

Legislative Assembly of Alberta

Title: Wednesday, February 14, 1996 **8:00 p.m.**
 Date: 96/02/14
 [The Speaker in the Chair]

THE SPEAKER: Please be seated.

head: **Consideration of His Honour
 the Administrator's Speech**

Mr. Stelmach moved:

That an humble address be presented to His Honour the Administrator as follows:

To His Honour Mr. Justice J.W. McClung, the Administrator of the Province of Alberta:

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

THE SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Vegreville-Viking.

MR. STELMACH: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's an honour and a privilege to move acceptance of the Speech from the Throne which has opened our Fourth Session of the 23rd Legislature. I congratulate His Honour Justice McClung on his presentation. I would like to mention – and this is based on some very good information – that Justice McClung has spent some time in the area of Viking and has hunted from time to time and really enjoyed it.

I also commend His Honour the Lieutenant Governor for the very dignified manner in which he represents Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II in Alberta, and I'm also sure that I represent all of my colleagues when I express my hope that His Honour will be blessed with a speedy recovery.

As a member of this government I strongly support the direction taken in the throne speech. This is the year we will balance the budget, a goal that Albertans asked us to achieve in the last election. While reducing operating expenditures by first attacking administration and eliminating overlap and duplication of programs, we have witnessed improvement in many of the health and education delivery services and in agriculture, three areas that are extremely important to my constituents.

Let me talk about health first. Physicians in Vegreville-Viking have indicated that streamlining that has occurred in the Capital region with respect to treatment of trauma has reduced the waiting time to access specialists and has enhanced emergency treatment. This is a very positive response indeed, Mr. Speaker.

Changes in health have created new partnerships as well. Most notably in my constituency there has been co-ordination between RHAs, voluntary organizations, and community groups.

Health in many ways is a community undertaking. When the Premier visited the Lamont health centre early in the month of January, he witnessed firsthand the re-establishment of acute care services after the devastating fire that destroyed the hospital in early May. He was also informed of another unique program. The Lamont health centre, a voluntary organization, has acquired the services of an ophthalmologist from Sherwood Park to conduct a lens implant program, offering better access for the senior population in my constituency. Seniors and others are now able to drive to Lamont from Bonnyville, Lloydminster, and Viking as opposed to driving to a large city for surgery, which would be

much more stressful. The equipment was purchased, Mr. Speaker, not by government or by the RHA but from community sources and donations. The centre is now in discussion with an orthopedic surgeon to operate out of their hospital. Together with the co-operation of the RHA and the community the board is in the planning process of an innovative community health centre that would provide all services in treatment, prevention, and therapy.

As I mentioned before, even though the health budgets were reduced, health service delivery was maintained or improved. For example, cardiovascular surgery continued to increase from 1,342 performed in '91-92 to 1,695 performed in '94-95. Joint replacements increased from 2,473 in '92-93 to 2,848 in '94-95, and MRI testing increased from 6,851 in '91-92 to 15,664 in '94-95. These were all done in the public clinics. Again, these increases in services were made possible by directing administration savings to frontline services. [interjections]

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

The hon. Member for Vegreville-Viking.

MR. STELMACH: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. As with any changes, there are areas that require monitoring and adjustment. The Premier has announced an additional \$10 million to address waiting list backlogs caused by increased demand in the previously mentioned services.

There is good news in the throne speech for education as well. On his tour of Vegreville-Viking the Premier visited the Andrew school, a kindergarten to grade 12 school with an enrollment of approximately 230 students. Since the school is rather isolated in the jurisdiction, with this small enrollment, students depend extensively on distance learning to offer a full complement of courses. While speaking to the students, the Premier congratulated them on exceeding the provincial average on all of the provincial achievement tests in grades 3, 6, and 9. Mr. Speaker, this accomplishment was done without exempting any students from writing. Investing in the use of more technology in the school will further enhance their pursuit of excellence.

Mr. Speaker, I would also like to address the Alberta advantage that we enjoy throughout the province, particularly with respect to agriculture. Alberta led the country as the nation's top agriculture-producing province for the first nine months of 1995. Farm cash receipts of that period put Alberta on top, with even Ontario trailing behind for the first time since Confederation. As a result, Alberta will certainly set a new record with estimates showing receipts at around \$5.86 billion.

