed to not be able to support Bill 35, and I would urge other members to please reconsider it. It's not too late. [interjections] I appreciate the interjections from the hon. Treasurer because I know he means well, but in this case he'd do better to put his money right where his mouth is, and that is to do something about it.

Thank you.

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

MR. LANGEVIN: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It is my pleasure this evening to rise to speak in support of Bill 35. I wish to support this Bill because I want to represent the constituents from Lac La Biche-St. Paul. In my constituency there were four . . . [interjections]

MR. SPEAKER: Order. [interjections] Order please.

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

MR. LANGEVIN: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Like I was saying, I am in support of the Bill because I want to represent the constituents of my riding, and the seniors of Lac La Biche-St. Paul attended the seniors' roundtable meetings that we had in our communities. We held four different roundtable meetings, and there was in attendance . . . [interjections]

MR. SPEAKER: Order please. [interjections] Order. The hon. Member for Lac La Biche-St. Paul doesn't have the leather lungs of some other members, and the Chair would like to hear him.

MR. LANGEVIN: They have to give me a chance because I'm not as vocal as some of my previous colleagues. Anyway, there are all kinds of remarks that are made when you stand up on this side of the House, because they think that this side should be unanimous, but I think we have to realize that there are three seats on this side that don't belong to the Official Opposition, and we have the right to express our own opinions. [interjections]

Point of Order Imputing Motives

MR. SPEAKER: Order. [interjections] Order please. If the hon. member's colleagues would permit the hon. Member for Edmonton-McClung, the Chair believes there's an indication that he might wish to raise a point of order.

MR. MITCHELL: The fact is, Mr. Speaker, that he has missed . . .

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Citation.

MR. MITCHELL: I'm getting to that; 23(j). He has impugned our motives by suggesting that somehow we are motivated in the same way he is by putting himself in the Official Opposition. That member is not in the Official Opposition. [interjections] Thank you.

MR. SPEAKER: Order. [interjections] Order, hon. members.

MR. LANGEVIN: Mr. Speaker, I did not try to indicate that I was part of the Official Opposition. I said there was a difference between the Official Opposition and another member of the opposition.

MR. SPEAKER: The Chair could well understand how there could be that misunderstanding with the din that has been persistently operating in this Chamber this evening.

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

Debate Continued

MR. LANGEVIN: Getting back to my constituents, when we had the roundtable meetings for the seniors, what the seniors said in my riding was that they were not going to sign petitions and try and oppose the government on this Bill but that when the roundtables were held, they would make strong presentations on the issues they felt strongly about. They felt very strongly about the \$9.70 maximum dispensing fee that was proposed by the minister, and they voiced their opinion on that. They also voiced their opinion on the thresholds that were too low. They voiced their opinion that they felt the coverage through Alberta health care should remain under the Department of Health and that the spread in the income from when you start paying to when you pay the full amount was not wide enough. They wanted a wider spread. I have to say that on the three issues they were successful in obtaining what they wanted except that the thresholds were raised by a very minor amount, and they were hoping for a little more. I think they're prepared to live with that.

I have to mention, and I mentioned it to the seniors in our roundtable hearings when we had them, that they have to realize that Alberta's single parents – a lot of people in my riding earn less than \$18,000 per year, and there are many couples who have one, two, and three children to send to school, who have low education, minimum wages, and earn less than \$27,000 a year as a couple. These people have to pay their own health care. They have to pay their own land tax. They have no benefits of health care or Blue Cross, and they even pay income tax to sustain this program, which pays the seniors. I think the seniors realize well that a lot of these young couples are their own children. Some of these seniors have told me, "If there's not enough money in the pot to help the whole of society, we are prepared to pay some of it, because we remember too well in the 1930s and during the war, when we raised our families, that it was very, very hard to raise a family on minimum income." I say again that the riding of Lac La Biche-St. Paul is not a financially very well-off riding. A lot of people have low incomes. I truly believe that I represent the opinion of my seniors when I say that they're prepared to accept this level because they want to keep their threshold in perspective to what other people earn in the riding. It's not everybody that has a profession or that has a good business or a very successful farm operation and makes a lot of money.

