

Legislative Assembly of Alberta

Title: **Monday, March 23, 1998** 8:00 p.m.
Date: 98/03/23

head: **Government Bills and Orders**
head: **Committee of the Whole**
[Mr. Tannas in the chair]

THE CHAIRMAN: I'd like to call the Committee of the Whole to order.

Bill 31 Appropriation Act, 1998

THE CHAIRMAN: Are there any comments, criticisms, questions?

MR. DICKSON: We're dealing with Bill 31 this evening, Mr. Chairman, and there are a number of observations I wanted to make with respect to the Appropriation Act, 1998.

As is usually the case with appropriation bills, it's very skeletal. I mean, it's all of five pages long, yet it's the reason why we have to deal with the Appropriation Act that's currently in front of us, the legislative authority for \$12.363 billion in expenses dealing with the 1998-99 fiscal year. The amount of supply being requested here, the \$12.363 billion, is comprised of almost \$12 billion in operating expenses for the government ministries and the Assembly, then \$257 million – actually, the point I was reading was simply the capital investment for government ministries and the Legislative Assembly, then the nonbudgetary disbursements for government ministries, and then the \$173.3 million for payments under the lottery fund.

Now, a couple of observations I wanted to make with respect to specific items, but first I'll just touch on the reason why I have concerns with Bill 31. These are concerns, distressingly, which aren't unique to the 1998 Appropriation Act, because in fact they are issues that the opposition has raised in the past with respect to past appropriations. What happens is that the presentation of expenses under an appropriation act is in effect rendered meaningless, Mr. Chairman, since the government has the ability to transfer money between programs and ministries virtually at will. Certainly one might argue that this is a big, powerful majority government; why shouldn't it have the right to do that? In fact, I think even large, powerful governments will acknowledge that they make mistakes. There are bills that come forward without adequate scrutiny, and there are expenditures that are made without due attention paid to them, sufficiently rigorous questioning of ministries and deputy ministers.

The fact that the Legislature in this province can only approve the transfer of funds between and within ministries after the fact in supplementary supply is, I think, a really major limitation. I'd say with the greatest respect, Mr. Chairman, that I don't think this measures up to the kind of fiscal accountability that Albertans wish to see from their government, and indeed I'm not sure it measures up to the kind of fiscal accountability that the government has represented in the past that they would provide Albertans with.

The other item I wanted to identify is that we don't adequately link the outputs to results achieved. I remember right after the 1993 election Mike Percy, who had been my seatmate at that time, talking about accountability frameworks and the need for accountability frameworks. Each successive member of my caucus who has been responsible for shadowing the Provincial

Treasurer has again talked about the need for adequate performance measures and benchmarks. I don't think I have to take members through each page in the business plan booklet that accompanied the budget, but we find again that the performance measures and benchmarks in many cases are immaterial to the purpose of the program, immaterial to the expenditure, and most importantly, immaterial to the real consequences that flow from difference expenditures or changes in expenditures.

This isn't rocket science, Mr. Chairman. In fact, we've challenged the government in the past that there have been systems that have been applied by state legislatures in Minnesota and Texas which have done, frankly, a far better job in terms of linking outputs to expenditures so we really know whether we're having some success. I guess I just lament that this year it would be really nice to say that the government has taken those criticisms to heart and decided that in fact they were going to adopt performance measurements that were really meaningful, performance measurements that were material to the quality of service Albertans might enjoy, but alas, it is not to be in this current budget year.

I just make the observation as well that Budget '98, the so-called Agenda for Opportunity, does not speak to the needs of the 2.8 million Albertans who live on the main streets of our communities. I remember one of my colleagues talking about this being an agenda of opportunity for Bay Street financiers, not a budget for the 2.8 million Albertans living on main streets of Alberta communities.

I'll turn in a moment to some of the specific departments, but I wanted to make those general observations because we have to have some expectation that the minister responsible for children's services and every one of her colleagues understands the need to take these enormous expenditures of dollars and make the appropriate linkages to positive input in terms of positive impact in our communities.

Now, I'll just move on and in terms of a program-based performance budget raise the concern that we still have our three-year plans which are basically prepared on the basis of ministerial or departmental boundaries rather than on the basis of a program category. Program category, which would be the normative way of trying to deal with this, is one that would refer to a group of activities sharing a common purpose working toward the achievement of common outcomes that cut across ministries.

I could give you an example, Mr. Chairman. We can talk about population health. The Minister of Health and senior officials in his department talk about the importance of population health. We know of places like Sweden that have developed a very sophisticated model of actually measuring programs and processes that improve the health of Swedish children and adults. When the minister and the ministry talk about population health, what they're talking about is a whole series of measures that have to deal with illiteracy, child poverty, and domestic violence. Those things are also part of population health. Those things don't fit neatly into one of the 17 government departments, because as we've seen, you may have the Justice ministry involved, you may have the Health department, you may have the Education department, you may have Family and Social Services. Wouldn't it be refreshing to see a budget organized and an appropriation organized around those core service areas rather than being simply caught up in the kind of traditional jurisdictional boundaries that you find in each of the 17 departments?

That continues to be a need that I think my colleagues will press on the government. It would be as simple as this. I can offer

really a four-step process that ought to be followed so that we never again are presented with Bill 31 and forced to make the same kind of criticism or the same kind of observation.

8:10

The first proposal would be this: to identify target populations and expected outcomes in order to reduce gaps and overlap in services; secondly, to identify emerging trends and factors and the effects these trends and factors have on things like workload, program performance, and expected outcomes; furthermore, ministries serving similar client needs would identify common outcomes for the purpose of program and service co-ordination; and then fourthly, identifying strategies, activities, and innovations for achieving objectives and improving services.

One might ask, Mr. Chairman, if that were the case, how much different Bill 31 would look. When we look on page 3 and see the votes as they're recorded in each of the government departments, how much different would they look? Well, what we would see very clearly would be the amount of money committed to advantaging Alberta children. We'd see the total amount, not in a fragmented form. We'd see the total amount of money spent on human rights education. You know, when I see the Minister of Community Development across the way, I'm reminded that in the past when the minister and her colleagues were challenged for the very modest amount spent on human rights education – it was identified as \$30,000 in the budget – the minister would say: well, this is quite unfair; other departments spend money on human rights education too. But this was always said in a way that was absolutely nonspecific, so you have no way of measuring whether you have an adequate amount, whether the amount is changing from year to year. That would be, I think, one example of a better way we could do the appropriation process.

The second thing I think is important is just in terms of annual performance reports. We have a government that focuses mainly on inputs and pays scant attention to outputs. That, Mr. Chairman, is regrettable. What's more, it doesn't allow Albertans, the people paying the freight, to determine whether they're getting fair value, good value, or any value from the government they've elected to manage their affairs.

The other thing that could be done that would make Bill 31 or its subsequent iterations a lot more useful would be to ensure that the Auditor General could audit annual performance reports, because I think all members know that the kind of review that's available, whether it's in a designated subcommittee or a regular subcommittee of supply, simply tends to be inadequate. Responses are given vaguely to specific questions. Responses are often received months after we've voted on an appropriation bill like Bill 31, and often the budgets contain only skeletal information. Information in the three-year budget book is, as I suggested before, often immaterial to the needs of Albertans, and that continues to be a problem.

I'd like to make this positive suggestion, Mr. Chairman. It would simply be this: we could have the Auditor General mandated to review and audit the annual performance reports prepared by program area. If they were to do this, I could make some suggestions in terms of what that might look like. You might have the Auditor General answering questions like this. Number one, does the report generally fulfill the purposes established by the Government Accountability Act? Number two, does the report describe the performance in all program area major subdivisions for the reporting period? Does it set out anticipated performance for the next two years? Do the program area objectives follow the mission and goals? Can the report be

read and understood by the general public and elected policy-makers? Does the program area provide a fair account of itself through a performance report? Is the report a concise summary of program area performance? Does the report show how the program area reached conclusions about its performance?

