

Legislative Assembly of Alberta

Title: Wednesday, April 16, 1997 **8:00 p.m.**
Date: 97/04/16
 [The Speaker in the Chair]

THE SPEAKER: Please sit down.

Hon. members, may we receive unanimous consent of the House for an introduction that the Minister of Advanced Education and Career Development would like to exercise?

HON. MEMBERS: Agreed.

THE SPEAKER: Mr. Minister.

head: **Introduction of Guests**

MR. DUNFORD: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I would like to introduce to you and through you tonight to the members of the Assembly a young friend of ours from Lethbridge. Her name is Bobbi Jo Stannard. She works with the University of Lethbridge. She's in the members' gallery, sitting with my executive assistant, Shelby MacLeod. I wonder if we could give her a nice warm welcome.

THE SPEAKER: Introductions as well?

MS CALAHASEN: Yes. Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'd like to introduce two people whom I've known over the past few years but most especially one individual who's here to see his wife in action. The two individuals up there are people who I think will make a difference tonight in terms of the delivery of some speeches. I'd like to introduce Mr. Jack O'Neill, who's seated in the members' gallery, and Mr. Max McCann.

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

Mr. Shariff moved:

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

To His Honour the Honourable H.A. "Bud" Olson, Lieutenant Governor of the province of Alberta:

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

MR. SHARIFF: Mr. Speaker, I'd like to begin by first extending my congratulations on your election as our Speaker.

I am pleased to see that the good news that I am hearing from constituents of Calgary-McCall is reflected in the Speech from the Throne and across the province as a whole. Albertans have taken control of their future through their hard work and dedication in implementing the reforms put in place by this government some four years ago.

The Speech from the Throne was full of optimism and realism both for the present and the future. When I look at what we can do now in the area of reinvestment and what doors have been opened, I am more convinced now than ever before that the course of action we began in 1993 was essential. It was essential that the government exercise fiscal responsibility. It was essential that we create a climate for jobs. It was essential that we streamline government. Most of all, it was essential that we listen

to the people of this province in implementing these changes. Our constituents deserve no less, Mr. Speaker.

We live in a society dedicated to the principles of peace, order, and good government. Albertans asked for good government and they got it, first in June 1993 and again on March 11, 1997. As a result, in 2005 we will not only be able to celebrate our centenary, but we can also celebrate the fact that we will be net debt free and deficit free. With the passing of each day, the amount of money that we are able to reinvest in Alberta's priority areas increases as the interest payment on our debt is whittled away. After this year's debt payment we will have opened up close to \$400 million in interest savings which can be reinvested. We are now on solid financial ground and have the flexibility to focus on the priorities of Albertans. Mr. Speaker, financially we are well ahead of schedule. This is partly due to higher than expected revenues and partly due to realistic estimates, but it is also due to the hard work of Albertans who have made sacrifices and helped us find new and better ways of doing things.

At the same time, we continue to look for better ways to attract business to this province. Investment is a key part of the Alberta advantage. For each additional billion dollars of new investment we generate hundreds of new jobs, jobs that Albertans need and deserve. In addition, this investment increases our tax revenues by some \$30 million for each billion dollars of investment.

Alberta currently has the best job creation rate in the country, and last month we had the lowest unemployment rate across the nation. We also have the most productive workforce in Canada. Albertans are among the most highly skilled and educated people in North America with more than 40 percent of the workforce holding postsecondary certificates or university degrees. Alberta has the highest labour force participation rate in Canada with over 70 percent of working age Albertans in the labour force. Since our esteemed Premier first took office, key Alberta industries such as agriculture, energy, manufacturing, and business services have created roughly 157,000 new jobs, the vast majority of which are full-time. Our new target is to see the creation of 155,000 new jobs by the private sector by the year 2000.

Now we have a human resource strategy to complement this job-creation strategy. The new human resource strategy will help to prepare youth for the workplace, help to overcome barriers to employment, and promote continuous learning to open up job opportunities. Adult learning and job retraining programs give Albertans a chance to put themselves in a position to take advantage of these jobs which will be created. It is important that all Albertans are able to take advantage of the new economic environment we have all worked so hard over the past four years to create.

Our province is also the proud home of some of the brightest students in the world. This was clearly demonstrated by the recent scores we received in mathematics and science. Alberta's grade 8 students ranked third in science and in the top one-third of participating countries for mathematics in the third international mathematics and science study in 1996. Alberta's 13- and 16-year-old students achieved significantly higher science results than their Canadian counterparts in the school achievement indicator program. Alberta students were number one in the provincial comparisons for both age groups. I was pleased to hear in the Speech from the Throne that the government remains committed to its effort to provide children of this province with the best education system possible to ensure these impressive results continue.

A sound financial foundation has been laid for our schools,

allowing us to put resources back into the classrooms, where they are needed the most. Now the government is able to look at the areas that need work and address them. For example, we will be working to increase access to technology, to improve our high school completion rates, to produce better results in mathematics, and to better meet the needs of our special-needs students.

One of the trends which I have noticed through discussions with parents and educators is that teachers across the province are dealing more and more with their students' socioeconomic problems instead of their science problems. In my opinion, this is one of the weaknesses in the education system that needs to be addressed. For this reason I was quite pleased to hear of the children's services initiative, which should provide some relief in the area. The fact that this program is community based should help to ensure that the differing needs of our children are met, whether they live in Calgary or Cold Lake. I also like the fact that this program is being co-ordinated with committed, caring Albertans. The future of our province lies with our children, and it is our duty to give them every chance to succeed.

