

Legislative Assembly of Alberta

Title: **Monday, February 27, 1995**

8:00 p.m.

Date: 95/02/27

[The Speaker in the Chair]

THE SPEAKER: Please be seated.

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

Moved by Mr. Brassard:

That an humble address be presented to His Honour the Honourable the Lieutenant Governor as follows:

To His Honour the Honourable Gordon Towers, Lieutenant Governor of the province of Alberta:

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

[Adjourned debate February 22: Mr. Renner]

THE SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Medicine Hat.

MR. RENNER: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I was reviewing *Hansard* this afternoon to update myself and remind myself what I had said the last time. I think I did a pretty good job of covering the material, and I really don't think it's necessary to expand upon what I said last time. So with that, I will resume my seat.

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

MR. ZWOZDESKY: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I really enjoyed the comments of my previous speaker. I wish I could condense everything that I feel into such a short time frame. [interjections] If I were able to, even at the urging of members opposite, I surely would. However, having paid very careful attention while His Honour the Lieutenant Governor was speaking and delivering his speech and having reviewed it again a couple of times, there are a few comments that I would like to make. So I am delighted to kick off debate tonight for this portion of the throne speech.

I want to say at the outset, Mr. Speaker, how impressed I was with the delivery of His Honour in regard to this speech. As always, he was very interesting and very captivating. I really did enjoy his speech, almost as much as I enjoyed his eloquence at a gathering that he hosted just around the same time. I particularly delighted in His Honour's introduction of the throne speech with the term "mandate for change." As I read the first, second, and third paragraphs of His Honour's Speech from the Throne, I delighted in realizing that he was using three words that I myself campaigned on back in 1993, because of course the title *Mandate for Change* was very much the Liberal banner, the Liberal slogan, that we all ran on. So I got excited by that because I thought: yes, His Honour has grasped totally the concept of Liberalism as we would have introduced it here. However, as I read on and as I listened, soon realized that those were three words that I guess were used but in a different way than we had used them.

Nonetheless, I do applaud the government's efforts to make an attempt to balance the provincial budget, although I disagree rather completely with how most of it is being done. I find that as they are going about eradicating the so-called fiscal deficit, they are leaving what we call a human deficit in its place, and I don't think it is very responsible of the government to be doing that.

However, as I read on and I read the other things about creating the proper climate and so on, I do commend the government for attempting to do that. We'll see as time wears on as to how successful or not they are, and ultimately the electorate will judge accordingly.

The part that caught my attention most was where it says, "a mandate from the people of Alberta . . . to continue to listen to Albertans." I thought what it should have said instead was "to start listening to Albertans," because I can't see too much that would suggest that they have been listening so far.

Mr. Speaker, I was one of the people who attended the rally in Mill Woods to try and save the Grey Nuns hospital, to maintain it as a full active treatment, active care centre, and that would have been a good time for the government to have demonstrated their ability and their commitment to listening to Albertans. On the first occasion we had somewhere around 15,000 people show up and demonstrate in full voice what they felt about that particular health care change to the greater area of Mill Woods, and on the second occasion we had another large group that came out and spoke as well and demonstrated as well, in equal numbers virtually, to ask the government to please listen. Then I recall one of the organizers, one Corky Meyer, having actually met with the Premier and having spoken with him directly and having received some assurances from him and from the hon. Minister of Health, and at that point I thought: yes, now they will surely listen. But of course that wasn't to be, so those attempts were unsuccessful.

Now I find that my colleague for Edmonton-Meadowlark has presented yet another opportunity for the government to listen with regard to the changes that are being mused over surrounding the Misericordia hospital. To present a petition as large as 73,000 names, Mr. Speaker, I would suggest is ample example, ample proof that out where it really counts, people feel they're not being listened to as well as they would like. I'm sure that there are some people who might feel they're being listened to, but the vast majority I feel right now are not being listened to. So as I read that all through, I thought: this is a good time for them to start. Instead, as I read on, I found that there were some other things that I wanted to take issue with.

There is a pretence within the speech by the government to deliver programs to the people who use them on a more effective basis. So I scoured through to try and take a look at where that was happening, and I started with one of my favourite areas, one I'm deeply committed to, and that's the area of education. Now I find that we're talking about a delivery program here where a lot of these parents and so-called school councils are in a position where they're being handed suddenly a great deal more responsibility and a great deal more authority than any of them would ever have hoped to have had to begin with.