Those are the kinds of things, Mr. Chairman, that would be, I think, really important for Albertans to be able to know, but that information isn't available to them because the Auditor General is not currently required to review those annual performance reports. That's something that ought to happen, and I think it's really regrettable that it does not.

Another suggestion that would make Bill 31 far more meaningful, Mr. Chairman, might be this. How much different would Bill 31 look if we had a requirement that in January of each year an economic and fiscal strategy report would have to be released by the government which would project trends for key economic and fiscal indicators over a planning horizon of not less than five years at least and perhaps 10 years, a discussion of the general policy the government intends to pursue to achieve its economic and fiscal objectives?

How many times, Mr. Chairman, when you go shopping on a Saturday afternoon in downtown Okotoks and those folks come in from the entire area around Okotoks and they recognize their MLA, have they come up to you and said: we continue to be frustrated by legislators who drive looking at the hood ornament. They're tired of legislators and government people that spend all their time focusing their budget on what's happening in the next five months or six months or nine months. What they want is the driver in the car that they're a hapless passenger in looking way down the road, looking to the horizon. Yes, you have to have an eye on what's immediately in front of your front bumper, but you also have to have an eye much, much further down the road. That's the only way you're going to be able to chart the straightest possible line down the highway.

I know that people in Okotoks understand that sort of need and the advantage that would come with that longer kind of projection. What Bill 31 does is it means that we continue to a very large extent to lurch from one side of the road to the other, and every now and again we find we're creeping a little bit over the centre line or we're a little bit over onto the shoulder because we're not looking far enough down the road. I think that with Bill 31 that would be not an unfair criticism.

So the things that would make Bill 31 more meaningful would be the program based performance budget; number two, annual performance reports; number three, auditing of annual performance reports by the Auditor General; four, the kind of fiscal strategy report I've just mentioned; five – and this is one we've talked about before – a fiscal stabilization fund, something that would stabilize the fiscal position of the province to address in an intelligent and long-term way the cyclical nature of Alberta's economy and Alberta's revenue sources and simply look to sustain investment.

Our education and our health care systems, as we've been reminded a lot during this spring session, require long-term planning. We simply can't go on in the situation where – if we take the health care area, how many announcements have we seen in the last six months of additional money going into health care? It's as if we've simply discovered the year 2000 problem, as if we've just discovered that the population-based funding formula for regional health authorities isn't working, as if we've just discovered that with the enormous population growth in places like Grande Prairie or Calgary or Brooks, Alberta, you have to

provide additional funds to meet the needs of that growing population without reducing by a single day the waiting list people experience, whether they want an MRI in the Capital region, whether they require neurosurgery, cardiac surgery, or any of those specialty services.

Those are some of the concerns I have, Mr. Chairman. Thank you very much.

8:20

THE CHAIRMAN: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Calder.

MR. WHITE: Thank you kindly, sir. I rise to speak on Bill 31, amazing as it may seem, in some areas with some support, but by and large I'll dwell on the other areas, because there's a great number of members that are here present that I'm sure would love to speak in support of this bill, the appropriation bill.

I should first like to speak about that which my hon. colleague from Calgary-Buffalo spoke about, and that's a vision. He was speaking of the hood ornament and looking a little farther out than just merely getting to the next election, as it were, or through this particular session. I'd like to speak about what we would like to see for our children or our grandchildren, the kinds of things that you'd want your Alberta to be and the kind of place about which you'd say, "Yes, this is a very special place," where we have used the resources that were God given – certainly they weren't given by any of us or earned by any of us – that which bubbles out of the ground or we can mine out west of town or the land that we can grow everything but good grapes on close at hand, gathering all those things together and saying: look; this is a place with a sparse population, massive resources, and we don't seem to be able to get it together. We don't seem to be able to use all of that and do some very, very simple things.

I spoke about a number of things the other day. I ended off at advanced education when the minister perked up his eyes and ears to acknowledge the fact that I was alive and was speaking about his particular area. Sir, I'm speaking about vision. I'm speaking about a longer term vision, something that would say to the children of this province: this is absolutely unequivocally the place to be because we can get an education here, we're encouraged to get an education, and we're not held back by reason of finance, and we're not held back by reason of quality of school, and we're not held back by reason of having some early learning disability of some sort that would prevent us from reaching full potential.

Now, I know and you know, Mr. Minister, that there are a great number of children out there who, before they get into advanced education, going from K to 12, fall off for various and sundry reasons. It may be some emotional difficulties. It may be that one particular year they've had a breakup in the family or there's a handicap of some sort, whether it be a learning disability or physical handicap, that has put them off and put them on a stream of: I can't do some things. In that area there's so, so much more that could and should be done. It's being timely; it's being there right on the spot.

I can't claim any special knowledge of children in school, but having the good fortune to be able to coach children from probably under 7 years of age to under 19 and under 17 years of age, I've seen a lot of these things, and I wish I could have been more of a parent to some of these children that needed it, needed it badly. Some of them just needed a good hug once in a while and to hear, "Yeah, you're doing well," even though that child may have been the less skilled, shall we say, player on the team. But that child had some abilities, and that child should have been encouraged to use those abilities to their best advantage. I'm sure

this relates to what the province is not doing in education: not encouraging a child, every single child – and the analogy here in my case is that when they step on that playing field, they're doing their level best every single time, every single play.

If the education system from K to 12 could do that – it's not a massive expenditure of time and effort. I'm not sure that it requires any exceptionally special skills; it doesn't require advanced knowledge of child psychology. What it really means is to encourage that child to be good in something. I don't think the education system in this province does that, and it sadly lacks that *raison d'être* to do just that, to have a child receive the help they need on a timely basis to attain that.

That being said, there are some that make it through the system regardless and get to a place where they have graduated or they're into some postsecondary learning, and they really need the assistance of the state, not all children, certainly not mine and certainly not a number of those members that are here present. They are financially secure. But I come from a constituency, in fact part of a neighbourhood where there isn't always that parental involvement, and there certainly isn't the parental finance, whether the will is there or not. To say to these students that would like to have maybe a four-year course in welding or the brand spanking new one that I know the minister will know of: an RV mechanic – it may sound a little glib to those that aren't aware of it, but it's probably one of the fastest growing areas of endeavour, and in fact the ministry is working towards something. Perhaps it's about eight to 10 years behind the northwestern United States, and it's about five to seven years behind British Columbia, but it is coming.

If a child wants to do that and says, "Here's an opportunity; I can see a technical involvement that I can perform and then on to a business endeavour," the finance is simply not there. There isn't enough involvement by this provincial government in the areas of apprenticeships. There's certainly not nearly enough opportunity for the apprentices that do want to learn from those that do have the skills.

I'd say to you, sir, that I suspect you are a champion and I hope you are a champion in your caucus of the causes of which I speak, but the results don't really show it. Here is a government that turns a massive, massive budget surplus. Now, you can't err on the side of putting money away to the exclusion of these young people's futures and say that at all times you have absolutely done the right thing. I would like some time an admission that just perhaps if we'd put X amount more funds and interest into some of these areas, we might have been able to say to the children of today or the children of tomorrow, "Yes, we did err on that side, because we know that that is where the future of this province lies, in the academic or the intellectual achievement," whether it be in something as simple as recreational vehicle maintenance and mechanics.