8:10

Health care is everyone's priority. Throughout the redesigning of the health care delivery model Albertans have been able to get the care they need. We will continue to work to look for ways to improve the quality and accessibility of our system as well as making it more accountable. The result will be a health care system which will be able to meet our needs today and the needs of generations to follow, and most importantly, it will be sustainable. The Speech from the Throne has also reaffirmed this government's commitment to monitor changes to ensure that Albertans get quality services at a price we can all afford.

Mr. Speaker, these examples are proof that this government not just listens but continues to listen to Albertans. We listened, we re-evaluated our position, and we changed our policy to address the concerns of the people of this province. I was first elected by the residents of Calgary-McCall who believed and continue to believe in the direction we are heading in. They did not just vote on an election promise but upon seeing those promises being kept. My constituents remain satisfied with their decision, and they have not been disappointed. We keep doing what we said we would do. Above all else, this is a government that's committed to keeping its word and listening to its constituents.

My constituency, Calgary-McCall, is home to a wonderful variety of cultures and is continually changing and growing. One of the common threads that weaves between the diverse cultures is the great value and importance they place upon education and learning, upon living healthy lives, and upon maintaining a good, caring, and nurturing safe community to raise our families in. I'm indeed proud of the residents of Calgary-McCall and all Albertans who also ascribe to these values.

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

With that, Mr. Speaker, I move that the Assembly accept the Speech from the Throne delivered yesterday by His Honour the Honourable the Lieutenant Governor.

Thank you.

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

MRS. O'NEILL: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It is a great honour and a privilege for me to rise in the House this evening on behalf of my constituency of St. Albert to second the motion that we accept the Speech from the Throne which has opened the First Session of the 24th Alberta Legislature.

I would like to thank His Honour the Lieutenant Governor, Bud Olson, for presenting this Assembly with the reading of the Speech from the Throne and for the performance of his duty as the representative of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II.

I would also like to congratulate you, Mr. Speaker, on your election to the Chair. I am confident that with your experience comes a wealth of knowledge. It is this knowledge that will guide me and other members of this Assembly during the times ahead, and I trust that you will tell us when we can sit down.

Mr. Speaker, I would also like to take this opportunity to commend Premier Ralph Klein for his commitment to working with Albertans, for his leadership in directing our fiscal course, and for his strength in accomplishing what needed to be done.

Mr. Speaker, it was with feelings of pride and gratitude that I was sworn in as MLA by His Excellency the Lieutenant Governor. I would like to thank the constituents of St. Albert for the privilege of representing them in this Assembly. They have placed their trust in me to be their representative in the Legislature and to bring forward their views and their concerns. I will endeavour to fulfill their expectations and to be deserving of their trust.

Yesterday the Lieutenant Governor spoke of our province as a work in progress. For me, His Honour's use of this phrase is particularly meaningful. I am, Mr. Speaker, a painter of sorts, and I often look at things from an artist's perspective. When the artist has an idea for a painting, he or she begins with a sketch to provide the structure for the picture. Often it is only after the concept is clearly sketched that the use of colours comes into play.

Mr. Speaker, I can see clearly that the future picture of our province has been sketched. The structure is clear. We now have balanced budgets and an ever diminishing debt. In fact, by the year 2005 Alberta will be debt free. This latter prospect is both euphorically exhilarating and seriously challenging to us as legislators.

Just as colour always adds texture, light, and life to a canvas, a debt-free province contributes to the endless bright opportunities available to Albertans. Mr. Speaker, it is now time to complete the picture, to work the colour, if you will. I look forward to working with the Premier and this government to paint a vibrant future for our province. Because we stayed on course and did not stray away from our path of fiscal responsibility, we are now in a position to look freely to the future of Alberta. We are now able to focus on Albertans' priority areas such as health, education, and seniors.

Mr. Speaker, I believe that it is the role of government to provide for, to protect, and to serve the people it represents. It is our job as representatives and as legislators to pass legislation and to develop policy that will facilitate a rich quality of life for all Albertans. We must provide the necessary tools and the enabling climate to help Albertans take responsibility for their own future and to realize their own goals, all the while ensuring that we continue to help and protect those who are unable to provide for themselves.

Mr. Speaker, we must be responsive to the changing needs of all Albertans. I was pleased to hear the Lieutenant Governor set

out our government's mandate for the next four years as one of fiscal responsibility with a social conscience. Our government's agenda is for "growth, prosperity, and jobs" while ensuring "quality, responsive, and affordable public services" for all Albertans. It is this agenda that I fully intend to pursue, encourage, and actively promote.

8:20

Upon winning the election in the constituency of St. Albert, I made a promise to myself. I promised above all else to remain true to two immutable principles. The first comes from Shakespeare's *Hamlet*: "To thine own self be true." The second is the essence of democracy: representatives are freely chosen to serve the people. Mr. Speaker, I'm committed to these principles, and I will remain true.

Mr. Speaker, I'm proud to represent the constituents of St. Albert. We're a diverse group of educators, health providers, professionals, students, military personnel, athletes, business-people, tradespersons, and civil servants. St. Albert boasts a highly educated and a highly skilled population, and education is certainly one of our priorities.

In addition, my constituency is home to one of the leading edge community hospitals. Sturgeon community hospital has much to offer the residents of St. Albert and our surrounding neighbours. Services there include superb 24-hour emergency care, a clear focus on health care promotion and injury and illness prevention, carefully monitored short-stay surgeries, a unique pediatric care environment, mental health services, and crisis intervention initiatives, including assistance in dealing with family violence.

My constituency is fortunate enough to include the Redwillow park system, which is anchored by the Sturgeon River. Here everyone from St. Albert can enjoy long, scenic strolls or energizing walks or rollerblading or biking along the many paths which border our city's portion of the river.

St. Albert also offers superb sports programs, which have spawned many outstanding athletes. In fact, you can find athletes from St. Albert in the NHL, on the Canadian junior curling team, and contenders nationally and internationally in sports from figure skating to tennis to swimming.