As it goes on, I keep hearing from people throughout Alberta, not just in Edmonton but right across the province, that the school boards were elected for a certain purpose: to be there as the voice, as the arm, the vehicle, as it were, that oversaw fair and good education, proper education in this province. Now I see that some of that role is being circumvented by the government. So I can't see that the delivery of the education programs in this province is going to benefit from that erosion of some of the school boards. Certainly after having spoken with some of the members throughout the province, I believe that that is taking place.

However, I read on, and I got really excited when I read this paragraph on page 2 that said, "changing government to reflect what people need, what they expect, and what they can afford." As I looked at that, I thought to myself: everything seems to be

based again and still entirely on the bottom line of the almighty dollar, what can people afford. Sometimes, Mr. Speaker, if the government is truly listening, I think they should design programs based on what people really need. When you're a good and an effective government, you will find a way to support and to afford those things if they are truly needed, but the failure of I think the government and the thinkers who design some of these business plans is in their inability to have properly surveyed and properly canvassed the opinions of Albertans.

We get back to the so-called roundtables. We were looking for a correction and a shift in that direction, at least insofar as the health care changes were concerned, but we find the same kind of nonsense has continued to go on, and those people are still being ignored and still not being properly consulted. We still don't know what it is that we properly need here as a result of all of that primarily because the people who are in the best position to provide that advice have been ignored, just like all the doctors were a few weeks ago at the Mayfield Inn, I believe it was, where they showed up en masse in numbers of about a thousand to try and counsel the government's ear. But it wasn't to happen.

So I thought as I read there: here is what Albertans can expect. What governments fail to sometimes recognize is that you can't just keep on changing the rules just as people begin to understand them. For example, with the seniors, Mr. Speaker. I was quite dismayed as I knocked on doors over the last year or so. People are so down about how these changes to seniors have been made that they are almost without any sense of hope in many cases. They have planned their whole lives to live at a certain level of comfort, given certain tidy sums of money they have put aside for this twilight era in their lives, and now suddenly those goalposts have been moved, have been shifted on them.

So telling Albertans that they have a government that will provide things that they can expect and count on really is a misnomer; that's not the way it works. We see the same thing with some clever budgeting that has been done here lately. Just as systems get caught up and people start to understand them, we bring in some new systems of accounting to confuse a little bit. At times it looks very deliberate, Mr. Speaker, and I would hope that the government would eventually plant those goalposts in such a manner that they would stay put for awhile so that a proper analysis could be done. We would solve this problem of: do we have a \$15 billion debt, or do we have an \$8 billion debt? I saw the same kind of difficulties happening as cuts and changes were mused about for ECS funding.

So I find that there's a broadsword here at play, a broadsword that is being used to usher in some kind of a new ideology, and that really has me worried. It's tantamount to mind control and total subservience. That's part of the agenda that I'm reading into this. I'm reading into this some kind of an attempt to dominate over the masses, which I cannot agree with.

8:10

I saw that today when we had an opportunity to support Freedom to Read Week. What could be greater or more essential to democracy than freedom of information and freedom of reading, than supporting a motion such as that, a harmless one as it were, especially given that the hon. Speaker split the motion into two parts to clearly differentiate the two different themes that that motion conveyed? To have voted against that, to me, Mr. Speaker, is clearly going back to the way the old Soviet Union used to operate. Do you remember that? They took all the books, all the intelligentsia, shipped it up north . . .

Speaker's Ruling Relevance

THE SPEAKER: Order please. This is not the time or the place to be rehearsing what happened this afternoon. We're speaking on the Speech from the Throne, hon. member, the address of His Honour.

MR. ZWOZDESKY: I was, and thank you, Mr. Speaker. I realize that some of this is difficult to take. I understand that.

THE SPEAKER: It's not a question of whether it's difficult to take or not. The hon. member is always very pleasant to listen to and very clearly expresses his ideas, but there's the question of relevance, hon. member. The subject before the Assembly this evening is His Honour's address outlining the government's agenda.

MR. ZWOZDESKY: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I was just coming to that very point.

The point is that on page 2 it says, "My government's greatest concern is people," and one of the things of greatest concern to people is their ability to choose materials they feel necessary for their own emolument and edification by way of reading materials. That was the point that I was going to make. [interjections]

THE SPEAKER: Order please. The fact remains that what happened this afternoon had nothing whatever to do with the Speech from the Throne, hon. member.

MR. ZWOZDESKY: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I was simply taking what I thought was a small liberty there to make a contemporary connection.