I'd like to move on, then, beyond Advanced Ed and Career Development – time is moving much faster than I expected it to – into an area that particularly concerns me as an engineer and an owner of the resource, the massive amounts of that black carbon that comes out of the ground all over this province. We just scoop it up, put it in the train, and ship it out. Yes, we're providing some jobs. Yes, we're doing what we can in most instances to repair the massive holes that we've left, the big scars in the earth, to repair those into a state where they at least are partially habitable by some wildlife over the course of 20 to 50 years. But the amount of money that was returned to the coffers to pay for those other services, like education and social services

and roadways and all that infrastructure, is simply not there. There's some \$20 million or some ridiculous, ridiculous fee. We ship this out to points offshore with absolutely no upgrading. There they turn it into coking coal in the steel industry. On the other side of the ocean they do an awful lot of things with it, but here we do nothing, and it is a pretty sad tale to tell. If anybody has the opportunity to fly over, have a look at the massive amount of earth moving and the open pits and realize that this is going out of the province with a pittance of return. It's a pretty sad state. In previous times on my feet in this Legislature I've dealt with energy in the oil and gas industry and dealt most recently with the advent of electricity, and now I believe I've completed the discussion of coal.

8:30

I'd like to move on to another area where the vision is horribly, horribly short, in my view, of what this government has been doing in the last while, the last five or six years, and that is dealing with municipal governments. Now, that's a legitimate level of government, and it's been said and it'll be said again that it's a child of this level of government, that it's a wholly-owned creature created by this Legislature, but if that's how the Legislature treats its children, I would hate to be one of those children, because they are so terribly, terribly treated in the way of any kind of respect for what they do. Yes, members go out to their individual councils and say nice things and do all of these, but when it comes back into the caucus room, what happens? It's slice and dice time.

Here it is. There's one taxpayer. That's all of us, the 2.8 million in the province, and what happens to our tax base? It's hoarded. It's pulled into one lump under the dome called the Legislature. And does it go out of here? It goes out of here with a price tag. You be nice and we'll drop something in your little pauper's purse there if you don't complain.

You go to a meeting called by the AUMA, the Alberta Urban Municipalities Association, of which I happen to be a member, starting I think in about 1983. That ages me a bit. It hasn't changed from that day to this. They go and smile and don't say anything nasty about the government. The Minister of Municipal Affairs comes, and everybody gives a lovely round of applause no matter what the person says or no matter how foolish it sounds to any of them. There aren't any complaints because they're absolutely beholden to that level of government. The complaints there are zero. It's a travesty.

Why does it occur? It's because they have had specific experience with those that did complain, those that did say: this is not right; there should be another way of disseminating some income; there should be another way of application of tax. What happens? In the next round there is some manner of punishment, whether it be in transportation grants – “Gee whiz, your highway just didn't hit the priorities this year” – or whether it is in those things we call the grants for the community in whatever form. In my time there have been about five or six different forms of financing, financing assistance for hockey rinks and the like. There's all manner of ways to cut the pie and to punish and to reward.

So you don't have any complaints, but I'm here to tell you to go talk to those people individually and find out that they believe they are charged with taxing in a manner for the services they provide that is not properly applied. They'll tell you that the application of property tax should be applied for property tax on property for property, not for social services, not for recreation; perhaps, yes, for policing, because that can be associated with

some geographical area, at least in part. Fire, yes. They definitely believe it should be charged for that protective service. Ambulance. Doesn't it say somewhere that that's the responsibility of the province? And it should be so. Certainly not for recreation as separate from parks. Parks can in fact be included, because they would be associated with the geographics of a piece of property and the proximity to some green space. Parks also traditionally, in the municipal setting, include such things as maintenance of road allowances and the like. So you could include those.

But for social services, which they pay for dearly, and for recreation, which they also pay for dearly, and for ambulance and the like and part of policing, they don't believe that should come out of their purse, as it were, and certainly not be accused, because of their rate base, having to collect on behalf of the province the educational tax. They are actually blamed for it in large measure oftentimes when the rate goes up. Strange as it may seem, it comes directly. It doesn't even get passed now, currently, through a board of education. It's just, phsht, right into the provincial coffers.

Well, truly look at the complaints and the concerns they have and break them down and say, “Yes, okay, in these areas we understand why you're overtaxed,” and do something about it. There's ample room in, as the accountants say, a goods and services tax in some areas in order to pay for things. But for property tax what you're doing in large measure with a major tax every time you improve the property, which would be, I would think, something that a government would want to encourage – you're in fact discouraging. That simply is not the kind of thing that one should be doing.

I've spoken about the downloading, and with the time being so terribly short, I wanted to move on to the last area of Treasury. I did speak in brief about a true debate in this Legislature on taxation. Now, I'm not saying that one should really head in another direction, but I think one should certainly examine the possibilities of what the architects of finance, the accountants, said back a couple of years ago. It's to – a terrible word, I know – harmonize tax collection and the imposition of tax across this nation such that there is one tax collector in the way of income tax and one tax collector in the way of a goods and services tax and one taxpayer in each municipality for the municipal associated tax, and get rid of all the other user fees and the myriad of things that occur, such as the application of a tax on one's health. To pay a health premium as though we're paying some insurance fee or something, it's a ridiculous charge. But look at that and do that.

What the tax accountants were looking at and talking about was actually taking a little hiatus, first reducing the income tax level, the provincial associated tax, which is 44 percent now, down to perhaps as low as 22 percent or in that neighbourhood, providing at the same time a negative income tax and moving the bar up to where one does not pay any income tax, such that it would move it up to perhaps \$25,000 or \$30,000, below which there's a blank with no income tax either way, and then a negative income tax below that to cover the lower income levels. Yes, it will cost a substantial amount of money in the interim to make the conversion to a goods and services tax. Oh, yeah, all of a sudden no new taxes, and you'll give me all the bad lines you've ever heard about taxes. Actually think about it and put it to that person out there that is in the service station or in the small bank or the accountant or the local lawyer and say: look, what we're doing here is leaving the money in your pocket so that you have that money

until such time as you decide the manner in which you want to spend it, and then it will be taxed in the way of something that you're spending your money on. That makes much more sense in classic Keynesian economics.

Unfortunately I've run out of time once again. One of these days I'll be able to speak faster and get more in.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

8:40

THE CHAIRMAN: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Manning.

MR. GIBBONS: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I'm pleased to stand to speak to the specifics of this bill. Bill 31 seeks the Legislature's authority for the granting of the supply of \$12.363 billion in expenses, which are under operating expenses, capital investments, and nonbudgetary disbursements, which take place within the general revenue fund or the lottery fund for the 1998-99 fiscal year. Of the dollar breakdown a \$173.3 million payment will be made under the lottery fund. Lottery fund payments include financial assistance for initiatives related to agriculture, culture, recreation, education, and community facilities.

Mr. Chairman, in this I'd like to speak to some of the items under video slot machines. I'd be remiss if I didn't bring this up and talk about it. Budget '98 continues the government record of addiction to video lottery machine taxes and illustrates the lack of government priorities in the area of gambling. The government expects to raise \$484 million in revenues from VLT operations in '98-99. Between '92-93 and '98-99 revenues from VLTs have increased from \$17.4 million to \$484 million, an increase of \$467 million, or 26.82 percent, in six years. I do believe that in 1991, when the experiment took place, the government did know from their travels that these percentages would increase to this. They didn't know if it was going to be three years or six years, but we realized it in the sixth year. This percentage increase translates into a tax increase of \$166 for each and every Albertan.

The total government revenue generated per VLT in Alberta increased from \$45,448 in '93-94 to \$81,321 in '98-99, an increase of 79 percent in five years. In Calgary alone \$93,033 in government revenues per VLT was generated in '96-97. On the other hand, total grants for local community groups from the lottery fund has increased from \$90 million in '92-93 to a projected \$173.3 million in '98-99, an increase of \$83.3 million, or 92 percent, over the past seven years.

