

Legislative Assembly of Alberta

Title: Monday, April 28, 1997 8:00 p.m.
Date: 97/04/28

head: **Committee of Supply**

[Mr. Tannas in the Chair]

THE CHAIRMAN: I'd like to call the Committee of Supply to order. Hon. members, this evening we are dividing into subcommittees, subcommittee C and subcommittee D. Subcommittee C will remain here in the Assembly and cover the estimates of the Department of Agriculture, Food and Rural Development, and subcommittee D will be going upstairs to room 512 to consider the estimates of the Department of Energy. So all those people who are members of subcommittee D are now excused, and in a moment we'll reconvene here with those that are in subcommittee C.

[The committee met as subcommittees C and D from 8:02 p.m. to 10:20 p.m.]

THE CHAIRMAN: I'd call the Committee of Supply to order.
 The hon. Member for Lacombe-Stettler.

MRS. GORDON: Mr. Chairman, subcommittee D of the Committee of Supply has had under consideration certain resolutions of the Department of Energy, reports progress thereon, and requests leave to sit again.

Mr. Chairman, I would also like to table a copy of the recorded vote on the motion to rise and report.

THE CHAIRMAN: Does the committee concur in this report?

HON. MEMBERS: Agreed.

THE CHAIRMAN: Opposed? Carried.

MR. CLEGG: Mr. Chairman, subcommittee C of the Committee of Supply has had under consideration certain resolutions of the Department of Agriculture, Food and Rural Development, reports progress thereon, and requests leave to sit again.

THE CHAIRMAN: Does the committee concur in this report?

HON. MEMBERS: Agreed.

THE CHAIRMAN: Opposed? Carried.

The hon. Government House Leader.

MR. HAVELOCK: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I move the Committee of Supply rise and report and request leave to sit again.

[Motion carried]

[The Deputy Speaker in the Chair]

MRS. GORDON: Mr. Speaker, the Committee of Supply has had under consideration certain resolutions of the Department of Agriculture, Food and Rural Development and the Department of Energy, reports progress thereon, and requests leave to sit again.

I wish to table documents tabled in the Committee of Supply.

THE DEPUTY SPEAKER: Does the Assembly concur in this report?

HON. MEMBERS: Agreed.

THE DEPUTY SPEAKER: Opposed? Carried.

head: **Government Bills and Orders**
 head: **Committee of the Whole**

[Mr. Tannas in the Chair]

THE CHAIRMAN: I'd call the Committee of the Whole to attention and ask for the hon. Government House Leader or hon. Deputy Government House Leader.

Bill 6

Appropriation (Supplementary Supply) Act, 1997

MR. HAVELOCK: Mr. Chairman, if I understand, we're discussing Bill 6. I'd ask that you call the question.

[The clauses of Bill 6 agreed to]

[Title and preamble agreed to]

THE CHAIRMAN: Shall the Bill be reported? Are you agreed?

HON. MEMBERS: Agreed.

THE CHAIRMAN: Opposed? Carried.

The hon. Government House Leader.

MR. HAVELOCK: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I move that the Committee of the Whole rise and report.

[Motion carried]

[The Deputy Speaker in the Chair]

MRS. GORDON: Mr. Speaker, the Committee of the Whole has had under consideration certain Bills. The committee reports the following: Bill 6.

THE DEPUTY SPEAKER: Does the Assembly concur in this report?

HON. MEMBERS: Agreed.

THE DEPUTY SPEAKER: Opposed? So ordered.

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

Bill 6

Appropriation (Supplementary Supply) Act, 1997

MR. HAVELOCK: Mr. Speaker, I move third reading of Bill 6.

THE DEPUTY SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Creek.

MR. ZWOZDESKY: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's been a very interesting evening. I'm pleased to rise at this time in order to

make some concluding comments with regard to Bill 6, the Appropriation (Supplementary Supply) Act, 1997. I want to just state at the outset, for purposes of clarification and for those individuals who will be reading *Hansard* in regard to this debate, that this particular Bill really applies to expenditures for the year ended 1996-97; in other words, for the year ended March 31, 1997. Essentially what it is is a statement of expenditures which the government has seen fit to make by reshuffling moneys between departments.

Speaker's Ruling Decorum

THE DEPUTY SPEAKER: The Chair is finding it somewhat difficult even with the amplification that's provided by the electronics in here. I wonder if we can remember, hon. members, that we are in Assembly stage, and lively conversations are encouraged in the Confederation Room or in the lounge.

The hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Creek.

10:30 Debate Continued

MR. ZWOZDESKY: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. So to continue, we are not really talking about new moneys per se. We're simply talking about moneys that are being redirected or have been redirected during the course of the last year from one department to another.