I would also like to speak for a moment about the outstanding French immersion educational programs and the Francophone school within my constituency. St. Albert is home to many Franco-Albertans, who play and have played an important role in creating one facet of the culture that we call Albertan. One of the things that I truly respect about our province is its distinctiveness not only among geographic regions but within our many communities. Alberta is a wonderful, rich mosaic of a culture that should be respected and celebrated.

During the election campaign I spoke with many people in the community. I believe the views and concerns they expressed are shared by many Albertans. In the Speech from the Throne the Lieutenant Governor referred to Alberta as our house. By now I think that most Albertans are familiar with this metaphor. This is our house and fellow Albertans are our family. As a family we must ensure that all members feel at home, and that all Albertans have access to quality, responsive, and affordable public services.

Overwhelmingly, people told me that access to quality health care is a priority, but that there exist some wrinkles in our health system that need to be ironed out. Mr. Speaker, my constituents want the assurance that when they are sick or hurt, they will receive the treatment they need. While I believe that Albertans were able to receive the health care they needed before and during the restructuring, it is my hope that over the next four years we

will continue to improve the quality and the sustainability of our system.

In order to ensure quality, accessibility, and stability in the health system for today and for the future, we must consider the needs of our changing population. We need not only to address current pressure points in the system but to establish a system with the proper skill mix of health care providers that will be sustainable and responsive to the future needs of a growing and an aging population.

As Albertans we need to refocus our understanding of health care in this province. We must learn to take responsibility for our own health including an increased focus on healthy lifestyles and injury prevention. If we do our part now, the system will be there for all Albertans in the years to come.

Our government's commitment to addressing these issues is evident in the Speech from the Throne. We are setting clear expectations for our health system, and we will be measuring its performance. Health standards will be in place to ensure that all Albertans receive quality services when they need them. If Albertans have concerns about the system, they will be able to access a new and simplified system of appeals and complaints that will address their concerns in a timely manner.

The previous generation of Albertans has set the pace. We must ensure that we carry the torch of responsibility. I know that over the next four years we will continue our search for better, more efficient ways of providing these health services so that we can remain contemporary, affordable, and efficient into the 21st century and beyond. We must ensure the sustainability of our health care system.

Mr. Speaker, the residents of St. Albert are a wise and learned group of people who are committed to education and are aware of the need for the community to provide access to it. This includes all levels of schooling from ECS through to all avenues of postsecondary education. I'm very proud of St. Albert as its innovative education programs are leading the way into the next century.

St. Albert is a continuous learning community. For those of you not familiar with this program it is a partnership among the business community, schools, educators, and in fact everyone with knowledge to impart and/or a desire to learn. I hope that innovative programs such as this will assist all Albertans in our pursuit of lifelong learning, global interdependence, and, above all, healthy minds and bodies.

Mr. Speaker, my constituents have also conveyed their concerns to me regarding seniors in this province. They will be very pleased to hear that ensuring that low-income seniors receive the support they require remains a priority of this government. As many across the province do, seniors in St. Albert benefit from government programs such as the Alberta seniors' benefit and special-needs assistance. I commend this government and the generosity of other seniors for being responsive to their needs. It is my hope that with seniors' input on programs that impact their lives, we can facilitate a dignified and comfortable life for all seniors.

In particular I hope to address those seniors who fall right on the income threshold. As we all know, it can be difficult for those living on a fixed income to keep up with the rising costs of living. We've seen that this winter with the rise in natural gas bills. With consultation with seniors we can determine how best to meet their needs and ensure that the necessary funding is made available to those who need it most.

8:30

Mr. Speaker, we often hear about the need for environmental protection to ensure that Albertans have pure water and clean air, but we tend to forget about the need for protection of our social environment. I believe that the government has a responsibility for creating a social vision, a vision formulated through consultation with Albertans and founded on truth, fairness, honesty, integrity, and true justice. My constituents and especially the young adults, who are much wiser and more knowledgeable than my generation was at their age, are looking forward to strong, inclusive communities, which hold great promise for all Albertans.

Mr. Speaker, in closing, I believe that we the government must be vigilant and attentive to the needs of our constituents. We must continue to listen to Albertans and to act quickly to maintain and enhance the quality of life for those who live in our home called Alberta. When I look at our house in the global village, I see a democracy that works. It may not be perfect, but I will work with this government to further enhance the democratic process through increased accountability and openness and by listening to all Albertans.

Ladies and gentlemen, Alberta is a work in progress. It is clear that we must continue on the path that we are on today so that we can face the 21st century on very strong footing. We must remain fiscally responsible to ensure that we leave this province to subsequent generations with the same promise that prior generations left it to us. We must leave them with a house that is viable and strong, with a house that is rich in colour and texture.

Mr. Speaker, I am proud to be the representative for St. Albert, and on behalf of my constituents I support the direction of this government as presented yesterday by the Lieutenant Governor.

I am pleased to second the motion to accept His Honour's Speech from the Throne.

THE SPEAKER: Hon. Leader of the Official Opposition.

MR. MITCHELL: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's a unique honour for me to have been recognized this afternoon and this evening by you, having spent 11 years in the Legislature with you. I'm not nearly as experienced as you are, of course. Having enjoyed greatly the time that I spent working with you as House leader, I understand and appreciate your commitment to this House, to this place, and the manner in which you honour it and respect it, and for that reason I believe that you will be a very strong Speaker and an excellent servant for the people of Alberta in managing and in supervising and in chairing the processes in this Legislature. Congratulations on your victory.