Funding to the Alberta Alcohol and Drug Abuse Commission has been cut from \$32.2 million in '92-93 to \$27.1 million in '98-99, a reduction of \$5 million, or 16 percent, over seven years. Funding through the lotteries for problem gambling has increased from \$150,000 in '93-94 to a projected \$3.048 million in '98-99. In Budget '98 this government is devoting an additional grant total of \$754,000 through lottery funds toward problem gambling.

Returning to the balance sheet analogy, we find that the \$521 million in the so-called tax reduction in the past five years, including the 22 cents per day tax cut, is negated by \$900 million in new taxes over the corresponding period. Thus, rather than a 22-cent tax cut, Albertans are faced with a cumulative tax increase of \$3.7 million since 1993. This represents a bill of \$135 per Albertan, a 37 cents per day tax increase.

I also want to bring something to your attention, Mr. Chairman, and it is the buzzword of the '90s. We talked earlier on in the '90s about user fees, but there's premiums and there's licences. Budget '98 continues this government's user-fee mania in Alberta. With Budget '98 this government under the past and present-day Treasurers' teams have cracked the century mark with a new and increased direct user fee. This does not even include the 380 new

and increased user fees that have been imposed by cabinet via regulations. There's 104 new and increased direct user fees contained in the '93-94, '95-96, and '97-98 budgets.

Between '92-93 and '98-99 revenues from user fees, licences, and premiums have increased from \$1.006 billion to \$1.222 billion, an increase of \$216 million, or \$77 for each and every Albertan. This negates the 22 cents per day tax cut contained in this Budget '98. According to the three-year fiscal plan, revenues from fees, licences, and premiums are expected to increase by another \$29 million or 2.3 percent, \$10 per Albertan, between '98-99 and 2000-2001.

Alberta has the fourth highest rate of increase in user fees among the Canadian provinces between '92-93 and '96-97 at 27.2 percent. Alberta is ranked third among Canadian provinces in '96-97 in revenue raised per person: \$473.83 from user fees. For what this government has said about user fees, I'll quote Premier Klein:

We'd better look very, very carefully at user fees just as we look at taxation because we want to make sure we maintain that competitive position and maintain what we refer to very proudly as the Alberta Advantage.

This is quoted from the *Calgary Herald*, October 29, 1997. From the user fee actions taken in budget '98-99, Premier Klein's words on user fees ring quite hollow.

Albertan Liberals believe that there is a real reason and a concern about tax burden imposed by user fees and premiums. The more Albertans are asked to pay user fees and premiums, the less money they can have in their pockets, and thus the economy isn't growing. We believe, among the Canadian Federation of Independent Business and others, that further user fees, premiums, and licence increases should be referred to the Legislature for discussion.

Mr. Chairman, I'd also like to talk a little bit about the auditing practice, and I have a couple of questions on it. One of the main items I want to talk about is balance. Does the program area provide a fair account of itself through the performance report? Under economy: is the report a concise summary of a program area's performance? Under documentation: does the report show how each of the program areas reaches conclusions about its performance?

With that, Mr. Chairman, I take leave and look forward to another speaker on this one.

Thank you.

[The clauses of Bill 31 agreed to]

[Title and preamble agreed to]

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

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Agreed.

THE CHAIRMAN: Opposed?

SOME HON. MEMBERS: No.

THE CHAIRMAN: Carried.

Bill 32

Appropriation (Supplementary Supply) Act, 1998 (No. 2)

THE CHAIRMAN: Are there any comments, questions, or amendments to be offered on this bill?

The hon. Member for Calgary-Buffalo.

8:50

MR. DICKSON: Mr. Chairman, thanks very much. I have some comments, I have some questions, and I've got some other thoughts on the bill. Thanks very much for the invitation.

Bill 32 is in fact a bill that I do support, and I will be voting in support of Bill 32. But to those constituents, those Calgarians in Calgary-Mountain View who are wondering why I would be supporting . . . [interjections] I can see that the chairman is admonishing me; he's giving me that look. I'm going to heed that, and I'm going to focus. I'm going to make eye contact with you, Mr. Chairman, and I'm going to talk about Bill 32.

Mr. Chairman, there are a number of things I want to say about this Bill 32, the Appropriation (Supplementary Supply) Act. There are a couple of elements in it that give me some concern, and while I may be voting for it, this is not blind support. In fact, speaking of sight deficiency, I must tell you that one of the things we're looking at is the payment of \$131 million from the lottery fund to Alberta Health to ensure that the health system's medical equipment, facility operating equipment, end-user computing equipment, and core systems are year 2000 compliant.

On that score, Mr. Chairman, I have to point out that when we look at the material - I had the opportunity to make a freedom of information request. As a response to that request, I was proud to make this application. I received back the minutes from the chief information officer. [interjection] Actually, I paid \$25 for the information. But I made a commitment to the public body that I would do my level best to share the information I learned there with Albertans, and that's the reason why I said it was important that the information be realized and available and given some greater currency than it would otherwise.

Mr. Chairman, if you go through the Chief Information Officers' council meeting minutes through 1997, through the latter part of 1996, what do we find? We find that the government came to recognize the year 2000 challenge late. This is notwithstanding the fact that Muriel Abdurahman, when she was a colleague of mine and a member of this House, raised in debates in Committee of Supply, challenged the government, challenged the then Minister of Public Works, Supply and Services and said to that minister: what are you doing to be 2000 compliant? What was received at the time, as best I can recall - and this is a rough paraphrase; I'll stand to be corrected by that minister tonight - was: "We have this in hand. We know what's required. We've got a time line. We're working towards achieving year 2000 compliance. No big deal." Well, what we find, Mr. Chairman, is that if in fact we were on track, if we had the kind of planning and preparation that a responsible, competent government would be expected to have done, we wouldn't be looking at the need for another \$130 million by way of a supplementary supply act.

I'm voting for this because our regional health authorities and the Alberta Cancer Board need that money, but I'm not going to pass up the opportunity, I absolutely will not pass up the opportunity to simply point out that this ought to have been factored into the budget for 1997-1998. What's more distressing is that in speaking to Bill 32, I don't have the requisite confidence. Right now we know and the Minister of Health knows what's required to be able to meet the requirements of year 2000. It wasn't so long ago that I asked the Minister of Health: how many computers are noncompliant by region, by Provincial Mental Health Advisory Board, by Alberta Cancer Board? The minister said: we don't have that information. So if you don't know how many computers you've got that are noncompliant and you don't know how many in each of the 17 regions, how could you possibly say with any credibility that \$131 million is the price to fix the

problem. Well, I am certainly not going to stand in the way of the \$130 million going to those regional health authorities.

I'm going to make a prediction. I'm going to make a prediction right now, Mr. Chairman, and I expect the members opposite to pillory this member if a year from now this \$130 million is sufficient. I know the Member for St. Albert is making a note right now and diarizing this over for a year. I know she wants to be able to come back and remind me in 1999 that I said that this evening. I'm prepared to predict right now that this isn't going to be adequate funding, that when we finally take stock of the number of computers that aren't year 2000 compliant, we're going to find that the needs in not one of the 17 regional health authorities, not two of the regional health authorities but perhaps in half of the regional health authorities are going to require significantly more money than what's provided.

I know the Provincial Treasurer said the other day that this is an international problem, that it's a national problem. Well, I always like to think we are a little smarter in Alberta. When I went to a parliamentary conference in Quebec last year, I boasted that some of the smartest legislators in this country sit on the front bench in the Alberta Legislative Assembly. I said that these are men and women who have some ability to see a freight train headed towards them when they're standing haplessly on the track. [interjections] Mr. Chairman, I regret to advise you that some of my colleagues have disassociated themselves from my comments just now on Bill 32.

