

## Legislative Assembly of Alberta

Title: **Tuesday, February 23, 1999**

8:00 p.m.

Date: 99/02/23

[The Speaker in the chair]

THE SPEAKER: Please be seated.

Hon. members, before I recognize the next speaker, I wonder if we might just briefly revert to Introduction of Guests.

HON. MEMBERS: Agreed

head: Introduction of Guests

THE SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Livingstone-Macleod.

MR. COUTTS: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It gives me a great deal of pleasure this evening to introduce to you and through you to the members of the Assembly some very close friends of mine from the town of Fort Macleod. These folks have operated a very successful retail lumber business in Fort Macleod known as Economy Lumber. The owners and proprietors of that business are Bob Kingston and Sandy Kingston, being the bookkeeper. Tonight they have with them their young grandson. His name is Torin Helwig. They've also brought another friend of theirs and a friend of mine too, and her name is Phyllis. They are seated in the members' gallery, and I would ask them to please rise and accept the warm, traditional welcome of this Assembly.

head: Consideration of His Honour

head: the Lieutenant Governor's Speech

Mrs. Fritz moved:

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

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

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

[Adjourned debate February 22: Mr. Coutts]

THE SPEAKER: Now, hon. Member for Livingstone-Macleod, you adjourned the debate. Before I recognize another member, do you wish to continue, or are you finished?

MR. COUTTS: Yes, Mr. Speaker. I wish to continue with my response to the Speech from the Throne.

THE SPEAKER: And in your introduction you failed to recognize that your friend Phyllis was originally from Barrhead.

MR. COUTTS: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. That's twice this week I've been remiss in mentioning some of the people that I know are originally from the great town of Barrhead.

It's a distinct honour and a privilege for me this evening, particularly in view of the fact that I have constituents that drove here for five hours. They didn't really realize that they were going to be listening to me respond to the Speech from the Throne, but I'm very pleased to see them here, because it is an honour when your constituents come to the Legislature and you get a chance to show them their building. You also get a chance to show them the true democracy that is depicted in the debate that goes on on the floor.

AN HON. MEMBER: You'd better be good, Dave.

MR. COUTTS: Yeah. Maybe the pressure is on, but I'm rising to the occasion tonight.

I wish to pay tribute to the Lieutenant Governor for his speech and the reading of the speech. As the government Member for Livingstone-Macleod it's my responsibility to see that the concerns of my constituents are heard and addressed in this Legislature.

My constituents, Mr. Speaker, believe in being responsible, and fiscal responsibility is part of that. They agree that paying off the debt is a good idea and that it can be done in conjunction with reinvestment on priority areas when they are needed. We as a government have acted responsibly in balancing the budget, and we have reinvested additional funding into priority areas such as health care, education, and social services. This way we will continue to maintain the high standard of services that we currently enjoy by identifying where investments would be most effective.

The constituents of Livingstone-Macleod share a vision for the future. It is an inherent characteristic of the hardworking people there. Many initiatives and many ideas that have been brought forth in the Speech from the Throne have been discussed with me on my many visits to their communities. They have expressed to me their support for stable and predictable funding for health care in this province, funding that will help meet the needs of a growing and aging population.

They are pleased that preventative health care has become a priority for this government, preventative health care that encourages healthy lifestyles and works to prevent illness and injury, which will lower costs in the future. An example of this vision is the establishment of the seniors' health coalition in Pincher Creek. Present chair, Frances Jenkins, keeps this active group focused on healthy lifestyles and living. She's ever vigilant in bringing forth ideas on present and future needs such as advocating for independent living and advocating and working with the regional health authority for some continuing care beds, which are urgently needed in Pincher Creek. These beds are particularly required where intermediate care is required.

They also want to be able to discuss the benefits of good home care. They will be pleased to be participating in the new housing policy as was announced in the Speech from the Throne.

