

Legislative Assembly of Alberta

Title: **Wednesday, May 1, 1996**

1:30 p.m.

Date: 96/05/01

[The Deputy Speaker in the Chair]

head: **Prayers**

THE DEPUTY SPEAKER: Let us pray.

Our Father, we thank You for Your abundant blessings to our province and ourselves.

We ask You to ensure to us Your guidance and the will to follow it.

Amen.

Please be seated.

head: **Presenting Petitions**

THE DEPUTY SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Meadowlark.

MS LEIBOVICI: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It gives me pleasure this afternoon to once again present petitions that urge that there be no more cuts to rehabilitation services in the Capital health region, in particular to the Glenrose hospital because these cuts would erode that hospital as a world-class facility. Even the World Health Organization identifies rehabilitation as the restoration of an individual disabled by disease, injury, or congenital abnormality to an optimum state of medical, social, psychological, and vocational functioning.

Thank you.

head: **Reading and Receiving Petitions**

THE DEPUTY SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Meadowlark.

MS LEIBOVICI: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I request that the petition I presented yesterday be now read and received.

THE CLERK:

We the undersigned, request the Legislative Assembly of Alberta to urge the government to ensure that there are no more health care cuts in the Capital Health Authority in the next fiscal year and that a portion of the provincial surplus be allocated to ensuring that the Capital Health Authority has sufficient resources that they do not have to make more cuts to rehabilitation services in the region.

head: **Notices of Motions**

THE DEPUTY SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Meadowlark.

MS LEIBOVICI: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I give notice now that I intend to move immediately after question period the following motion: "that this Assembly recognize May 1, 1996, as International Workers' Day."

head: **Tabling Returns and Reports**

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

MR. ZWOZDESKY: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise to present two tablings. The first of them is an information sheet called

Facts about Community Heritage Language Schools and Multiculturalism. It was prepared by the Northern Alberta Heritage Language Association, and it expresses some concerns about the continuation of the community heritage language programs as well as opposition to Bill 24.

The second tabling is also an information and fact sheet prepared by the Dante Alighieri Society, or School of Italian Language and Culture, in this province. It also expresses some concerns about Bill 24 and refers to the reasons why the multiculturalism policy of this province should be supported. As well, it presents interesting facts that everyone should know about the importance of language learning and the small amount of money that the government is contributing to this cause, albeit very important.

Mr. Speaker, these two tablings represent somewhere in the neighbourhood of a 50,000 membership, so I hope the Premier will take that under advisement in his deliberations about who's concerned about Bill 24.

Thank you.

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

MR. EVANS: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Further to the commitment that I made in this House to the Member for Edmonton-Strathcona, I'm pleased to table copies of the response to recommendations of the MLA task force relating to the administration of the Young Offenders Act in Alberta.

THE DEPUTY SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Bow Valley.

DR. OBERG: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm here to table a letter from the Eastern irrigation district. The Eastern irrigation district is the province's single largest private landholder and the single largest water licensee in the province. This letter confirms their commitment to the new Water Act, introduced by the Minister of Environmental Protection, and goes on to state that this legislation "protects and enhances the benefits of water management that will be enjoyed by present and future generations of Albertans."

THE DEPUTY SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Calgary-Buffalo.

MR. DICKSON: Mr. Speaker, thank you. A number of tablings. Firstly, a copy of my correspondence to the hon. Minister of Justice requesting that the new Limitations Act not be proclaimed for at least a year.

Then with regard to Bill 24 a number of pieces of correspondence: firstly, an excerpt from a newsletter from the Canadian Manufacturers' Association indicating opposition to Bill 24 or parts of it; correspondence from the United Church of Canada opposed to Bill 24; correspondence from a Mr. Ron Ross of southwest Calgary opposed to Bill 24; a letter from the Calgary and District Labour Council dated April 30, 1996, indicating opposition to Bill 24; a copy of a letter from Jean Forest, one of the authors of the Equal in Dignity and Rights report, appointed by the hon. Premier some two years ago to do the consultation, indicating her concerns and opposition to Bill 24; finally, a very thoughtful analysis and statement of opposition from the Canadian Council of Christians and Jews, Alberta region.

Thanks very much, Mr. Speaker.

head: **Introduction of Guests**

THE DEPUTY SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Lethbridge-West.

MR. DUNFORD: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I want to introduce to you and through you today a guest that we have sitting in the members' gallery. Now, in a moment you'll see that he bears a striking resemblance to myself, but he is neither a brother or a son but a very good friend and a supporter. I would ask Reg Dawson to stand and receive the warm greetings of the Assembly.

MR. DINNING: Mr. Speaker, Alberta is blessed this week by the presence of two interns from Ukraine associated with the external debt management project of the World Bank. They are in the members' gallery today. They are Valentina Tkachova of the National Bank of Ukraine, Alexey Berezchnoy of the Ministry of Finance in Ukraine, and they are joined by Bob Ascah and Frank Hanus, colleagues of mine from the Treasury Department. I would ask them all to rise and receive the warm welcome of the Legislative Assembly.

MR. JONSON: Mr. Speaker, it's my pleasure to introduce to you and through you to members of the Assembly 31 students from the Ponoka Christian school. They are accompanied by teachers and group leaders Mr. Nick Prins, Mrs. Ella Land, and parents Mr. Klaas Klooster, Mrs. Hilda Punter, and Mrs. Jackie Hvizdos. They are in the members' gallery. I would ask them to stand and receive the traditional warm welcome of the Assembly.

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

MRS. ABDURAHMAN: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm very pleased today to be able to introduce to you and to Members of the Legislative Assembly three constituents of mine from the city of Fort Saskatchewan. They are three seniors who reside in our seniors' lodge, the Dr. Turner lodge. They are Birdie Hare, Hazel Ferguson, and Mike Kliachik. I'd ask them to rise and receive the warm welcome of the House.

THE DEPUTY SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Calgary-Buffalo.

MR. DICKSON: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my privilege this afternoon to welcome 46 very special guests from the West Yellowhead constituency on behalf of my colleague the MLA for West Yellowhead. The guests are 46 keen and enthusiastic students from the Vanier Community Catholic school in that constituency. Accompanying them are Dianne Buoy and Coralynne Desnoyers, Janet Polak, Gordon Mullin, Wendy Dunne, Hali Hennig, Linda Browne, Randy Grant, and Gail Fischer. I'd invite those students and teachers and parent assistants to rise and receive the customary warm welcome of the Legislative Assembly.

Thanks.

THE DEPUTY SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie.

MS CARLSON: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure to introduce to you and through you to all Members of the Legislative Assembly Alethea Au, who joins us from McGill University,

where she is enrolled in a joint honours economics and political science program; and David Prenoslo, who joins us from the University of Alberta, where he is studying for his BA. It's our pleasure to introduce these young people as STEP students who'll be working with us in the caucus over the summer. I would ask that they now stand and receive the traditional warm welcome of this Assembly.

head: **Oral Question Period**
1:40

THE DEPUTY SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Glenora.

Health Care Funding

MR. SAPERS: Mr. Speaker, thank you. The Premier, the Treasurer, and the Minister of Health all slash budgets, then they pick numbers out of the air to base health funding on, and then they're somehow surprised when it's not right. Now, yesterday's announcement revealing how another \$25 million will be spent is one more indicator that this government still has no plan for the delivery of health services and that they continue to make things up as they go. Will the Treasurer please confirm for the Assembly which of the budget targets for Alberta Health are real and which ones he will allow to be changed in order to meet the needs of Albertans?

MR. DINNING: Mr. Speaker, I know the hon. Minister of Health will want to supplement my answer, but if the hon. member would like to look in Agenda '96 at page 43, it's very clear. It's spelled out that some \$3.705 billion – \$3,705 million – is being spent on health care in a province of some 2.8 million Albertans. I would say to the member that the member, I know, spoke at length in the Committee of Supply, where the details of the Ministry of Health's estimates were up for debate. He knows the numbers very well. I know that he likes to get up and play a few political games here, but clearly he was part of the debate that took place in this Assembly that approved over \$3.7 billion of expenditure for the Ministry of Health.

Perhaps the Minister of Health would want to supplement the answer.

MRS. McCLELLAN: I think the Treasurer has indicated quite clearly what the budget is for Alberta Health for this year. That budget has not changed with the announcement yesterday, and certainly Alberta Health intends to operate within the budget they presented to the Assembly.

As the hon. Treasurer has also explained, the hon. Member for Edmonton-Glenora, who asked the question, was present, I must say, and participated very actively in the debate on Alberta Health's supply discussions and I think in fact made the comment that it was one of the best Committee of Supply discussions that had been held. I have reviewed the *Hansard* from that Committee of Supply, and I would say, Mr. Speaker, that all of the questions that were asked by the hon. member were answered at that time, and if there were any hon. members who had questions that required more detail, those have been since communicated to them.

Mr. Speaker, the budget of Alberta Health is a public document. That document has not changed since any activities that occurred yesterday. It stands today, and if members wish to peruse the Committee of Supply estimates *Hansard*, which is very carefully done, they will find that these items have all been discussed in that committee.

THE DEPUTY SPEAKER: First supplemental, Edmonton-Glenora.

MR. SAPERS: Thanks. That was a great answer. I just wish that it had been to the question I'd asked, Mr. Speaker. The point is that the government has come back time and time again through supplementary estimates.

Now, does the Minister of Health agree with the Provincial Treasurer that there is no need now nor will there be a need in the future for the Department of Health to request additional funds for the regional health authorities in this fiscal year?

MRS. McCLELLAN: There is certainly no contemplation of additional dollars for the Department of Health's budget. As the Treasurer has indicated, the Department of Health's budget is some \$3.75 billion of taxpayers' money. I think the taxpayers in this province would prefer that we ensure we spend those dollars that have been entrusted to us wisely, which is what the discussion was about yesterday, before we contemplate, one month, 30 days – we're actually into the 31st day of this budget year. So, Mr. Speaker, I would concur completely with the Treasurer that there is no contemplation of additional dollars in Health's budget at this time.

THE DEPUTY SPEAKER: Final supplemental, Edmonton-Glenora.

MR. SAPERS: Sure. That's sad news I think, Mr. Speaker, for all of those health authorities.

Why does the Minister of Health continue to cut budgets one day and then throw money at the problems that she's created the next day, instead of immediately putting into place a fair and predictable population-based funding formula so we'll all know how much money is to be spent on health care in this province?

MRS. McCLELLAN: Mr. Speaker, as usual, in the preamble of the question comes some rather interesting comments. The budgets to the regional health authorities in fact were not cut this year. There's a rather selective memory occurring here. In fact, this government did not proceed with \$53 million of anticipated cuts that were slated for year three and in fact did proceed with \$40 million additional money to be provided for community services.

Mr. Speaker, the minister has met with the regional health authorities at a six months into the budget year timetable, that carried out again last fall. In discussions with the regional health authorities at that time, it was their recommendation that we not proceed with the reductions. They also made the case to us that they were experiencing some difficulty in planning for equipment replacement. That was dealt with in this budget. There was also a transfer of waste management services to the regional health authorities. Those moneys were transferred in this budget.

Mr. Speaker, we have listened very carefully to the regional health authorities. However, the Capital health authority came to the provincial government after the provincial budget was in fact ready for presentation and identified an issue that was a surprise to them. I think yesterday's announcement shows that this government sits down with their regional health authorities. It shows that its first priority is patient care, quality patient care, and we have worked out a strategy with the regional health authority that addresses their concerns and ensures that patient care in this city and the surrounding area will not be comprised.

THE DEPUTY SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie.

Capital Health Authority

MS CARLSON: Mr. Speaker, in response to the Capital health authority's financial crisis the Minister of Health has offered her usual response: to form another committee. Perhaps the most insulting aspect of this decision was to appoint the government member from Bow Valley to head this new committee which effectively replaces the Capital health authority. The mandate of the new committee will be not only to review the operations of the authority but also to develop and implement strategies for clinical services and program structure. How does the Minister of Health justify firing the Capital health authority for doing nothing more than requesting adequate funds to provide necessary health services in the Edmonton region?

MRS. McCLELLAN: Mr. Speaker, I guess the hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie's question just really demonstrates how out of touch the opposition are, and I find that absolutely shocking, being that there are a large number of members there from the Capital region. I would encourage you to get into this learning mode, to at least read the news releases, to at least read the communications that are put out.

If they had read that, they would understand very clearly that the Capital health authority supports an external review, supports understanding what the anomalies or the difficulties are that they are facing in meeting their service needs within their budget allocation. It clearly states that the review panel will work with the Capital health authority and that effectively the Minister of Health has expressed her confidence in that board, has thanked the board publicly for the work they have done in moving health services forward in this city.

I find it insulting that a Member of this Legislative Assembly from this region does not understand the complexity of this issue, does not understand that the Capital health authority board members want the answers to these questions every bit as much as the government, and doesn't understand that the Member for Bow Valley is the chairman of the health restructuring standing policy committee.

1:50

MS CARLSON: Mr. Speaker, it's very simple: when you've been replaced and you haven't resigned, then you've been fired.

How does the Minister of Health expect her new committee to discover in the next two months what the Capital health authority hasn't been able to provide over the last two years, in spite of engaging the Auditor General to do a management audit and paying KPMG \$40,000 to do a management review?

MRS. McCLELLAN: As I indicated in my first comments, the Capital health authority board is completely supportive of this review. They do not feel that they have been replaced. In fact, they know that this is a strategy they are supportive of and indeed was developed fully in consultation with them. This was a review panel that was put in place at the regional health authority's board members' request as well as mine.

Mr. Speaker, the review panel undoubtedly has a large task. However, I believe that very capable people will further this work. They will build on the work that came from the Auditor General's report recommendations, which, I should say, the Capital health authority requested the Auditor General to review.

The KPMG report, which was requested by the Capital health authority; the comparative analysis study between Calgary and Edmonton, which has been worked on: all of this work will be used in their final report.

Again, I am appalled that a Member of this Legislative Assembly from Edmonton does not understand the complexity and the seriousness of this issue and doesn't have the same sincere desire to see it resolved that the Capital health authority has.

MS CARLSON: I know what the problem is. I understand all too well, Mr. Speaker.

Given that the Minister of Health has undermined the role of the Capital health authority, does she now agree with the Premier that Edmonton's problems stem from mismanagement . . . [interjections]

THE DEPUTY SPEAKER: Order. The front benches of both sides are making it difficult for the Chair to hear the question and presumably for others to hear the question. I wonder if we might have the question asked by Edmonton-Ellerslie.

MS CARLSON: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'd be happy to repeat the question. Given that the Minister of Health has now undermined the role of the Capital health authority, does she now agree with the Premier that part of Edmonton's problem stems from mismanagement and not underfunding?

MRS. McCLELLAN: The only opinion that the Capital health authority's authority has been undermined comes from that side of the room. This minister has stated publicly that she fully supports the Capital health authority. I have explained that the Capital health authority requested this review. Mr. Speaker, there is a role for critics and for questioning, but there is also a role and a responsibility for MLAs from a region to get involved with solutions. I am waiting for those solutions.

THE DEPUTY SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Lethbridge-East.

Health Care Funding (continued)

DR. NICOL: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Within the health care budget this year there has been a \$25 million contingency fund, which has now been spent in support of the Edmonton and Calgary regional health authorities. Normally, contingency funds are used to cover unexpected expenditures that arise when late-year priorities are changed or when unexpected events occur. My questions are to the Minister of Health. Now that the \$25 million has been committed to the support of the regional health authorities, are there any more contingency funds within the health care budget that can be used to support other regional health authorities when they experience critical shortages or unexpected needs?

MRS. McCLELLAN: Mr. Speaker, I don't recall if the hon. member was able to be in attendance at the debate on the budget, but obviously there was at that time quite a good discussion of an area in the budget which talks about dedicated program funding. I wouldn't term these as contingency dollars. I explained at that time that we had dollars set aside, both the \$40 million in community, with which we responded to the request from the regional health authorities, and the other sum of dollars, which is the \$25 million that the hon. member is discussing today, that we

wanted to have further discussions with the regional health authorities as to the allocation of those dollars, that we would have those discussions over those periods of weeks, and that we would have that information to the regional health authorities as close to April 1 as we could conclude those discussions.

Mr. Speaker, I believe that this government has been extremely responsive to the regional health authorities, to pressures in restructuring. This government understands the complexity and the magnitude of the task that these regional health authorities have taken on. We also commend them for the work they have done, but those dollars were to be allocated and they have been allocated: \$12.25 million to Edmonton; \$12.25 million to Calgary; and \$0.5 million to WestView.

THE DEPUTY SPEAKER: First supplemental, Lethbridge-East.

DR. NICOL: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My next question is also to the Minister of Health. I'd just like to ask her: how many of the other regional authorities agreed to this split of that \$25 million? How many of them know how that money was being spent?