But undaunted I just want to say that I've always told Albertans that we have a smart group of men and women running the 17 government departments in the province of Alberta, and I said that they know a problem when they see it. When I speak to Bill 32, I'm in a really awkward position tonight because I made those representations to legislators from the U.S., from other Canadian provinces. Tonight what would I be able to say to those people? What would I be able to say, Mr. Chairman? I'd have to report that these people I've been touting as bright and farsighted cabinet ministers were asleep at the switch when it came to year 2000 compliance, that they weren't able to make adequate preparation.

MR. WOLOSHTYN: Not true. Not true.

MR. DICKSON: Well, Mr. Chairman, the proof is in Bill 32. The Minister of Public Works, Supply and Services may try and deny it, but he can't deny the fact that the government didn't adequately budget and they still haven't adequately budgeted. We have no assurance that they're going to do a better job in what's left of 1998 and the first half of 1999 than they've done in the last year.

9:00

The Minister of Labour has an advantage because he's got some crackerjack people that work in information systems. They may have known, Mr. Chairman, but somehow that information hasn't trickled down or percolated up to the ministers of this cabinet. So here we are, \$130 million going to deal with a problem which has been predicted by the opposition for at least three years. [interjection] Well, the Minister of Public Works, Supply and Services likes to claim convenient amnesia. He'd make a great witness. He'd make a great witness because he just seems to not remember anything before the commencement of the current spring session, but *Hansard* tells no lies.

MR. WOLOSHTYN: We are acting on it in a prudent and timely manner.

**Chairman's Ruling
Interrupting a Member**

THE CHAIRMAN: Order. Hon. Minister of Public Works, Supply and Services, you will have ample time to answer any of the questions that the hon. Member for Calgary-Buffalo chooses to throw at you, but in turn.

So it's your turn right now, Calgary-Buffalo, to engage . . .

Debate Continued

MR. DICKSON: Mr. Chairman, I'm pleased to represent the Calgary-Elbow citizens as well as citizens of Calgary-Buffalo, and I just want to say . . .

MR. HLADY: Don't spread those votes too thin. It was 72.

MR. DICKSON: Mr. Chairman, it was 195. I'm going to have to circulate a copy.

There's some consistency here. Those members in the government caucus that seem to have locked off . . .

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

**Point of Order
Questioning a Member**

MR. HLADY: Yes, Mr. Chairman. I was wondering if the member would entertain a question under *Beauchesne* 482.

MR. DICKSON: I'd be happy to entertain a question under *Beauchesne* 333.

Debate Continued

MR. HLADY: Well, actually, Mr. Chairman, I realize it's Monday night and the hon. Member for Calgary-Buffalo is struggling to make this stretch out for 20 minutes, so I thought I'd ask him a question to help him a little. Earlier he mentioned that he felt there should be a lot more money going to fund the updating and upgrading of computers. I thought: would you really want to overfund something if it doesn't really need that money? Or would you rather fund to the level that you think and then if you need more, get more money to fund those possibilities?

MR. DICKSON: Well, Mr. Chairman, I have an answer. First I want to compliment the Member for Calgary-Mountain View because it's apparent he's engaged in the discussion, and that happens all too rarely in this Assembly. So I pay a quick tribute to the Member for Calgary-Mountain View.

No, my issue isn't spending more. I don't want to spend more money on year 2000 compliance. What I want is my provincial government to do adequate long-range planning to identify if you know you're going to have a year 2000 problem. It's in every magazine, every periodical, every daily . . .

MR. SAPERS: They canceled all their subscriptions because of cutbacks.

MR. DICKSON: Yeah. What's happened in the government library, Mr. Chairman? I mean, anybody who picked up a *Time* magazine in the last three years would know . . .

MR. SAPERS: *Alberta Report* didn't cover it.

MR. DICKSON: Mr. Chairman, people knew there was a problem, so this is certainly not an issue of throwing more money at it. I just want a degree of confidence I don't have this evening that \$130 million is going to fix the problem. If the Minister of Health doesn't know how many machines are noncompliant, doesn't know how many in each of the 17 regions, doesn't know how many computers are noncompliant at Alberta Cancer Board, doesn't know how many computers are noncompliant working under the auspices of the provincial mental health council, how could we know that \$130 million is going to do the job? What this gets to is predictability. What it gets to is lack of planning, and I think we have to mark that tonight. I will be astonished if a year from now we come back and the Member for St. Albert is able to point out, with the able assistance of the Minister of Public Works, Supply and Services and the Minister of Health, that we only needed \$110 million to do the job. I'd be absolutely astonished if that happens. I don't think that's going to be the case. Anyway, let *Hansard* show there's some dissent. We have a vigorous disagreement between the Minister of Public Works, Supply and Services and the Member for St. Albert.

I know that already we can see that not only can this government not agree on what they require to get their computer systems compliant, but we can see there's some disharmony in the government caucus this evening in evidence, for those Albertans in the gallery who are able to witness the kind of cleavage we see here. We hope those members are going to be able to broker their disagreement and we're going to find out what the appropriate number is.

Mr. Chairman, I want to move on from year 2000 simply because there are a lot of other important issues that have to be addressed with respect to Bill 32. The other thing that I wanted to note - I wanted to indicate that a number of my colleagues have raised some questions around the additional money that's being provided for the offices of the different legislative officers. I just wanted to offer by way of explanation that I have the privilege of being a member of that committee. I think the concern is that if in fact the provincial government is looking at making adjustment to the compensation scheme for senior civil servants, it's important that the legislative officers be fairly treated. Our legislative officers provide a role and a function at least as important as any deputy minister in any of the 17 government departments, arguably in some respects a more important role. I think it's the adjustment here I fully support, because when the budgets were initially dealt with for the different legislative offices, we didn't know at that point exactly what was being done with the Public Service Commissioner and the provincial government in terms of compensation to senior employees. I think it's important that that adjustment be made.

Certainly some of my questions have asked about concerns in terms of business plan goals, performance measures. I've done my best to assure them that that all-party committee attempts to reflect on the spending in those different areas.

I guess the other point I'd just make is that the money which is going into the regional health authorities and the two health boards comes from lottery funds. I know it has been offered or suggested by my colleagues before that it's hard to escape the cynical suspicion that this is a way of, if you will, laundering lottery money. It's a way of attempting to tart it up and pass it off as respectable dollars as opposed to tainted dollars, Mr. Chairman, a little bit like the dye that banks put in that wad of dollar bills that the teller is supposed to hand out when there's a stickup . . .

MR. SAPERS: The sucker wad.

MR. DICKSON: The sucker wad, I'm told by my colleague with more experience at this than I. The dye doesn't come off the fingers. When that vial explodes and you get the ink over your fingers, you will be marked wherever you go, probably for weeks, as somebody that has held up a bank. In much the same way, the provincial government may think they've taken these lottery dollars and that by tucking them into Health, which is a priority concern for Albertans, somehow people are going to forget the source of the money. Well, Mr. Chairman, I don't think that's going to be the case. Even though Health continues to be, unprompted, the number one concern identified by Albertans when they're polled – and this isn't a recent phenomena. I remember that in June of 1997, when Calgary city council did a poll of Calgarians to find out unprompted what was the number one concern on their minds, Calgary city council expected they were going to be told something about sewers or snow removal or policing. The number one concern was lack of access to health care.

Thanks, Mr. Chairman.

9:10

THE CHAIRMAN: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Manning.

MR. GIBBONS: Thanks, Mr. Chairman. I'm pleased to stand and speak on Bill 32, the appropriation bill No. 2. I'd like to tell people across the floor that I'm not quite as windy as other people from our side and from Calgary.