Specifically we have five departments listed under schedule A. Those are Community Development, Education, Family and Social Services, Health, Transportation and Utilities. In total we're talking about some \$223 million which the government is seeking approval for in these areas under supplementary supply. That figure, Mr. Speaker, is comprised of something like \$217.3 million in operating expenses and about \$5.6 million in capital investments.

I want to state at the outset that the Liberal Official Opposition will be supporting this particular Bill because of the areas to which the funding is going to be going, or has already gone, I should say. We very much value health care and education and a secure social safety net as part of what we call the building blocks of our community and indeed of our economy. It's these very building blocks, Mr. Speaker, taken in conjunction with the social services area, transportation and so on, that comprise what this province is founded on. Investments in our social infrastructure are, of course, the foundation for a sustainable, growing and productive Alberta economy that will prepare us and take us well into the 21st century and even beyond.

During the election campaign that just concluded last month and obviously during the last couple of days in supplementary estimates in this House, my colleagues and I have had a chance to talk about the so-called human deficit that has been created in certain areas as a result of some of the cuts coming perhaps too quickly, perhaps too deeply and certainly in some areas, by the government's own admission, without a great deal of planning. As a result some of the people programs, I believe, have suffered, some of them needlessly, in particular the areas of health care and education and certainly social services. I think we see evidence of this virtually every day at our constituency office, and as some of the new members will be quick to realize, they will be hearing even more about it as they deal with constituents on the home field.

During the proceedings, Mr. Speaker, on supplementary estimates a number of suggestions, very constructive suggestions, have been offered by my colleagues on the Liberal side, sugges-

tions for the government's consideration on how to deal with the human deficits. I sincerely hope, hon. members, that you will do what you can to persuade government to take a look at those suggestions. Perhaps they're not all acceptable, but I would hope that you would find the bulk of them worthy of some further exploration and perhaps adoption.

I want to be very clear, Mr. Speaker, in this summary of Bill 6 that balancing the budget is something that we on the Liberal side have sought for many years. We espoused it during previous election campaigns, and we will continue to espouse it. However, balancing that budget isn't simply an exercise in itself. It has to be done in a very, very, careful, well-thought-out way so that the financial bottom line is not the only target being sought. It means meeting our commitments and our obligations as elected officials to provide Albertans with the types of programs and services that are effective and efficient but also programs that meet the needs of the people whom we are elected to serve.

Now, I appreciate the fact that the government has succeeded in balancing the budget from a financial perspective. In fact, I can applaud the fact that it is balanced. We may not like how it was done or the speed with which it was done or the depths to which it was done. However, we do recognize that something has been done and that the budget is balanced from now on and forever into the future, we will hope. So we openly acknowledge that fact and to some degree obviously support it.

There is still a lot of work that has to be done to deal with what I would call the structural imbalance that has developed between the so-called core programs and services that Albertans deserve vis-à-vis the programs and services that have been eroded to whatever extent by government cuts. So we'll need to address this imbalance, and I'm looking forward to that over the next while in this House.

Mr. Speaker, with those opening comments I want to just summarize briefly some of the issues that my colleagues have raised, specifically in regard to supplementary supply estimates as they relate to Bill 6.

In the area of social services I realize that the government has been criticized for its lack of vision or perhaps its lack of planning with respect to some of the announcements, in particular announcements that relate to regionalization of children's services, which is obviously a very, very major concern to every member of this House, regardless of where you sit. Everybody here is concerned with the care for children, be they our own or be they society's children or be they the neighbour's children. Yet I find it interesting that while some regions of the province have developed a fairly sophisticated social service delivery plan for children's services, there may be some areas of the province that lag behind or perhaps haven't as yet been as fully developed. I would challenge the government to try and do a little better coordination, I suppose, of those regionalized delivery systems and bring them all up to an even par so that children everywhere are looked after equally, equitably, fairly, and as humanely as possible. They are the most innocent people that we serve and are trusted to protect.

In fact, earlier today, Mr. Speaker, I had the pleasure of dropping into the office of the minister responsible for children's services. I was just there on a casual basis, and I noted with some appreciation that there's a tremendous amount of work being generated out of that office, which suggests that at some point the government may actually have to look at creating some new vehicle to help care for these children. A new vehicle may result in even a new ministry that specifically looks after the needs of these children.

The department may not be able to provide all the reliable

information and specific data with regard to the number of children that are in the so-called special-needs area in each of the regions, but if they follow that advice of co-ordination pursuant to this Bill, then perhaps these children will have a better and fairer chance of accomplishing their hopes and dreams.