I extended congratulations to the government this afternoon, and I mean that sincerely: congratulations on your victory. I was very impressed that the Premier responded in the way that he did, acknowledging that we had an excellent campaign, that it was clean, that it was in many respects above reproach. I think it distinguishes each of the members who have been elected to this House that that was the manner in which they were elected. I won't say that we're entirely happy with the outcome. I will say that we accept that outcome without reproach and without hesitation, and I will say that we have 18 excellent MLAs in this Legislative Assembly, who will serve with all our energy, all our commitment, and all our dedication the people of this province in the role that they have asked us to fulfill. I'm very proud to be here with the MLAs who have returned, and I'm especially excited about the new MLAs that we have, who bring a great deal

of enthusiasm, new views, new perspectives, and offer much to what this opposition, this Official Opposition, will be over the next four or five years.

I will probably surprise the Speaker when I say that there are a number of things in this government's Speech from the Throne that recommend it. First of all, I think it's certainly recommended by virtue of the fact that it actually includes many of the ideas that we have offered up in this Legislature over the past number of years, and therefore its quality is clearly enhanced over what it might otherwise have been.

Initiatives outlined in this Speech from the Throne on freedom of information are encouraging to us, and clearly the work of the Member for Calgary-Buffalo is reflected in those initiatives. We are fearful that it may be slower than it could otherwise be, but we're encouraged that at least the need to expand the freedom of information to other, public sectors is an important step and initiative.

We are encouraged as well that one of our ideas with respect to savings for our children's education is at least hinted at on page 2 of the throne speech, where the government has made the point that they will make it easier for people to save money for their children's education. We of course have established strongly our position on registered educational savings plans, which would fulfill that objective that seems to be captured by the government. The Treasurer happily is making notes once again to underline his commitment to that particular idea.

We also note that there is a commitment to improve the small claims court process. We have argued that the limit of claims should be raised from \$4,000 to \$10,000. That's not explicitly covered in the throne speech, which isn't often open to detail, I know, but seems to be establishing that the government will go in the right direction.

One thing that is subtle but I think very important is that in our Bill 214, the Bill that dealt with domestic violence in the last session, which was in fact passed at second reading by the government - we would hope that it would be recalled by the government, because in fact members had said they would do that. One of the difficulties the government had with that Bill was the question of emotional abuse, arguing that that couldn't be defined and that therefore the Bill was perhaps inoperable. In fact, the government now points out in its effort to protect, support seniors that they would recognize a designation of emotional abuse. Thank you for accepting that idea, and we would like to see it accepted in our Bill 214 on domestic violence.

We're also happy to see a commitment to expanding youth justice commissions, which we think are very effective in bringing the community to bear in the justice system, making it more quickly responsive to young offenders, which is an important step in ensuring that they don't offend again. Finally we see what appears to be a major commitment by the government in this throne speech to that idea.

I am not raising this list of ideas that have been accepted by government particularly to gain recognition for the work of my opposition, our opposition party. I am raising it in large part to demonstrate the success of this Legislature in the last session and to congratulate the government on understanding that it can accept our ideas without shame and that we can advance the progress of this province and the people within it by working together in that manner. We are committed to doing that, and I think it's clear from our election campaign that we have many, many positive, creative, thoughtful ideas that it would be helpful to Albertans if the government were inclined to accept.

I am also very encouraged although not entirely convinced by this, by the government's statement in the throne speech that they will work to enrich the quality of life of Albertans in their communities. That sounds, Mr. Speaker, like they are broadening their perspective from a single-minded, almost ideological commitment to the economic side of this province to a thoughtfulness, to a consideration of those values that build people and build the communities within which they live and create the true richness, not just fiscal and financial, in the lives of each of us as individuals in this province.

8:40

There's an interesting juxtaposition, however, that underlines just how important the question of the government's commitment to enhancing quality of life really is. I think we're all very proud of what has been termed the Alberta advantage, and we can see it measured in very clear economic terms. We have one of the highest if not the highest rate of economic growth in the entire country. That's an achievement; it's something to be proud of. It's a responsibility as well. We have some of the highest rates of employment, the lowest rates of unemployment. We have one of the lowest costs of living probably in many areas and in many ways, and we also have some of the lowest taxes in the entire country.

I said earlier that these measures are not just measures, that they are also a responsibility. They are not just benefits; they are also a responsibility. What they lead to is a very pressing and very important question: who is it in this province who is receiving the Alberta advantage? Who is it that is participating in all these remarkable benefits that are stimulated, that are generated by the kind of economy and economic growth that we have enjoyed in this province over the last number of years?

That brings me to another set of criteria and another set of measurements, which are not something we should be proud of in this province at all and which are a blight on the legacy of this government. We have the lowest per capita funded health care system in the entire country. We have the ninth lowest per capita funded education system in the entire country. There are those who will argue: well, we had to do that to balance the budget. And I say: well, if that's true, then why is it that Saskatchewan and Manitoba and New Brunswick and Newfoundland have all balanced their budgets and are all ahead of us on those important scales and they don't raise \$600 million in health care premium taxes every year? We have the lowest minimum wage in the entire country. We have the third-highest level of poverty in the entire country. We have the third-highest level of children living in poverty in the entire country. We have the fourth-highest level of single mothers living in poverty in the entire country. Mr. Speaker, who is it exactly who is getting the Alberta advantage?

So if this government means what it says when it states its commitment here on page 3 of its throne speech, that it is committed to "enrich the quality of life [of people] in their communities," then it is essential that they begin to prove it in this session and in the sessions to come over the course of this term of government. I am encouraged, Mr. Speaker, by what appears to be a commitment to that very important objective and that in fact very important ideal, but I am not convinced.

It's interesting. Each of us in our election campaigns very often ran across Conservative candidates who were campaigning against their own government. It was really a remarkable thing. We saw literature, we heard statements, we heard reports time after time of Conservative MLA candidates standing and saying: "We're concerned about health care. Something must be done.