Debate Continued

MR. ZWOZDESKY: Nonetheless, a short while later I read where the government says: good health care is a gift. As I read that directly from the throne speech, Mr. Speaker, I asked myself: so how is this government protecting this greatest gift? There I was looking to find some relevance between what it was that they were saying in the speech and the actions that they have taken up till now and whatever hopeful actions they might make in the future, and I couldn't find very much relevance to that statement that would support that they really do believe that good health care is a gift. If they really believed that, then I think they would be listening to people, which connects back to what they said on page 1 about listening to Albertans, but that relevance hasn't been made.

I think what you have instead here is some very recklessly announced across-the-board cuts to health care that don't properly treat that gift the way that it was passed on to Albertans through the five principles of the Canada Health Act. I just don't see evidence enough of that in here. What I do see, as I mentioned earlier, is a broadsword of ideology at play here, and I see attempts to ignore some of the democratic process here as well.

As I read on here, I found a point of great interest that's relevant to the education community on page 3. That was talking about maximizing resources in the classroom, yet I don't see that happening. I don't find that the schoolteachers that I've spoken with and the many parents that I've spoken with feel any better about how the classrooms are being treated by this government, because the cuts are filtering down to that level, Mr. Speaker. In the same way that the cuts are filtering down to the level of

patients in our health care institutions, so too are they filtering down to the classroom level.

There was supposed to be more involvement by parents in the community in an advisory capacity, as I recall, but that hasn't been quite the case here. I think what's happened instead is that we see some form of attempt at domination. I don't see anywhere that parents actually asked to run the schools. I think they asked to have a say in it but not to actually run the schools. So I take some issue and some exception to that because, to me, clearly education is the key.

What I wanted to see was some emphasis here on what they were talking about in regard to our emerging global marketplace and the importance of education, the vital importance of education helping to fulfill Alberta's proper place within that marketplace so that our young people would have the full advantage of students elsewhere across Canada and indeed around the world. Do we see an emphasis of that here? No. What we see is a constant bickering back and forth regarding something as elementary as kindergarten funding. Instead of having a level playing field, one which sends students equally prepared on to grade 1 and elsewhere – we already have groups in Medicine Hat and elsewhere talking about a two-tiered education system that is starting to happen, and I fear that that is exactly part of that whole ideological bent.

I'm reminded of a quote that the Premier gave a while back in regard to, you know, the Bovar situation, where he said: believe me, we're not hiding anything; if we had something to hide, we would have done it. I always look at these things through those careful eyes to see whether or not something is being hidden or kept from us here. Again, time will tell a little more clearly whether in fact that is the case. As you put these things together with the fundamental question of what kind of society we want to live in, that's what I was looking to have answered in this throne speech, which was prepared for the Honourable the Lieutenant Governor.

Do we in fact, Mr. Speaker, want a society with a liquor store on every corner? Do we want one like that? I can see where we might have ushered in this whole privatization of liquor stores a little differently to appease the rural areas. I grew up in a rural area. I know how convenient it would have been for my parents and for others to have had some store in the neighbourhood, but to have thrown it wide open, *carte blanche*, like this is going to cause two or three or four more problems that we don't want to deal with. On the first hand, we have a rather mass privatization that is going to result in an abundance of liquor stores – we're seeing that now – and therefore an increased availability and possibly even increased usage. On the second hand, people have gotten into this business so quickly that I feel that there is going to be a fairly high mortality rate of liquor store businesses. You can't take a small community such as Calmar and expect it to support three or four liquor stores within three or four blocks. It's simply not possible.

Do you want the kind of society that has a VLT in every corner in every bar? I would suggest probably not. You see the devastation that that's causing. Entire paycheques are being lost. We hear stories, Mr. Speaker, about people losing the down-payment on their homes, for heaven's sake. Now, somewhere over there somebody must be paying attention to this. I'm sure they must be, because these cut to the very fabric of what our society is all about, and somebody is having to speak out about this.

We see increasing rolls of children in poverty as a result. Kids are being abandoned in favour of things like VLTs. We see one in four children in the Calgary public school system coming from

a home of poverty. This is a statistic that we learned just last week. Perhaps it's been around for longer, but to me it was a revelation and a shocking one at that, that we could allow this to happen in this province given the backdrop we have and the tremendous honour we have placed, the great importance we have put on education and on each other as human beings. This is a shocking tragedy to allow to happen.