With regard to the supports for independence, Mr. Speaker, I note that the Auditor General did make some very specific recommendations over the past couple of years about the need for the department to begin tracking and measuring the success of welfare clients, particularly in relation to their obtaining meaningful, sustained employment. This has been mentioned as a deficiency in a recent report even by the C.D. Howe Institute. We can't continue to have what I would call the revolving door scenario, whereby social services recipients are taken off the welfare rolls to perhaps try and accommodate some statistic that is being sought, and then once that statistic is over, has been collected and reported on, then back onto welfare they go, and we have this revolving door scenario that sometimes takes place.

I think there's an obligation by the government to understand this issue in terms of administrative law versus legislative law versus the laws that govern the Executive Council and the responsibilities that it has in terms of implementing government policy. There are fine lines of distinction between all of those, which I would challenge the members to have a look at.

Briefly in the area of Education. We're all aware of the current level of concern regarding the amount of funding that is or perhaps is not going to these areas from government coffers, and I think it's fairly conclusive to say – and many would agree – that there perhaps are insufficient moneys going to some of the areas that are in need. I note with some glee that an additional \$29,300,000 in Bill 6 has been appropriated to that area.

10:40

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

**Point of Order
Relevance**

MR. HERARD: Yes. Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Unless I was off on a mental holiday there for a minute, I think we are in third reading, and we should be discussing the Bill such as it is and not referring at length to debate that's already taken place in committee.

THE DEPUTY SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Creek.

MR. ZWOZDESKY: Yes. Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My comments will be brief, and I think they do speak directly to the Bill. Furthermore, there was a bit of an unwritten agreement that because I didn't have a chance during second reading to sum up, we saved the House a lot of time. We had an agreement that if we moved through Committee of the Whole in two minutes or less, we would have the time now. So we've saved a great deal of time there. So it's all right; it's no problem. I won't be very long at all here.

THE DEPUTY SPEAKER: While the point of order raised by the hon. Member for Calgary-Egmont is well advised, I think the explanation given by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Creek would suffice to allow him to conclude debate on third reading at this time.

MR. ZWOZDESKY: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and thank you to the Member for Calgary-Egmont for his understanding.

Debate Continued

MR. ZWOZDESKY: I was commenting about sufficient funding in the area of education. As a former teacher myself for a number of years – and I know there are many here who are – I think we're very quick to understand and appreciate that the needs of our children are best met when the classroom teacher ratios are at a more palatable level. Classes are at the moment overcrowded. Many of them are. I'm not saying they all are, but I think there are enough that are in an overcrowded situation that it warrants the government's attention. Teachers are experiencing record-level burnouts in some areas. This was reported statistically in this House by myself and a number of others. Leaves of absence are at an all-time high, and something simply has to be done.

There are also some inequities in funding between regions that have been reported, and I would ask the government to address itself to that wide range of funding between our different areas of the province and come up with some solutions to help alleviate the problems.

Our children truly are our future, Mr. Speaker, and I would hope that the government clearly appreciates that and applies it more strictly than perhaps it has to date to meet the investment in our children, who really are an investment in our future. Alberta ranks seventh at the moment among all provinces in the amount of resources, or what we call the wealth of Albertans, that we spend on education – that includes basic education as well as advanced ed – in terms of GDP. I'm sure you've heard that speech a number of times, but even with the planned increases in Education such as the government is espousing at the moment, Alberta will still wind up in the middle of the pack on spending in Education. As the expression goes, if you think education is expensive, you should try ignorance. So please let's not ignore that area.

It ties in nicely with the aspect of children's services, too, which I raised earlier. In this area too, Mr. Speaker, the resources for special-needs students also have to be addressed a little more acutely and in an adequate fashion, let me say, by government. I know that we've got a lot of programs in schools that are new that do address this to some extent, and I'm not sure if under Education operating expenses the \$29 million there does include some additional funding for modified behaviour classes, for example. This is a tremendous needs area at the moment.

We have proposed details in our budgets in this regard to address the difficulties in the education system, and I would hope the government will take that seriously. I don't really even care if you give us credit for it, but I do hope you have a look at it. That's really what we're saying. We just want to urge you to give serious consideration to those proposals.

In the area of Community Development, specifically with regard to seniors' benefits, we certainly support the additional funding that's being allocated to augment in particular the ASB, or the Alberta seniors' benefit program. One-senior couples have told us on numerous occasions, Mr. Speaker, since the ASB's inception back in 1994 that a couple where one partner was under 65 does not necessarily live more cheaply or have fewer expenses than a couple where both partners are over the age of 65. Unfortunately, it's taken the government about two and a half years to better or more fully understand this and to make some positive moves in the right direction, and I congratulate you for

doing that. Seniors are the people who obviously built this province. They don't have any meaningful way of employing themselves perhaps at this stage, and they do need to be looked after. There are societies around the world who pay a great deal more attention to their seniors than do we.