Mr. Speaker, I know that recent funding increases will also benefit the children of Livingstone-Macleod. It will help them by developing their skills and enhancing their education opportunities, particularly with respect to early intervention and literacy. For children to advance, they need these basic skills. These programs are worth while, and they promote a future for our young people.

I said that my constituents shared in this vision, and they will continue to deliver on that vision. An example of this is the partners in literacy program, or PAL as it's called. They're celebrating their 10th anniversary on May 14 in 1999. Another Pincher Creek initiative, the Read Write program, will be celebrating its 15th anniversary this spring. The community of Claresholm is participating in early intervention in their literacy programs with a similar Read Write program.

Mr. Speaker, this province's initiative in fiscal responsibility has reassured our province's young adults that they will be starting their lives free of the bonds of debt and government overspending. Society offers to the coming generation of young people, people that we look at as being categorized as the X generation -- however, in Alberta I feel we should more accurately call these folks the next generation. As Alberta's next generation they are now going into the workforce with a clean slate, a bright future, and renewed hope. We have the lowest unemployment rate and the highest economic

growth in the country with the reputation of being a land of opportunity. That sentiment is indeed reflected in the comments that I'm hearing from my young constituents.

In addition, to help them develop the marketable skills they need to take advantage of this tremendous growth we are seeing, the government will be creating 23,000 more spaces for them in colleges and universities. This will be particularly advantageous to the University of Lethbridge as it will alleviate overcrowding and enable the university to continue to offer the good programs that it has in the past. This will be a benefit to the young people in the southwest corner of the province, Mr. Speaker. These extra seats will facilitate our young adults from this area attending a university that is closer to home, one which will give them a good university training that will be very cost-effective. In terms of transportation and living expense it will give them a hand up in making sure that they are close to their rural families.

Mr. Speaker, I'm please to hear that the province will be further developing the north/south trade corridor. The north/south trade corridor will indeed help to promote trade and attract investment to our province. With the harmonization of regulations for the movement of trucks from Canada to Mexico, this will further facilitate this vast trading relationship. Within the context of that trading relationship we have the advantage of being a member of the Pacific Northwest Economic Region, or PNWER as it's called. As president of PNWER I am pleased to see the further development of the north/south trade corridor as this will only make it easier for our exports to get to our PNWER partners and further on into those world markets.

8:10

But it's not only the main corridors that are needed to get products to market and people to destinations. There are also those connecting corridors that are required to facilitate the effective movement of goods. In my constituency, Mr. Speaker, highway 3, which goes east and west across the bottom of this province, is just that kind of connector. It is presently getting excessive traffic and will soon need to be twinned. The planning of the twinning of highway 3 must begin now for a date in the future when that expansion gets too much for the present capacity of highway 3.

Adding to our trade relationship, recent StatsCan figures indicate that 14.9 million Americans crossed the border last year to visit our country. That shattered the previous high set in 1986 of 13.6 million visitors. Among Canada's overseas markets, the United Kingdom recorded an increase in tourism numbers of 1.9 percent in 1998 over the previous year. The government's new framework for tourism will help promote Alberta and especially my breathtaking piece of the province, the southwest corner of the province, for all Canadians and for people around the world to come and see.

With respect to agriculture Montanans and Albertans are very similar in their ideas about farming and adding to the co-operative relationship between them. Furthermore, the commitment by both governments, both Montana and Alberta, to solve border issues is welcome and will help to alleviate concerns regarding trade commodities across our borders.

Farmers' wives are even joining in with their counterparts in Montana in the discussions around issues that are common to transboundary issues. In a recent conversation with one of my constituents, Betty Cyr, from Pincher Creek -- she's a member of the Alberta Farm Women's Network. They will be heading to Montana next month to set up a meeting that will look after an agenda and help define some of the major issues for a meeting scheduled for April 9, 1999, in the border town of Coutts, Alberta. So everyone gets into the act when we're dealing with cross-border issues in southern Alberta.