MRS. McCLELLAN: Mr. Speaker, as far as I know, they all know that the money is being spent. I believe that every region in this province understands that Calgary and Edmonton carry a high degree of provincial programs. Every region in this province at some time accesses services out of Edmonton and Calgary for high tertiary care. I can tell you that every region in this province supports having those programs of excellence in our two major cities. They understand that this sharing in effect serves all of the citizens of this province and all of the regions of this province because they have the quality programs here to transfer their persons into when they need them.

THE DEPUTY SPEAKER: Final supplemental, Lethbridge-East.

DR. NICOL: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I guess that's a new definition of consulting: we tell you, and you do.

My final question to the minister is: now that that contingency fund has been committed, are there any other dollars within the health care budget that can be used to cover critical health care procedures when they're needed, such as the double listing for heart transplant patient Kristy Plotsky from Medicine Hat?

MRS. McCLELLAN: Mr. Speaker, as I have said, the budget for Alberta Health is \$3.75 billion for this year. We believe that to be a figure that will cover our health services for this year. As I indicated, I also met with the regional health authorities in early November of last fall to talk about pressures. The hon. member is from Lethbridge; I can tell him that I've had discussions with that regional health authority probably three or four times in the last six or seven weeks. That is not uncommon with any health authority.

The hon. member raised another issue in his question. He should understand – and if he doesn't, I'd be happy to send him over the information – that there is an Out-of-Province Supplementary Assistance Committee that makes the decisions on any person receiving health services out of this country. That is a policy direction, it is a policy that is in place, and I could send him that information so he clearly understands that this is not an issue of money.

THE DEPUTY SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Calgary-Bow.

2:00 Federal Women's Prison

MRS. LAING: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. There is a growing concern regarding the safety of Edmonton communities with the recent escape from the Edmonton women's prison. Although this is a federal facility, the safety of Albertans is the responsibility of the Minister of Justice. Mr. Speaker, would the minister please tell this Assembly what steps he is taking to ensure that the communities of this city are safe?

MR. EVANS: Well, Mr. Speaker, I've had a number of conversations with Edmontonians and people from other parts of this province indicating concern for personal safety as a result of the recent escapes from the women's prison. As the Minister of Justice of the province I have written to the federal minister, the minister who is responsible for Corrections Canada, the Solicitor General, not only asking what are the concerns and what are the problems that are being faced at that women's prison but also offering to provide some assistance to the federal government if they need some assistance in this period of time when there is a great deal of chaos over at that facility.

The mayor of the city of Edmonton contacted me this week asking what we'd heard about the processes that were going on there and what was being done to deal with the safety concerns. I told him that I didn't have that information, but that I would try to seek it out. So that's what we've been doing all this week.

THE DEPUTY SPEAKER: First supplemental, Calgary-Bow.

MRS. LAING: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Would the same minister please inform the Legislature as to the response that he has received from the Rt. Hon. Herb Gray, Solicitor General of Canada, on the offer to assist the federal government to ensure there are no future escapes?

MR. EVANS: Mr. Speaker, this morning I received a phone call from the Solicitor General of Canada requesting the assistance of Alberta, our correctional facilities, to take the maximum and the medium security prisoners who are currently housed at the women's prison into our provincial facilities to ensure that they are going to be safely kept and that the safety of Albertans would be addressed. At the same time, Mr. Gray indicated that he would be sending out senior corrections officers from the federal corrections branch to look after the five minimum security prisoners who would remain at the correction facility during the time frame when they are doing remedial work to try to ensure that escapes don't occur in the future.

THE DEPUTY SPEAKER: Final supplemental, Calgary-Bow.

MRS. LAING: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Would the Minister of Justice please address the concerns of some Albertans regarding the use of provincial resources to house federal prisoners in the Alberta corrections system. Will he be able to keep his budget on track?

THE DEPUTY SPEAKER: The hon. Minister of Justice.

MR. EVANS: I'm sorry, Mr. Speaker. I didn't hear that whole question. I wonder if the hon. member could repeat it.

THE DEPUTY SPEAKER: Calgary-Bow, to repeat.

MRS. LAING: Thank you. Would the Minister of Justice address the concerns of some Albertans regarding the use of provincial resources to house the federal prisoners in the Alberta corrections system, and will his budget be kept on track?

MR. EVANS: That's a good question, Mr. Speaker. We have a continuing and I think positive relationship with the federal corrections people. We are not looking at this time, hon. member, at a payment back from Corrections Canada. We're most concerned about public safety, and public safety is an issue at that facility. We will take account of what expenditures we have in looking after these inmates in the interim period of time that we are keeping them under our custody, but that is not, again, the primary concern. I know that we can deal with that through our existing budget. I know that the staff we have in our facilities will be able to take on that extra workload, because they are professional, they're well-trained, and they're more than prepared and able to take on that responsibility.

THE DEPUTY SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands-Beverly.

Child Welfare

MS HANSON: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The heavy-handed way in which this government has treated child welfare organizations and service providers during the reforms has been shameful during the whole process. First it was the women's shelters and the parents of handicapped children. Affected groups such as the Edmonton Cerebral Palsy Association have learned that they, too, will be swallowed up under the children's authorities without even a phone call to ask their opinion. My questions are to the Minister of Family and Social Services. Mr. Minister, how could you not inform major service providers from the very start when these reforms are going to have a substantial impact on the families of handicapped children? That was a terrible omission.

MR. CARDINAL: Mr. Speaker, in fact that is why the reforms in my department, in Family and Social Services, were done. We found two and a half years ago, before the reforms in '92-93, that we had a \$1.7 billion budget. There was a welfare caseload of over 96,000 or 180,000 individuals. Most of the dollars that were designed for handicapped children, persons with disabilities, children in need, and families in need were being utilized by healthy young Albertans that should have been in the workforce. That is exactly what this government has done: reformed the system to make sure that the dollars are available, the human resources, the flexibility to plan and design programs at the local level involving local people. That is exactly what we've done.

We have announced changes in child welfare just recently, Mr. Speaker. We have not implemented any of the changes. We have the best child welfare program now in North America. All we are trying to do is provide more dollars, provide more human resources, more ability to have still better programs than that, and the option is there for the Liberals, the opposition, or for the public to be involved in assisting us design a system. I still have the Liberals' updated reforms. There are only four pages. Now another page is blank.

MS HANSON: There's a difference between principles and policies, Mr. Minister.

Mr. Speaker, the minister did not answer my question. If you're planning a good system, you consult everybody. My

question is to the minister. At the very least will you guarantee that a minimum level of services for handicapped children, which is the subject today, will be maintained under the new authorities so that the parents won't have to go and fight all over again for services for handicapped children?

MR. CARDINAL: Mr. Speaker, no one in that particular category has to fight for any services. You can be assured that the standards will be there. Do you know why? The standards will be developed by the community, and they will be involved. Over 5,000 people were consulted . . .

DR. WEST: How many?

MR. CARDINAL: Over 5,000 people were consulted while the review was done by the commissioner, Mr. Speaker. What we have in place now is the perfect opportunity for the Liberals, the public out there to be involved in actually designing how each program will be implemented, and the design will be done based on local needs, local requirement of dollars and human resources. How better can you have it? The opportunity is wide open. I am open to listen. I am open to design programs based on what the community needs and best of all what the clients need. The Liberals could do a better job by providing some decent recommendations on how we can provide better programs. They don't have a plan.

MS HANSON: Have you answered the letter to you from the parents with 10 concerns? Will you, Mr. Minister, grant this request from the Cerebral Palsy Association and leave handicapped services to operate under the department until you can give them meaningful answers to their many questions contained in this letter of April 22?

MR. CARDINAL: Mr. Speaker, on the whole issue of children's services, the authorities will all report to the Ministry of Family and Social Services. Now, how better can you have it? How can a person question that when that is exactly how we've designed the process? All the agencies will report to the Ministry of Family and Social Services. The authorities will have to develop service plans based on community needs, which the ministry and this government will approve, set the standards, set the funding, provide the human resources that are required. How better can we have it? What is your plan?

THE DEPUTY SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Medicine Hat.

Physician Recruitment

MR. RENNER: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My questions today are to the Minister of Health. Many health regions in the province continue to experience problems in recruiting physicians, and I would like to deal specifically with my health region, the Palliser health region. While it's true that in recent months they have experienced some success in physician recruitment programs, we still continue to have a problem recruiting an additional orthopedic surgeon. This means that people who are injured on weekends and require the services of an orthopedic surgeon need to go to either Calgary or Lethbridge to have their bones set. My question: can the minister indicate whether a shortage of physicians in Medicine Hat is compromising access to services?

2:10

MRS. McCLELLAN: Mr. Speaker, the area of physician supply

in areas outside of the two major centres continues to be a challenge for us. However, I am pleased to inform the hon. member that according to the College of Physicians and Surgeons' data on physician inflow and outflow, in fact Medicine Hat has one more physician now than they did about a year ago. However, they do have a very serious concern. I was in contact with the authority quite recently, and they are still trying very hard to recruit another orthopedic surgeon. They have one in Medicine Hat, and I can tell the House that it is quite a strain in an area such as orthopedic surgery to have only one surgeon. It's really indeed unfortunate, because certainly there could be pressure relieved in other areas if they could recruit to that position.

They are recruiting aggressively in this area, and they're hopeful because they've been very successful in the areas of urology, gynecology, and some of the other specialties that they were short of. So I believe the situation is improving for Medicine Hat. Unfortunately, we still face those challenges in many other rural communities.

THE DEPUTY SPEAKER: First supplemental, Medicine Hat.

MR. RENNER: Thank you. Well, given that orthopedic surgeons in both Calgary and Edmonton are restricted in the amount of operating room time they have available to them, what has the minister done to advise orthopedic surgeons in both Calgary and Edmonton that hospitals in outlying areas such as Medicine Hat would have plenty of operating room time available to them?

MRS. McCLELLAN: Mr. Speaker, the regional health authorities generally do the discussion of availability of surgeries and so on. However, I can tell the hon. member that I have had a conversation with an orthopedic surgeon in Calgary and also in the capital city at the time we allocated more dollars to reduce the waiting lists and suggested to them that it would be extremely useful if the orthopedic surgeons in this province could come together to develop a type of orthopedic surgery plan such as we do in cardiac surgery. It is unfortunate when people are on long waiting lists when those waiting lists could be shortened if we could improve that planning between regions. I can tell the hon. member that the surgeons I spoke to were quite warm to this suggestion and felt that this would be a good initiative for us to move forward on. So we are looking at a way that we can co-ordinate those surgeries better.

MR. RENNER: The budget for physician recruitment resources was increased in this year's budget. Can the minister give any indication of what kinds of activities those additional funds will support?

MRS. McCLELLAN: Mr. Speaker, the co-ordinating committee, which, as I indicated to the House some time ago, is being chaired by Dr. Larry Ohlhauser, registrar of the College of Physicians and Surgeons, met just very recently, and they looked at a number of initiatives that would improve this area. One of them was in flexibility in the student loan remission program. That would be of help. They were going to do an evaluation of the incentive payment program.

Certainly one area they discussed that I think is important is the increase in the locum program. That's the program that offers weekend relief and sometimes education relief for physicians in rural areas that are in single- or dual-physician areas with a large population who are on call virtually seven days a week, 24 hours a day.

They also looked at expanding the focus of the recruitment fairs in both Calgary and Edmonton. They've had considerable success, and we think that is a good way to make both the communities and the physicians looking for a place to practise aware of the opportunities.

THE DEPUTY SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Sherwood Park.

Energy Industry Impact on Cattle

MR. COLLINGWOOD: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. In April of last year the Alberta Environmental Centre at Vegreville completed a report entitled impact of the petroleum industry on cattle production. This report looked at how oil and gas pollution enters our air, land, and water and how the health of cattle is affected by this pollution. This report describes specific cases where cattle have become sick or have died from these sources of pollution, and the report states that action is needed now to ensure the future sustainability of both of these industries. My question is to the Minister of Environmental Protection. This is a pretty significant report with respect to cattle and the energy sector. My question is: why hasn't it been released? It's already over a year old.

MR. LUND: Mr. Speaker, while the Environmental Centre was the vehicle through which this report was compiled, it was actually commissioned by the Cattle Commission. The Cattle Commission did hire a consultant to work on the report. There were some financial problems. I'm not part of the whole issue as it relates to the relationship between the consultant and the Cattle Commission, but the end result was that there was a copyright filed. In fact it's not our report. We cannot issue it. The copyright issue has not been settled, and until that is settled, there's nothing we can do about this particular report.

MR. COLLINGWOOD: How convenient, Mr. Speaker, that we can't see this report.

My question to the Minister of Energy: what is the Minister of Energy doing to ensure that this report is released at the earliest opportunity? It relates to the energy sector and its impact on cattle?

MRS. BLACK: Mr. Speaker, I think clearly the hon. Minister of Environmental Protection answered the question earlier. This is not a government report, and as such you cannot go out and make someone resolve an issue that is out there when it is not our report. Therefore, I will not do anything to make somebody do something that they don't wish to do, thank you.

THE DEPUTY SPEAKER: Final supplemental.

MR. COLLINGWOOD: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. This is a very significant report, so I'm going to go back to the Minister of Environmental Protection so that we can have this on the record and very clear.

THE DEPUTY SPEAKER: We appear to have a couple of people who want to ask questions and a minister who seems most anxious to answer several questions. I wonder if both, who'll know well who they are, could listen to a succinct question from Sherwood Park.

MR. COLLINGWOOD: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. To the

Minister of Environmental Protection: for the benefit of the consultant and the Environmental Centre at Vegreville, whose report is this?

MR. LUND: Mr. Speaker, there were components – and I think this is the report the hon. member is referring to. There are actually two or three parts of a report, and I think he's talking about the compilation of these components. Clearly, there is a portion that the consultant has a copyright on. If the hon. member is prepared to take on the legal responsibilities and somehow find the money to pay the consultant for the copyright, then I guess there's a solution. Clearly, it is not a function of Environmental Protection to try to settle with the consultant. We did not hire the consultant. The Cattle Commission hired the consultant.

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

Air Quality

MRS. ABDURAHMAN: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Constituents in Clover Bar-Fort Saskatchewan and Sherwood Park are concerned about the quality of air that they breathe and the cumulative impact of industrial emissions. In January of 1994 an emission inventory specialist was hired at Alberta Environmental Protection to complete an inventory of air emissions in the Edmonton area. Mr. Speaker, my question is to the Minister of Environmental Protection. Has this inventory been completed? If so, when will it be made available to the public?

2:20

MR. LUND: Mr. Speaker, the fact is that we do have many monitoring stations. As a matter of fact, there's an hourly rating that the hon. member can get that deals with the quality of air in our major cities.

It's really interesting. Alberta has some of the most stringent emission standards in the world. We have some 343 industry and 11 government stations that are monitoring on an hourly basis, and that information is available. Like I mentioned, for both the cities of Calgary and Edmonton it's readily available on a 24-hour basis.

MRS. ABDURAHMAN: Mr. Speaker, it would be wonderful if we could get a straight answer to a simple question.

When will you monitor the inhalable fractions of fine particles, which we know are major health concerns, rather than just monitoring total suspended particulates, if you understand the question, hon. minister?

MR. LUND: Well, yeah, Mr. Speaker. I was having great difficulty hearing the question, but I think that if the hon. member cares to go through it again, I would appreciate if she would pronounce some of the words more clearly.

MRS. ABDURAHMAN: Mr. Speaker, I will try with my best English accent to pronounce the words so that you can understand them, if that's the inference. When will you monitor the inhalable fraction of fine particles – got it? – which we know are major health concerns, rather than just monitoring the total suspendible particulates?

MR. DINNING: Did you write that for yourself?

MRS. ABDURAHMAN: Mr. Speaker, I find the Provincial Treasurer just intolerable in this House. [interjections]

THE DEPUTY SPEAKER: Order. Hon. member, I'm sure that was not your question; the other part was.

The Minister of Environmental Protection.

MR. LUND: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Now that I did hear her question, it is what I thought she said the first time. The fact is that we do monitor for particulate, and if she could clearly give me the chemical composition of the compounds that she's specifically interested in, perhaps we could answer her question more clearly.

THE DEPUTY SPEAKER: Final supplemental, Clover Bar-Fort Saskatchewan.

MRS. ABDURAHMAN: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. When will you create an air shed to regulate air quality in the Edmonton area, including the regions of Clover Bar-Fort Saskatchewan and Sherwood Park. An air shed, Mr. Minister.

MR. LUND: Mr. Speaker, as I indicated in my first answer, Alberta has the most stringent emission standards in the country, so if the hon. member has a specific compound that she's interested in, I wish she would give me that chemical composition so that we could research it. To just talk about particles – is she talking about fine dust? What is it exactly she's talking about? [interjections] There are many compounds that are suspended in the air, and some of them have absolutely no harmful effect on human health. It's very, very difficult to answer a question that is as broad ranging as that particular question. [interjections]

Speaker's Ruling Decorum

THE DEPUTY SPEAKER: Order. The Chair finds it rather difficult that people ask questions and then proceed to give a variety of answers to their own questions. I wonder if we could ask the question, let the minister reply, then ask a supplemental, and so on rather than giving all of the answers at the same time as the minister is trying to do so. [interjections] All hon. members.