Alberta farmers and producers are taking a very entrepreneurial approach to the very traditional industry. Members of this industrious group are taking advantage of potential markets in Asia and the Pacific Rim. As you know, Mr. Speaker, that part of the world is witnessing a demographic revolution. With a population of over 1 billion people, a declining land base, a dwindling capacity for production, and rising incomes Pacific Rim countries, particularly Japan but including Malaysia, Indonesia, and Korea, are looking to Canada and Alberta for processed products, and Alberta farmers and food processors are responding.

Opportunities in these global markets are numerous. Most notably there are honey exports, pork and pork products, frozen potato hash brown patties for Japan. There is a potential for a tenfold increase in potato product processing alone.

Clearly these examples show that Alberta producers are working hard to take advantage of the opportunities in emerging markets. They also show that the agriculture industry is contributing to the Alberta advantage. As a result of these initiatives and other similar ones, agriculture is on track and becoming a \$20 billion industry in this province, and with my government's fine-tuning of the Alberta international export strategy and creation of one-stop business information services, this important industry is certain to keep growing.

Along with the entrepreneurial spirit, research and development and technology transfer are two of the driving forces behind our highly productive agriculture and food industry. There have been significant results in research that have generated immense benefits for Alberta.

Mr. Speaker, because of these advancements in research and technology in soil and water conservation, summer fallow acreage in this province has decreased by over 30 percent. Minimum and zero tillage research is one of the biggest contributors to this conservation. The use of new farming practices such as low disturbance direct seeding is increasing, and these practices result in energy savings and reduce the risk of soil erosion. I am proud to say that Alberta leads the country in researching and implementing these conservation tactics.

8:10

I am also proud to say that applying new technology to an established industry such as agriculture and food processing is part of the Alberta advantage. I say this because we use technology transfer and research and development in pursuing our province's economic goals and social well-being. We are witnessing the partnering of producers, researchers, and innovators that will ensure the well-being of Alberta for future generations.

In the coming year Alberta faces a 22 percent reduction in transfer payments from the federal government. Having taken action to balance our budget by eliminating our deficit and reducing our net debt, our government commits to protecting Alberta's health, social services, and postsecondary education programs from this \$342 million reduction.

As we forge ahead with new initiatives in all areas in our province, it is important to remember the early settlers. Pioneers who were risk-takers ventured into an unknown land with a harsh climate to begin a new life. After breaking land to produce foods, they proceeded to build communities, hospitals, schools, and roads. During this period many suffered early death from illness, disease, or accident with no medical services available. Before government got involved, volunteer organizations stepped up to build hospitals and schools. We all must remember that all of the programs, services, rights, and privileges we enjoy today are a result of the hard work, perseverance, and commitment of our forefathers, the pioneers that put this province in a position to offer these services and consequently assured us a position to prosper.

Mr. Speaker, it is incumbent on all of us not to forget the sacrifice but to ensure that we keep producing in a way that will perpetuate our precious resources and that we preserve and maintain our health and education services for our children and our children's children.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

THE SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Calgary-McCall.

MR. SHARIFF: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It is a great honour to rise in this House today to second the motion my colleague from

Vegreville-Viking has put forth, that the Speech from the Throne be accepted.

As you all know, this was the first time I've participated as an MLA at a throne speech. I am pleased that I was able to witness this special occasion, and I would like to compliment His Excellency the Lieutenant Governor's representative, Justice McClung, for carrying out this duty on behalf of the Lieutenant Governor.

May I also add that I was very honoured to have been sworn in as an MLA by His Excellency the Lieutenant Governor. I wish the Lieutenant Governor well, and I pray that he has a speedy recovery.

Mr. Speaker, I also wish to take this opportunity to pay my compliments to the Premier for his commitment, dedication, and perseverance to improving the quality of life of all Albertans. His wisdom, his commitment to incorporate Albertans' feedback, and his caring personality have all contributed to a dynamic team of hardworking representatives who listen to the views of Albertans and put them to action. I am indeed proud to represent the constituents of Calgary-McCall on this team led by the Premier.

As you all will have noted, the Speech from the Throne indicated that the coming session will focus on six areas:

- quality and accessible health care,
- effective and equitable education,
- more economic growth and jobs,
- responsible financial and program management,
- secure and self-reliant communities, and
- a strong Alberta in a strong and united Canada.

Mr. Speaker, since being elected to office, I have held several forums at which I have sought feedback. One of the questions I have asked is: in your opinion what are the top five issues confronting Albertans today? The top three responses have consistently been health, education, and employment and economic prosperity. I am honoured to note that the top three issues identified by the residents of Calgary-McCall are being addressed by this government. I look forward to working with this responsible team to address the challenges confronting all Albertans, and in doing so, I hope to meet all the needs identified by the hardworking, law-abiding citizens of Whitehorn, Falconridge, Castleridge, Coral Springs, Saddleridge, Martindale, and Taradale communities that make up Calgary-McCall.