That nasty government simply didn't fulfill our expectations. We're concerned about education, and that's why I'm running, because I can change it from within. We're concerned about this, and we're concerned about that, and really what we're doing is opposing our own government." But you know what? Since March 11 I have heard almost none of that from this array of newly elected Conservative MLAs. In fact, I've seen something even more than that. I've seen the Member – and I say this in good jest – for Edmonton-Whitemud actually say that his priority is to dampen expectations about what he was saying he was going to do for Edmonton. I might say, if I can say in fun, that many of us didn't have all that high expectations about him in the first place.

Mr. Speaker, I want to be convinced that this government means what it says about the social side of this province and about the depth and the real richness and where it's found in this province. But I can't be convinced about that until we start to see in this debate about these issues a debate about values and actions on values that reflect what they really are. I think we've seen quite a clear expression of values in the policies of this government to this point. It was said – and I have to say it again. I've said it in the House before. It was so clearly stated by the now minister of social services several years ago that the philosophy – read "value" – of this government is, quote, every man for himself. Of course, he forgets that 50 percent of the people in this province are actually women. He also forgets that it has never been the tradition in this province – nobody in this province has ever built any section of this province, any segment, any piece of this province by themselves. We have always worked together to build communities, to bring out the strength in people, and to make something that is good and that is great.

I can think of a number of statements that really capture what that's all about, what that set of values is: sharing means less for me; if I'm richer, I'm somehow entitled to the first of a two-tier system. It's as though the focus on individualism, which is something I think we all share, the belief in the individual – in fact, one of the reasons I'm proud to be an Albertan is that sense of rugged individualism. But it's as though it's been warped from what it used to be, from that sense of, yes, the individual is important, but each of us should understand that we have to give up something, give something back to the community if it's ever, ever to have the richness and to support people and to develop the quality of life that we in this province should be able to develop without even trying practically.

I read from a current sort of contemporary philosopher, John Ralston Saul, in his *The Unconscious Civilization*. He makes a very interesting statement which I think describes what's happened. He says that nowhere in all of this question about the philosophy of individualism then, historically or before, was the individual seen as a single ambulatory centre of selfishness.

Mr. Speaker, I think what we have and what we see this reflected in is the nature of a government that has been driven very clearly by an economic ideology, by an ideology that is very unforgiving; very forgiving of elites, very forgiving of those who are advantaged, wealthy, educated, but very unforgiving of people who simply do not share those advantages.

There's another set of values that can be brought to bear in this Legislature that can define a government of greatness, a government that truly understands the importance of ensuring that all of these benefits aren't shared by just a very few people but are shared by all Albertans. That's a set of values that talks about building communities, about giving up something to somebody

else who's less fortunate than we are. It's a set of values that understands implicitly that those of us who are particularly fortunate are those of us who have a special responsibility to give back and to contribute. Mr. Speaker, that's the kind of set of values that we uphold over here and that we want to see clearly stated, not just in words, like we see here, but in the actions that we hope will follow from these words by this government over its term of office.

8:50

It's easy to talk about values, but what do they really mean? How do we give them a concrete basis? We do that by specific policy initiatives, and I do have a concern, when I look at this document, that there aren't a lot of those, that there are some very serious gaps. There is no real commitment in here, for example, in concrete, specific terms to fighting family violence. There is no commitment in here to fighting child prostitution. There is no commitment in here to the publicly funded health care system or to hiring the teachers we need to hire to make sure that our kids have classroom sizes where they get the kind of attention that they really need to have a world-class education. There is no commitment here to small business. It's almost as though corporate elites are all that matter in the vision, if I can call it that – such as it is – of this government.

In the interest, Mr. Speaker, of demonstrating and meaningfully demonstrating that we want to contribute positively and that we are here to give ideas – and how many times have we heard the Premier say “Give us the ideas”? How many times have we given them? I'm going to try again, and I'm going to give this Legislature at least a summary of some of the policy ideas that we have developed, researched, and worked so hard to ensure the public and this Legislature could see and hear and deal with.

Health care. We believe in a publicly funded health care system. There is no gray. It is black and white. And you know why it is? One, because it's far more compassionate, it's far more humane than a privately funded system. Some of the members may think: isn't that a soft description, humane and compassionate? You know what I think? I think those are very, very tough words, and I think those are characteristics that have made Albertans great.

But you know the other reason why I want a publicly funded health care system? Because it makes far more economic sense. It is a competitive advantage for business in this province. The American system costs three times as much as a percentage of their economy as ours does. The American system costs twice as much per person per year to run as ours does. If you want a humane, compassionate health care system and you want one that is a competitive advantage in an increasingly global, competitive economy, then you want a properly managed, publicly funded health care system, and we will fight with all our energy to ensure that that is preserved and enhanced in this province.

There's one simple step that we've asked the government to take in the past and that with its newfound commitment to quality of life we hope it will take in the future, and that is to include the five principles of the Canada Health Act in Alberta legislation. It would be an excellent starting point for their health standards framework. In fact, it shouldn't be very difficult to do, because time and time again we've heard the Premier stand in the House and say that he supports the Canada Health Act. We want to ensure that there is adequate funding to provide long-term care beds and acute care beds where they are needed and when they are needed. Edmonton's current level of acute care beds is 2.4 per 1,000. Saskatchewan, which has balanced its budget, dropped

its beds from 4.6 to 3.3 per 1,000, and they balanced their budget. Edmonton's used to be 4.6 per 1,000 population.

We want to ensure, Mr. Speaker, that there are special initiatives under women's health care; for example, 48-hour stays for mothers having delivered babies after they have delivered the baby. I think we have to look at minimum stays for women who have had a mastectomy, because some of them are being released four hours after radical surgery to go home to no support. I want to see and we want to see an effective, proper breast-screening program across this province so that women can have some sense of security that one of their particular health care needs is being attended to properly, as well as our health care system can provide that.