The hon. Member for Edmonton-Mayfield. [interjections]

Physiotherapy

MR. WHITE: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I thank the most boisterous member from the opposite side; the Provincial Treasurer seems to have taken it upon himself today to deliver all of the audience.

The delivery of physiotherapy in the Edmonton region has been and currently is in a state of chaos. Last year the budget for this service was \$5.2 million, and this year it is \$3.2 million. Mr. Speaker, one-quarter of the private-sector service providers can no longer bill the government for their service and now are effectively out of business. My questions are to the Minister of Health. How did the minister decide that the citizens of the Capital health authority region are overserved to the tune of 60 percent?

MRS. McCLELLAN: Mr. Speaker, I would be quite pleased to try to assist the hon. member in understanding the funding reallocation that occurred. Certainly the reallocation of funding

occurred most dramatically in both of the major centres, Edmonton and Calgary. However, I think that to understand that, one has to understand that prior to the community rehabilitation program a good many people were traveling to both of those regions for physiotherapy services.

When the program came into place, the ability to provide services in regions closer to a person's community of residence was available. Obviously, with the allocation of those services that had been provided to people outside the region, those dollars would go to that region as they are now being provided there. For example, if I recollect correctly – and I think I do – region 15, which is just north of here, prior to the community rehabilitation program did not have access to those services at all. Those persons in region 15 are now being served by the program. So obviously a number of dollars were taken not just from this region but from Calgary, and Edmonton probably noticed the larger significance.

This is an asset obviously to the persons in those regions who now don't have to drive a hundred miles or 60 miles or 150 miles to receive this service, but it has made it difficult on the private-practice physiotherapist. I do believe that when the review of this program and the prioritization tool is concluded, there will be a clearer role for the private insurers.

I want to remind the hon. member again that there are only four provinces other than Alberta that provide funding for physiotherapy in Canada, and obviously, Mr. Speaker, people practise there. [interjection] I can hear the hon. Member for Edmonton-Glenora saying: oh, but they have it in their hospitals. Well, hon. Member for Edmonton-Glenora, oh, but so do we.

That money that the hon. Member for Edmonton-Mayfield has just indicated is the money that is in the program for community rehab. We have significant contributions to rehab physiotherapy through our hospital-based program. We also have physiotherapy provided through our home care program. So there are really three avenues, at least, that physiotherapy is provided through.

It is certainly unfortunate that this has been quite a dramatic change for some of the persons who had private practices in this region, but as I understand it, the Capital health authority did provide an opportunity for bids for the work, for the program, and obviously, as in any process, some were successful and some were not. I also understand that the Capital health authority has had a request from those who were not successful for a meeting to understand this issue.

2:30

MR. WHITE: Mr. Speaker, I thank the minister for answering the questions that I didn't ask. Now I'd like the answer to this question, please: how did the government decide which businesses in this region stay in business and which do not?

MRS. McCLELLAN: Mr. Speaker, I hope I didn't hear him say: how did the government decide? The regional health authority is responsible for delivery of services. The regional health authorities did put out the request for proposals for contracts, and the regional health authorities are the ones that will enter into those contracts. So, indeed, that is how it was done.

THE DEPUTY SPEAKER: Final supplemental, Edmonton-Mayfield.

MR. WHITE: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Why did the government allow direct access to physiotherapy by the private sector yet disallow the marketplace to decide who stays in business and who does not?

MRS. McCLELLAN: Indeed that is in fact I guess what has happened: the marketplace will decide. When you put out a proposal for contracts, some people are successful and some people are not. There is still an opportunity for physiotherapists in the private sector through private insurance, through third-party insurers and those programs. But, Mr. Speaker, it is a marketplace. The requests were put out. Some were successful; some were not. Indeed this government, other than the allocation of over \$40 million to the community rehabilitation program in this province, which is unprecedented anywhere in Canada, did not decide who would be involved in this program and who would not.

THE DEPUTY SPEAKER: The time for question period has elapsed. Might we revert briefly to Introduction of Guests?

HON. MEMBERS: Agreed.

THE DEPUTY SPEAKER: Opposed? Carried.

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

MR. DOERKSEN: Mr. Speaker, we waited for the opposition members to make this introduction, and gave them the opportunity before, but since they were unwilling to do it, the Sweet Six here would like to introduce to this Assembly Dr. Abdul Abdurahman, who is seated up in the public gallery. I believe he is intimately related to the Member for Clover Bar-Fort Saskatchewan, and contrary to popular belief, he did not forget her birthday. I would ask if he would stand and receive the attention of this House.

THE DEPUTY SPEAKER: I don't recall any points of order.

head: **Motions under Standing Order 40**
International Workers' Day

THE DEPUTY SPEAKER: I'll call on the hon. Member for Edmonton-Meadowlark. A Standing Order 40.

Ms Leibovici:

Be it resolved that this Assembly recognize May 1, 1996, as International Workers' Day.

MS LEIBOVICI: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. With respect to the question of urgency, Mr. Speaker, each year on May 1 over 90 percent of the countries in the world recognize today as International Workers' Day. This is an important time to recognize the struggles that working people have had to endure. [interjections]

THE DEPUTY SPEAKER: The Chair would observe that in people leaving and taking advantage of the gap in between, others entering into conversation, many were unable to hear the Standing Order 40 call on the part of the hon. Member for Edmonton-Meadowlark. Fortunately it's been circulated, so all will have a copy of it.

The hon. Member for Edmonton-Meadowlark has moved under Standing Order 40 "Be it resolved that the Assembly recognize May 1 . . .

SOME HON. MEMBERS: No. No.

THE DEPUTY SPEAKER: No?

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Urgency. Urgency

THE DEPUTY SPEAKER: Yes. Okay. The Chair is more concerned at the moment with the noise that preceded this.

We have a request for Standing Order 40 debate. May we have unanimous consent? All those in favour of this request, please say aye.

MS LEIBOVICI: I'm not finished.

THE DEPUTY SPEAKER: Oh, you were not finished?

MS LEIBOVICI: No. It was the noise level . . . [interjections]

THE DEPUTY SPEAKER: Hon. member, I waited until you sat down, then I stood up. I was at that moment telling everybody - I thought you had spoken to urgency.

MS LEIBOVICI: I haven't even started. I couldn't speak above the din. [interjections]

THE DEPUTY SPEAKER: Order. There are two parts to this exercise. One is that you move that we carry on the debate and speak to urgency only. If it's agreed unanimously, you may then speak again at length.

Now, I did wait until the hon. member sat down. If you wish to call attention to the fact that there is too much noise, then what you do is stand and remain silent in your place, not sit down.

So we're on the question. All those in support of this motion, please say aye.

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Aye.

THE DEPUTY SPEAKER: Those opposed, please say no.

SOME HON. MEMBERS: No.

THE DEPUTY SPEAKER: It's lost.

head: **Orders of the Day**

head: **Motions for Returns**

MR. DAY: Mr. Speaker, I move that motions for returns appearing on today's Order Paper stand and retain their places.

[Motion carried]

head: **Public Bills and Orders Other than**
Government Bills and Orders
head: **Second Reading**

Bill 211

School (Age of Enrolment) Amendment Act, 1996

THE DEPUTY SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

MR. HENRY: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I would like to move second reading of Bill 211, the School (Age of Enrolment) Amendment Act, 1996.

What this Act essentially will do, if I may describe it briefly for members, Mr. Speaker, is lower the enrollment age of entering school in the province of Alberta, which is defined in the School

Act as six years, to five years. Essentially what it will do is make early childhood services, or kindergarten, part of the regular school system. I want to be clear on what this Act does: again, lower the age of enrollment; require the school boards and the provincial government to accept students at age five but give parents the option as to whether the children enroll at age five or delay that enrollment for one year and enroll at age six. So what it does is change the onus on the provincial government and school boards but doesn't change any options or any discretion with regard to parental action.

Why am I doing this? Well, we've had a history of ECS, or kindergarten, in our province, and I'd like briefly to go perhaps through some of that history and describe how we got to the point that I'm bringing this Bill forward today.

There was a very strong lobby effort and public policy initiative effort back in the late 1960s and early 1970s to bring kindergarten into Alberta. The then member of Executive Council, Mr. Lou Hyndman, brought in an Act to establish early childhood services, and there were many individuals around this province who participated in bringing forward this Act, from academics to parents to grandparents to the now president emeritus of the University of Alberta, Dr. Myer Horowitz, and many others who lobbied very hard and worked very hard to establish a program for five year olds in our province.

This went on for about 20 years. We had a very strong program in our province operated by both school boards and local community operators and offered to parents with no fees for tuition, for attending. This was a program that equaled programs across the country initially and then eventually fell behind, because programs in other parts of the country and I daresay other parts of the industrial world started developing full-day kindergartens and even junior kindergarten programs. We see those all across this country and in Europe.

2:40

Then we hit a problem. All of a sudden the provincial government decided in the government caucus that they were going to slash that program in half and that they would no longer offer 400 hours of funding but that in fact they would bring it down to 200 hours of funding. I want to point out here, Mr. Speaker, that in fact most programs were operating at the 450 or 475 hours per year, which is essentially a half-day program. In those days school boards had the ability to go to their local electorate and requisition tax dollars. Most school boards in this province supplemented the 400 hours of funding from the provincial government to bring it up to a full half day of kindergarten.

Then what happened is there was I'm sure a raucous debate and a full debate all held within the government caucus. Prior to this debate there had been a whole series of roundtable discussions. There had been a series of roundtable discussions on education in Calgary and a weekend in Edmonton. Mr. Speaker, I attended both of those, and both had eight to 10 groups that went away to look at various issues in education and came back and reported. Those were summarized in a report and given to the minister, to caucus, and to all of Alberta.

[Mr. Clegg in the Chair]

But something strange happened. Not once in all those deliberations was there a recommendation coming out of any of the 15 to 20 groups that were there – not one recommended cutting kindergarten in half. Not one. Not one group.

MR. WHITE: Not one person.

MR. HENRY: Not one person did I hear in those two weekends of consultation with a broad cross section of Albertans. So where did this come from? Well, there were little quiet, closed-door meetings held with the government caucus members. [interjection] The hon. Member for Calgary-Shaw says that they weren't quiet. Well, I'm sure that they were raucous inside.

All of a sudden somebody had the great idea, perhaps because they didn't go to kindergarten – and we see the results of that in the Legislature today. Perhaps the Provincial Treasurer would have had a different demeanour today had he been to kindergarten and learned to work in a group and listen when somebody's talking.

DR. MASSEY: Let's send him now.

MR. HENRY: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods said, "Let's send him now." Well, if we were to send him, we would have to be sure that he's only going to get part of a program, because it's not fully funded by this government.

So what happened was that in the government caucus there was, without any sort of rationale explained – I speak of the government caucus, and the hon. government Whip starts yawning and falling asleep. I daresay that I hope the caucus meetings aren't like that.

Mr. Speaker, I want to be clear. What happened in that caucus is there was a debate. Somebody thought: we don't need kindergarten. They said, "I didn't have it, my kids didn't have it, and we turned out okay, according to myself; therefore we're going to cut kindergarten." As things are in caucus, it was put to a vote, and it was passed. Kindergarten was cut in half in this province. At the same time, the government took away the ability of school boards to requisition taxes locally, so in fact the end result was more than half a cut in funding. Again, the government was funding 400 hours, and most school boards were topping that up to be 450, 475. The government removed the school board funding and cut their funding back to 200 hours. So we had a dramatic decrease. While other provinces and other industrialized countries around the world were increasing their preschool education, this province was decreasing it.

Well, one would want to think: was there a massive outcry from Albertans to government caucus members saying, "Cut those kindergarten kids; they're wasting taxpayers' money; they're responsible for the \$32 billion debt in our province"? Is that what all the government members heard? Was there an overwhelming, resounding sense from public discussions that we should have cut kindergarten? No, Mr. Speaker. What there was was a vote that barely passed. Some would say that it passed by a vote of one. Some have said that it was passed by a vote of one. If that's incorrect, I invite any government member to stand up and put it on the record that it was a solid majority of two-thirds or three-quarters. No, the information is that it passed by one vote.

What did this spark? What this sparked in this province, Mr. Speaker, was a tremendous outpouring of concern from academics, from parents, from community members, from people who thought they had fought the battle a long time ago. In the context of all of this, I consulted with former academics in the field of early childhood education, current academics. I consulted with parent groups. I consulted with school boards. I consulted with professional groups. I consulted with former ministers of Education of the Conservative government. Do you know what

I heard from several places, from former ministers, from former academics, from individuals who were involved in developing the first kindergarten program? They said, "You know, the one thing I wish I had done when I was there was put kindergarten into the School Act." I heard that over and over again. Then a government wouldn't be able to go behind closed doors and with a majority of one of the government caucus be able to end that program.

So that's what this Bill would seek to put into place, what several people have told me, what people who were involved in the development of the program, people who were involved in managing and administering the program and involved in participating in the program have asked for in this province. They have asked for some security that if there is ever a move again by a government to eliminate or to downgrade kindergarten or early childhood services in our province, they would have to come to this Legislature and have a full, public, open debate, not do it behind closed doors, Mr. Speaker.

I know that that sends trembles down the spine of many, many government members here because they don't like to have to make decisions and be accountable in public. They'd just as soon the opposition go away and hide and that the opposition to any government move go away and hide and that they never, ever have to be accountable.

AN HON. MEMBER: Mike, how could you hide?

MR. HENRY: I hear members telling me that I should hide or how can I hide. Believe me; it'll be a long time before they get rid of me and hide me away in this Legislature, Mr. Speaker.

In places like France or Belgium, Mr. Speaker, 95 percent of children at three years old attend a preschool program. All of the research indicates that the more money and the more time we put into preschool education, the better off we are in terms of competitiveness internationally when the children go through school, the better achievement scores we get on achievement tests and diploma examinations, the less we pay in terms of intervention costs both in terms of juvenile delinquent costs – or young offender costs, the current term – and in terms of catching learning disabilities long after we should have caught them. The more we have in preschool education, the more likely we are to save money now. We could make the hon. Justice minister's job a heck of a lot easier if we had a more comprehensive early childhood education program and screening.

The literature is clear. When the government decided to cut this program, Mr. Speaker, the Minister of Education and the Premier stood in their places and said that they had mountains and mountains of research that supported the contention that they could achieve in 200 hours what had been achieved in 475 hours. Well, as a dutiful member of the opposition I said, "I'd like to see it; produce the evidence." Well, it took them a few weeks, and finally the minister produced a whole series of studies that had absolutely nothing to do with the quality and the effectiveness of programs offered in early childhood but had to do with all sorts of other things. The fact of the matter is that the opposition repeatedly tabled studies showing the beneficial impact of early childhood education.

You know, what's really sad about this is that the government has come back and partially refunded the program. Again they go up to 400 hours, but again we're not going to have a full half-day program because most school boards now don't have the ability to go out and ask their local taxpayers to pay the extra 50 or 75 hours.

MRS. BURGNER: They do so. They do so. It's in the School Act.

MR. HENRY: The hon. Member for Calgary-Currie is saying: "They do so. They do so." Well, I invite her to join in debate, because we never heard one word from her when this government cut kindergarten. In fact, she defended that decision right to the wall, and as a result, for two years in this province whole groups of children did not get a full kindergarten program.

MR. HAVELOCK: Shame.

MR. HENRY: It is a shame, hon. Member for Calgary-Shaw. We had a situation here where some parents had to pay \$400 to \$500 to get their child a kindergarten program, and if parents couldn't afford that, they didn't get it and their children didn't get it.

MR. WOLOSHYN: Not true.

MR. HENRY: That is absolutely true, hon. Member for Stony Plain. I've tabled my statistics in the House of the surveys that we've done. I'd suggest that you table yours, but you don't have any.

The other thing the government's never, never done – and I asked the Minister of Education in fairness to do this. We do have achievement testing in grade 3. That's now been quadrupled in terms of amount in our province. We have achievement testing. So I asked the Minister of Education: would it be useful and would you consider tracking those children who had different levels of kindergarten – zero, 200 hours, and 450 hours – and see if by grade 3 there is still a difference with regard to how those students . . .

2:50

MR. WOLOSHYN: There isn't.

MR. HENRY: The Member for Stony Plain is saying, "There isn't." I daresay that when he was a socialist on this side of the House, he would have said something very, very different. But the reality is that he doesn't know because he's got no empirical evidence. He's blowing out wind and hasn't even cared about what happens to two years of children in our province. This opposition does, Mr. Speaker.

I'll tell you one of the things that we did. Because the Minister of Education failed in his responsibility to adequately measure what the impact has been on children, to actually identify those children, which he has the means to do through his tracking system, because he failed to identify those children who had kindergarten and those who hadn't and see how they do on their . . .

Speaker's Ruling Decorum

THE ACTING SPEAKER: We've got a very good debate going on here, but it shouldn't be a debate. It should be one speaker and then another speaker. I don't think we need the government Whip yelling across at the member who is speaking. I'm sure that he will get his chance to tell his side of the story.