Mr. Speaker, this year will be a time for reflection, a time to look at the accomplishments that we have made and to look at what needs work or adjusting. To use the Premier's analogy, now that the house is renovated, we need to arrange the furniture so that our living space is safe and comfortable. This will include smoothing out the rough edges made by the cuts to health care.

Consequently, Albertans' access to the health care system will improve. The health care system will be fine-tuned to keep it current, responsible, and affordable. This is something my constituents have repeatedly expressed their concern over. They have told me that they want value for their health care dollar, and at the same time they want service and reliability. They want to know that when they are sick or hurt, they will get the treatment they need.

Throughout the redesigning of the health care delivery model, Albertans have been able to get the care they need. I hope we will be improving the quality and accessibility of our system as well as making it more accountable. These efficiencies will be facilitated through the additional \$93 million extra funding that the regional health authorities will receive as a result of the cancellation of the last round of health care cuts. Health care is everyone's priority. I hope we have eliminated overlap and duplication without sacrificing quality or access.

Mr. Speaker, when we are done, we hope to have a first-class health care system, as pointed out in the throne speech. We will have a health care system which will be able to meet our needs, and it will also have the flexibility to meet the needs of generations to follow. Most importantly, it will have been developed without borrowing their inheritance; I mean the debt.

8:20

The Speech from the Throne has also reaffirmed this government's commitment to monitor changes to ensure that Albertans get quality services at a price we can afford. For example, on November 27, 1995, I had arranged a forum at Bishop McNally high school in the Falconridge community of Calgary-McCall on the topic: the future of quality education in our province. The participants included teachers, principals, parent council members, community association leaders, school trustees, as well as citizens from throughout the Calgary-McCall constituency. This group of concerned citizens identified several issues that I took note of. However, the top two issues in the education sector were funding for special needs and funding for 400 hours of ECS. Mr. Speaker, I'm convinced that it is this type of feedback from Albertans that resulted in our government's reinstatement of full funding for ECS.

I want to thank those committed educators, parents, and concerned citizens who have partnered through dialogues such as our forum in Calgary-McCall to improve the monitoring process. Mr. Speaker, these examples are proof that this government not just listens but continues to listen to Albertans. We listened, we re-evaluated our position, and we changed our policy to address the concerns of the people of this province.

Some of the other initiatives the government will be undertaking to make our province a better place include maintaining benefits to seniors and freezing health care premiums at the current level. As we work to improve our priority programs in education, justice, the environment, social services, and programs for seniors, we are building on the Alberta advantage, the reason that people want to do business in our province, and it's working. With over 100,000 new jobs for Albertans created over the last three years, we are well ahead of our goal of 110,000 new jobs by the end of 1996, a goal set in early 1993. We'll continue to promote and refine our strategy to create a business climate that will secure jobs now and in the future. I am pleased to advise the House that, just as I speak, NorTel is building a plant in my constituency that will create some 200 new jobs this summer. Mr. Speaker, that is the Alberta advantage.

The unity question was referred to in the throne speech. As a province Alberta is one of 12 contributors who make up our diverse nation. Every province is unique and its people distinct from each other, whether it be in culture or language. Newfoundland is as different from Alberta as Quebec is different from Ontario. However, despite our differences, we unite as Canadians to celebrate our similarities and share our pride in our home and our people. Mr. Speaker, when the Canadian Confederation was launched 128 years ago, there were grave doubts that it would last. In some parts that doubt persists even today. Those doubts are due to a lack of confidence and pride in our nation and its people. Albertans have that confidence. Albertans have that pride. Albertans have no such doubts about the future of our country; for that matter, neither does this government. Our country is one worth keeping, and this government is committed to promoting respect and equality between provinces. Albertans want a strong Alberta, and a strong Alberta can exist best in a strong and stable Canada, a united Canada.

Mr. Speaker, fiscally we are well ahead of schedule, partly due to higher expected revenues and partly due to realistic estimates. It is also due to the work of Albertans, who have made sacrifices, changed their standard of living, and helped us find a new and better way of governing. As a government we have a responsibility to continue to search for more effective and more efficient ways of doing business. This includes reworking the management of the Alberta heritage savings trust fund and limiting government's involvement in providing loans and guarantees to businesses.