In education we want to see 475 hours of kindergarten. It should be fully funded, a full half day, and it should be provided for in the School Act for two very critical reasons: one, so that we have consistent standards across this province, and two, so that we have consistent curricula across this province. Countries in the world who are stepping up to meet the challenges of a futuristic economy are the countries that are investing in education, not cutting it, and who are investing in early childhood education because they understand so clearly how that determines the course of a child's academic career and success throughout that person's life.

We want to see 1,000 new teachers, because class sizes are simply too big. If there is a single, specific obstacle to effective education, it's too many children in a classroom. There is not a teacher in this Legislature, on both sides of the House, who doesn't understand that implicitly. We want to see a 20 percent cap on postsecondary institutions' tuitions, because we don't want to see people who would otherwise be qualified unable to go to these institutions because they simply don't have the money. It's interesting to note that several years ago there was no room in some of our institutions. Now spaces are going begging. You know why that is, Mr. Speaker? I think it's because tuitions are too high and student loans are becoming mortgages by the time they finish their education.

We want to ensure that there are school lunch programs, because thousands upon thousands of children in this province go throughout the day without having a full and properly nutritional meal. If anything after class sizes, or perhaps equally, will discourage, inhibit a child's ability to learn, it is that they come to school hungry.

Seniors. We've got to reinstate the program to provide for dentures and eyeglasses for seniors. It's the single most often stated concern that seniors have. We want to have proper home care generally and special funding for home care for seniors. We want to enhance their drug co-payment plan so they can get the prescription drugs they need and so they don't have to make the choice between those drugs or food or eyeglasses or dentures. We want to see that there are more long-term care beds in each of our communities where they're needed so that elderly couples, among many other reasons, aren't split after 50 years of marriage at a time when they need each other perhaps more than they ever have in their lives.

The environment. So often I've sat in this House and I've watched the environment be reduced by this government to an economic initiative. It is always defined, it seems, in terms of the economy. I think one day we'll realize that the economy will have to be defined in terms of the environment and that real economic success and the greatest opportunity to diversify an economy will only occur in those economies, in those jurisdictions

that take care of, promote, and enhance their environment. There is so much evidence of that, that the greatest, strongest, most diversified economies are those in clean environments, that it's no longer acceptable for that observation, that empirical evidence to be dismissed by any government, let alone this government.

Poverty. Perhaps that really captures much of what I've been talking about. Yes, there's tremendous wealth. There is more wealth than people across this world can even imagine in this province. I used to think that that kind of wealth would make people less selfish, more giving, more inclined to want to help, but I don't think it does. I think this government has failed to realize that it should. We want to see adjustments in the level of social services funding, because today we have social services funding which includes for a family of four \$693 per month to cover all their expenses except for shelter and gives them about \$460 a month maximum for shelter when, for example, in Edmonton the average two-bedroom apartment is \$518 and in Calgary is \$595 per month. You wonder why so many children go to school hungry in this province.

9:00

We want to ensure that this government accepts its responsibility for child welfare and changes an Act that says that the priority is on anything that's good for the family and for the child, because that inhibits the apprehension of children who are truly in difficulty and in distress. We want to see a reinstatement of those provisions in the Act that says that it is the minister's responsibility for child welfare and that it cannot be abdicated or delegated or simply dismissed in the way it's been done in this Act.

We want to see a concerted fight against child prostitution because it may be one of the most corrosive and despicable manifestations of too much poverty in a society. We want to see domestic violence attacked, if I can use that aggressive word in that context, in a way in part that was captured in our domestic violence Bill, Bill 214.

We want to see a \$1 an hour raise in the minimum wage so that at the very least we're not the lowest minimum wage in the entire country. Mr. Speaker, we want to see a concerted effort to begin to deal with the problem of the working poor because they have been neglected in this focus on the number of jobs without any focus on the quality of jobs.

We want to see a renewal of democracy as it's expressed and reflected in this House. We want to see a renewal of democracy as it is expressed and reflected in the way that government structures the decision-making process and the input process in this province, but I'm not encouraged by what I see.

Mr. Speaker, you and I as House leaders on behalf of our caucus colleagues in 1993 negotiated what I think and what was seen to be quite a revolutionary series of changes to this Legislature to build democracy and to open up its process. One of them was mandatory fall sessions. Can you imagine that? What a novelty. In fact, Peter Lougheed campaigned on mandatory fall sessions in 1971, and the Premier campaigned on mandatory fall sessions in 1992 during his leadership campaign. All of a sudden they've become obsolete. We might just not need them. We may not be busy enough. The government may not have enough ideas to bring to this Legislature in the fall.

It isn't all about ideas, bereft as this government may in fact be of them. It is about the need in this democratic process to question the government in a public place on a consistent basis where all Albertans can see it and can respond to it and can evaluate it. Every manager is better when they are questioned, and there's not a person in that caucus, on that side of the House,

Mr. Speaker, or this corner of it, who consider themselves to be managers who would leave their employees unquestioned for 10 months of the year. We want fall sessions because they make this place stronger and they make the government better.

Free votes. One of the most revolutionary things was that we included . . . [interjections] Mr. Speaker, are they impugning my motives? Are they reading in what . . . [interjections] I think they are.

Mr. Speaker, we negotiated and we put into a memorandum of agreement free votes on private members' days. The House leader now has said: well, they never meant anything; they were never free votes. Well, maybe they were never free votes in that caucus, but I'll tell you, they were free votes in our caucus, and we fought hard always to keep them free.

MR. HAVELOCK: Point of order.

THE SPEAKER: Government House Leader.