Mr. Speaker, I have the pleasure of chairing the Special Places 2000 co-ordinating committee. It's a committee where we have acknowledged the nature and extent of Alberta's natural heritage, ensuring that examples of the geographical features of our province are included in a network of protected areas for the benefit and the enjoyment of our children. By the completion of this program we will have added an area approximately twice the size of Prince Edward Island under its web of protection. The Natural Heritage Act will build on this commitment to preserve the beauty and economic viability of our province.

Under the Natural Heritage Act there will be a new protected areas designation called heritage rangelands. This designation will be significant to the Livingstone-MacLeod region because there is currently a significant amount of public land allocated to grazing leases in my area. As some of these areas may be protected under the Natural Heritage Act in the future, it is important to my constituents that the land continue to serve as grazing land, as it has for the past century. Members of my constituency, as demonstrated here yesterday in this Assembly when they were introduced as members of the Porcupine Hills local committee on Special Places 2000, showed their pleasure in the designation of that particular candidate site because of the advantages that the heritage rangeland will offer to protected areas in terms of preserving the land and preserving its production capability as cattle grazing land for years to come.

Another initiative that will benefit my constituents will be the feasibility study of a program to help flood-prone communities protect themselves. The communities of Crowsnest Pass, Pincher Creek, and Fort MacLeod have numerous instances of flood-related damage, and ultimately the fallout of some serious sloughing of hills and cliffs today threatens homes in valleys. That is something that is presently happening in the town of Pincher Creek and must be addressed. That along with some repairs to the creek banks within the town of Pincher Creek is most necessary, and I am confident that the people of Pincher Creek will have the confidence in this government to help look at areas that will alleviate these kinds of problems.

Mr. Speaker, this past weekend I had the opportunity - and I always love going to this particular part of the constituency. I was in the community of Twin Butte, just outside of Waterton park. I had a meeting there with the farm and ranch community and the MD councillor for that area, and one of the many issues that we discussed and most of the issues that we were looking at were issues around agriculture that involved tax assessment, intensive livestock operations, that type of thing.

One of the things that I found was quite amazing when I saw it on the agenda was that they had the film industry marked on for discussion. This part of the province provides probably one of the greatest natural sceneries available in the world today, and these ranchers were pleased to learn that the new film development grant program to support Alberta-based filmmakers will eventually benefit the people from the Pincher Creek and Twin Butte areas and provide some more activity as far as filming and film crews coming in there. These farmers and ranchers were delighted to see some more activity that might result from that.

Other opportunities such as consumer choice of electric generation have provided another new development and new opportunity for wind generation throughout the southwest corner of our province, and the future looks very favourable for the Peigan Nation to be involved and to enter into this exciting industry, providing employment opportunities for people on the reserve.

Mr. Speaker, in closing, I would like to say that the Speech from the Throne illustrates this government's solid record, strong leadership, and steadfast commitment to the future of the constitu-

ents of Livingstone-Macleod and indeed to all Albertans.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

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

MS BLAKEMAN: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm very pleased to rise today and respond on behalf of the constituents of Edmonton-Centre to the throne speech delivered by the Honourable the Lieutenant Governor. I'd like to give a few words on Edmonton-Centre and boast a bit, and then I'd like to talk about what the people have asked me to bring forward to this Legislature, particularly around what is mentioned in the throne speech and what's not mentioned in the throne speech.

So what do we lay claim to in Edmonton-Centre? Well, the Royal Alex and General hospitals, the downtown core of business, both retail and offices, Eaton Centre, the Longstreet Mall, Oliver Square, the Avenue of Nations, the Legislature, and part of 124th Street. We have the EDE, the Downtown Development Corporation, and two BRZs, the Avenue of Nations and 124th Street.

8:20

We have educational institutions: Grant MacEwan Community College, Alberta College, and Alberta Vocational Centre. We don't have many schools, but I certainly prize the ones we have: Queen Mary Park, Oliver school, which has the Nellie McClung school for girls in it, McDougall, Grandin, St. Joe's, Victoria, and Centre high.