Health care appears to be something that only the rich are going to be able to afford, the same way as with education. If you carry through with your musings about privatizing education, I think we're going to be in equal trouble. That is not my vision of Canada, Mr. Speaker. That is not what my ancestors immigrated here for 100-plus years ago, nor do I suspect it was anything that others immigrated here for either. So we see this continued chaos, as we have said, in many areas.

We see seniors being neglected, somewhat overtaxed, to the point where they at their age are forced to march on the Legislature, and then when they get here, they don't even have the courtesy of the government coming out and listening to them. Well, there's got to be something about the type of society that is being bred here that is totally wrong. Record numbers of petitions being put forward; record numbers of letters to editors; record numbers of amendments in the House: who's listening to all of this stuff? On page 1 it's supposed to be the government. I have yet to see evidence of that.

Then we get on to the business of taxes and hiding of truths or whatever you can say in the House in that regard, duping the public, I would suggest. To say that there are no new taxes in the budget I think is a tremendous misnomer, and I would take issue with that given the definitions that are provided elsewhere of what health care premiums really are. Any time government provides a good or a service and charges people for that good or service, you can relate that as being a tax. In my view it is, Mr. Speaker, in any event. This is what people running around all over with the tax alert meetings were trying to get across. No new taxes would have meant no disguised taxes either. It's interesting that every fourth or fifth speaker at the tax alert meeting that I was at took issue with the Premier on this one. They were counseling our federal counterpart, Mr. Martin, to not usher in any of those kinds of disguised taxes either, the same way that the Premier has done.

8:20

MR. DINNING: And he did.

MR. ZWOZDESKY: I'm simply telling you what was being counseled; okay?

Now, when I hear the Provincial Treasurer – and I'll stick to the provincial domain unlike members opposite. The Provincial Treasurer needs to take a lesson from these tax alert meetings and learn the proper definition if that's what it takes. I'm sure he's done some studying since, and he's probably heading there now.

Instead what we see are a number of . . . Mr. Speaker, I hear the bell has gone off, and I was just getting started, but I will relinquish to my hon. colleague from Edmonton-Whitemud.

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

DR. PERCY: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise to make my speech to the throne. As I thought about what I was going to say, having read the document, I cast my mind back to why I had run in the first place, why I guess many of us had run, and why the people of Edmonton-Whitemud had elected me, what were the salient issues, and how those issues fit in with the Speech from the

Throne. I think that in my case and I suspect in the case of many of those others that had run, the issues that dominated were the deficit and loan guarantees and a sense that somehow we had a government that was if not out of control clearly financially irresponsible. So when I now try and stand back and look at the throne speech and assess why I was elected and to what extent over the past year and a half things have changed and what role the opposition has played, what role the government has played, and then assess the speech, from my perspective it's both good news and bad news.

Overall what you do see is a clear move to an orderly elimination of the deficit, and it is worth noting, Mr. Speaker, that although that is part of the theme that runs through the Speech from the Throne, two parties had made a commitment to the Deficit Elimination Act and the orderly elimination of the deficit. So in that sense I look at what has been done in terms of direction of fiscal policy, and I must admit that I'm satisfied with the direction of fiscal policy in terms of the gradual elimination of the deficit.

On the other hand, though, when I asked if it is faster than it ought to be, if it is deeper and faster, there again I don't find specific reference to it. I find mention of the Deficit Elimination Act. I do find reference to the speed at which the deficit is being eliminated, but I don't find a clear statement that in fact the deficit is being eliminated faster than is set out under the Deficit Elimination Act.

I think that is a problem, and it brings me to something that I think is really missing from the Speech from the Throne. There are terms and expressions in the Speech from the Throne talking about performance based budgeting, outcome measurement, and the like, yet we've come a significant portion of the way without having those in place, Mr. Speaker. If you cut without knowing whether you're cutting flesh or bone, you can often amputate what you don't wish to, and you can't replace it once it's gone.

If you look at our education system and our health care system, I think it's fair to say that given the period of time in the '70s and early '80s when we had clearly more money than brains, we got a system of programs in place, a pattern of expenditures that really didn't serve Albertans well. It certainly didn't serve taxpayers well. We got a variety of programs that were really almost independent of those that they were serving and certainly independent of any objective review of performance.

When I look at the Speech from the Throne and ask to what extent we have seen a clear effort at prioritization, a real focus on performance based budgeting and outcome measurement, we're not there yet, Mr. Speaker, by any stretch of the imagination. We still do not know the costs of the cuts the way that we've implemented them, because we can't see what's happening to the various performance measures that we're going to focus on or outcome measurement, and I think that's a real cost.