Please continue.

MR. HENRY: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. The hon. government Whip should be ashamed of himself as a professional

educator to sit here and say that early childhood education makes no difference. He knows better, and his profession knows better.

Debate Continued

MR. HENRY: Mr. Speaker, the opposition went ahead and did do a survey. We surveyed grade 1 teachers across this province. The only evidence that has been done by any member of this Legislature was done on this side of the House in terms of investigating what the impact was. I'll tell you what the impact was. When you rate students on a scale of 1 to 5, with 5 being excellent - I'm going to group them; I'm not going to go through the individual ones.

MRS. BURGNER: You want it mandatory, Michael.

MR. HENRY: The hon. Member for Calgary-Currie is bad-mouthing teachers here, and let the record show that.

When you talk about literacy skills, children who have 400 hours score, again on a scale of 1 to 5, an average of 3.5, yet those who have less than 240 hours score an average of 2.4, scoring poor. The students who have 400 hours do fair or good.

In addition, in numeracy skills the difference is again that children who have 400 hours of kindergarten do fair to very good, 3.5. Children who have no kindergarten do poor, do 2. With social skills, the same thing. We're looking at an even more dramatic increase, a score of 3.9 compared to a score of 2.4.

Mr. Speaker, children in this province have been damaged by the actions of this government. This evidence is clear. There were other studies done by graduate students, by academics - and I see the Member for Grande Prairie-Wapiti smirking there. There was evidence done in his own school jurisdiction - and this is empirical evidence - a study showing that children in his school jurisdiction who did not get kindergarten were disadvantaged when it came to grade 1 in terms of their ability to keep up with the other children. That's been published in academic journals that have peer review.

Mr. Speaker, the evidence is absolutely crystal clear that this government in its actions in going behind closed doors in a vote of a majority of one, one single person . . .

AN HON. MEMBER: Which one was it?

MR. HENRY: Which one was it is what I want to know. Which one was it? Would that person please stand up and acknowledge that they were the person who put it over the top, that there were two years of children in this province who did not get treated fairly by this government and by the Department of Education?

It was difficult for school boards. School boards, besides having to struggle with where they get the money because they can no longer raise money locally and how they provide a full kindergarten program, were subjected, rightfully so, to litigation, which cost more money. It cost taxpayers and volunteer groups and individuals money. Those were eventually solved in the court system. That was because this government went out and consulted on education, asked the public: what do you think the changes are in education? They simply then came back and closed the door, ignored every piece of advice they got, came up with their own solution based on personal experience, not based on any sort of objective criteria or objective evidence out there, and decided to do it to five year olds and blame five year olds for the mismanagement of the government members from 1986 through to 1993 and beyond. That, Mr. Speaker, I believe is shameful.

I will give the government credit that for the next school year the government has restored the funding back up to almost 400 hours, albeit at a lower level. Again, it's not a full half-day program, but they have restored the funding. What this Bill will serve to do, Mr. Speaker, is protect future five year olds down the road. Whether it be a Conservative government or, God forbid, a New Democrat government or a Reform government or if some silly ideas got into a Liberal government's head, it would ensure that no decision was made affecting five year olds in terms of their level of kindergarten without full and open debate in this Legislature. It wouldn't be a fait accompli before it was announced to the public.

Mr. Speaker, this is supposedly a private member's public Bill procedure we're in. I daresay that the government members will vote this Bill down, but if any government member truly believes in kindergarten and truly believes that five year olds should be protected, I urge all those government members who voted in their caucus against cutting kindergarten to have the fortitude, to have the integrity to stand by their principles today in a free vote, to stand up and support this Bill so that if any other dinosaur in the government caucus comes forward again with a wing-nut idea like blaming five year olds for the debt, they will have the opportunity to bring it to this Legislature and get full and reasoned public debate.

Thank you.

THE ACTING SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Calgary-Currie.

MRS. BURGNER: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

MR. HENRY: Where were you last time, Jocelyn?

MRS. BURGNER: I've stood in this Legislature a number of times listening to our discussions on education and education reform and have taken my share of hits, so I expect that that will continue the rest of the afternoon.

Mr. Speaker, I just want to start the debate on this Bill. The hon. member has brought forward an initiative, and I find it kind of interesting that notwithstanding his very serious belief that this go forward, he has focused a lot of his discussion on past practice and deriding colleagues and his ability to second-guess our caucus.

Mr. Speaker, I'd like to talk a little bit about the actual process. I'd like to talk about the educational initiatives that he's speaking to and indicate why, although I understand his motives for bringing this Bill to the House, I can't support it. On the off chance that the member doesn't remember or isn't focused on it, there's a great deal that's come out of the debate on ECS, and I think that that should not be lost as we go through this discussion. We have had a great deal of focus on the role of early intervention in the absence of part of our ECS funding. We've also talked about program continuity. We've talked about the expectations of our children in ECS. We've also talked very significantly about the role of the community. Those discussions are valid. They have their place, and they can't be lost as we go through this particular discussion because they are ongoing.

We've had very, very serious discussions, and we were elected to balance the budget. Whether or not the opposition or the private member opposite wants to recognize that, that is part of the motivation in dealing with the ECS funding. The role of education is mandated from grade 1 to grade 12, and we were faced with a number of serious decisions. Every single Albertan was affected by some of these decisions in order to secure a fiscal

future that would support education, health care, social services, advanced education, and a number of other initiatives that we are committed to. I don't think that can be lost in the debate.

We also are aware of the fact that different boards handle the ECS issue in different ways. Consequently, the knee-jerk reaction that says that we automatically have to go back to one response or one solution takes away the validity that each community across this province has a role to play in how we do deal with these very young children.

3:00

Mr. Speaker, I want to just give a little bit of background on some of the issues that are before us. In section 24 of the School Act government has established support for early childhood services for children who are as of September 1 younger than six years of age. This means that five year olds are able to attend ECS. In fact, the majority of Alberta children do attend ECS programs. In the '95-96 school year close to 87.2 percent of the five-year-old children in this province were registered in ECS. Eighty-seven percent of our five year olds attended ECS even though it wasn't mandatory.

Mr. Speaker, the key thing about that is the variety of ways that we offer our ECS program. There is no evidence that parents wish to have the attendance made mandatory. Many Albertans like the fact that ECS is flexible and not determined a mandatory part of the school system.

MR. HENRY: A point of order.

THE ACTING SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre on a point of order.

Point of Order Relevance

MR. HENRY: Yeah. On 459, relevance. The member is talking about mandatory attendance. There's nothing in this Bill that even implies or suggests mandatory attendance, and I wish she would stick to the contents of the Bill.

Thank you.

THE ACTING SPEAKER: On the point of order, hon. member.

MRS. BURGNER: Yes, Mr. Speaker. I believe I prefaced my remarks by suggesting that I'd like to talk a little bit about what we have in existence in the province in order to augment my arguments as I go through the debate.

THE ACTING SPEAKER: I personally don't think there is a point of order. Certainly, when we're in debate, it's my strong belief that people have to give us examples to get into the debate. Although I have no intention not to be lenient, I can remember last night especially - and the member has left - when the member spoke for 10 minutes, and he never was close to the Bill. So we're going to be lenient on it.

Hon. Member for Calgary-Currie, continue with your debate.

Debate Continued

MRS. BURGNER: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The point I want to make about the way the process currently exists is that it allows in the flexibility of delivery community service agencies to offer this program in addition to our school systems, and from the time that early childhood services was introduced, that flexibility has

been adapted to meet local priorities.

I think the hon. member will agree that one of the key factors in the success of our children in the school system is not the age at which they start; it's the support of their family and their community as they proceed through a formal education system. Consequently, to mandate or to impose that only the school system would offer this would give the potential for parents to have less flexibility in identifying how they want this service offered.

Parents play a significant role in their children's lives. They are the first teachers, and their influences are lifelong, much longer than the education system. This Bill has the effect of reducing the level of involvement by parents by increasing it in another. Not all parents are a hundred percent comfortable with their school system educating their children even when they get to grades 6, 7, 9, and into grade 12. So we cannot just assume automatically that once the school system has this responsibility, all parents are going to be enthusiastic.

On top of that, the Bill's provision allowing parents to defer the enrollment of the children until the next year puts the onus on parents to lobby the school board to opt out of what members admit is an optional program. It is in my opinion, Mr. Speaker, creating some hoops, some uncertainty, some confusion. You can go; you can't go. You offer it; you don't offer it. I don't think it's as clear a statement as we currently have.

I'd like to talk a little bit about the process that evolved following the transition in ECS, and that is the development of the new kindergarten program statement, which sets out the learning expectations for the ECS program. I think the hon. member will recall that I did a question in question period on the role of this particular document, on its impact within the community, and on the potential for measuring outcomes. It strikes me, Mr. Speaker, that this new kindergarten program statement will give us some very valid data. I do support what the member says about research. I don't necessarily agree with all of his, but I understand that the education system validates itself very much on educational research. I do believe that this new program statement gives us some of that opportunity. It replaces the previous ECS Philosophy, Goals and Program Dimensions document, which was developed in the early '80s. While this earlier document set a basic framework and principles for ECS, it did not set out the clear and consistent learning expectations for ECS-age students.

I think the hon. member will agree that there are some programs outside of the school system which certainly accelerate the educational process for our young children. These could be in music programs, literacy programs, and even in some athletic early-on programs that focus on our young children. Consequently, parents themselves have to identify the kind of direction and the focus for their children's program which is outside of the school system. This new kindergarten program statement gives us some focus and some ability to develop that research.

The new program is based on the provision of a basic ECS program combined with the learning acquired by a child at home and in the community, and these learning experiences will enable Alberta children to meet the ECS learning expectations and make a smooth transition into the formal education system. The government continues to support ECS programs for the children of Alberta, and the learning expectations described in the kindergarten program statement outline the skills which will lead to a smooth transition to grade 1. These learning expectations are developed with the support of parents, family, and community

agencies, which continues to be an extremely positive frame of reference. Our kindergarten program not only helps to prepare children for entry into grade 1 but also provides a foundation for later success.

The purpose of kindergarten is to provide learning experiences that are developmentally appropriate in order to meet the diverse needs of children and promote a positive attitude toward lifelong learning. These are very, very key statements, but they are not necessarily going to be delivered to all children in a formal school setting, and that is the key factor here. Albertans have told us that the standard 400-hour basic ECS program should be a priority for reinvestment for education to ensure that every student has the opportunity for quality education, and as has been recognized, we have resumed that 400 hours of ECS instruction. This amount is \$1,182 per child, and a total of \$6 million will be allocated to ECS transportation.

When ECS funding was reduced two years ago and the new program statement was developed, the government firmly believed that a quality 240-hour basic program in conjunction with family and community learning experiences would meet the learning expectations and prepare children for successful entry into grade 1. However, during the past two years Albertans have raised concerns about the inequities caused by the variation in the number of hours of ECS programming offered by the school boards and by the high instruction fees charged by some school boards for the program beyond the 240 hours.

At the same time, Albertans said that additional funding for ECS should be a priority for any potential reinvestment in education, and I think that is part of the reinvestment process that we're involved with. That's part of the evaluation of the impact of our deficit elimination program, and it's not to be shortchanged. It is a very key issue here. We have a balanced budget. We have dollars to reinvest. We can handle the reduction in transfer payments, and we've put that money back into ECS at the earliest possible time. Additional funding is provided to ECS programs to meet special learning needs of children with disabilities or socioeconomic disadvantages, and this ensures that those children most benefiting from ECS will have their needs met.

Again, that's a co-ordination of services – it's not exclusive to a school community – to provide physical, emotional, social, and learning needs for the children. Kindergarten does play a very significant part for some of our children, but so does the community. Services may include health, social and family support agencies, recreation and cultural associations, and a wide variety of other groups.

Mr. Speaker, I want to speak for a minute on the absolute diversity of the province of Alberta. I understand the comparisons between countries like Denmark or Holland that are able to target their youth programs and begin them at an early age. They don't have to deal with the issue of distance. Quite frankly, when I was living in rural Saskatchewan and had my young family, the opportunity to work within the community, to meet neighbours, to socialize, which were equally important for my child, who was an only child at the time, was much more important than whether or not formal schooling started. That was a view shared by a number of my neighbours and friends at that time. At that time we also had library programs that allowed a two year old to get a library card. You could learn the love of reading, you could learn storytelling, you could learn a whole bunch of things that go along with our ECS program in a community setting. That cannot be lost in the diversity of the size of this province.

3:10

Mr. Speaker, I know the hon. member will and has been very, very derogatory about my support for the reduction in ECS funding, but I firmly believe that we have communities in this province that because of their distance, because of their size, because of their local cultural need are able to have more appropriate options for our children. By mandating or demanding that the school boards take ownership for this program, we lose the ability for our communities to have a comfortable and appropriate voice in the beginning of the education system for our young children.

This government is giving Albertans the ability to make decisions based on the needs of their communities. Mr. Speaker, this is one of the basic tenets of the School Act. I'd like to just briefly in closing read the preamble of the School Act, which states: "Whereas the education community" – that's the community – "in making decisions should consider the diverse nature and heritage of society in Alberta within the context of its common values and beliefs."

While I firmly understand the passion and the belief that the hon. member has brought to bear on this issue, while I think it has been deemed to be a serious issue in some urban centres – and I don't discount that need – the solution for focusing on our young people, having them ready for grade 1, able to learn in a healthy environment is not the exclusive prerogative of the school system. This Bill reinforces the bureaucracy of education, not the family and community support.

Consequently, Mr. Speaker, I'm not able to support this Bill, but I do thank the member for bringing it forward for further discussion.

Thank you.

THE ACTING SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods.

DR. MASSEY: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I would like to say a few words in support of Bill 211. Because I've been prompted by a comment from the previous member, I'd like to start off for a few minutes looking at what exactly the purpose of kindergartens is and why they should be in legislation like this. Her phrase that would categorize kindergartens as formal schooling I think lies at the heart of the problems that we've had with mandating and funding kindergartens in this province. It's that prevailing belief that kindergarten is part of the formal school system, that it is just pre grade 1, that it is either a watered-down grade 1 or, even worse, a baby-sitting service that I think has really caused a great deal of the difficulty we find ourselves in in having to bring forward a Bill like this which would assure that kindergarten and kindergarten programs were there for those parents who would like to access them for their children.

Kindergarten is not – and again I say "is not" – grade 1. It's not pre grade 1. It's a unique time in a youngster's life. It's a distinct and a very identifiable stage in a youngster's life. It's not just preparation for what is to come; it's a life that youngsters are living. It's a time when we try to create for youngsters an environment where they can explore, where they can solve problems, where they are able to take action as knowledge builders, where they learn to be active inquirers, and where they learn to grow as thinkers. That's quite different than considering this a pre grade 1 year that youngsters somehow or other go through.

I think that in all of these debates the uniqueness of the life of

a four year old or a five year old has to be kept in context: what is that life like, and what are we trying to promote when we provide kindergarten programs for them? Time and time again that confusion here and in the Department of Education I think has caused us problems because we don't recognize it as being a distinct phase in youngsters' growth.

So given that it is a distinct phase – and I think that that's been recognized across the province for a number of years – what did people in Alberta believe about kindergarten programs? I took the opportunity to look back at the last royal commission that this government paid for in the early '70s, and I'd like to quote from that report, Mr. Speaker. Commenting on early education, the report said:

While several Canadian provinces have high participation rates in pre-school programs, Alberta remains the only one without established plans for publicly-supported endeavors at this level. Yet overwhelming support for such an undertaking was found by the Commission during its hearings.

So 25 years ago there was overwhelming support across this province. The commission went to centre after centre across the province, and there was overwhelming support for the establishment of kindergarten programs.

The report goes on to indicate that “the first, and most fundamental [conclusion that they drew] is that of universal opportunity for all five-year-old children.” That is, there must be universal opportunity for all five year olds. That's what this Bill does; it provides that opportunity. Again, it's not mandated, but it's there for those parents and those children who would access it. That was true 25 years ago and it's true today, as we saw from the outcry when kindergarten programs were curtailed by the government.

I think that report reminds us just exactly where we were going and how badly we've been derailed in terms of services to young children, because at the same time as they were finding universal and overwhelming support for early childhood education of five year olds, they also found that there was a broader support for early childhood programs. The universal provision of programs for five years olds was to be accompanied by a selective programming for disadvantaged and handicapped children who were three and four year olds – three and four year olds, not just five year olds.

Twenty-six years ago we were looking at providing programs for even younger children who were handicapped or who had special needs. Even further, there was a plea that all of the services that we offer for young children – day care centres and early childhood services – be integrated – play schools, nursery schools – that we'd be looking at the delivery of those programs for young children and trying to rationalize them and put them into some sort of meaningful context with the ultimate goal of serving very young children to the best of our ability and resources. So we really haven't come very far when you consider that in 1994-95 we withdrew services for young children who are five years of age.