Point of Order Allegations against Members

MR. HAVELOCK: Yes. Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I would rise under 23(h), allegations. The hon. Leader of the Opposition stated or I guess impugned that I had said that we never had free votes in this House, that we didn't support them. That's not the case at all, Mr. Speaker. In fact, what I've stated over the last few days is that certainly our caucus supports free votes. We had a number of free votes, in fact more, I can assure you, than the Liberal opposition had during that last four-year period.

Nevertheless, there are situations which arise where caucuses may not wish to have a free vote on an issue. I freely admit that because that's the way it works in this Legislature. The Liberals are trying to fool the people of Alberta that actually every vote they've ever had was a free vote, and that's not the case at all. We were simply trying to reflect practice by not putting into an agreement a provision which I knew on the odd occasion would likely be breached.

THE SPEAKER: Opposition House Leader.

MR. SAPERS: Yes. Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The Government House Leader, struggling as he may have to have made that point, really failed to acknowledge one simple fact. We had a previous agreement in this Assembly, Mr. Speaker, one that you're very familiar with. That agreement specifically spelled out that the proceedings in this Chamber will be "free of whips," meaning there will be free votes on private members' issues, particularly private members' Bills. This caucus respected that in the 23rd Legislature on every vote. We always held that up as an ideal. In fact, Mr. Speaker, on this side of the House we felt that free votes were so important that they were part of our campaign.

The Government House Leader specifically deleted that reference to free votes from any House leaders' agreement that may help govern the 24th Legislature. So it is very clear that the government has turned its back on free votes in this Legislative Assembly regardless of what they may say now. That is very clear.

The Government House Leader certainly did not have a valid point and in fact may have just done more damage to the cause of free votes than he had already managed to do.

THE SPEAKER: A point was raised as a point of order. This

Speaker will take the view that when an hon. member says, "this is the way it is in my view" – I heard the hon. Government House Leader state a certain position about free votes in his caucus, and I heard the Opposition House Leader say that in his caucus they've always believed in free votes. This Speaker will accept the interpretations of both gentlemen and recognize that this was just a difference of opinion and invite the Leader of the Official Opposition to continue his participation in the Speech from the Throne.

Debate Continued

MR. MITCHELL: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Well done.

We've also seen in the last year the removal of all substantive debate on the budget from the Committee of Supply, which is in this venue, to a series of committees in small rooms, hidden away, that in fact sit two of them at a time so that hon. members of this Legislature who would want to deal with an issue being debated in one committee and would want to deal with an issue being debated in another committee at the same time simply don't have the opportunity to do that. That is a tremendous setback to the debate about one of the most important things that government ever does in here, and that is: establish its budget.

There are also outside this Legislature indications of policies that I think don't serve democracy particularly well, and one of them is in this throne speech where the government reiterates that it's going to establish local appointed boards to allocate lottery funds. Mr. Speaker, it is very important that this be done locally. Those are the people who understand; those are the people who live in their communities and know what they need. Why impose another board? It will be a board of patronage, and it will be a board that is redundant and inefficient, because municipal authorities are elected and can do it. Is there precedent? Yes, it was part of the CFEP program. It was always done at the municipal level.

We want to see provisions for recall. We want to see fixed terms so that people can anticipate when the election's going to be called. We want to see fall sessions. I can hardly believe that I have to emphasize that as a point in this Legislature. It should be a given. We want to see the RHAs not two-thirds elected but 100 percent elected because we believe in 100 percent democracy.

Mr. Speaker, what may be lacking in this – and I think it was touched upon in a sense by the mover of the motion and the seconder because they did refer to vision – is a real vision of what this province can be in the next century, in the next millennium in a sense. There is a limited view. It's almost as though this government's vision of the future of this province comes down to a balanced budget and no debt. A balanced budget and no debt are not a vision of the future.

9:10

When I look at health care, for example – and I say, where's the vision? – I see a list of health care policies that could have been written and probably was by a management consultant. It is highly technocratic; it is highly bureaucratic. There is no sense of the greatness of that health care system or what it could be and how it fits into the very fabric of our society and the very fabric of our province and is such an integral part of how we raise our families and the confidence we have in the future and the health that we bring to the workforce.

In fact, it was interesting to hear the analogy by the Member for St. Albert as she talked about the canvas that we need and how we have to add colour. It's a very interesting analogy, quite

powerful. But the kind of vision that is captured here is a vision in black and white. The vision of the world generated and determined only by economic principles or primarily by economic principles is a canvas in black and white.

Let me tell you, Mr. Speaker, that when we begin to assess the difference on the one hand between this huge benefit against those indicators of what misery many people in this province live within, what we see is a group of people that live in an environment and a context that is profoundly black and white, that has very little richness of any kind and very little colour of any kind, that has no joy, that has no sense of hope for the future for their children, that has no sense of hope that they will be able to participate somehow in the benefits that so many of the people like us just take for granted.

What we want to see painted by this Legislature, Mr. Speaker, is a canvas of colours like these: a place where health care is delivered not because of how much money you have but because you're sick; a place where education isn't seen to be simply a privilege but is a fundamental right; a place where the environment is seen to be the most important and significant legacy that we can ever leave our children and their children and generations to come; a place where richness and the ability to generate a strong economy aren't left only to corporate elites but are focused on small business because that in a sense honours the individual, the entrepreneurship, the individual strength that has built this province; a place where we understand that all of what we got we didn't get just because we're smart and we worked hard. We got it because it was a gift from God for us to be born or to be brought up in this province, and we have a responsibility to build and to nurture and, yes, to take care of, in some senses, our neighbour.

Mr. Speaker, that's the kind of vision. That's the kind of canvas. Those are the kinds of colours we want to see emanating from this Legislature over the next four or five years of this government's life.