The main thing under Bill 32 is that the Legislative Assembly is being asked to approve an additional \$135.637 million in supplements of supply in the '97-98 fiscal year from the general revenue fund and the lottery fund. Now, I support this bill, but I want to ask a couple of things and I want to state a couple of things. Of the dollars and cents that I mentioned, \$135.637 million, \$130 million is being requested to authorize payment from lottery funds to the Department of Health to ensure that the health system medical equipment, facility operating equipment, and core systems are year 2000 compliant. Now, in this the government is rapidly becoming the king of supplementary estimates. Are we going to be looking at No. 3 in the next few days?

This is the second supplementary estimate the Legislative Assembly has been asked to appropriate, an addition of \$721 million for the current fiscal year over the past two months. This is evidence that the government needs better budgeting and management of the system. Under Economic Development's lottery funds the Minister of Health authorized the payment of \$130 million from the lottery funds to the Ministry of Health to ensure that the health system medical equipment, facility operating equipment, and user computers are up to par. This is treated as an expenditure from the lottery funds, and the amount received as revenue by the Department of Health is being used as onetime infrastructure support. I would like to mention that the destination of this money from the lottery funds is only being done to ease the conscience of this government, who cannot justify exploiting gambling addicts to help balance the budget.

Note that the March 1998 fiscal updating quietly booked an additional \$45 million from the higher casino slots and VLT revenues. Revenues are now projected at \$698 million – this hasn't been the story of the day, and this is, I'm hoping, going to get out – as compared to the \$653 million that was actually in the budget for '97. The lottery dollars are very unstable sources of

funding. It is ludicrous that a government that talks about being good fiscal managers uses lottery funds to cover cracks in the health care foundations, even if it is a onetime cost. What happens to providing RHAs with stable funding that allows them to establish priorities based on a three-year planning horizon?

We're asking and we're stating in every one of our statements that they should be building a stabilization fund. If they're going to have \$751 million in surplus, maybe this is what they should be putting in there now. What happens if they don't plan for three years and this does go on a crash? If there's an announcement to cover off the short-term deficit of the RHAs before March 31, 1998, will it come from the additional \$45 million in VLT revenues booked in the March '98 fiscal update? How much more can they squeeze out of the gaming addicts in the province between March 17 and the 31st of this month to cover off RHAs' deficits in '97-98 and '98-99? Is there a way this government is going to deal with the short-term deficit financing of the RHAs?

The issue relating to the year 2000 compliance for the government ministry was flagged by the Auditor General in '95-96 and in the annual report for '96-97. What has taken so long for the government to act on this one? It is evident, and I want to emphasize that this government needs a better budget management system. For instance, the \$130 million toward the RHAs to meet the year 2000 compliance should have been anticipated over the two years. When the Auditor did point these things out – and this comes from recommendation 2, page 29 – what took so long to act on this?

One of the main problems of the government has been the improper management of the budget. That refers back to the point I made before, the past Treasurer and the present Treasurer: with this type of budgeting, are Albertans going to be happy?

Under Transportation and Utilities, Mr. Chairman, \$1 million is requested to provide financial assistance to the municipality of Wood Buffalo to offset the costs resulting from the closure of the winter road between Fort MacKay and Fort Chip. Key points of this one: was the emergency access to Fort Chip needed, relating to the problems with the winter road, or is this the ring road that we're talking about going up the east side and across the north? I would like to know more about this one.

Mr. Chairman, I'm going to take leave and let somebody else stand and speak to this one. Thank you very much.

THE CHAIRMAN: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Calder.

MR. WHITE: Thank you, sir. Appropriation bills, particularly those that relate to supplementary supply: yes, there is a necessity oftentimes for unexpected expenditures to have an appropriation bill that would be supplementary supply, but not generally two of them. How approximate is this business anyway? How much does it take to figure out how much is required in the way of need and to plan for it? This seems to be the height of inconsistency in planning, when you end up having to put out another supplementary supply bill. Quite frankly, I'm going to speak in favour of this because, by and large, the expenditures that are herein contained are the ones that should be made. In fact, there's probably some that could use a little more money.

There are theories that I'd like to speak to first. Starting from the bottom and perhaps working up here is the \$1 million from the disaster fund or some such fund to offset the costs due to the lack of a winter road into Fort Chip and Fort MacKay and being able to fly in those supplies. Well, that's a reasonable expenditure, but there should be a fund. I mean, we have disasters in this

province over and over and over again. If it's not floods down south and going right through Taber, Warner, and on to Medicine Hat from the Crownsnest, it's floods up north. If it's not floods up north, it's El Niño striking Fort Chip. We have these things on a regular basis.

We probably should say that, yeah, there should be a substantive fund set aside that is drawn on, and you don't have to have supplementary supply. I would think that as in most businesses and certainly in most families, you set aside something for that worst of all possible situations. Then you keep that relatively liquid so that, yes, it's earning some funds, but it's relatively liquid at the time so that if something does occur, you can be right on it and not have to budget again.

This doesn't seem to be a reasonable way to do it at all. Not that the expenditure wasn't well spent. It certainly was, and I actually commend the minister for getting on it right away and providing that service to those needy folks that are up in those isolated communities. I'm sure he feels fairly good about being able to do that also.

9:20

Then we move up to the next expenditure, which I have to admit I don't know a great deal about, in the Ministry of Education: the payment of accrued interest for some capital work fund, some debentures thereto. I don't know what that's particularly about. I imagine that in my copious notes here some researcher has dutifully recorded it. I suspect that could have been and should have been discovered long before you have a second supplemental estimate. I would have thought that it could have come at least in the first or, more properly, would have been planned for. It's not like debentures are invented in the last 10 seconds of the hour that it takes to do the year's budgeting. It occurs in the long term. That's the reason for a debenture. It's a long-term repayment plan, in fact. So I think there's some lack of planning there. At least it appears to be on the surface of it.

Then they talk about the classic \$130 million. Now, this government is so concerned about optics that it's concerned about spending the \$130 million on some good. Here we are and the RHAs throughout the province are short of funds. So instead of putting it to that, we have to attach it to the millennium bug. Well, it's not as if we haven't all heard of the millennium bug. Chances are that this little puppy here before me, this 486, built sometime this century – I don't know when – will have the bug too. But it's not like it's something new, that all of a sudden we discover in the hospital system that there are all kinds of bugs and difficulties and we know we're short of money to have to call the input of cash in order to repair some computers or preset some computers and do some software work on the things to get a changeover into the year 2000. I think not. Come on. What kind of planning is that? I mean, they do it in high schools better than that. It's absolutely ludicrous to tie it to that.

This says one of two things. Either the planning is absolutely stupid, ridiculously, or this is a sly way of saying let's slip some money in here, and we don't have to take a shot at saying, "Ah, gee whiz, the health care system is hurting here; we're going to have to help it out." One of two – and only two – things can be said for that.

Mr. Chairman, I have many other things to talk about, which are in fact not expenditures here but in fact should be, from the massive, absolutely massive amount of money that was poured into the coffers of this province this past fiscal year. There are things in here that I spoke of the other day – many of you were unable to hear the entire speech, so perhaps I should hit some

highlights of that again – on the expenditures on fundamental education, early childhood education in particular. This government should recall and will recall that back some three or four years ago it decided it was time that early childhood education need not be funded to the same extent that it was. Well, the hue and cry went out after the fact, and now in one of these budget documents there's an expenditure to repair some of that damage done three years ago to those children who did not learn. But do you think this government would admit that? Hee, hee, hee. No, that's not the kind of thing we can do. We couldn't admit an error as gross as that and dealing with children. So we'll throw more money into the pot, and hopefully we'll bring them back to a place where they can actually read in grade 3.

Well, the government should perhaps learn something from that and say: "Okay, there was an error there. How can we further that cause?" Take that one step further and say: if we could err there three years ago in not teaching them how to read and now we can repair it here, perhaps what we can do is get them a head start.