Another issue that was not in the Speech from the Throne that I think is relevant – and this brings me, Mr. Speaker, to the study that I know the hon. Provincial Treasurer has disparaged somewhat, the paper by Warrack and McMillan from the Western Centre for Economic Research, which looks at where Alberta will be by the end of the Deficit Elimination Act in terms of the level of expenditures in per capita terms adjusted for inflation, real per capita expenditures. Their paper suggests that by the time we reach the target set out under the Deficit Elimination Act, the level of real per capita expenditures in this province will be somewhere in the neighbourhood of 27 to 29 percent below the all-province average.

Now, the all-province average itself, I think it's fair to say, is inflated by the fact that a number of the big-ticket provinces, Quebec and Ontario in particular, are running large deficits, so they are really financing today's consumption out of tomorrow's taxes. But regardless of the extent to which the all-province average in terms of per capita expenditures is too high because of deficit financing, it's not 27 percent too high relative to Alberta. So the issue is: do we have systems in place in our education system, our health care system, our advanced education system that will ensure that if we are 15 percent, just to pluck a figure out of thin air, below the all-province average, we can provide a quality of service that is consistent with what is being offered in other provinces? In the absence, then, of outcome measurement, performance based budgeting, it's not at all clear that we in fact will know whether or not we're competitive with other provinces in terms of the array of goods and services that Canadians expect their provincial governments to offer.

I think that's a vitally important point, because when firms come to a region, when individuals come to a region, they come because of tax advantages in terms of provincial taxes, no sales taxes, but they also come, Mr. Speaker, because of the quality of life, access to health care, the quality of the education system, and the ability of the education system to give their children a head start in a very competitive international environment. Those are the issues that I actually found lacking in the Speech from the Throne, because although we're cutting and we're cutting at a very rapid rate, we still do not know the longer term consequences. All we can do is look at benchmarks.

You know, it's misleading to look at expenditures in Alberta relative to expenditures in other jurisdictions, because you can't tell what you get just in terms of measurements and dollars. We don't yet have in place performance based measures, so we can't see what we're getting for the dollars that we're spending. All we see is the dollars that we're spending. If we do end up spending 15 to 20 percent less in real per capita terms than any other province, then there is a requirement on the part of government to ensure that the quality of services is at least comparable. So we have to be 20 percent more productive. In order to be 20 percent more productive, Mr. Speaker, we have to know how to design those programs and be able to highlight those areas where we're not providing the goods. That's why I think that when we look at what government is doing and the rapidity at which we're cutting, in the absence of benchmarks, performance based budgeting, I do have some concerns that that wasn't addressed in the provincial budget, because we don't know the medium to longer term consequences of these cuts.

I also look at this Speech from the Throne, Mr. Speaker, and I ask myself when I see references to, sort of, the flagship Bills that the government has proposed – they talk of the Taxpayer Protection Act, and they talk of the debt management plan. I see that these two Bills, Bill 1 and Bill 6, are substantively different than other Bills that we've seen in previous sessions. Whereas when you look at Bill 19, the Bills dealing with seniors, there was fundamental change being imposed on the provincial government despite what the opposition attempted to do by trying to improve the Bills. We saw that they were passed through closure. Those Bills did try and effect change but without any measurement of the consequences of that change.

8:30

When you look at Bill 1 and Bill 6, Mr. Speaker, although they're not referenced specifically in here – they're referred to in terms of the initiatives that the government is going to have –

they're different in the sense that they're quite shallow Bills. If you look, for example, at the Taxpayer Protection Act, that is a Bill that talks about sales taxes when no one else is talking about sales taxes. It doesn't include personal income taxes as a referendum issue. It doesn't in any way include protection for Albertans from other forms of taxes, whether they're health care premiums or user fees. It's a Bill that appears to be far more political in nature and in a sense superficially political than previous Bills that were passed in these sessions. Although one may disagree with the Bills that were passed in earlier sessions, one at least knew there was some structural focus to those Bills even if one disagreed violently with the structure that was being imposed.

If you look at Bill 1, that's not the case. This is a Bill that is superficial. If you look at Bill 6, the debt management plan, Mr. Speaker, it too is superficial. Any Bill that's called a debt retirement Bill which at the end of the day in the year 2021 still leaves you \$27 billion in debt with debt servicing charges of \$1.3 billion is not debt retirement, at least not where I come from. To use the analogy of paying off the mortgage, anyone in this House who has a mortgage and only pays off one-third of it and then goes to the bank and asks for title is going to be told to take a long hike off a very short pier. I think we're seeing in a sense now a shift from efforts of structural reformation, again without efforts at measuring the consequences, to a focus on Bills that are overtly more political in nature and really setting much more of an agenda for an election that lies down the road.