At the same time, we will still be looking for better ways to attract business to our province. Investment is a key part of the Alberta advantage. Mr. Speaker, for each billion dollars of new investment we attract, \$30 million in annual provincial tax revenues will be generated through thousands of new jobs. Our deregulation initiatives, which will make it easier for companies to do business, will also attract businesses. A one-stop information source will make it easier for potential investors to find out what the Alberta advantage can do for them.

Mr. Speaker, I was elected 10 months ago by Albertans who had seen the direction that our government was moving towards. They did not just vote on an election promise but upon seeing those promises being kept. My constituency remain satisfied with their decision, and they have not been disappointed. We just keep doing what we said we would. Above all else, we in government have a responsibility to do just that, and this is a government that keeps its word and listens to its constituents.

Mr. Speaker, on behalf of my constituents I welcome the direction that the government has presented to us in yesterday's Speech from the Throne. The Member for Vegreville-Viking has my support for his motion to accept the Speech from the Throne.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

THE SPEAKER: The hon. Leader of the Opposition.

MR. MITCHELL: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Tonight I would like to take my opportunity to respond to the Speech from the Throne, to present in the Legislature our Speech to the Throne, which I presented first last night at the McKay Avenue school, the site of the first Alberta Legislative Assembly. This Speech to the Throne is our opportunity to tell all Albertans what we, Alberta's Official Opposition, intend to do in the legislative session that is now upon us. It is also an opportunity for us to show Albertans that there is a better future than the one presented by this government, that there is a better way to reach our common goals, that we are a government in waiting. [interjections]

THE SPEAKER: Order. Order.

8:30

MR. MITCHELL: Over the past year we have listened to the people of Alberta. All members of this caucus have traveled throughout the province. [interjections] We have listened . . .

THE SPEAKER: Hon. members, please, order. [interjections] Order.

The hon. Leader of the Opposition.

MR. MITCHELL: We have listened, and most importantly we have heard the people of Alberta. We have heard their concerns, their ideas, and their vision of what this province can be, and the policies that we will present to the people of Alberta reflect what we have heard. What we have heard is that the people of this province are uneasy. They are concerned about the actions the

government has taken. They want again to feel that they are in control, that they are masters of their own future. They are tired of a single focus, where every action is measured against the bottom line. Albertans want to be masters, not servants, of provincial budgets.

What we have heard is that people want a stop to the politics of division. In their book *Trojan Horse* the authors accurately describe this destructive trend. Following tradition, Alberta once again is seeking out enemies. This time, however, the focus is on the enemy within. Alberta Liberals believe there is no enemy within, that all Albertans are entitled to a voice in their government, and that no one voice should be heard over others. Alberta Liberals believe in the power of the individual. Alberta Liberals believe in the power of the free marketplace. Alberta Liberals also believe there is a role for government in providing everyone with an opportunity to prosper. Alberta Liberals believe that those opportunities grow in a safe and caring community in which to work and to raise our families.

The community of Alberta. What is community? We live in many communities: our family, our town, our province, our church, our workplace. Big or small these communities are held together by a sense of what is good, by tolerance and honesty, by treating others with fairness and dignity. Our communities are held together by a commitment to democracy and a belief in a better tomorrow. These are values that bind us. Working together, pooling our energy and our resources, we can all be better off. We've proven it by building what were once the finest schools and hospitals and what was once a quality of life among the highest in the world.

But this way of life is under attack. Unthinking budget cuts, unplanned changes, and the reckless pursuit of a political agenda are destroying communities and eroding the very values that have served us all so well. It is time to stop. There is a better way, a way that challenges our ingenuity, restores our communities, and fulfills the promise of a better Alberta. It is also time for us in the Alberta Liberal caucus to build upon our ideas and our policies which will give Albertans a choice. We have begun to do that.

Health care we can trust. We have begun to present our ideas on what Alberta's health care system should look like and will look like under an Alberta Liberal government. It will be a health care system with equal emphasis on health and caring. It will be a system in which all Albertans from every corner of this province will be treated equally. It will be a system where care providers, the professionals and the nonprofessionals alike, will be treated fairly and equitably, and they will be treated with the respect . . .

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

Point of Order Questioning a Member

MR. HAVELOCK: Actually, *Beauchesne* 482, Mr. Speaker. I'm wondering if the hon. Leader of the Opposition would entertain a question.

MR. MITCHELL: No, I wouldn't, Mr. Speaker. I'm trying to present this speech, and I want to get on with it.