How about spending some effort there and finding out if we can actually get these students – put some funds, some energy, and some effort into these children, particularly the children that don't come from a home where they were always read to and don't come from a home where there is some value placed on some kind of higher learning. There are quite a number of homes that aren't so inclined. Take those children and give it a try. See if you can take those children and bring them to a state where by the time they're in grade 3, they are so keen to get to school in the morning, not because they may get fed but because their minds are being fed, because they'll be finding things – they'll learn of dinosaurs and other worlds and how engines and things work. I mean, to have that delight as an adult when that child asks you those questions and looks into your eyes, as though this is some kind of oracle, that you're telling these things for the first time, and see the lights go on in their heads when they make the connections, as opposed to the child that was shut out of any kind of learning or had the kind of learning that they may have learned at a remote control, the difference between a Barbie doll and Ken in drag. I mean, that was really a good learning experience.

The difference between those two children can be as much as a tiny, tiny expenditure of time and effort in a child's early development. To get them to understand how to read and how to express themselves and how to socialize and feel comfortable with who they are and the abilities they have: this is the area the expenditures are not made in. Yet we have a classic Scrooge case here. We have Tiny Tim going hungry and running off on crutches, and here we live in one of the most advanced societies that this world has ever produced, with the most money to spend, with the most Mercedes' outside, with the most Lexuses in the parking lot and the biggest Oldsmobiles out in front of this building, yet we cannot take those children to the state where they can be joyful from simply learning and therefore . . . [interjection] Oh. Well, there you go. I have been informed that there was a letter to the editor that said approximately that in the *Edmonton Journal*.

Another area of expenditure that is not here, again dealing with something that is near and dear to my heart, is the advancement of trade education in this province. In the last 10 years trade education has been virtually dropped from the agenda. There was no need for plumbers and pipefitters and insulators. We just said: "Oh, close the doors; we just don't require this. Fellas, we just don't have any need for you. Just run off to another province."

Now what are we doing? We're scrambling. It's darn difficult to find a competent plumber in this city to do a retrofit. There are quite a few that'll do the initial construction. But a retrofit in an older dwelling: try and find a competent one and book one. It's not that easily done because the trades have been left to languish.

I would have thought that one of the areas that you'd want to encourage is the trades. I mean, this is a growth province. This is a province that has relatively few people. Here we are turning people away in droves because they don't have any trade training, yet we don't train them here. So the only ones we want to invite here, that we want to take from other provinces, are those that have those skills.

In the ministry of environment we have to import foresters all the time because we haven't trained them here. Not only the department but also the industry has need of those. I don't know how many we've imported from Nova Scotia in the last five years. Now, why couldn't there have been training here for those kids that – remember five years ago? They were languishing; they had nothing to do. They had absolutely nowhere to go to use their skills. In the forest industry, a wonderful industry to be involved in in this province, a growth industry, one where you're out there in the outdoors and you are dealing with the management of the environment and watching things grow, being out there on the land: what a wonderful opportunity. Yet what happened? We closed the door to them five years ago, and we are closing the door on those kids today. We're not doing the things that propagate the happy society, those people that should contribute. We're not doing that. It's another area that is missing in this supplementary appropriation.

9:30

Particularly the second supplementary appropriation bill is late, late, late, in the dying moments, but it is never too late to do the right thing. Putting money into that area of Advanced Education and Career Development would be in this member's view absolutely the right thing to do. This member would compliment the government on it, although it clearly is not being done, nor will it be done.

There's a number of other areas that need to be spoken of, in particular the areas where there are more funds in – this is dealing with only the expenditure of funds, but I'm talking about income. There's an overage of even the revenue that was projected in the last budget for VLT income. Now, isn't that sad? It's a horrible, horrible, horrible situation. The worst thing you can possibly do to people is hook them on something. I mean, it's despicable what this government has done and sits on their hands and does absolutely nothing about it. It's so difficult to deal with from this side of the House.

I'm not trying to moralize or anything. All you have to do is just hang around and have some of those people to deal with. I happen to come from a constituency where dealing with that roll of the dice, the hope, the "Gee whiz, if I just strike it this time," dealing with that kind of mentality: "I'm not feeling particularly good about myself" – dealing with that happens, and it happens a fair bit. It certainly is not advantageous to have a society drawing down those people.

Now, I understand that those who are much more knowledgeable in this area than I have said that every single one of these people that unfortunately becomes addicted to these things affects somewhere in the neighbourhood of 15 to 25 people in the negative. That's their brothers, their sisters, their aunts, their uncles, their cousins, their spouses, their children, beyond the

immediate family into the work environment and, yes, sometimes strangers that they end up stealing from in order to cover up for their habit, because they're feeling so insecure that they must lie about the habit, lie to themselves too, of course, to sustain it.

[Mr. Zwozdesky in the chair]

Now, those are the kinds of areas that you say: look; with the kinds of massive budget overages in income in this particular area, this government doesn't need that. They just don't need that. It really is despicable. When I tell my children that this is what the government does, they're dying to help me out in doing something to rid themselves of that part of this government that says that that's the right thing to do.

Mr. Chairman, there are so many other things that need to be discussed on this Bill 32. I'm sure a number of others from both sides of the House wish to add to the debate, and with your leave I will now take my seat.

[The clauses of Bill 32 agreed to]

[Title and preamble agreed to]

THE ACTING CHAIRMAN: Shall the bill be reported? Are you agreed?

HON. MEMBERS: Agreed.

THE ACTING CHAIRMAN: Those opposed? That, too, is carried.

Bill 3

School Amendment Act, 1998

THE ACTING CHAIRMAN: Hon. members, are there any comments, questions, or amendments to be offered with respect to this bill?

The hon. minister of advanced education.

MR. DUNFORD: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. On behalf of my colleague the Minister of Education, it is my pleasure to introduce these House amendments to Bill 3, the School Amendment Act, 1998. I believe they've been circulated to all of the members.

The first amendment simply pluralizes a verb to correct a simple grammatical oversight and in no way changes the meaning of the act.

The second amendment in Bill 3 relates to section 37 of the School Act, changing the term "work experience" to "off-campus education program." Section 66 of the Employment Standards Code refers to "vocational training through employment" in clause (a) and to "a work experience program approved under the School Act" in clause (b). The House amendment that I'm introducing on behalf of the Minister of Education simply repeals clause (a) of section 66 of the Employment Standards Code as it is obsolete and amends clause (b) from "work experience program" to "off-campus education program" to reflect the change to section 37 of the School Act.

On behalf of the Minister of Education, I ask you to accept both these amendments.

THE ACTING CHAIRMAN: Hon. member, we're looking to locate those exact amendments if you could just bear with us for a moment here.

Thanks for your indulgence, hon. minister. Yes, everyone has now received the amendment including the chair and the Clerk's table here. We're dealing with amendments to Bill 3, the School Amendment Act, 1998, and we're calling that amendment A1.

The hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods.

DR. MASSEY: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I'd like to speak against the amendment, because the amendment is not merely a housekeeping amendment. The words in the amendment that would take out "work experience" and change that to "off-campus education program" are really quite significant. We've raised the issue a number of times in the discussion of Bill 3, that the change to "off-campus education program" widens very, very considerably the kinds of activities that school boards can authorize.

I think we all have a very clear definition of what work experience consists of. We're familiar with high school programs where students in those work experience programs go out into the community and work with an employer or with a service agency to try to gain some insight into the marketplace and the kinds of jobs and professions available there. That is a very, very well-defined activity, and the purposes of that activity are abundantly clear.