So I was disappointed in references, then, to Bills . . .

THE SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Stony Plain rising on a point of order.

**Point of Order
Recognizing a Member**

MR. WOLOSHTYN: Yes, Mr. Speaker. I just wanted to ask for clarification. I've been watching the member opposite. *Beauchesne* is very clear on this, that a member must rise in his place to speak. Is that correct, Mr. Speaker?

THE SPEAKER: Yes.

MR. WOLOSHTYN: Well, I think the last portion of his speech was null and void because the light on the fifth desk from the end was on, and that is, I believe, the hon. Member for Calgary-Buffalo's place and not the hon. Member from – gee, where would he be from? – Edmonton-Whitemud. So I'd ask, Mr. Speaker, that he be given the privilege of starting all over again so we get the right speech for the record.

DR. PERCY: But not at expense to my time, Mr. Speaker.

THE SPEAKER: Well, as long as the hon. Member for Edmonton-Whitemud can assure the Assembly he is in his place, he may continue.

DR. PERCY: I was projecting my voice to this speaker, Mr. Speaker.

Debate Continued

DR. PERCY: As I was saying, Mr. Speaker, I found, in part, the references to what the government has considered as flagship Bills to be I guess somewhat disconcerting, because I don't think the Bills have as much substance as some of the Bills passed in

previous sessions. As I say, although I disagreed with the substance of some of these Bills passed in the earlier sessions, at least there was meat to debate and they were less overtly political.

Now, there are references in here that I do find confusing, particularly with regards to our education system, because it talks about an education system that's responsive, that's quality driven, where there's control with parents, yet the boards still have autonomy. Yet, Mr. Speaker, when I look at what Bill 19 has generated, I see a system that has tended to become somewhat more centralized because the government has absorbed the property tax base that is used to finance education, and many boards do define their autonomy in terms of their control over the tax base.

There still are requirements that superintendents be vetted by the Minister of Education prior to being appointed. So, on one hand, we see more centralization. We still see Alberta Education going through, you know, constant curriculum renewal every year, imposing higher and higher costs on school boards who now, in some instances, have less money while other boards, because of fiscal equity, may have more but are still dealing with constant changes in curricula.

On the other hand, we now see the move to parent advisory councils, which will have more power. Although this may change from group to group or constituency to constituency, I found that in my constituency most parents did not want greater parental authority. They wished that the councils would be advisory in nature rather than having effective control. I'm quite willing to concede that that will vary from constituency to constituency, but at least where I came from, it's very clear that the parents are much more concerned with having input as opposed to control.

What I see emerging, Mr. Speaker, is that now you're going to have school boards that, on one hand, are constrained from above and are now in some instances really being constrained from below. I think the worst possible job in creation now would be to be on a school board. You have relatively few degrees of freedom in terms of what you can do, no access really to the funding base, and you may have a variety of parent councils nipping at your heels, focusing on issues which may not in fact be representative of what the district as a whole wishes. Now, there are ways of dealing with that. You know, charter schools are one mechanism for dealing with that.

I find that the references to education in here don't really focus on the reality now that is out there, particularly the reality that faces school boards. If it were, we wouldn't have the 17 to 19 suits facing the government that have been generated by school boards.

Again, it's clear that the health care system would have to be restructured, since it absorbs such a large share of provincial government funds. What we've observed, Mr. Speaker, is that, in part, hospitals now have been remarkably efficient in terms of turnaround and getting individuals out of hospitals, but we don't have the home care system in place to deal with them once they're out of the hospital. The largest number of calls that I get at the constituency office now are from people who have been fast-tracked out of hospital into a home where there's nothing there for them; the home care is not yet there. Now, the government can argue that that is a transition problem prior to the regional health boards taking power on April 1, but the reality is that this is a problem that was easily foreseen and could have been dealt with by ensuring that the home care system was in place.

There are also concerns that the emergence of these regional health boards, rather than leading to a seamless health care system where the dollars follow the patients, are going to lead to a

balkanized provincial health care system where there are walls that preclude the mobility of positions, where there are walls that preclude the mobility of patients, where hospitals will seek to keep money in their jurisdiction by offering services that could be better provided in larger urban centres or medium-sized urban centres.