Debate Continued

MR. MITCHELL: They will be treated with the respect they deserve. It will be a system easily accessible to all. Simply, it will be a health care system we all can trust.

That health care system will be based on the principles of accessibility, quality, and continuity of care. It will be an accountable and affordable system based upon the following. Regional health authorities will be accountable to the people they serve by being elected by the people they serve, but they will not be given the power to tax. Facility fees for so-called private clinics will be eliminated. A two-tiered system is not only unfair; it costs our economy much more than a well-managed, properly funded public system . . .

THE SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Cypress-Medicine Hat is rising on a point of order.

Point of Order Questioning a Member

DR. L. TAYLOR: *Beauchesne* 482. I'm wondering if the hon. member would entertain a question just at the end of his speech.

MR. MITCHELL: No, Mr. Speaker. I want to get through this speech, and I'm actually surprised that the Speaker would recognize somebody in this Chamber, when we're sitting as the Assembly, who doesn't wear a tie.

Debate Continued

MR. MITCHELL: . . . and properly co-ordinated home care system which does not download the costs of drugs and equipment on patients as soon as they leave hospital, a provincewide, fully integrated and fully-funded ambulance system which would include a 911 response number in every corner of this province.

Mr. Speaker, would you like me to sit down while you continue the conversation with the member from Medicine Hat? Thank you.

We will implement a fair and stable system of funding based on population and needs. Liberals will fund health care based on people, not institutions. We will establish a health care advocate who will have the power to investigate and monitor the actions of regional health authorities and who will report to the people of Alberta through the Legislative Assembly and not to the minister. Above all, Liberals will reflect the principles and the spirit of the Canada Health Act. To ensure this, Mr. Speaker, I have introduced as our first Bill this session Bill 201, the Alberta Health Care Entitlement and Accountability Act. This Bill will guarantee the right of each and every Albertan to basic health care service and will ensure that the government is held accountable for providing that service efficiently.

We believe in an accountable, publicly funded, well-managed health care system. A health care system we can trust is not a privilege. It is not a luxury to be cut and remolded at the whim of a minister. It is a reflection of our values. A health care system we can trust is based on the values that we share as Albertans, values such as compassion and respect. It is a fundamental building block of a caring community.

8:40

Education that works for all Albertans. Another equally important product of those shared values is an education system that works. Our future as a prosperous community, our future as a vibrant economic entity will be increasingly based upon a progressive and sound education system. An education system under a Liberal government will give our children the well-rounded background they need today to compete in the emerging global economy of tomorrow. Our education system will feature

properly funded programs from kindergarten to grade 12. A Liberal government would never, ever attack the foundations of our children's future for political reasons. The goal of a Liberal government will be to implement 475 hours of kindergarten instruction for the children who are our future, because it does make a difference. We will mandate school boards to offer the full kindergarten program, but we will give parents the choice to participate or not. We will ensure our schools are properly financed and equipped to meet the demands of the new century.

DR. WEST: Regardless of whether we have the money or not.

MR. MITCHELL: It is not enough to ensure . . . [interjections]

THE SPEAKER: Order. Order, hon. members.

The hon. Leader of the Opposition.

MR. MITCHELL: This from the minister of transportation, who voted for nine consecutive deficit budgets, Mr. Speaker. This from the Treasurer, who voted for nine consecutive deficit budgets. These are the people who mortgaged the future of our children, and now they're asking our children to pay it off by taking away their education. Twenty-six billion dollars worth of deficit budgets voted on by this smug and cocky Treasurer.

It is not enough to ensure every school in the province is connected to the Internet. It is far more critical to have enough computers in schools to ensure our children, our students, have adequate access. We believe that the ratio of one computer . . . [interjections]

Speaker's Ruling Decorum

THE SPEAKER: Order. Order. Hon. members on both sides, it's the Leader of the Opposition who has the floor. It isn't each of you on each side having the floor or six or eight of you on each side having the floor; it's the Leader of the Opposition.

Debate Continued

MR. MITCHELL: We believe that the ratio of one computer for every three students in high school and one computer for every six students in elementary is a reasonable goal. The costs of catching up with the rest of Canada in classroom technology will not come cheaply. The cost of not catching up with the rest of Canada will be much, much higher, Mr. Speaker. We believe this is a laudable and affordable goal, and we will ensure that there will be ongoing service and upgrading of this program through a technology endowment fund.