9:40

In speaking against it, I make that distinction between the narrowness of work experience as it now exists and the broadening of off-campus education and all that might entail. Again we go back, and I think the work of one of the consultants to the government when the whole issue of privatization was raised as part of the government's agenda – and I quote from the work of one of the consultants who said that educators should plan for a regime where 50 percent of all teaching takes place outside the K to 12 system and should seek to be actively involved in comparative performance measurement. So this consultant was advising members of the business community that there were going to be great opportunities in the K to 12 education system for private entrepreneurs. This particular amendment, moving to off-campus education programs, I think opens that door, and it's a door that I think we should make sure is not opened in defence of the public school system.

So I would like to propose a subamendment, if I might, Mr. Chairman.

THE ACTING CHAIRMAN: Thank you, hon. member. If you would circulate that subamendment at this time.

DR. MASSEY: There are two of them.

THE ACTING CHAIRMAN: Starting with the table here, we'd appreciate that.

Hon. member, in receipt of your notice of subamendment on Bill 3 with respect to proposed section 6(b), we are calling that subamendment S1. As soon as all members have received their copy, you may proceed.

DR. MASSEY: The subamendment I think is fairly straightforward, Mr. Chairman. It reads, if I may: in the proposed section 6(b) by striking out "education" and substituting "work experience." The kinds of arguments I've put forward in terms of making this a reference to a specific program with which we're all familiar and not opening the door to a wider delegation of programs to private individuals and other agencies, by not allowing school boards to draw upon those other agencies for

fulfilling their mandate under the School Act, I think are in keeping with the intent of this amendment.

THE ACTING CHAIRMAN: Thank you, hon. member.

Are there any other speakers to the subamendment? The hon. Member for Edmonton-Glenora.

MR. SAPERS: Yes, Mr. Chairman. Thank you. I'm just confirming that we are working on amendment A1, sponsored by the Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods.

THE ACTING CHAIRMAN: Excuse me, hon. member. We're dealing with subamendment S1, as we're calling it, which refers to a proposed change to section 6(b) of the government's amendment.

MR. SAPERS: Right. So it's a subamendment.

THE ACTING CHAIRMAN: That is correct.

MR. SAPERS: I had misheard earlier, Mr. Chairman, and thank you for your guidance. That was a fantastic ruling.

THE ACTING CHAIRMAN: Please proceed, hon. member.

MR. SAPERS: When we had an opportunity to first discuss Bill 3 at second reading and raise some of the concerns related to the wording on work experience programs, I had some feedback from some educators in my constituency who were very concerned that they, too, did not know what that wording was all about. It seems to me that the wording "work experience" is far more straightforward, far more explanatory, intuitive, and should be the wording in this act. Even the words "an off-campus education program" raised some of the same concerns that we had earlier discussed during debate. So I think this is very much in keeping with the tone of the government's amendment, and I think this subamendment improves and clarifies what the government was trying to accomplish with its own amendment to its own bill.

I would encourage my colleagues in this House to quickly approve this subamendment so that we can get on with the vote on the main amendment.

THE ACTING CHAIRMAN: Thank you.

The hon. Member for Edmonton-Calder.

MR. WHITE: Thank you kindly, Mr. Chairman. I, too, wish to speak to this subamendment, as it were. There is a marked difference between an educational experience and a work experience. This amendment, in effect, limits the school boards to that broad, broad experience they call "an off-campus education program," which could mean virtually anything and could be so, so broad as to include so many other kinds of experiences. I don't think this government intends to leave that kind of latitude to a board, particularly when they're giving accreditations for these kinds of things.

This particular amendment is a valid amendment, and it limits the effect of the changes in this act to that which was more originally intended and originally drafted. We know not where this particular amendment comes from that needed the required supplement put forward by Dr. Don Massey, MLA, heavy on the doctor in that that is his training. That is what he spent a good deal of his life as. That's what he does almost to the exclusion of

many other things, much to the chagrin of his wife. But that is what his calling is . . .

**Chairman's Ruling
Referring to a Member by Name**

THE ACTING CHAIRMAN: Hon. member, I hesitate to interrupt, but of course naming members in the House is not commonplace, as you know.

MR. WHITE: Oh, yes. I am sorry, sir. I neglected that, and I shall stand admonished forevermore.

THE ACTING CHAIRMAN: We appreciate the point, but it must be the case that we maintain parliamentary tradition. Thank you.

MR. WHITE: I am so ashamed, sir, that I think this brings me to an abrupt halt in my words. I can no longer feel that I'm competent in speaking to the matter now that I have named the member.

So thank you for the time, sir.

THE ACTING CHAIRMAN: Thank you.
The hon. Member for Calgary-Buffalo.

Debate Continued

MR. DICKSON: Thanks very much. I'm happy to rise in support of the subamendment. It seems to me that without the subamendment, what we've potentially done is created an opportunity we would not want to see, which is to have part of the K to 12 program turned over to a private operator, a for-profit operator. [interjection] You know, the minister of advanced education probably is suggesting that this is a stretch, that this is a long reach, but, Mr. Chairman, if it were not for the fact that my colleagues on other occasions have found instances where the government has moved heaven and earth to be able to privatize, to be able to balkanize, to be able to take away things from the school system . . . [interjections] I hadn't thought it was that humorous speaking to the subamendment, but that's what happens. The government gets a little shifty every now and again. They get us laughing, and they throw us off our more considered analysis of a bill or, in this case, a very positive subamendment. [interjections] These guys are having too much fun tonight. Seriously . . .

9:50

THE ACTING CHAIRMAN: The chair is taking this seriously, so please proceed, hon. member.

MR. DICKSON: Mr. Chairman, I just wanted to say that I'm speaking in support of this subamendment. I encourage other members to. I think this may have been an oversight on the part of the government. I expect that when the minister of advanced education thinks about it, he will appreciate the assistance being offered by my colleague, and I think this would be a salutary amendment. I encourage all members to support it.

Thank you very much.

THE ACTING CHAIRMAN: Thank you.

Seeing no other speakers, the hon. minister of advanced education wishes to comment on the subamendment. Please proceed.

MR. DUNFORD: I've listened quite closely to the subamendment, and I think it's only fair, Mr. Chairman, to respond in a way that would be, I think, equal for both sides. The Minister of Education is not available to us at this particular point in time, so I'd like to adjourn the debate.

THE ACTING CHAIRMAN: Hon. minister, could we be clear? You wish to adjourn debate on the subamendment and then on the main amendment as well?

MR. DUNFORD: Yes.

THE ACTING CHAIRMAN: So we're attempting to adjourn debate on the subamendment and the bill.

MR. DUNFORD: I wonder, Mr. Chairman, if perhaps to clarify the situation, I should have made a motion to adjourn the debate on the bill.

THE ACTING CHAIRMAN: Thank you, hon. minister.

MR. DUNFORD: If that is more appropriate, I will thus make that motion.

THE ACTING CHAIRMAN: Thank you, hon. minister. The hon. minister has moved adjournment of debate on Bill 3. Those in favour of the adjournment motion?

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Agreed.

THE ACTING CHAIRMAN: Those opposed?

SOME HON. MEMBERS: No.

THE ACTING CHAIRMAN: That adjournment motion is carried.
The hon. minister.

MRS. BLACK: Mr. Chairman, I move that the committee rise and report.

[Motion carried]

[The Deputy Speaker in the chair]

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

MR. ZWOZDESKY: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The Committee of the Whole has had under consideration certain bills. The committee reports the following: Bills 31 and 32, as well as progress on Bill 3. I wish to table copies of all amendments and subamendments considered by the Committee of the Whole on this date for the official records of the Assembly.

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

HON. MEMBERS: Agreed.

THE DEPUTY SPEAKER: Opposed? So ordered.

[At 9:57 p.m. the Assembly adjourned to Tuesday at 1:30 p.m.]