So it's not clear to me, when I look at some of the changes that are emerging, Mr. Speaker, that one can speak of them in the glowing terms you see in the Speech from the Throne. I think there are real structural problems which are arising in our health care system, and it's not, as the government argues, the result of special interest groups pursuing their own ends. I think many of the health care professionals have one goal: treatment of patients in the most efficient, least cost manner. I think the fact that they're not serving on these boards and that these boards are not elected and accountable is doing everybody a disservice: the government, residents, and the health care system itself. So I was really disappointed, when looking at the Speech from the Throne, that there weren't references, then, to an elected and accountable system of regional health authorities.

I was also disappointed when I looked at the Speech from the Throne that, in terms of the discussions of taxes, the government has increased taxes. Health care premiums are a tax. We can fight over the definition of user fees. In some instances they are truly the cost of providing a service, and in some other instances I think they are much more a form of disguised taxation. It depends on the particular fee or levy that you're looking at. I think the government has relied extensively on user fees and other forms of levies and charges to increase revenues, so I think the continual focus that we've done it our way, done it on the expenditure side alone really isn't consistent with the evidence. I think it does the government a disservice to in a sense turn a blind eye to the increases in taxes that they have imposed.

8:40

One other area that does concern me, Mr. Speaker, is, as I mentioned earlier in my speech to the throne speech, that the Alberta advantage, in terms of attracting individuals, depends not only on provincial taxes but also depends on the quality of life, access to health care and education. As the government continues to download taxes onto municipalities, we are seeing sort of an array of differential taxes across jurisdictions in this province, and we are becoming far more balkanized now at the level of local government services. I think in a sense one hopes that just as the federal government ensures that this provision of services is to a common standard and provides transfers to ensure that that is accommodated, it behooves a provincial government to ensure that there is some homogeneity over the level of services provided across local government and that it's done through transfers, unrestricted block transfers to local government.

Businesses do find property taxes to be an important barrier to location. I know the Conference Board, in the 1994 study when they looked at the competitiveness of the petrochemical industry in Alberta – I was really shocked to find that they ranked us the least competitive in Canada. That was in large part because of the M and E. But we don't really see reference, then, to changes in those forms of taxation in here or what is going to be done with M and E and how that's going to be shifted, what we're going to do in terms of the allocation of property taxes, small business taxes, residential property taxes.

Let me just sort of summarize what I've said. I think there are some positive features to what the government has done. On the other hand, I think the process by which they have achieved those

results has imposed more cost than needed to have been imposed. I think, in fact, that my time has run out, so I will sit in my seat.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

THE SPEAKER: The hon. member for St. Paul. Sorry; Bonnyville.

MR. VASSEUR: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

MR. DAY: Good to see you, Leo.

MR. VASSEUR: Well, thank you.

MR. LANGEVIN: St. Paul would make a different speech.

MR. VASSEUR: Not much, Paul.

In the first part of the Speech from the Throne we refer back to "mandate for change," which came about after the 1993 election.

AN HON. MEMBER: Amazing.

MR. VASSEUR: Amazing because a part of that came out of our campaign literature, I'm sure. If you look, the first thing was to balance the provincial budget. And if we take a look at that statement and the direction we thought we should take with it, fiscal responsibility I think, it's basically the same words, just used a little differently. But in the process of balancing the provincial budget, there's certainly an expectation out there that that is going to be a difficult job to do. In Alberta, of all places, Albertans should expect nothing less than that happening, because if we take a look at the overall economy in Alberta and if we go back a good 20 years, we know that the economy has been very strong in Alberta. The problem with Alberta is that we started squandering money in the late '70s, when we had way too much of it. So to try to prove to Albertans that we're creating a miracle by balancing the budget, especially in a year like we've just had, where we've had excess revenues of \$1.2 billion that we didn't even anticipate a year ago – I think it's quite easily done.

The second item was to create the climate for wealth and jobs. Well, the creation of that climate – I honestly believe the climate was always here. There have been some ups and downs, but the climate in the agricultural community has always been there. It's been strong for the last 10 to 15 years in Alberta, and it's been on its way up.

The oil and gas sector. Previously we'd had some extremely good years. Unfortunately, in the mid-80s when the price of oil and gas went down, the government was way too slow reacting to the reality. Seven or eight years ago when I was knocking on doors, I was telling people that we're in a deficit in Alberta, and they didn't know that. So for seven or eight years in Alberta we were busy hiding all the mistakes we had done, and now we're bragging about how good we are. We've had an exceptionally good year in revenue from the oil patch.