The Treasurer's children don't have to worry about computers, Mr. Speaker, because the Treasurer is a very, very privileged individual in this society and he can afford them for his children, but there are many children in this society who do not have that kind of privilege and need to have the equality of opportunity that this program will afford.

Mr. Speaker, the fund will be created with a onetime cash injection from portions of the sale of the province's holdings of Vencap. This \$70 million fund should yield enough money annually to upgrade and modernize classroom technology and educational software.

We will not abandon our goals of returning education funding to a formula where it will be less of a burden on property owners and more of a responsibility of the provincial government. We believe the government should be more responsible for education

funding and property owners less so. Municipalities must have greater latitude to lower the tax burden on property owners and to concentrate on the infrastructure of our cities, towns, and rural municipalities.

We believe the government cannot abandon its responsibility for advanced education. Alberta's universities and colleges should be considered some of our most valuable intellectual and economic assets, not a drain on the public purse or a luxury. We should set long-term participation rates as a goal for the success of our institutions, create postsecondary institutions with an emphasis on research, cap tuition fees at a reasonable level.

DR. L. TAYLOR: They're already reasonable, Grant.

MR. MITCHELL: Then cap them.

Education is a lifelong pursuit. It will begin with comprehensive kindergarten and can continue throughout a person's life.

Our social covenant. Education works when children are in a position to learn. We will implement a targeted provincewide school breakfast program in partnership with community groups and the business community which will help those children in need to receive the nourishment to learn. The school breakfast program is not just a social program. It is an education program, and just as important, it is an investment in our long-term economic future.

THE SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Calgary-Mountain View rising on a point of order.

Point of Order Questioning a Member

MR. HLADY: Yes, Mr. Speaker. I was wondering if the Leader of the Opposition would entertain a question tomorrow since he won't do one today.

THE SPEAKER: Order. That is not a point of order.

Debate Continued

MR. MITCHELL: The school breakfast program is not just a social program. It is an education program, and just as important, it is an investment in our long-term economic future. It is one of the programs which will help break down the cycle of poverty which far too many Alberta children are trapped in. This cycle of poverty begins before a child is born and far too often continues throughout their life. Any attempt to break the cycle from prenatal stage forward is worthy of our consideration. Programs such as automatic forgiveness of school fees for low-income families, continued funding for community-based agencies who provide nutritional support and information for pregnant women and for young families who need help: you should be interested in that. All these things will contribute to the health of our communities. [interjections] You can laugh about that, but you should be very interested in that.

The people of this province must be free to pursue their interests, to build their careers and their businesses without the threat of financial ruin because of illness or injury and the catastrophic health costs which go with a private health care system. They must be free to pursue profits and growth in their own endeavours without the constant worry about the quality of their children's education. They should be able to step off the endless treadmill of fund-raising for their communities or for their children's schools or for their health care system.

The volunteer spirit in Alberta is great. It is one of the things which makes this province a wonderful place in which to live.

MR. HLADY: Finally I agree.

8:50

MR. MITCHELL: Then you'll agree with the next statement. This volunteer spirit is being taxed to the point of breaking. The demands for time and money on volunteers across the province are increasing with no end in sight, and while these people who understand community values are dedicating hundreds of thousands of hours of volunteer time chasing down a dwindling amount of money, our provincial government is pulling the rug out from beneath them.

Our provincial government – and the Member for Olds-Didsbury will be very interested to hear this – which should be supporting this incredible volunteer effort is undermining it with its own addiction to video slot machines. VLTs are wrong. They are an addiction-creating machine which has no place in this province. We as a community have come to an accommodation regarding gambling. Charity-based casinos, lotteries, and raffles supply money to fund worthwhile community endeavours and should continue to do so. VLTs supply an obscene windfall profit to an addicted government which is bent on increasing their availability. The Liberal caucus will continue to fight to have them removed from this province.

Today I introduced Bill 202, the lotteries amendment Act. This Bill, when passed, will eliminate all VLTs from the province by the end of 1999. The removal of all VLTs and finally putting an end to any discussion of the introduction of Las Vegas type for-profit casinos is part of our promise to the people of this province to return a higher level of integrity to government.

Integrity in government. Integrity in government comes in many forms, but underlying it is the sense of what is right and what is wrong. Is it right to make a highly addictive form of gambling widely available? No, it is not. Is it right to continue to supply millions of dollars in shaky loans and loan guarantees through the Alberta Treasury Branches based on political affiliation? No, it is not. Is it right to continually use budget projections for purely political reasons? No, it is not, Mr. Speaker. Grossly underestimating revenues by a billion dollars a year for two consecutive years in order to pursue a political agenda is wrong. It is dishonest, and it will stop under a Liberal government. The Treasurer was only out by a billion and a half dollars this year. Can't add. His predecessor couldn't add, and he can't add.