I also have to say that I have a lot of respect for the seniors. They have contributed a lot to this province. In the roundtable meetings I made them well aware that I respect the seniors, that they played an important part in this province, and that they should co-operate and play a very important part also in the financial direction we have to take at this time because of the financial straits the government is in. I think that's quite acceptable. I'm prepared to vote in support of Bill 35 in second reading, and I urge all members of the House to do the same.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

MR. SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Stony Plain.

11:50

MR. WOLOSHTYN: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm really amazed at how little faith the opposition has in the integrity of seniors. It seems to me that last spring in this Legislature there was some legislation passed called the Deficit Elimination Act. When that Act was passed in third reading, those of the opposition that are still here from the previous group supported it. Some are gone; some are here.

SOME HON. MEMBERS: That would be you.

MR. WOLOSHTYN: Mr. Speaker, for the record and to show how little they know, yes, I was in this House and, yes, I was on the government side when that legislation was passed. So let's have the record clear. If you're going to throw accusations across the floor, at least have them accurate.

MR. MITCHELL: So you defected earlier than we thought.

MR. WOLOSHTYN: Well, I can appreciate that I crossed earlier than you thought. That is not very hard to do, because I question whether you can think at times.

Mr. Speaker, the Deficit Elimination Act was the platform on which Premier Klein embarked into the last election. I think the results of that election were quite clear. We got an overwhelming mandate: 51 seats to 31 seats, plus one Independent who votes with his conscience at all times. The importance of the Deficit Elimination Act is simply this: when Premier Klein . . .

MR. SPEAKER: Order. Hon. member, please, just the position. The hon. the Premier will do.

MR. WOLOSHTYN: Thank you. I'm sorry, Mr. Speaker.

The hon. the Premier indicated to all groups, including seniors, that we would all participate in addressing the deficit. Mr. Speaker, for the record the seniors were very willing to do their fair share. There were a significant number of seniors who were in favour of the seniors' benefit plan as presented prior to the second round of consultations. I think the members from across the way are forgetting that.

The Member for Edmonton-Avonmore went off on a tangent about seniors and votes. Now, Mr. Speaker, the Official Opposition may be guided by where they think votes may come from. However, I think it takes courage and conviction to do what you think, what you know is right. I know that the vast majority of seniors appreciate what is happening and contrary to Edmonton-Avonmore's thoughts will be very supportive of us.

Now, Mr. Speaker, when we make a decision on this side of the House, it is for the good of all Albertans, including the seniors. The seniors in this province have contributed greatly to the wealth of the province. Also, I must point out the other side of the coin: they have also benefited from being Albertans. Many of the seniors who are currently drawing benefits are most appreciative of that. Many of the seniors who are eligible for benefits in fact have expressed wonderment as to why they are in fact receiving them when they are self-sufficient. I feel very strongly when I've sat here for hours upon hours listening to

meaningless rhetoric taking away from the integrity of the seniors – and I repeat that, Mr. Speaker; their rhetoric questioned the integrity of the seniors – that I for one have a lot more faith in the seniors understanding and appreciating what is being done.

Mr. Speaker, there is also a difference between listening, consulting, and telling. After the first round of benefits was announced, there was some reaction to it, and what happened? There was a round of consultations, and as the Member for Lac La Biche-St. Paul has indicated, we made some adjustments. Extended health care was left unchanged. It was left unchanged; it went back to where it was. There is no recognition, other than from Lethbridge, of that in fact occurring, and I feel that the seniors will be most appreciative of that. The threshold was adjusted, yes; maybe not as much as we would have liked to, maybe not as much as many people would have wanted to, certainly not as much as we wanted to, but we have the obligation of being also fiscally responsible so that these programs can in fact continue into the future.

If you listen to the opposition, there would be no limit to the funding, to the money going to education, to advanced education, to social services, to any program, and there would be zero accountability. When the campaign is on, it's brutal cuts. When they're sitting over there, it's brutal spending. They know not what they want, Mr. Speaker. They do know one word, however, and that one is "brutal," and their rhetoric at times in here on this issue has been very brutal.

There was some concern, Mr. Speaker, on the cost of prescription drugs. There was a plan put forth that had its merits; it was a straight fee of \$9.70 for each prescription dispensed. It appeared that, for whatever reasons, the seniors and, in fairness, the pharmacists didn't really care to have that particular program. So through the course of consultation with both the seniors and the pharmacists, the prescription program was amended to read that the maximum a senior will pay for a prescription is \$25. Prior to this change being made, seniors were more than willing to accept this approach.