The next issue here that they talk about is "to improve and streamline government." Again we should expect nothing less. In streamlining governments, we have to take a look at other jurisdictions and the number of people it takes to run the bureaucracy, run all the different departments. We know that in Alberta we are probably number one in the country as far as the number of bureaucrats within our system compared to any other jurisdiction. If I recall the numbers – and it's been a couple of years since I've seen those numbers – I believe we were in the high 20s

per 1,000 capita to run our government departments in Alberta. In B.C. with the bad NDPs running that government, they've only got 15 people per 1,000 population. Again this is not magic, trying to reach a reasonable number. To reach a number of 20 public servants per 1,000 population is probably where the number should have been to start off with, if we hadn't been squandering all the money that we thought we had.

In '93 there was a promise to continue to listen to Albertans. I know that on the government side they say that they continue to do that, but we have some different opinions about listening to Albertans. Did we really listen to Albertans when we cut kindergarten from 400 hours to 200 hours? Nowhere in the road show did Albertans tell them to do that. Yet this government chose to do that to save some \$25 million. Now, to save \$25 million in the system when we're educating our young people, when we're trying to start them out in a classroom doesn't really fit in well at all. In the Speech from the Throne it says, "My government's greatest concern is people." Well, what better way is there to prepare the children of our society to become reasonable adults later on than to start looking after them when they're young? Those are the formative years. You don't start at 18 years old or at 16 years old by throwing them in jail and throwing the key out the back door. You have to start when the kids are young. If we really want to believe the statement that's in here, we really believe we should reintroduce the 400 hours for kindergarten.

When we talk about absolutely no increase in taxation – the throne speech alludes to that again, that there is no tax increase – we have identified already that a health care premium is a tax. We have to recognize on this side of the House, too, that some of the areas that we are charging fees for – there is a reality to that and probably an acceptance by most Albertans. There is a big difference between a fishing licence and a health care premium. The fishing licence is a very small part of the whole fishing trip, especially if you're going there with a \$15,000 boat. If you can afford a fishing licence, you can afford the extra \$3 or \$5 that you're going to put on there as a fee, but that's not the same thing when you come to the Alberta health care premium. Some of these people can hardly put food on their table. This flat tax that we call the health care premium is a tax. It's an increment in tax, and as a matter of fact, it should not even exist as far as I'm concerned.

8:50

I'd like to just touch on one more issue. The government is starting the process now of listening to the community, so they tell us, about child welfare. In the throne speech it says that the

government "will restructure children's services," and there is no argument about that. I mean, we've been talking about community based child care or child welfare for a long time. I honestly believe that if it's overhauled properly, it's going to deliver a better system if it comes from within the community, but one thing really scares me about allowing some community groups in the delivery of child care services. There is some very critical delivery that's required that I'm afraid some of the community groups that are applying to do that are not qualified to do. The government had better listen to that.

If we talk about crisis intervention, for example, if we talk about people having to go to a home where there is a real struggle going on and a dangerous situation, the last place the police want to go to is a domestic squabble. Yet this government expects a neighbour to go in there and fix it. They expect a volunteer to look at that situation and fix it. In these changes we must make sure that the proper professional people are going to be responsible for crisis intervention. That's the biggest issue, I think, in child welfare delivery that must be maintained, and it has to be one of the criteria that are set out for those community groups in taking over that responsibility to make sure that it's done properly. I see some groups coming out of the communities that are probably very well meaning but don't have that capacity or don't even have that understanding of what that delivery is.

In conclusion, Mr. Speaker, I would like to allude again to the comments that were made on page 2 of the throne speech. It says, "Good health is a gift we must treasure." That's fine, but to be able to have good health, we have to treasure a good health care system, and I see too many things happening to it right now that really, really confuse me. There are all kinds of trial balloons going out right now without a definite plan, and if we talk to the people on the front lines, on the delivery lines, every day these people are more and more confused. They're the ones that are working in the hospitals and in the clinics. They're saying, "Tell us where the plan is." I think we've put the cart in front of the horses here in the restructuring. We should have had a plan for the regional people to go with so that we wouldn't have to redo it, because this is what we're going to have to do.

Thank you very much.

MR. DAY: Well, Mr. Speaker, the debate has been interesting as usual and obviously requires some time to fully assimilate the profundity of the expressions. Given that, I would ask that we stand adjourned.

[At 8:55 p.m. the Assembly adjourned to Tuesday at 1:30 p.m.]