It is time for the people of Alberta to be able to have some faith in their government, to be able to believe what they are being told, and integrity in government means allowing the people of Alberta to have freedom to access the information that is important to them without having to pay for it. We will continue to fight for real and meaningful changes to the Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act, an Act which was born out of Liberal policy and brought to life by the Liberals.

Liberals will once again lead the way in putting integrity into government through changes to the way we as politicians conduct ourselves. [interjections] I know that this is a sensitive issue, Mr. Speaker, for this government. There remains a cloud of uncertainty over government officials and their ethical behaviour at the very highest levels. In the eyes of the public, politicians must avoid conflict of interest and the perception of conflict of interest. We will support the recommendations of the integrity in

government panel, and we will bring in our own legislation to deal with the perception of fairness in the halls of this Legislature.

We will introduce a Bill which will require the registration of all paid lobbyists and all those who are paying them. We will introduce the conflict of interest amendment Act, which will extend the period between the time a cabinet minister or senior civil servant leaves public office and when they can do business with the department. Our Bill will hold senior public servants up to the same standards as those of elected officials. It will expand the investigation procedures of the Ethics Commissioner. The people of Alberta demand nothing less.

We must be more accountable, and we must always work on behalf of the people of this province, even if it is not in our own self-interest. That is why this Liberal caucus continues to support the reduction of the number of members of our Legislature. In the past we have introduced a Bill to reduce the number of members. We will introduce Bill 206, the Recall Act, which would allow the people of Alberta to petition the Legislative Assembly to recall any member of this Legislature. Recall will make this Assembly much more accountable to the people of Alberta at all times. Accountability means actually listening to the people of Alberta, especially those whose voices are often the faintest.

Support for seniors. Alberta seniors are one such group. Seniors in this province have been branded yet another special interest group by the present government. Seniors are not a special interest; they are a human interest. Every human being is either a senior or will become a senior. One of the particular things that is special about seniors is how we should treat them. They deserve to be treated with respect, they deserve to be guaranteed a minimum standard of living, and they deserve to live out their years in relative comfort confident that the health care system they helped to build will be there when they need it. We will pursue these goals because we believe it is the right thing to do, and Albertans agree with us in ever increasing numbers.

Fiscal responsibility. Albertans have always agreed with us about bringing fiscal responsibility to government. For the past 10 years it has been Liberals in this province who have led the charge against deficit financing, against government intervention into private business. The deficits have finally stopped, and there is some slowdown in the amount of public money that makes its way into private business. But fiscal responsibility, as we see it, has not been achieved in Alberta. Fiscal responsibility means making responsible choices with tax dollars. Fiscal responsibility to Liberals means treating every tax dollar with the respect that it deserves. It means dealing with our debt in a realistic and aggressive way. The Liberal plan – Mr. Speaker, did you see that? I'd like you to see that sign.

SOME HON. MEMBERS: What sign?

MR. MITCHELL: The sign that the Member for Medicine Hat, who is now lying about it, just showed me. I'd like you to see it. It's appalling. It's appalling.

THE SPEAKER: Order. The Chair has to intervene with respect to the word that the hon. Leader of the Opposition used there.

MR. MITCHELL: I'd just like to say, Mr. Speaker: ask him directly whether he was holding up a sign and see what he says. Tell us what it is, Lorne.

9:00

THE SPEAKER: You know, it's not up to the Chair to make that inquiry. The Chair didn't see it, but if the hon. member was holding up a sign, he should not be holding up a sign. He should behave according to the rules.

MR. MITCHELL: And maybe the hon. member will have the courage to tell you what sign it was, because he said, "What sign?" when you asked him if there was sign. Hold up the sign, Lorne, and demonstrate to him what it was. He's pretty courageous. I bet you he was equally courageous in grade 7, Mr. Speaker. Very, very juvenile. Very juvenile.

Mr. Speaker, fiscal responsibility means dealing with our debt in a realistic and aggressive way. The Liberal plan, called 2020 Vision, will use a legislated annual debt repayment schedule which would commence on April 1 this year and would completely retire the province's debt by the year 2020. Based on realistic fiscal projections, 2020 Vision allows the flexibility to accelerate payments if we are blessed with windfall oil and gas revenues. Unlike the present government's plan, 2020 Vision will leave Albertans completely debt free in the next century.