There's some complaint about putting services for young children into law. I looked at the history of compulsory education. If you look back at really the very first public schools, you'll find that the very first state-controlled compulsory system was in Prussia. It was included in the Prussian school codes in the 1700s – 1763 and 1765 – and those codes promulgated by Frederick the Great included compulsory education for children five to 13 years of age. As far back as the 1700s compulsory education for five to 13 year olds was in place. Here we are hundreds of years later in one of the richest provinces in the

world arguing whether we have the resources and whether we should be providing that kind of service for our own five year olds. It seems quite incredible. Those same Prussian codes made the hours of school attendance compulsory. They laid out the vacations and when they would be taken. They also included the fees that parents would pay and fines for parents who didn't comply with the compulsory school laws of that time. So the history of legislation such as Bill 211 goes back hundreds of years. I don't think we can be extremely proud of our progress when we view where we are today in the context of those early efforts to serve young children.

3:20

I think you can look at, you know: why do we need this Bill? Why are we here arguing about Bill 211 at this time? Certainly it grows directly out of the government's action. The province had come a long way in providing services for five year olds. The model that had been chosen, that of a co-operative model that allowed parents to have a great deal of say and in fact demanded that parents have a great deal of say in kindergarten programs in the public schools, had been nurtured and promoted by previous governments. It had been endorsed and carried out by well-meaning parents across the province, and it was really working quite well. There was I think great satisfaction with the program and the progress that had been made. Somehow or other the government found fit to try to destroy what had become a rather trusting relationship between the government, Alberta Education in particular, and parents in providing this program. People around the province still scratch their heads and ask in wonder how the discontinuance of kindergarten ever got through this government and through this Legislature. They still cannot quite understand the kind of politics that led to that decision being made and, further, that decision being put into practice.

There's been certainly a destruction of public trust. The people who are calling for this kind of legislation are the people who have been hurt by the changes that were made arbitrarily. I think it's been mentioned and it's going to become a classic in Alberta politics: the roundtables that were held in education and the advice that was given at those roundtables and the kind of contrary actions that were taken in early childhood education as a result of those roundtables. I think that, in large part, discontinuing the early childhood program led to a cynicism around the whole effort of government to gain public input through the roundtable process. The roundtables themselves were called into disrepute by the actions of the government growing out of the education roundtables on discontinuing kindergarten.

The roots of this Bill are in those compulsory education laws. This one, of course, is different. It's an enabling law; it's one that says to parents, “If you want a kindergarten program for your youngsters, then that program will be there.” If they don't – and many parents make the decision that they don't need such a program for their youngsters, or their youngsters aren't ready for that kind of a program – then that's their prerogative, and that's as it should be.

So in concluding, Mr. Speaker, I urge endorsement of Bill 211. I'd say it's sad that it has to be here, because we had made considerable progress, but I think it's a very necessary Bill.

Thank you.

THE ACTING SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Stony Plain.

MR. WOLOSHYN: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The comment by the previous speaker that it's sad this Bill is on the floor I think

I totally concur with for a variety of reasons. I don't think the mover of the Bill really understood what he was doing. The way the Bill is written certainly reflects that. Secondly, in his introductory remarks he appeared to be more interested in what our caucus did or didn't do or how we did or didn't arrive at decisions. As usual, he was consistent; he was wrong on everything he said.

The other part that I sort of wonder where he's coming from is when he comes out with all the research that found that 400 hours and 200 hours and 240 hours made a difference. When the program was reduced, the funding to the program was reduced. Programs were not reduced across the province. Some were; some were not. However, when he concludes that achievement scores, social behaviour, and all these other attributes that he said in his talk would somehow change with a 400-hour exposure to kindergarten and not change with a 200-hour exposure, it showed quite clearly that he was coming from a total lack of knowledge in this area.

With respect to his questioning my own experience with kindergarten, I'd like it on the record for him to realize that I was responsible for starting a kindergarten in the school that I was at and maintaining it for 13 years. I also was responsible for starting and maintaining a younger program, K4 to play school, for some nine years. I certainly do agree with the statement that he alluded to very briefly: that early intervention was desirable. What he forgot to say, however, was that you don't have early intervention on every student that's in this province. Some children, depending upon where they're from and what the situations are in their home environments, certainly do benefit from programs that are directed at the needs that they show. I would stand up and would certainly be supportive of an expansion of early intervention in some particular cases. So, Mr. Speaker, for him to say that I wasn't familiar with what was happening in kindergarten was totally wrong.

The other part that I would like to state on the record: students who come from similar kinds of homes, if they do have a kindergarten experience, usually but not always are a little bit ahead in some areas for approximately the first six weeks of grade 1. After about the middle or end of October children from the same background are on the same level socially and academically.

MR. WHITE: Prove it.

MR. WOLOSHYN: I can prove it very easily. I have gone through it. I've had it in my own school. I've tracked students, and it just is a fact.

As I indicated, however, there is a place for early intervention where the need is identified, and I agree with that, but to have early intervention right across the board is nothing short of being silly.

The motivation for his Bill, I think – I think; I'm not sure – was funding, although the way he wrote the Bill convoluted the whole business. I would like to point out to him that when the funding that was earmarked for kindergarten was reduced, the majority of the school boards in this province acted responsibly and maintained the programs without increasing fees to the parents. That indicates to me that the move was a correct move, that students did not get hurt. The boards were able to budget appropriately, and the students who wanted the program accessed it. In addition to that, when the dollars within the area became available, the funding for the luxury was in fact reinstated. It was reinstated, basically, I would say, because of the fact that that was

one of the programs that was the last to be reduced. So when the member comes forward and wants to change school compulsory age under the guise of trying to access funding, I quite frankly don't know what planet he's from or which one he's pointing at even.

3:30

The effects of the funding reduction I think we should look at, and I think statistically it can be shown that there was almost a zero reduction of students taking part in kindergarten programs. Simply stated, in 1995-96 87 percent of the students of kindergarten age were going to kindergarten. Therefore, 87 percent of the students in 1995-96, I repeat, Mr. Speaker, were enrolled in kindergarten. Prior to the reduction in funding I'm not sure if it was even that high.

The other aspect that I think we have to address here is the kindergarten scene in Alberta. It is not pointed out by the hon. members opposite that there are some 243 private ECS operators currently operating in this province. Why are they existing? I would suggest to you that it's parental choice more than anything, simply because every public school board does offer a kindergarten program in this province. I for one am very, very supportive of parents having the option as to whether or not their child enters an ECS program. If this Bill were to be supported, that option would virtually be taken away because we would have it compulsory unless you choose to opt out. That's a total reversal of what is currently in the program, and that is that you have the option to opt into a program.

MS LEIBOVICI: Is that your only complaint? No problem; it can be fixed in Committee of the Whole.

MR. WOLOSHYN: Mr. Speaker, it must be spring. I hear a little chickadee chirping across the way, and if there were something laudable coming from her, I think we should all listen.

MRS. ABDURAHMAN: And she's fluffy and cuddly.

MR. WOLOSHYN: Well, I won't comment on that, hon. member.

One of the issues that I have with the Bill – and I did indicate that – is that compulsory versus voluntary is reversed, and that I don't think is healthy.

The other aspect. The way the clauses are written, it states quite clearly that a five-year-old student could not necessarily enter kindergarten but could enter grade 1 by implication. Subsection (1.1) which is proposed to be added – and bear with me, Mr. Speaker. I know it's not clause-by-clause study; however, I think it's relevant to point this out: “The parent of a student who at September 1 in a year is 5 years of age may defer the enrolment of that student until the next school year.” That's good. If you go to the one that leads into it, it says that “subject to subsection (1.1), at September 1 in a year [a student who] is 5 years of age” can be put into a school program. That indicates to me that if I am the parent of a child that I wanted to start grade 1 at age five, it's possible. I might also add that it's currently possible with the agreement of the board and the parents, in any event. This would make it almost compulsory.

The thrust of this, I think, was to address the funding. I'm not sure because it doesn't relate to funding in the Bill itself. I would have liked to have seen something either in the preamble or whatever that would address why we would segment out one portion of a school program, a voluntary, nonmandatory portion

that is currently funded more than adequately. Why all of a sudden we'd want to redo the school entry age to bring funding in through the back door, I don't know. I think that the desire of the member to ensure full funding for kindergarten – and that was his desire, I think, in the Bill – wouldn't be met as the Bill is drafted, in any event.

I feel very strongly, too, that the public outcry that is purported to have been made because of these changes is somewhat exaggerated. Yes, some of the people were not very happy. They were mostly in urban areas. I would quote an hon. member of this Legislature who said: some parts of Alberta had no complaints over the reduction; it seemed to be more acute by some vested interest groups and some urban centres. That was an observation of a member of this House, and I think a very accurate observation.

MR. HENRY: Okay; we'll send that to the ATA. The early childhood council will love you for that one. They used to be your colleagues; remember?

MR. WOLOSHTYN: They still are my colleagues, and I respect them one and all. When they need support, hon. member, they know where to come, and that's not to you but to me.

MR. PHAM: Call the question, Stan.

MR. WOLOSHTYN: I can't because he gets time to close. I would like to call the question because I know that at this point in time – and it will get better as it goes – every hon. member in this House currently would have no choice but to vote against this particular Bill.

Mr. Speaker, I think I'll close very shortly by just stating very clearly that this program takes away from volunteer programs. It takes away parental choice. It doesn't ensure funding. It doesn't ensure any kind of enhanced program. He hasn't addressed what the purpose of the program is. I will concede one point, which I'm sorry this Bill did not address, and that is the value of early intervention on its own merits and for children who need it.

Mr. Speaker, I don't have any difficulty with the Member for Edmonton-Centre mailing my remarks to the ATA, because this Bill, the way it's drafted, certainly couldn't be supported by anybody. It's so poorly crafted that even the ATA, who are supportive of kindergarten, could not support this piece of poorly crafted legislation.

Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

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

MR. ZWOZDESKY: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm happy to rise to speak in support of Bill 211, that being the School (Age of Enrolment) Amendment Act, 1996, as brought forward by my hon. colleague for Edmonton-Centre, a real champion of education in the province and one who is widely appreciated for his comments, his remarks, and for this Bill no matter where he goes.

I was interested in what the hon. Member for Stony Plain had to say in regard to the ATA because like him, I too am a former member of the ATA, and I would sure like him to provide that documentation wherein the ATA suggests that it's opposed to this Bill. I'd really like to see that. I would ask the member at some point to provide it because it's germane of course to this particular issue.

Point of Order Clarification

MR. WOLOSHTYN: A point of clarification. I didn't say that I had documentation. I said I thought the ATA would not support it.

MR. HENRY: That's not what he said. He said the ATA didn't support it.

THE ACTING SPEAKER: I don't think we have to argue about those points. It will be in *Hansard*, and everybody in Alberta can read it if they want to.

Debate Continued

MR. ZWOZDESKY: In any event, the thrust of this Bill has been fairly clearly explained. I think the Bill is not that complicated, and all members on both sides of the House will have no problem following it. What we're really talking about here is simply amending the School Act to really allow for more and for better and for earlier education for our most precious resource, that being our children. Instead of requiring students to attend from age six onward, we're simply saying: let's make it a little more flexible, a little more optional, and encourage them to come in at the age five level.

As we debate the merits of this Bill and shoot back and forth on it, I think we really do have to take a look at what is going on elsewhere. Often we hear the term Alberta advantage used. We hear it in relation to industry and we hear it in relation to the economy in general and jobs and so on, and we applaud those types of initiatives that encourage that and help deliver that advantage. Here is an example where we again could put forward a true Alberta advantage for our young people, yet I hear government members balking at that suggestion. It puzzles me why they are balking on it.

3:40

Mr. Speaker, as we look at what's going on elsewhere in the world and we look at other countries such as Belgium or Spain or wherever, we shouldn't go too far beyond our own country and take a look at what's going on here as well, because as we look at what's going on across other provinces, we see time and time again where governments in those provinces have done very positive things to help impact the cause of education from an earlier and earlier age.

I've said it before and I want to say it again, because I know all members are listening carefully, that we have at least two other provinces that not only encourage ECS programming at age five, or what you might call the primary kindergarten program, but they also are encouraging a junior kindergarten program now as well, which means they are placing so much more emphasis on it elsewhere. So, too, should we so that we can fully give our students the true Alberta advantage, if in fact there is such a thing, that the government has in mind.

We look at Ontario and we look at Quebec, where those types of things are moving forward. They do this after having consulted with the public and after listening to the public and after looking at studies and looking at real results as to the benefits of involving students at an earlier and earlier age in the process. Then we have to also take a look at where our province stands in relation to other provinces in this country in terms of not only our verbal commitment to the ideals of education but to the dollars behind that commitment. What can you do for your child that

would benefit that child most, Mr. Speaker? You've asked yourself that question a number of times, I'll bet, in rearing your own family. I've asked myself in rearing mine. In the end what you hope to do is develop good, careful, sound-thinking individuals who can make decisions and make choices on their own, and the earlier we get them on with that program so much the better.

Where do we stand as a province in relation to that commitment financially? I think we had some statistics offered up earlier that suggested that Alberta has slipped now to the point where we are very nearly the lowest if not the lowest province in terms of our per capita expenditures in the area of education. I'm not saying that money is the total solution. What I am saying is that money properly spent and properly used can give proper preparation to the students at a time when they need it most. It is a proven fact that habits learned early can be positive, lasting learning habits. What could be better than the habit of learning? Why not encourage our young people to get in there sooner? Where is that leadership from our government in that regard?

This is of course a question that we have raised a couple of times now in this House formally. We've raised it often in our speeches, but we have brought forward at least two Bills: one by the Leader of the Opposition earlier and now again, by the Member for Edmonton-Centre. So it's very clear where we stand as opposition members of the Liberal caucus, and it's becoming unfortunately much more clear where the government stands, and I regret that it is really at the polarized end of the pro-education spectrum.

Where does the public stand on this issue of ECS, Mr. Speaker? Well, I think the public has been pretty clear. After hundreds of names, in fact thousands of names, perhaps 20,000 names appeared on petitions, after a number of protests and demonstrations occurred and individuals visited our gallery here and listened to debates, finally the government had to backtrack on its earlier initiative, which was to curtail early childhood programming support in this province. Only after that large outcry did the government actually capitulate or, in the eyes of some, actually listen. We're asking once more for the government to listen here, and I sincerely hope they do, because we don't want to have to go through that whole process again and use up the valuable time of this House or use up the valuable time of our Alberta public to prove a point that shouldn't even be being debated as long as it is being debated here, but we're fighting for it because we believe in it, and we're trying to convince the government members opposite to lend some support.

Mr. Speaker, where do educators stand on this issue of ECS funding? Well, as a former teacher – and I know there are others in this House – I think we stand fully in support of anything that helps further the cause of educating our young people at an early age. Last week I had the great pleasure of being at the ATA with a number of other colleagues from the Liberal side – and I think the Independent member was there as well – to hear some concerns expressed to us very directly by some 200 plus teachers who were attending a meeting, and ECS funding or ECS programming was certainly part of that discussion. We heard from these teachers last week some of their points in favour of having this type of programming. Again, I speak from some exposure to this as a professional teacher myself. I taught primarily at the high school level and somewhat at the junior high, but we certainly did come in contact with these younger people. In having come in contact again with the teachers who are charged with delivering this precious commodity called learning and education to our young people, we heard firsthand from them what it is that they

feel is important to our young people.

They feel that this is extremely important as part of the longer life learning curve, because we know that if we encourage learning at an earlier age, if we encourage some of the disciplines that go along with the education system at an early age, if we encourage reading at an early age, and if we encourage their participation in all of the things that prepare them to become those thinkers and decision-makers that I alluded to earlier, they will become better for it. Why not allow them that opportunity, as this Bill purports? Mr. Speaker, all we're saying is that today's young people really require these tools for tomorrow, and the earlier we can provide them, give them into their hands, the better off we will be as a society, and certainly the better off they will be as a society.

The teachers were telling us that in spite of the tremendous burnout that they feel, in spite of the tremendously unfair conditions that some of them have to operate under because of ill-planned or poorly planned restructuring in the education system, they are nonetheless trying their hardest to put forward those issues that are somehow going to benefit or impact the system to make it a better outcome, a more successful outcome for the students that are coming up through that system. The teachers want us through this Bill to give some hope that that particular process will start a little earlier. They want to help bring children into the system sooner.

This Bill certainly attempts to do that, yet in doing that, Mr. Speaker, it would also allow parents the opportunity to opt out for a year, as the Bill states that there would be a provision within here that allows for parents to make that decision. That point is covered under section 4 where section 24 is amended. It provides students with the option to defer “the enrolment of the student pursuant to section 8(1.1).” So there are options built in here in case some parents object or in case some parents feel their child may not be ready or whatever the case may be.

So we're seeing the best of both worlds here. On the one hand, they're allowed to take advantage of the system should they wish. On the other hand, should the parents in their discretion decide that it is not beneficial at this time for the student to go into an ECS program, they can certainly hold them back until such time as they feel the student is better ready for it, because there may be some of those cases where that's necessary. So that tells you a little bit of where educators stand and I think where parents stand as well. By allowing students to come into the program a little earlier, I think we are in effect easing the pressure on both the educators as well as the students. We ease the pressure because they become acclimatized sooner to each other, and in becoming acclimatized, they become attuned to what's going on. They become better and, I hope, sooner learners, if I can put it that way.