We've had all sorts of programs throughout the years, the best seniors' benefit program in all of Canada, and that will continue even with the slight adjustments that have been made. The opposition may go out and solicit petitions on everything from the colour of the rug in their back porch to what people think about kindergarten, but I notice that they haven't been bringing in wheelbarrow loads of petitions with respect to seniors lately.

Point of Order

Imputing Motives

MR. SAPERS: A point of order.

MR. SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Glenora is rising on a point of order.

MR. SAPERS: Yes, I am, Mr. Speaker. Thank you. Under 23(i), imputing false motives about petitions. It should be clear to the hon. Member for Stony Plain, as he had the opportunity to sit in the opposition himself once upon a time. He knows that when people are totally frustrated with a government they think is callous and uncaring, they come of their own volition with petitions. They come on their own with concerns and complaints, page after page after page. Thousands and thousands and thousands of Albertans have petitioned of their own free will

members of this Assembly to urge the government to reconsider their ill-thought-out budget plans . . . [interjections]

12:00

MR. SPEAKER: Order please. [interjections] Order please. [interjections] Order please. The hon. Member for Edmonton-Glenora has had the opportunity of making his clarification.

The hon. Member for Stony Plain.

MR. WOLOSZYN: Mr. Speaker, I was not questioning how he obtained these petitions. I'm sure they coerced, begged, pleaded, and maybe the odd one came in of its own volition, but I know that they came in droves. However, the point that I was trying to make was that they've run out of petitions on behalf of seniors lately, and just for some changes perhaps they'll go and solicit some more in the next few weeks as the House is sitting.

Debate Continued

MR. WOLOSZYN: Mr. Speaker, the new Bill 35 is indeed necessary. It's necessary so that the program can be implemented for seniors. I feel there were references made, very inaccurate references, to closure earlier. Closure in this session has only been used – this is the second Bill; Bill 19 was the first. I think that it is very important that legislation as valuable as Bill 35 be expedited as quickly as possible.

Mr. Speaker, in summary, I think it's important to note that the program ensured that seniors on the lower end of the scale would not be affected, as the Bill guarantees an appeal process in case there is in fact an area that seniors may have fallen into that has to be addressed. It has addressed most of the concerns that seniors have had, and I think that the whole Assembly, including the opposition, when they get through reading their speeches, will be very pleased to support this legislation, because they know full well that it's necessary to implement as quickly as possible.

Mr. Speaker, in keeping with Motion 24, I move that we now call the question.

MR. SPEAKER: Before calling the question, as the Chair is required to do pursuant to Government Motion 24 and under Standing Order 21(2), there's an indication that there might be a desire for unanimous consent for a one-minute bell. Is there such consent in the Assembly?

HON. MEMBERS: Agreed.

MR. SPEAKER: Opposed? So ordered.

Having reached the point in the day when the questions must now be put on the motion for second reading of Bill 35, Seniors

Benefit Act, as moved by the hon. Minister of Community Development, does the Assembly agree to the motion for second reading?

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Agreed.

MR. SPEAKER: Opposed?

SOME HON. MEMBERS: No.

MR. SPEAKER: Carried.

[Several members rose calling for a division. The division bell was rung at 12:04 p.m.]

[One minute having elapsed, the Assembly divided]

For the motion:

Amery	Forsyth	McFarland
Black	Fritz	Mirosh
Brassard	Gordon	Paszowski
Burgener	Haley	Pham
Calahasen	Havelock	Renner
Cardinal	Herard	Rostad
Clegg	Hierath	Smith
Coutts	Jacques	Stelmach
Day	Laing	Tannas
Dinning	Langevin	Trynchy
Dunford	Lund	West
Evans	Magnus	Woloszyn
Fischer		

Against the motion:

Beniuk	Nicol	Soetaert
Bracko	Percy	Yankowsky
Collingwood	Sapers	Zariwny
Germain	Sekulic	Zwozdesky
Mitchell		

Totals: For – 37 Against – 13

[Motion carried; Bill 35 read a second time]

MR. SPEAKER: Order please. The House stands adjourned until this afternoon at 1:30.

[At 12:11 a.m. on Thursday the Assembly adjourned to 1:30 p.m.]