Fiscal responsibility means cutting political ties with Alberta's financial tools: the heritage savings trust fund, Alberta Treasury Branches, and the Alberta Opportunity Company. These institutions have been hobbled by political interference for years, and confidence in their ability to act for the people of Alberta has never been lower. The Liberal caucus intends to make their independence a priority, and in the case of the Treasury Branches and the Alberta Opportunity Company, they will no longer be used as tools of political patronage and as avenues for the continuing practice of questionable loan practices, loan guarantees. These are examples of fiscal responsibility, and as you will see, these will be a priority for us in the upcoming session: fiscal responsibility, integrity in government, and creating a community with care.

I have identified health and education as two of the key elements of that caring community. Another is the workplace, our engines of growth. Liberals believe our greatest economic resource is the people of Alberta. We believe the role of government is to create an environment which will unshackle the potential of Albertans.

Alberta Liberals have always believed the backbone of our economy is small business. In the past we have proposed a tax break for small business. We stand by that but also believe that if there is to be a tax cut, government's priorities should be a tax cut for each and every Albertan. Sometimes governments make small business big business, Mr. Speaker, just like Bovar.

We believe working Albertans deserve a decent wage. We would introduce an annual review of the level of minimum wage to ensure people are receiving a living wage.

Liberals recognize the shifting reality of the workplace. Albertans are national leaders in developing new working relationships, and therefore we must offer adequate legal recognition and protection for home-based business and workers in nontraditional roles.

We will protect workers who feel they must speak out to protect the public. We will introduce Bill 203, the whistleblower Act, which would allow workers to speak out in the interests of the public and expose government negligence or abuse.

All of these things are designed to make the workplace more efficient, more profitable, and an integral part of our community.

Respect for the environment. An integral part of that community is our natural environment. This may sound redundant to most Albertans, but this province is blessed with natural beauty. We must never lose sight of that. In the upcoming session we will urge the government to aggressively pursue the principles of Special Places 2000. We will ask for a comprehensive review of the development in Kananaskis Country, and we will introduce Bill 215, which will allow access to the Crown grazing leases for people on foot but limit vehicles to designated roads.

Alberta Liberals support meaningful management plans to protect the quality and quantity of water. We recognize that the real limit to growth in the southern half of this province is not oil, nor is it gas, nor is it money, but it is water. We support a policy that grants future supply for our food producers and domestic users at the same time as preserving our natural economy and environment. We support an independent audit of the management of our provincial forests in order to ensure that we are not destroying our long-term interests for short-term gain. An exciting new initiative by this caucus and the Liberal Party in identifying the value of our natural assets is the Canadian Rockies ecosystem land use policy. This policy will be designed to strike a balance between the need to protect the ecosystem for wildlife populations and the need for Albertans and visitors to enjoy recreation opportunities in the Rockies and our Eastern Slopes.

Celebrating human diversity. As we celebrate our natural diversity, we will embrace human diversity and equality with the same vigour. This might be of interest to several of the people in that backbench. Liberals will create an independent and effective human rights commission which will have the ability to initiate its own investigations. We will make the necessary changes to the Individual's Rights Protection Act which would ensure that all Albertans are treated equally.

All these things contribute to our single overriding goal: to build a community that cares and a community that we care about. Creating this community is not a dream outside our grasp. It is affordable today and into the future. We have calculated the costs of reaching our goals and find the total well within the means of the government of Alberta, given today's revenue projection; in other words, without raising taxes. All we need to do to create this community is to come together as Albertans to fight the politics of division imposed upon us by that government.

Earlier I talked about the description of the present government as one searching for enemies within. Those enemies don't exist within the Alberta that my colleagues and I see today and into the future. There are only Albertans, hardworking people who ask only three things from their political leadership: integrity, respect for their hard-earned tax dollars, and two-way communication.

We in the Liberal caucus, Mr. Speaker, have done our part over the past number of years and will continue to act in our role as opposition aggressively and honestly. But we also look forward to the beginning of this legislative session where we will show Albertans that we are ready, able, and willing to step in and to lead the people of this province into the next century.

THE SPEAKER: The hon. Minister of Justice and Attorney General.

MR. EVANS: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It's been an interesting first day, and accordingly I would now move that the Assembly adjourn.

[At 9:10 p.m. the Assembly adjourned to Thursday at 1:30 p.m.]