What will be the outcome of this Bill? Well, I would hope that the outcome would be a greater degree of success, a much better and more globalized approach, if you will, to what's going on elsewhere in preparing our students for the information age, which we are now going through. In the end I think we will see more successful students arising and clearer and better long-distance thinkers.

What I get asked more often perhaps than not is: where does the government stand on issues like this? Well, it's becoming clear through the debate where they stand. I really am questioning where the government is coming from on this issue, because I see here an opportunity through this Bill for the government to in fact come back to that role of leadership, of good leadership

that from time to time was provided over the many years that have just passed. This is an opportunity for them to send a clear, loud signal of what their priorities are. What are the priorities of that government? Now that the deficit has been eliminated – and some would argue it was eliminated almost two years ago – why are we still proceeding with this perhaps spirit of minimal care for something as important as education of our very, very young people?

3:50

There are compelling articles and compelling evidence elsewhere that the government would do well to follow. I note, for example, that in an article titled Education and Care in Early Childhood, which is put out by the OECD Bibliography group, they have come to some startling conclusions. I'd just like to read you one very short one here.

Clearly, and despite the trend in other social policies from universal to selective benefits across OECD countries, universal pre-school for children from the age of 2 1/2 years to compulsory school age is emerging as the goal for a number of industrialised European countries.

And we cite Belgium, France, and Spain.

Because of the socialisation and learning experiences it provides, pre-school is viewed by parents and educators as being 'good' for a child's development, regardless of the standing of the parents' occupations.

There are a number of articles similar to that which tell us that everyone is looking at increasing their commitment to education because of the tremendous and obvious value that it has. So I would urge the government to please take up this challenge.

MR. JACQUES: Point of order, Mr. Speaker.

Point of Order

Allegations against Members

MR. JACQUES: Standing Orders 23(h), (i), and (j). I don't know on how many occasions in the last five minutes the member has referred to the government. I must point out for the benefit of the member that this is a private member's Bill. It is not a government Bill nor is it government versus Liberal. I would hope that the member would respect this House and realize that it is a private member's Bill and categorize it. Thank you.

THE ACTING SPEAKER: On the point of order, hon. member.

MR. ZWOZDESKY: I would hope that the member pointing that out would respect it as well. I'm sure he probably will. I'm aware of that, Member for Grande Prairie-Wapiti. All I'm saying is that I'm urging the government to look at this private member's Bill through the proper glasses and to let us help you correct the oversight, or the mistake, that may have been made by your government in not bringing this forward itself. Show the proper leadership, and please get off this ideological assault on education.

THE ACTING SPEAKER: On the point of order. The hon. Member for Grande Prairie-Wapiti certainly has brought up a good point of order, because these Bills are not government members' or opposition members' Bills. They are private members' Bills. I know that the hon. member has certainly made good remarks. I'm not too sure if he ever said that it was a government Bill, but he always said the government didn't do it. I think members on both sides of the House have to convince the

House to vote for or against this Bill when it comes to a vote.

The hon. Member for Edmonton-Avonmore.

MR. ZWOZDESKY: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. That is quite correct, and I'm sure that when the hon. Member for Grande Prairie-Wapiti does check the Blues, he'll see that I never once referred to this as a government Bill, because of course it isn't. I certainly wish it was a government Bill, but of course it's not. It's a private member's Bill from Edmonton-Centre and from this side of the House.

Debate Continued

MR. ZWOZDESKY: Mr. Speaker, the final point I want to make is with regard to certain allegations that were made in the heat of the debate in this House and outside the House by some government members who kept challenging certain studies that were put forward in support of ECS programming when the first cuts to the ECS program were announced by the government. I want to save the government from any further embarrassment. I think that once they announced that funding for kindergarten was going to be cut by 55 percent, there was a real scramble that took place to try and support the basis for that decision, and of course no real hard evidence could be found to support it. I recall certain ministers being embarrassed by that. I would like that to not be repeated. So here's an opportunity for them to again do the right thing: step forward and give this Bill proper consideration and help out our young students in this province.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker. With those remarks I will conclude and let someone else speak to this very important issue.

[The Deputy Speaker in the Chair]

THE DEPUTY SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Calgary-East.

MR. AMERY: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It's a pleasure to rise and speak to Bill 211, sponsored by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre. As some of the members of this House may recall, at one time I had proposed a Bill which made ECS mandatory. [some applause] Hang on. Hang on a sec. It's not over yet. This actually was in response to a concern, that was raised by hundreds and hundreds of my constituents . . .

SOME HON. MEMBERS: How many?

MR. AMERY: Hundreds and hundreds.

. . . that some children were benefiting more from the ECS program than others due to funding inequities. In making the program mandatory, I also specified a minimum level of funding for the program. Since then, Mr. Speaker, the government has reinvested funding in ECS and has resumed funding 400 hours of instruction. This ensures that Alberta children have access to the same level of basic ECS programming and an equal opportunity to acquire the learning expectations of an ECS program. This has addressed my concerns about funding inconsistencies and my reasoning for mandating ECS.

Mr. Speaker, some Albertans believe that ECS should be a mandatory part of children's education and wish the government to enact this in legislation. There is a concern that the ECS program could again be cut, should another budget crisis occur. At the same time, this government continues to hear from the majority of Albertans that ECS should be optional for children and their parents.

At present, Mr. Speaker, there is no curriculum for the ECS program. The ECS program statement lists both general and specific learner expectations and is a guideline for what material should be covered. It is not formalized in the School Act and therefore is not curriculum but for the most part is followed as such. This program statement is based on the provision of a basic ECS program combined with the learning acquired by a child at home and in the community. These learning experiences will enable Alberta children to meet the ECS learning expectations and make a smooth transition into the formal education system.

The whole issue surrounding ECS is one of flexibility, Mr. Speaker. It has always been a program where local communities could offer programs according to their wishes. From the time that ECS was introduced in this province, there has been flexibility to meet needs according to local priorities. Albertans like the fact that ECS offers that flexibility.

Since ECS programming began, Mr. Speaker, each school jurisdiction had their own ideas about the kind of program they would offer their students. Before the amalgamation of school boards, down from 141 to 75, there were 141 different methods of delivering ECS. If one considers that each school within that school board may have had a different program, there could have been quite a variety of ECS programs. This reflects the diversity of programs within our province. That is one of the benefits of a community-based ECS system.

Mr. Speaker, before 1973 there was no government support of ECS. They were privately owned and community based. As such, parental involvement and planning and decision-making were essential for the success of the program. Since then the ECS process has been formalized. It has always been up to the parents to determine the importance of the ECS program for their own child.

4:00

In last fall's results report of the department's three-year business plan the department surveyed the satisfaction that Albertans have with their level of involvement in the education system. In 1995, 78 percent of the parents surveyed felt they had an adequate opportunity to be involved in decisions affecting their children's education at school in their community. The figure dropped to 57 percent, Mr. Speaker, when they were asked about their opportunities at the local school board level. As a result of these statistics, the department determined that one of their goals for improvement should be increasing the opportunities for parental involvement in education decision-making.

To me this says that parents want to be more involved in their children's education. Instead, Mr. Speaker, Bill 211 empowers school boards to a greater extent. Bill 211 would change section 24 in the School Act from reading "a board . . . may provide an [ECS] program" to "a board shall provide an [ECS] program." This gives the board no option but to provide the program. It reduces the parent's input and flexibility.

Mr. Speaker, I really don't think the Bill that the Member for Edmonton-Centre proposes is a credible alternative to this. This Bill does not talk about learner's expectations or about any clear goals with respect to ECS programs.

Mr. Speaker, it's not just the responsibility of the Department of Education and the school system to see that our children are educated and able to make the transition from home to school. What is needed is a co-operative effort involving families, teachers, and communities. The goal of the ECS program is to help prepare children for formal education and ease of transition from home to school.

Although ECS programs are voluntary in Alberta, Mr. Speaker, they are very important to our education system. Research indicates that the emphasis should be put on the quality of the program itself. The nature of the program and the way it is structured and delivered is the most important factor.

Mr. Speaker, providing schooling in a meaningful way to meet the diverse needs of children is one of the biggest challenges our teachers face. I know the hon. member recognizes this and is concerned with it.

I do not want to imply that I think ECS is not valuable to a child's development. Mr. Speaker, I do question the mandatory nature of Bill 211. However, ECS is not mandatory, and making it mandatory may not guarantee any improved outcomes.

Mr. Speaker, perhaps the most compelling evidence against the Bill is the statistic that the Member for Calgary-Currie raised earlier. Eighty-seven percent of the five year olds in the province are already attending ECS. If this is so, I really do not see a great need to amend the law making it so the other 13 percent have to attend.

Albertans are meeting the basic premise of Bill 211 on their own. I say that they continue to be allowed the freedom to determine if such a level of participation continues to be in their interest. I am not convinced that this Bill would benefit our children any more than the present system we have in place. If anything, Mr. Speaker, it limits the options and flexibility the education system has.

I cannot support Bill 211, Mr. Speaker, and I ask the hon. members to do the same.

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

MRS. ABDURAHMAN: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise to speak to Bill 211, the School (Age of Enrolment) Amendment Act, 1996. I speak in full support of this private member's Bill.

I'm not going to speak to it from the perspective of research that has been done within the educational field and go into in-depth debate about what can be proven by research and what can be disproved. I'm going to speak to it, Mr. Speaker, purely from the point of view of a mother and a grandmother and looking at the future of the province of Alberta and what our greatest resource is, and the greatest resource we have is our children.

We're in a very competitive world environment, something that my generation, I believe, really can't get our heads completely around, how much things have changed even in my lifetime, far less my mother's, who's still alive, to understand that global marketplace and that you're not just competing for a job in Fort Saskatchewan or the city of Edmonton, that in actual fact when you're competing for a job, it's going to be in the global context, particularly with free trade. So as I've indicated, Mr. Speaker, the greatest gift that we can give to our children is the best educational system and the ability to access that educational system irrespective of what your financial status is as a family.

I was really concerned because this, as has been pointed out by a number of members, is a private member's Bill. It behooves us to look closely at the contents of private members' Bills, because they really can serve Albertans in a very positive way. We just saw that last week when we had the alternative medicine Bill – I believe it was 209 – being unanimously supported by private members in this Assembly who were seated here for that vote. That is going to benefit all Albertans. I would say that the Bill that has been sponsored by my colleague from Edmonton-Centre

is such a Bill, and for the Member for Calgary-East to suggest that it's mandatory, he's missing the point. It's mandatory for government to ensure that the resources are there for the child whose parent has made that decision to come into the early childhood educational program.

We all know that age is not the only criterion that determines where a child is in the educational system. Unfortunately or fortunately, however you look at it, we have premature births, and some children, because of that premature aspect of their birth, aren't necessarily ready on the calendar date of their life, at five or six, to be going into early childhood. This would allow the parent to look at the development of their child and if it was the appropriate time for them to enter into the ECS program, Mr. Speaker.

The other aspect of this – and I get absolutely amazed when I meet with young people with young children to see the total involvement by parents, and it goes beyond what I had with my four children – is where you're into information systems. Children who are not even at school feel quite comfortable sitting in front of a computer, having learned through their parents how to use that computer, or indeed their intellect being stimulated, believe it or not, by television because there are many educational programs that can be accessed. You'll find parents who are very conscientious and direct their children to the right type of program. You will find that that child of five is intellectually developed far beyond what I was at five. So for us to understand the capabilities of young children today, we have to realize that we're in a different time.

I find it incredulous that here we are in the province of Alberta debating the merits of a publicly funded educational system, which of course encompasses many delivery systems, whether it's a separate system, Catholic or Protestant, or whether it's a Jewish school or whether it's an Arabic program school or Ukrainian school. We're actually debating the fact that the funds may not be available, because the School Act doesn't require it, so that this child can access early childhood at the age of five. I would say that we shouldn't be debating that in this House. We should have recognized as a society that that is something we need to meet this global marketplace.

The other – and I'm increasingly concerned about it – is that we see more and more parents opting to remove their children from the publicly funded school system because they're not satisfied with that level of education, or it may be the societal differences in discipline and value systems. I think it behooves us as elected officials to realize that we have a responsibility of accountability to ensure that we don't see people within our communities removing their children and weakening that publicly funded educational system. Many of the reasons are for values and also to ensure that their children will have an advantage that they believe may be greater over other members of society so that they can access that job market or be successful in the entrepreneurial world or indeed be leaders in the multinationals as chief executive officers. I believe this Bill recognizes the opportunities that we give to our young children by requiring governments to fund early childhood.

With those comments, I would urge all members of this Assembly to support this private member's Bill. I compliment Edmonton-Centre for bringing it forward, and contrary to a private member sitting across criticizing the writing of this Bill – I think we should be careful when we do that. We rely on Legislative Counsel to assist us laypeople with the writing of those Bills, and I find that criticism not warranted, Mr. Speaker.

Thank you.

4:10

THE DEPUTY SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Calgary-Bow.

MRS. LAING: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I am pleased to speak to the second reading of Bill 211. The hon. member's Bill raises an issue which is of the utmost importance to all Albertans. Albertans want the needs of their children to be met, and they want to ensure that their children have access to all the advantages available to them in this wonderful province of ours.

This is not a debate on whether or not there should be kindergarten. It's not a debate on whether or not kindergarten is important. This is a debate about whether ECS should be mandatory. Mr. Speaker, I'm opposed to making ECS mandatory, as this Bill would have us do. I feel that if we make ECS mandatory, it'll reduce the flexibility of the program that we have now in place.

We have some excellent community-based ECS programs in place where the community and the parents work together to build the program and then hire the teachers. This flexibility allows for emphasis in the program of the community's interests and features of the community. For example, parents choose to send their children to a program which may specialize in the arts, where drama or dance is incorporated into the program. A community ECS program could be more able to place emphasis on music for instance. Alternatively, a program could focus on addressing the specific need that the community has. A Cree or Vietnamese or Ukrainian community may set up a program which includes a strong ESL component of instruction to prepare the child for grade 1, or it might dwell on cultural awareness to develop a tolerance and an appreciation of other cultures in that community. Under the present system the parents and the community have the ability to do so.

Another concern I have is for children of ECS age in the rural areas. If ECS were mandatory, we would have to see small children traveling unnecessarily long distances to get to a board-operated ECS program at a school. If this is the case due to busing requirements, we will then end up with children having to spend perhaps a full day at school, unable to return after half a day because there are not the buses to take them back. I don't think this benefits the children. At the present time most programs in the rural areas are attended for a full day, two days a week, so they're able to get around the transportation issue. For a small child who is five years old, this is a very long day. Many of them are the first to be picked up on the route and taken to the school and have a long drive, perhaps several hours if you take both of those into consideration.

In some rural areas today there may not even be an ECS program due to the fact that there's not enough interest or there are not enough children. The children that wish to attend may be funded to do so; however, it may not be feasible to rent or buy a facility to house the program for such a small number of students. If mandated, these children again would have to travel a great distance to reach a program where they have no facility in their own community. Instead, in some cases we are presently able to have teachers come into the small communities to instruct the program. It might be held at the hall. It might be held in the church basement. It may even sometimes be held in a home. Often in these cases a greater proportion of the parents become involved in the program, the teacher becomes a valued member of the community, and this is a system that serves both the students' and the community's needs.

I should point out that teachers at these community programs

are fully qualified teachers and they follow the intent of the kindergarten program statement. The programs themselves receive per pupil funding from the government, the same as a board-operated ECS program does. The result is a quality program which meets the needs of the community and offers the parents input into the program.

Another problem I have with this Bill is that it does not look at the individual needs of children. Children mature at different rates. They do not all walk at the same time. They do not all read at the same stage either. There's also a slight difference in the development of boys and girls. Girls are more verbal at this age and are ready to read, whereas boys require a bit more big muscle programming and a different approach.

The result is that some children just are not ready in some cases to go to school at age five. I think the Member for Edmonton-Centre should consider the implications this Bill has for the development of the children. Let's assume that this Bill is passed and attendance becomes mandatory. Five year olds are now required to go to kindergarten. The child who's not quite ready to be in that environment may not do well. Because of their struggle every day with the academics they may lose interest in school.

MR. HENRY: A point of order, Mr. Speaker.

THE DEPUTY SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre is rising on a point of order.

Point of Order Relevance

MR. HENRY: Relevance, 459. The member is talking about mandatory attendance at kindergarten, which has absolutely nothing to do with this Bill. There's no part of this Bill that would suggest there's mandatory attendance at kindergarten. So I'd ask the Chair to direct the member to speak to the contents and to the principle of the Bill.

Thank you.

THE DEPUTY SPEAKER: On the point of order, Calgary-Bow.

MRS. LAING: I don't believe there is a point of order. He was talking about all five year olds having to go to kindergarten, and that's basically where we are.