The Alberta health care insurance premium subsidy is actually funding that deals with changes to the income definition used to determine eligibility for the health care insurance premium subsidy. We support this funding increase, but we note that this government is the first one to require seniors to actually have to pay health care taxes or premiums, whatever you want to call them. It is an additional hit on seniors.

With regard to special-needs assistance this is definitely needed, but I think it's an admission that seniors are definitely falling through the cracks. The fact that special-needs assistance has to be augmented on a fairly regular basis shows that there are still major cracks in the ASB program. I recall the backlogs that were there when they first introduced the renters' assistance program, and at that time there were more people phoning in than could be answered. That left a lot of people in my constituency of Edmonton-Mill Creek without service for some time.

So again, Mr. Speaker, I would just urge the government to examine some of the proposals that we've put forward in that regard, take them under due consideration, and please keep the promises that you've made to the seniors who've built this province.

Very quickly, I know that in the area of health care we want to continue to pursue quality and accessible health care services as a priority for us and for everybody in this House, so I note with some positivity the additional expenditure of \$124 million pursuant to Bill 6. We believe that the cuts to our health care system over the past four years have resulted in some problems of significance in some areas, and the government needs to address those problems. So I would hope that you move with some alacrity in that regard to fix them. Band-aid solutions don't work and longer term plans perhaps will.

We need to make sure that we don't hear the government say again that it had no plan and it had no vision for health care when it set out to restructure it. Now that we're as far along the way as we are, I want the government to say: "We have a plan. We have a vision, and here's what it is. Here's what it's going to look like, and it will be based truly on need." That's what Albertans want to hear. That's what we in the opposition want to hear. All of our criticisms – most of them have been of a positive nature; we tried to make them that way – are coming from that area of co-operation.

So while the funding allocations in provincewide services for organ and bone marrow transplants, heart surgery, renal dialysis, neurosurgery, or funding for the hiring of frontline workers or funding for clinical equipment, Aids to Daily Living, and so on that are supported by this caucus are there, we don't just want to see a papering-over effect in the approach to the government's restructuring and recrafting of health care. We want meaningful, sustainable, accessible, affordable, available health care that is predictable and there when we need it.

The final fact that I'll just close with here is that Alberta still remains the lowest funded province in terms of health care. I don't understand that. I deal with it at the constituency level, Mr. Speaker. I also deal with it at the personal level. I've recently had some of my relatives in the hospital, and while the nurses, the frontline workers as it were, did their very level best to provide

the type of care that these family members needed or that my constituents needed, it's still obvious that we haven't quite got the right handle on it.

10:50

I'm not trying to rain on the government's parade unnecessarily here, but you've got to take a stronger, more firm look at this and come up with a funding formula model that better reflects today's society in terms of needs. For a have province such as we are to not be dedicating some additional dollars to the pressure points, as you call them, to the right areas is not in concurrence with what Albertans want. It's nothing short of shameful when you say that we are 10th among 10 provinces and two territories. In terms of our GDP we've got to move quickly toward fixing that.

Mr. Speaker, I will take my stand there again by simply saying now that the bell has sounded that we will be supporting this Bill through third reading. Thank you for your attention.

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

MR. DICKSON: Thanks, Mr. Speaker. I can't match my colleague from Edmonton-Mill Creek in terms of either energy or stamina at this hour of the evening, but I wanted to ask the government just one question. There had been in the course of the supplementary estimates debate and the debate preceding this stage on the appropriation Bill a number of serious, legitimate questions asked in both the areas of health care and education and in particular in Community Development. I note that we had received some assurances from ministers opposite that we'd be getting explanations. In the case of the Minister of Education he talked about a written response to questions that had been asked. If this system is to mean any sort of legitimate review, then surely it is that we have to have responses before we vote.

Now, I think it's of less concern on the supplementary estimates, but I guess I'm just saying that I have an expectation of the Minister of Education, who had said on April 22:

With those . . . comments and my undertaking to review the Blues and take a look at [the] questions asked and provide my written responses, I move the vote on the supplementary estimates for the Department of Education.

I haven't seen any tablings from the Minister of Education in terms of those responses. Then we had the comment from the Minister of Health on page 185 on April 23, where he indicated that he would be prepared at the next stage when we're dealing with the budget to get into details of the agreement with the AMA and the physician agreement, the long-term agreement with respect to the United Nurses. I guess all I'm saying is that I have an expectation that given those undertakings that had been offered earlier, we'll have responses before we're in a position where we have to vote on the main budget, Mr. Speaker.

Those are my particular concerns, and I expect they're shared by members of the Official Opposition.

Thanks, Mr. Speaker.

THE DEPUTY SPEAKER: Would the Minister of Justice like to conclude debate, to close debate? No? Okay.

[Motion carried; Bill 6 read a third time]

[At 10:55 p.m. the Assembly adjourned to Tuesday at 1:30 p.m.]