Thank you.

THE SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Medicine Hat.

MR. RENNER: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I was under the impression that the hon. Leader of the Opposition was just getting on a roll, and I was just about to converse with one of my colleagues when he caught me by surprise.

It is a pleasure for me to rise this evening to speak on the Speech from the Throne. I have a few comments that I would like to make, but before I do, I too would like to take the opportunity, Mr. Speaker, to congratulate you on your election. I look forward to the next session under your leadership. I think that you have a good deal of knowledge and understanding of this building that you'll be able to impart to all members, and we certainly look forward to it.

I also want to acknowledge and extend my gratitude for what seems to be a newfound spirit of co-operation in the House. Certainly we saw that this afternoon. It began to deteriorate somewhat in the last 15, 20 minutes, but I accept the fact that the Leader of the Opposition professes to reassess his role and the role of the opposition. I look forward to some good, serious debate as we begin to discuss the business of the government and specifically the business as we see in the Speech from the Throne.

Tonight the people of Medicine Hat are happy with the Speech from the Throne. What are they happy about? Well, the people of Medicine Hat are happy that they have elected a government

that continues to keep its promises. Promises that were made during the 1993 election were kept, and this Speech from the Throne clearly indicates that promises that were made during the 1997 election will be kept. That's absolutely a key, Mr. Speaker. This government was re-elected because we kept our promises after 1993, and we will keep our promises after 1997.

There are a number of points that apply to all Albertans but very specifically apply to the people of Medicine Hat. Medicine Hat is not a wealthy city. As a matter of fact the average per household income is among the lowest of the cities in Alberta. The commitment that came out of the Speech from the Throne yesterday indicating that this government will follow through on its commitment to reduce income taxes to low-income families will benefit many, many low-income families. I never fail to be amazed by the lack of understanding on both sides of the House about the people of Medicine Hat. Whenever we get into discussions about inner-city problems, about poverty problems, everyone simply assumes that there's no poverty and there's no inner city in Medicine Hat. Mr. Speaker, Medicine Hat has the same problems that every other city in this province has, and I don't live in some kind of an imaginary dome and ignore the fact that there are people in Medicine Hat who will benefit immensely by that reduction to low- and middle-income families. There are a lot – a lot – of low- and middle-income families living in Medicine Hat. That is something that the people in Medicine Hat look forward to.

The other thing Medicine Hat looks forward to is on the positive side of things, Mr. Speaker, and that's in the whole realm of energy. While Medicine Hat does have some low- and middle-income families, the basis of the economy in Medicine Hat still is agriculture and energy. The approach that the government has taken to develop the energy industry in Alberta is just beginning to show some substantial benefits to the city of Medicine Hat. We were pleased to see the announcement of additional production capability for the Nova plant at Joffre. There have been a number of discussions taking place, and I'm pleased to have the co-operation of both energy officials and in particular economic development officials in discussions that the city of Medicine Hat has been having with a business delegation from the People's Republic of China that has made serious overtures to locating a major gas manufacturing facility in the city of Medicine Hat. So the people of Medicine Hat are pleased with the direction this government is taking.

I also want to talk a little bit about some of the issues that were prominent at the door during the election, and like every other member in this House the most important issues that we faced when we were knocking on doors during the election were health care, education, and seniors' programs. Mr. Speaker, I am, contrary to what the Leader of the Opposition saw in this speech, very pleased with what I see in this speech. This speech clearly shows that these are and will continue to be priority areas for this government, and I look forward to sitting in this Legislature over the coming few months, dealing with some very important issues in those key areas of education, health care, and seniors.

9:20

Mr. Speaker, there is some restlessness in the room tonight, but I want to make a couple more points, because I think it's important that we have an opportunity to talk about some of the issues. We heard earlier this evening about youth justice and the implementation of youth justice committees. I was very pleased to attend a meeting of the youth justice committee in Medicine Hat. They are up, they are running, and they are just getting started. Frankly they are an enthusiastic bunch of people, and I give them all my support in what I think is truly something that the communities need to get involved with. It's not enough that we turn our backs on the youth in our society that for some reason or another run contrary to the law. There is a justice system that's there to help them, but the community is really the key to helping them, and the people of Medicine Hat, in particular the people that have organized the youth justice committee, have seen fit to get involved with that.

Mr. Speaker, I'm getting signals from the Government House Leader here. He wants me to make a particular motion, which I fully intend to make, Mr. House Leader, but I do have some comments that I want to make first.

Finally, I want to talk about the priorities that we as a government and we as elected people in this province have to deal with over the upcoming few years. I think the best news that was included in the throne speech was the discussion on the growth summit. Frankly, Mr. Speaker, I think that the concept of a growth summit to deal exactly with a number of the issues that we have identified during the election, issues that we have identified in this House, to deal with an economy that is growing and vibrant – nevertheless there are issues that that growth must be controlled. We must have controlled growth, and we must be able to provide for all the citizens of Alberta, not just those citizens who are directly involved in that growth. We need to have an overall understanding of how we deal with that growth, not only this year but next year and in the years to come. Frankly, from my perspective and from the perspective of the people in Medicine Hat the upcoming growth summit is something that we all look forward to, and we all hope there is ample opportunity for participation from all sectors in the Alberta economy.

Mr. Speaker, at this point I would like to adjourn debate.

THE SPEAKER: Before I ask the Assembly to agree with the motion, the Speaker is reminded that he had read someplace that there have been those speakers in history whose eloquence was so great that they caused all people to move.

Having heard the motion by the hon. Member for Medicine Hat, does the Assembly agree with the motion?

HON. MEMBERS: Agreed.

THE SPEAKER: The motion is carried.

[At 9:25 p.m. the Assembly adjourned to Thursday at 1:30 p.m.]