THE DEPUTY SPEAKER: On the point of relevance. The hon. member was contending that it isn't mandatory, and you are saying that it is mandatory.

MRS. LAING: Well, my point is that it should not be mandatory, and I'm giving some of the reasons why I feel it should not be mandatory. It may be irrelevant to the member, but to a child who's not ready for school and is struggling every day, it's very relevant.

THE DEPUTY SPEAKER: The Chair would certainly hesitate to question the proposer of the Bill. Unless we're talking about two different words for the same term, it says in here, the change, that "a board or, with the approval of the Minister, a person may provide an early childhood services program." Hon. member, if that has the same meaning to you as it does to me, as another term is kindergarten, then I'm not sure that I understand what the correction is. So that's how I would see it. If we're talking about two different terms having the same meaning, then . . .

MRS. LAING: Yes. Yes, we are.

THE DEPUTY SPEAKER: Hon. member, continue.

MRS. LAING: Thank you.

MS LEIBOVICI: If I may, Mr. Speaker.

THE DEPUTY SPEAKER: The Chair has indicated that the hon. Member for Calgary-Bow may continue. At best it would appear that it's a matter of interpretation and debate between members.
Calgary-Bow.

4:20

Debate Continued

MRS. LAING: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. We were talking about children coming to school before they are ready for it and also the struggle they have as they try to cope with things that they are not developmentally ready for. There's also the social environment they're put into. If they're from a small community and they come to a large school, that takes them out of their community and also throws them into a very different social environment than what they're used to, and sometimes they're not ready to cope with that. They may need more time to learn and develop at home and within their own community. The child is not ready for - if you wish, I can call it kindergarten.

They may do poorly in one aspect or another and fall behind the group, which again decreases their self-esteem, and this often sets a pattern for the rest of the student's career. Many problems may develop from such negative experiences in these formative years, and the confidence that the student loses at that stage becomes increasingly more difficult to recapture as they get older. I don't think that any of us really want to see this happen, and having had a lot of experience with these children that have lost their self-esteem due to this, it is a real serious problem. It's a problem that can impact on the rest of their life.

All of us here want what is best for the children of the province, and we all have different views on how to achieve that goal. The Member for Edmonton-Centre may believe that by making kindergarten mandatory, he'll be able to guarantee children will be advantaged by ensuring that funding for the program not be cut, but I do not believe that funding necessarily goes hand in hand with the best education possible. More importantly education involves looking at the needs of the individual students. I want to point out, however, that I believe strongly in the importance of providing kindergarten programs. The basic purpose of kindergarten is to help the children be comfortable socially as well as physically in the school setting. It also helps prepare them for grade 1 and formal school. So this in my opinion is the goal that must be met as our children begin school.

There are of course exceptions to this rule, Mr. Speaker. Those children who come from deprived homes may very well need more time and more funding in the kindergarten program, and there are many options open for these children. There are excellent community programs operated by parents and volunteers and community members for very little cost, and the government with the early intervention programs will provide the needed funding for the children. Disadvantaged children are being taken care of today. There are also options available to all the families who want to supplement their child's learning program. Again, there are a number of groups and activities, playschool and trips to the zoo, that children may attend to enrich the type of learning that they have.

We should all remember that before 1973 the kindergarten programs did not receive any provincial support. They were privately operated and community based. The importance of involving parents was absolutely essential to the success of the program. Since then, kindergarten programs have become more formalized and restructured in a way that has become more convenient for school boards. However, it's always been up to the parents to determine the importance of kindergarten for their own children, and I don't think that should change.

The three-year business plan for Education supports the government's commitment to high standards for students, to increase accountability and greater community involvement in education. The government has listened to Albertans who've told us that a standard 400-hour kindergarten program should be a priority for reinvestment for education to ensure that every student has the opportunity for quality education.

Mr. Speaker, in response, we have resumed funding for 400 hours of kindergarten instruction. This will amount to \$1,182 per child. A total of \$6 million will be reallocated for ECS transportation. All Alberta students will have access to a solid core program and the opportunity to acquire the knowledge, skills, and attitudes that they need to be self-reliant, responsible, caring, and contributing members of society.

Our children are being taken care of. An education is not just about funding. It's about providing a quality program that best meets the needs of our children both now and in the future. Funding is simply a means to an end, and it's in the best interests of the children of Alberta to keep in mind what our goal is when we talk about education. I think it's important that we continue to move towards that goal and not be distracted by rhetoric and cloaked agendas.

In my opinion Bill 211 does not provide any more benefit to the children of Alberta than the present system does. It will increase the bureaucracy the parents have to deal with, it will lessen the decision-making powers of parents and communities, and it will needlessly mandate a program that already has an 87.2 percent participation rate. It also fails to respect the varying developmental needs of children at that stage of development. Making five year olds attend a program does not benefit the development of the child nor does it contribute significantly to their overall education.

Mr. Speaker, it is with these reasons that I find I will not be able to support the Bill, and I urge my colleagues to join me. Thank you.

THE DEPUTY SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

MRS. HEWES: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Just a few comments about this Bill. We seem to have lost sight of the objective of this Bill and the reason that it has come forward. It's very clear to me that the reason the Bill came forward was because of a decision made by the government of Alberta to save money. It was part of a whole series of decisions, of cuts that were made. This Bill would stop that happening again, ever, at the whim of the government. That's what the object of the Bill is. Everybody here seems to say that ECS is a good idea. Well, this simply makes it a reality, not subject to government whim.

Mr. Speaker, let me just go back in time a little bit. The notion of not having an annual deficit is a good one, but I ask you: who voted for it? Certainly nobody that I know in this caucus ever voted for a deficit budget. It was created by the government of

Alberta, and many of the current members in the government voted for it.

Mr. Speaker, it's not uncommon at all in this Legislature and in this session for the government to write legislation to protect itself from itself, and we've seen that in a couple of Bills just in recent weeks. We saw the government introduce legislation to stop itself from deficit budgeting, and we saw the government writing legislation to stop itself from investing in business. This private member's Bill is asking the government to stop itself from stopping important programs on a whim or for a reason that has not in any way been defended. I think that makes a lot of sense, and I would think that a government that is now trying to right itself, that members would all want to support this kind of thing. We must stop the government from punishing the children of Alberta.

I'm also reminded of the kind of curious things that happened when the decision was made. It went along with a number of other decisions, some of them almost as critical as the reduction of funding for kindergarten: breaking the contract with seniors, the kinds of cuts that were made to health care and to social assistance that really were very critical in our province. But it was a very curious decision this one. We watched it, and we were all very puzzled in the province, saying, "Well, based on what?" I mean, what evidence was there, Mr. Speaker, that this program could possibly sustain that kind of cut? The minister at the time got up and said, oh yes, he had much in the way of documentation that kindergarten was not necessary and didn't prove useful, but we never did see anything that really provided us with the kind of evidence that would really substantiate such a decision.

Mr. Speaker, members in the House have spoken about the fact that the hours were restored. Well, they were restored, and we all know why: the public was so outraged and enraged that they had to put it back. The government was called kicking and screaming into changing its decision because I think it finally acknowledged that (a) politically and (b) on behalf of children it was a bad decision, and the public quite vocally and quite obviously brought that to their attention very quickly. The fallout was immense because this particular cut really forgot about the kids; it forgot about the children. It was simply made, an arbitrary, unilateral cut, and it didn't take the children into consideration.

So you have to say, "Well, have the members who have spoken against it forgotten that this is an amendment to the School Act?" This isn't a stand-alone Bill. This doesn't make kindergarten mandatory for parents. This simply says that we want to have it there, available, so that children all across the province have the same opportunities. Those who have spoken against it, I wonder if they are not supportive of public education. Are they not supportive of their own School Act? I don't know. There's a lot of discussion about parent involvement. The School Act certainly provides for parent involvement. This would make no substantive difference that I see whatsoever.

4:30

Mr. Speaker, I don't have much more to say except that I think this government has been delinquent in its response to children. I think it's a sad state of affairs. We have spoken on a number of occasions about the need for Head Start, about supporting programs that help children who are in fact seriously deprived. There's been no real response to that. On the contrary, the response was to go even further and take what I consider to be a very negative and draconian step.

Mr. Speaker, just finally, this isn't 1973. The world is a very different place than it was in 1973. I see government actions in fact in child welfare and actions such as the ones on kindergarten that are punishing and depriving children and not understanding where we are in the world of 1996. I would beg those who have spoken against it to reconsider and those who have not spoken yet to support this Bill that will benefit all children of the province and will stop any future government – any future government – from punishing children in a way that was done in the past.

Thanks, Mr. Speaker.

THE DEPUTY SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Innisfail-Sylvan Lake.

MR. SEVERTSON: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It gives me pleasure to rise today to speak to Bill 211, the School (Age of Enrolment) Amendment Act. This Bill would amend the School Act, as the hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar has just said, to make the entry level of a formal education system five years of age instead of six with a parental option to delay entry for one year. Bill 211 calls on the government through the School Act to make ECS a mandatory public education program with parents having the choice of them attending or delaying their children's entry into mandatory education.

There are a few concerns I have with the Bill proposed by the Member for Edmonton-Centre. The first has to do with the amendment to section 3. The Bill proposes that section 3(1) of the School Act be modified so that children between the ages of five and 19 years are entitled to have access to an education program. It is the inclusion of the term "education program" that concerns me. Education program means grades 1 to 12. In other words, this Bill will encourage five year olds to enter grade 1. In fact, section 2 of Bill 211 will make it mandatory that children aged five years or older shall attend school unless the parents defer enrolment for a year. Mr. Speaker, that means that five year olds shall enter into grade 1, not ECS. Is this what the member really wants?

Personally, I feel that children need to be able to be children for a while before entering school. They should be able to play and explore and learn and develop their own life experiences. In denying them the opportunity to play and putting them into school, are we not doing them more a disservice? As children play, they develop thinking and language abilities. They learn how to make choices. They learn how to take risks and live with the consequences. When they're allowed to learn by playing, their self-esteem and confidence grows along with them. By placing them in mandatory schooling a year early, the member would be eliminating the valuable period where a child may play freely. I see no need to fast-track our children into the school system and deny them a year of relatively unstructured freedom to play, learn, and enjoy life. Granted, the opportunity to play is provided in kindergarten, as it is in elementary and secondary school programs. However, it is the years before children enter the school system, when learning to play is directed largely by the children themselves, that benefit their development the most.

With Bill 211 the Member for Edmonton-Centre mandates our children into ECS in order to adequately prepare them for grade 1, which they may enter in one or two years. What he is forgetting is that preschoolers develop the social skills that enable them to adjust to school life through their play and experiences. What is the purpose of a Bill that mandates ECS instruction yet allows parents to opt out of it? This is exactly what the member

is doing in his amendment to section 24(1).

This is not the only curious aspect of Bill 211 or that section for that matter. Mr. Speaker, the proposed amendment to section 24(1) reads as follows:

A board shall provide an early childhood services program to a student who, as of September 1, is 5 years of age unless the parent has deferred the enrolment . . . pursuant to section 8(1.1).

This section would make it mandatory for a school board to provide kindergarten to students who are five years of age unless, of course, the parents decide otherwise.

In requiring school boards to provide ECS programs, the Bill may contradict the community decision-making process where they may have decided to have early childhood services served by community groups. Instead . . .

THE DEPUTY SPEAKER: Sorry to interrupt the hon. Member for Innisfail-Sylvan Lake, but Standing Order 8(5)(a) provides for up to five minutes for the sponsor of a private member's public Bill to close debate before all questions must be put to conclude debate upon the motion for second reading. I would therefore invite the hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre to close debate on Bill 211.

MR. HENRY: Thank you again, Mr. Speaker. A few comments I'd like to make before we go to the vote on this Bill. Number one, I find it amazing that government members would sit there and rack their brains looking for arguments, looking for reasons why they couldn't support this Bill. Very clearly, the government Whip has decided and the government caucus has decided that this Bill is not to be supported. The record will be that the government will vote this Bill down because the government doesn't want to be forced into open accountability when it goes to attack the ECS program the next time it has a whim to do that.

I find it absolutely fascinating that different members of the government would actually contradict themselves in terms of the interpretation of this Act. I find it incredulous that members of the government would criticize Parliamentary Counsel for the drafting of this Act, which has happened in debate here, very clearly talk about sloppy drafting and poor drafting from members over there, and I find that offensive.

Mr. Speaker, it is really clear – the evidence is irrefutable – that when you cut early childhood programs, you hurt children. The Member for Stony Plain shakes his head. He got up and gave some anecdotal evidence. I'd challenge his anecdotal evidence with empirical evidence any day of the week. This side of the House has tabled empirical evidence to that effect. That side of the House has done absolutely nothing except punish five year olds for the mistakes that they made in our province. I urge all hon. members on the government side who care about five year olds, who care about the future of public education in our province to support this Bill.

4:40

I also want to point out to the hon. members across the way – we've had hon. members comb this Bill looking for one little line that they might not be able to support. Let's make it really clear that *Beauchesne* says very, very clearly that what we're voting on now is the principle of the Bill. The principle of the Bill, I'll articulate very clearly, is: should ECS be made available to every child in this province, and should there be a Bill that would prohibit a government caucus from unilaterally, without public discussion, without legislative approval, withdrawing funding from that program? That's the principle of this Bill. If members have

a problem with one line, let's vote for this Bill, get it into committee, and we can entertain amendments where we can fix those things up.

But that's not going happen because the government has already decided, under the direction of the Premier, that we will not be ensured that we have ECS for every five year old in this province. It is very clear that under this Premier – this Premier was the person who directed . . .

MRS. BURGNER: Point of order.

THE DEPUTY SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Calgary-Currie is rising on a point of order?

**Point of Order
Imputing Motives**

MRS. BURGNER: Yes. I would like to rise on the issue of imputing motives. This is a private Bill, and there's been no direction from the Premier, and for the member opposite to make that allegation and make it publicly is inappropriate.

MR. HENRY: On the point of order. The record will show that the Premier stood in this Legislative Assembly and defended his government and his decision to cut ECS in this province, and when we're finished in about two minutes, Mr. Speaker, again the record will show one way or the other where this government votes as a block. I daresay every member of this government who has opposed this Bill has found a little line that they don't like, and rather than move this Bill into committee and try to rectify their little problem, what they're doing is they're following the direction of their Whip and they are following the direction of their caucus, led by this Premier, to defeat this Bill and ensure that children in this province do not have full kindergarten.

MR. SEVERTSON: On the point of order, Mr. Speaker.

THE DEPUTY SPEAKER: I think we've heard sufficient on the point of order. I think the hon. member has clarified the position.

If the hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre would continue to conclude his debate.

MR. HENRY: From the heckles across the way, if I'm wrong, then let the hon. Premier come in here for the vote and vote for this Bill. Let one government member – one government member – stand up and be independent and vote for this Bill. It won't happen because the government has decided that this is not a true free vote. The government has decided that they are going to defeat this Bill. There are no members across that way who dare cross the Premier on this one. There are no members across the way who dare stand up for their constituents.

Debate Continued

MR. HENRY: The principle of this Bill that we're voting on is to ensure that there is in law a provision for ECS for every five year old in this province and to ensure that no government caucus in the future – no government caucus – can do the dastardly deed that these folks across the way did: just go behind closed doors and on a voting majority of one – of one, of one, of one – deny five-year-old children full ECS in this province and require a lot of volunteer resources and resources of the communities of Alberta to convince this government they had to back down and

bring back a fully funded program, which they have yet to do, Mr. Speaker.

Thank you.

[Motion lost]

**Bill 212
Consumer Protection Act**

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

MRS. ABDURAHMAN: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm very pleased to rise to speak to second reading of my private member's Bill 212, the Alberta Consumer Protection Act. We are all consumers, but unfortunately in this province we have little protection. The amendments made in this session to the Direct Sales Cancellation Act have had little impact on consumer protection, and any legislation that does exist is buried in other statutes. Acts such as the Real Estate Act and the Franchises Act went a long way . . .

MR. DOERKSEN: Yeah.

MRS. ABDURAHMAN: . . . in spelling out the responsibilities of both the buyer and the seller, but Alberta has a long way to go.

I'm pleased that the private Member for Red Deer-South has acknowledged that, yes, we went a fair step with the Real Estate Act and the Franchises Act, but the reality, Mr. Speaker, is that this government has not gone far enough and indeed the attitude of buyer beware is not serving Albertans in a positive way. We've certainly dragged our heels in the whole area of consumer protection.

The one area that I hear most from my constituents is when they believe that their rights have been violated as a consumer or as a constituent. There's a very fine line between, you know, when a constituent's rights have been stepped on or when a consumer's rights have been stepped on. The telemarketing scams and the pushy sales tactics are preying on our seniors and those with limited incomes. I found it very sad when we looked closely at my mother-in-law when it became evident that she had a dementia.

DR. TAYLOR: Must have been a Liberal.

MRS. ABDURAHMAN: Well, hon. Member for Cypress-Medicine Hat, in this instance I'm going to take offence to that comment. Really, you shouldn't make light of an elderly person's dementia.

DR. TAYLOR: I agree.

MRS. ABDURAHMAN: I mean, the bottom line is that you may face it sooner than my mother-in-law did.

MR. SEKULIC: There is evidence.

MRS. ABDURAHMAN: Yes, I would agree. There is distinct evidence in this House that it may have set in already. So, Mr. Speaker, it's interesting. We can always find some humour in every incident, and I'll acknowledge that there is some humour here.

The thing that really we as a family found very disturbing was

when we started looking at her personal belongings, coming across where she had paid three memberships to *Chatelaine* magazine, and when we started to look at her limited income, she had been really abused by scam artists. I mean, people have to know whether somebody's paid a membership not once, twice, and three times because of the records that we keep. In the long run we all pay for it when this happens. Just look at our bankruptcy rate in Alberta. It's the highest in all of Canada, and consumers are faced with increasingly heavy debt loads.

Mr. Speaker, Bill 212 is the right step in providing legislation that would help the buyer beware. Bill 212 creates a consumer service bureau which would be responsible for investigation and resolution of complaints raised by consumers.

At this time, Mr. Speaker, I want to acknowledge the incredible work that the Consumers' Association of Canada does, particularly the Alberta chapter, but you know, the bottom line is that they're so strapped for resources, they can't meet the needs of all consumers. It's sad that we see dedicated people all across Canada through the Consumers' Association, specifically here in Alberta, wanting to have an information bank to share with Albertans and to direct Albertans how their rights can be protected or, if something's happened, the steps that can take place.

The consumer service bureau that would evolve from Bill 212 would provide the information to the buyer and also assist in clamping down on unscrupulous businesses. It would be an independent consumer watchdog, and that's important.

Mr. Speaker, it doesn't appear that there's an awful lot of interest in the House on this Bill that I'm speaking to at this moment, and I find that absolutely amazing and surprising, because the one thing that we all know, whether we're in the federal government or whether we're in the Legislative Assembly of the province of Alberta, is that our responsibility is back to the consumer, which is each and every Albertan, each and every Canadian. I would have thought that that is the very basis of a strong democratic process.

4:50

A value of the creation of the bureau would be the ultimate creation of long-term economic growth in this province, because you'd have consumer confidence. Consumers would indeed be confident that their rights are protected under legislation, and then they'd be more apt to invest in businesses registered and operating in Alberta.

You know, Mr. Speaker, one of the saddest commentaries that I heard recently, when we were talking about the large number of bankruptcies in Alberta, was where we had people, whether it be within the civil service or within the health care field, who had been given their severance packages and they entered into the private marketplace and set up their own businesses. It's my understanding that a lot of the people that invested in our marketplace actually have ended up in bankruptcy. So the severance packages are very quickly gone, and that's sad. I would suggest that the creation of the bureau would save the expensive litigation process, which in many cases is the only resource available to consumers. Over and above preventing that litigation for consumers, it would have prevented those unfortunate bankruptcies and the loss of financial resources.

MR. SMITH: Point of order, Mr. Speaker.

THE DEPUTY SPEAKER: The hon. Minister of Economic Development and Tourism is rising on a point of order. Would you cite that, please?

Point of Order Questioning a Member

MR. SMITH: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. *Beauchesne* 482. Would the member entertain a question relative to bankruptcies and her private member's Bill?

THE DEPUTY SPEAKER: The hon. member need only answer yes or no, not enter into debate.

MRS. ABDURAHMAN: My answer is no, not at this time. I certainly will have no problem addressing it at a later time.

Debate Continued

MRS. ABDURAHMAN: As I've indicated, if you had well-informed consumers, indeed we would be able, through the bureau, to prevent the expensive litigation process that so often consumers have to enter into to have their rights protected or to get retribution.

The consumer service bureau would be given control over the collection, storage, and supply of information kept on file by the consumer service agencies in this province. Right now important decisions affecting our constituents' lives are being made based on information on file with these agencies. I can use an example, Mr. Speaker, of where a wrong credit rating had been documented on a specific Albertan's file, and indeed upon investigation they had discovered that the information belonged to another party of the same name.

The surprise to individuals has been that they have no right to correct that information. We need a bureau such as this and legislation to ensure that that cannot continue to happen. Unfortunately, it is extremely difficult to determine if this information is indeed correct. If it is erroneous, it's even more difficult to get it corrected. Bill 212 would relieve a lot of headaches by ensuring that all consumer reports have been verified.

With this Act negative billing would also be outlawed. The federal government in a rare move approved a private member's Bill that would eliminate negative billing, currently being used by cable companies in this country. Bill 212 will prohibit negative billing in other areas as well. To my mind, this is an insidious practice that has no benefit, and Bill 212 would eliminate it. In fact, Mr. Speaker, it's gone beyond cable companies. I find it a little bit disappointing that the federal private member's Bill did limit it to negative billing of cable companies, but I'll give you an example. If you've got an extended . . . [interjection]

The minister of economic development is saying: isn't that Liberal? Yes, it's Liberal. One of the things this private member's Bill clearly points out is that the Liberal federal government hasn't done its job in that area. They have been dragging their feet, and it took a private member's Bill to correct that. There were enough private members who were on the government side that supported this Bill, and as I say, it was a first. Now, a Conservative government under the famous Brian Mulroney, that took us down the disastrous road of GST, could have also protected the consumers. [interjections]

THE DEPUTY SPEAKER: Order.

The hon. member is requested to continue her debate on the Bill.

MRS. ABDURAHMAN: Mr. Speaker, indeed, I take your point at being on the Bill, but you know, the fact that a private

member's Bill was passed in the federal House dealing with negative billing is certainly very much part of my Bill because indeed they didn't go that step far enough, as I see it, that Bill 212 does. Bill 212, if this Assembly, all private members, supports this Bill, would outlaw any form of negative billing.

What I was attempting to do, Mr. Speaker, was to use another example, and it's extended warranties, where when you're buying appliances, household appliances specifically, they encourage you to take these extended warranties out. So you pay a year's premium. Guess what happens a year after the fact? You suddenly get on your bill the price for the ongoing year's extended warranty, and you will be charged that unless you take the time to sign to say that you don't want it. It's a form of negative billing. It's totally unacceptable, because unless people take the time to read that and watch closely on their bill when they're buying it, they would end up paying for an extended warranty that they may not have intended to continue to have. It's no different than cable companies charging you for channels that you don't want. They put it into your home. So the federal legislation is limiting inasmuch as it only deals with negative billing for cable companies.

Through the debate on this private member's Bill it was clearly identified that, you know, should it be federal jurisdiction? The reason this private member's Bill, I believe, was supported was because it was dealing with the CRTC and it was dealing with cable negative billing, but as many speakers in the House of Commons pointed out, if provincial governments had done their job, they wouldn't need this federal legislation dealing with negative billing. Unfortunately, provinces like Alberta had not done their job to ensure that we had consumer protection legislation that would prohibit negative billing. So that in itself, this portion of Bill 212, is very important to Alberta, not just because of the cable company negative billing but because of all other areas of negative billing that can happen.

You know, when you speak to elected officials and you read the minutes, the *Hansard*, of the House of Commons, the one thing that you see reflected in the debate that took place is the number of constituents that brought to the attention of their Members of Parliament or MLAs in different provinces the fact that the consumer was not protected from all forms of negative billing.

5:00

You know, some very interesting points were raised in the House of Commons, Mr. Speaker, that would behave us here in the province of Alberta to realize that we're in a very different time with the Internet. [interjection] There was an example down in Calgary – and this is not a joking matter, as the minister of economic development seems to think it is – where an individual had put a young lady's name, telephone number, and address . . .

THE DEPUTY SPEAKER: The hon. member is rising on a point of order.

Point of Order Questioning a Member

MR. SMITH: Mr. Speaker, 482, injurious comments. I'd like to ask the member if she'd entertain a question pertaining to my laughter.

MRS. ABDURAHMAN: No, because the minister's a joke. [interjections] He said it.

Continuing on, Mr. Speaker, I did not enter the word "joke." It came from that other side of the House.

THE DEPUTY SPEAKER: The hon. minister is asking the question whether the hon. member speaking would entertain a question. If I understand her correctly, the comment was based on the loud outburst of laughter that emanated from that very corner, and that's what you were referring to and not to the person.

All right. The question has been refused, which is perfectly the right of the person speaking. We would invite Clover Bar-Fort Saskatchewan to continue in her speech.

Debate Continued

MRS. ABDURAHMAN: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Relating what happened to this young woman in I believe it was the city of Calgary on the Internet, someone, another party, had shared information about this young woman, her telephone number, and that she actually was offering a service to the opposite sex which was illegal. Now, there was nothing in legislation that that young woman could do to ensure that her good name was protected, and the damage had been done to her because there's not appropriate legislation in place. So when we're looking at legislation, whether it's federal legislation for consumer protection or provincial, I would say that if the federal government has not in their wisdom put in place good consumer protection, it behoves every province in this land to ensure that we have adequate consumer protection, particularly looking at what's happening on the Internet and just the whole change in our global marketplace. We have to ensure that there's consumer protection there.

Getting back to the fact that there's not a day goes past that you don't read, whether it be in newsprint, or hear on radio or television where some consumer has had to write a letter to the editor or has gone to live media, whether it be visual or whether it be radio, to bring a consumer issue forward so it can be publicly aired, so that their rights can be protected and restitution can be made or a contract can indeed be held to, I think it's sad commentary when people have to go public to the media to ensure that their rights are protected. There should be legislation within the province of Alberta that would ensure that a person does not have to go to CFRN or CBC or ITV, if it's their kitchen where the contractor let them down, and be embarrassed out there the way it's happening right here in the province of Alberta.

[Mr. Clegg in the Chair]

We only need to look back at the whole area of banking and what the rights of the customer are in the lending institution. If indeed they got into the insurance business, if they get into the car leasing industry, we have to ensure that consumers know their rights when they're dealing in these areas.

I've had brought to my attention that people who want to get glass replaced through window insurance are being controlled as to what companies can replace that glass. Well, surely a consumer has the right to decide which company they want to go to and get their glass replaced. They shouldn't be directed by some insurance company. Is there a deal being done? Does it benefit the consumer? That's an area that's been brought to my attention on a number of instances.

Also, let's look at what it's costing people when it comes to dental costs. We see over the past decade that we've seen dental fees soar close to 42 percent. Now, who's looking after the consumer there? Why have we seen dental costs skyrocket to that extent?

The other area that I believe . . . [Mrs. Abdurahman's speaking time expired]

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

THE ACTING SPEAKER: Could we have unanimous consent for the hon. member to finish her remarks?

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Agreed.

THE ACTING SPEAKER: Opposed, if any?

SOME HON. MEMBERS: No.

THE ACTING SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Peace River.

MR. FRIEDEL: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I find myself compelled to get up today and enter into the debate on this Bill 212, the Consumer Protection Act. The proposal addresses a key part of our economy, and that's consumers. They're the oil that keeps our thriving Alberta economy running at a high level and makes Alberta the leading province that it is. No doubt consumers are the most vital part of any economy, and as such I think it's important that we be extremely careful when we contemplate any legislation that could have a direct impact on them.

As with the majority of private members' Bills that we see in this House, this Bill displays good intentions. I know that the sponsor wants to ensure that consumers are protected from undue harm resulting from bad credit ratings. An important concern, however, Mr. Speaker, is that this Bill fails to consider more prudent and reasonable alternatives that would better serve the people of Alberta, alternatives which could do so without a tremendous extra cost and without added bureaucracy and regulation.

As the chairman of the Regulatory Reform Task Force, Mr. Speaker, I've seen many, many regulations which have been on Alberta's books for a number of years and are by and large nonessential, and many of these have to be removed or at least substantially modified. These regulations hamper productivity in our Alberta economy and provide a disincentive for investment in job creation in Alberta. The bureaucracy and the layer upon layer of red tape that the private sector faces are already quite overpowering. The most frustrating part is that there is often no compelling reason for the regulations and the red tape to even be there. All too often there's a better solution. That is what the task force is dedicated to achieving, and I will continue to attempt to persuade those who propose regulations and added bureaucracy to prove how they are beneficial. If they cannot do so, the proposal should be reworked or altogether discarded.

The same applies here in the Assembly. I cannot support legislation which would create more bureaucracy and more red tape, and I encourage my colleagues to do the same. The sponsor of Bill 212 has not given sufficient consideration as to why we need this legislation, this red tape, this added bureaucracy. I believe that the consumer services bureau which the legislation proposes would become another hindrance not only to business but to the consumer that it purports to protect. I don't understand the desire for more government intervention. It may just be a general Liberal philosophy that government must grow ever larger – in other words, the Big Brother syndrome – or just their attitude that government should be the primary employer rather than the private sector. I don't know what the reason is, but I'm proud to say that I stand against this kind of attitude, and I would suggest, Mr. Speaker, so do the vast majority of Albertans.

5:10

Albertans want a smaller government not bigger. They want a government that exercises responsibility with their hard-earned tax dollars. They want to see the most efficient use of those dollars. They want less bureaucracy. They want less duplication. Fortunately, Mr. Speaker, the Liberals are not in power in this province as they obviously aren't listening to the people nor do they understand what the people want. I believe that many if not all of our members will reject this Bill, which is just another government should take more control kind of measure. I don't know how many times I read the word "control" in the draft Bill.

The excuse in the proposing of the Bill is that the government does not have such an agency and that individuals are suffering as a result. Well, Mr. Speaker, that's not correct. There already is consumer protection legislation in place. It falls under several statutes, mostly administered by the Department of Municipal Affairs. This legislation would see the bureau administer only a few of the Acts dealing with consumer protection, presumably leaving the rest of the department to administer the remainder. I think we can see the problem here: an added layer of overlap and confusion. This government has been quite innovative and forward looking as it consolidated responsibilities in departments and agencies and not the other way around.

The government is becoming leaner, and people understand that a smaller government can and does work better and more efficiently. Co-ordination and consolidation have been keys in this progress, Mr. Speaker, so I fail to see why we should take a step back when we have already made such marked progress.

I'm afraid that I must say no to the sponsor's attempt to impose more costs and red tape when better alternatives are available and the need for this legislation or a new bureau is certainly not evident. From my understanding very few complaints are made against credit bureaus, so why should we set up a new bureaucracy when the government already has an efficient, practical working system in place to deal with only a few complaints every year? Quite simply, I don't believe that it's necessary, and I believe that most would agree with me on this matter.

Another problem that I have with the Bill is that it proposes to create strict rules of conduct, rules which would emphasize process rather than outcome. These rules would be at the will of the director of the bureau to create. It's generally accepted that strict rules of process seldom leave any room for common sense. When you attempt to make the rules as comprehensive as possible, the true objective often becomes blurred. Allowing good common sense to prevail, you will get good results without a lot of hoops to jump through.

What about the cost of this legislation? As it's a private member's Bill, it cannot be a money Bill. However, it calls for the creation of a consumer services bureau and appropriation of money. What would be the cost to set it up, looking at the number of functions that are required in the proposal? What would be the capital costs? What would be the costs to operate? A hundred million dollars, \$200 million, or more? I can see how this would escalate as the bureau sets up, begins to advertise, starts to actively solicit customers and new initiatives and so on. And for what, Mr. Speaker? So the government can take more control . . .

THE ACTING SPEAKER: Hon. members, we are not in committee, and there's a tremendous amount of noise throughout the House. The hon. Member for Peace River should have the right to give his address in this debate.

The hon. Member for Peace River.

MR. FRIEDEL: Continuing, Mr. Speaker. So that the government can create more jobs? I don't think that's even close to the direction that we ought to be going. I don't believe that the government needs to step in here. In competitive markets such as in Alberta another level of interfering is the last thing the government should be doing. Must we interfere in every area where consumers are having a few problems? I don't think so.

Mr. Speaker, I don't believe that Albertans want this type of legislation. It's duplicating, unnecessary, creates more bureaucracy, and would cost more tax dollars for the little benefit that it would provide.

Mr. Speaker, I encourage all members of this Assembly to reject Bill 212 because of these reasons. Albertans deserve better use of their tax dollars. The Alberta advantage is built on many things but not on bureaucracy. Let's keep away from these outdated, knee-jerk overreaction solutions and keep in mind that Alberta prospers when government keeps its nose where it belongs and spends tax dollars efficiently and effectively.

That concludes my remarks, Mr. Speaker, and I would like to move that we now adjourn debate on the Bill.

THE ACTING SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Peace River has moved that we adjourn debate on the Bill. All those in favour, please say aye.

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Aye.

THE ACTING SPEAKER: Opposed, if any?

SOME HON. MEMBERS: No.

THE ACTING SPEAKER: Carried.

The Deputy Government House Leader.

MR. EVANS: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Tonight at 8 o'clock we'll have the opportunity to participate with the Lieutenant Governor in Royal Assent to a number of Bills, and I'm sure that hon. members will wish to be present at 8 o'clock or thereabouts but certainly not later than 8 o'clock. I'm sure that message is now clear.

[The Assembly adjourned at 5:18 p.m.]