We have many volunteer and NGO organizations, including the Mennonite Centre for Newcomers, Changing Together, which is a centre for immigrant women, Catholic Family Services, and other multicultural and immigrant-serving organizations. We have E. Fry, the Sexual Assault Centre, the Society for the Retired and Semi-Retired, and West Edmonton Seniors. We have theatres, libraries, concert halls, movie houses, parks, a good part of the river valley trail system, the Telus baseball diamond. We also have the Rosssdale power-generating station, the water treatment plant, the main training centre for Edmonton emergency services, the Convention Centre, the major downtown hotels, and especially precious to me, the communities and community leagues of Rosssdale, Oliver, Queen Mary Park, and McDougall. So, that's an awful lot that we manage to pack into an area that's 23 blocks by 16 blocks.

DR. MASSEY: You've got the school board archives.

MS BLAKEMAN: The school board archives. Oh, I'm getting all kinds of assistance here.

DR. MASSEY: The Environmental Education Centre.

MS BLAKEMAN: No, we don't have that. Sorry.

We also have the most seniors of any riding in Alberta.

MRS. SOETAERT: Do you?

MS BLAKEMAN: We do indeed.

We also have a lot of students, a strong community of Chinese and Vietnamese people, and a smaller Cambodian community. We have a number of yuppies, which are our professional couples with no children. We have low-income working folks, and we have the well-to-do. We also have a fair number of people that are living on AISH in subsidized accommodation.

So I spent the time between the spring session and the fall session visiting all of the seniors' high-rises in Edmonton-Centre and a large number of the rental apartments and the condominium apartments

there, and I took notes on what issues were being raised and what people wanted me to bring forward into the Legislature. I am very pleased to have the opportunity to bring that forward now in relation to the throne speech. I also have the most marvelous invention called the telephone answering machine, and many people have taken advantage of the 24-hour ability to call in to Laurie and leave a two-minute message with what's on their mind. I duly write all of this down and bring the notes with me into the Legislature.

What is on their minds? Well, here are a few of the concerns and in no particular order: health, long-term care, access to acute care, the environment, summits and the concept of democracy, housing, inner-city schools, seniors' issues, human rights, vulnerable people, minimum wage, the ideological versus the economic agenda, "Who caused this?" and small business. So, I'd like to go over some of these concerns a bit.

We'll start with health. The questions that are being raised to me and which I hope we will see answered in this session of the Legislature, although I'm having some difficulty in picking the answers out of the throne speech, are: what is the plan, and is money being invested? A number of the people are very aware that there had to be an admission now that there wasn't a plan for the money that was taken out, and there's real concern that there isn't a plan for the money going back in. So we're looking for what are the specific outcomes. How many more hospital beds will there be? How many months will the waiting list be for, say, hip replacements or heart surgery?

A big issue in Edmonton-Centre: how long will seniors have to wait for long-term care beds? So there are certainly a number of concerns about health care. Particularly with the number of seniors that we have in Edmonton-Centre, being able to depend on a publicly funded health care that embraces, not just lip service, the five concepts put forward in the Canada Health Act is really important to the people in Edmonton-Centre, and I understand that concern.

A subset of health care is the long-term care. We have a number of independent seniors who are getting on in age, and as much as their spirit is independent, they are needing more care. I'm thinking of a 90-year-old woman who is wondering about whether she should leave her independent-living seniors' residence and go to something with more care. In fact, I think her family is urging her to do this. There are a number of very nice new locations that one can take advantage of in Edmonton-Centre in the \$2,000-a-month range, which this woman was really agonizing about. Well, it could be argued that that's not long-term care. It certainly isn't in the hospital. It's partly a housing issue, but it is partly long-term care, because we have a number of seniors who truly do need the long-term care, and they're having to leave Edmonton-Centre to get it.

There's also an issue about access to acute care. This has been particularly heartbreaking for the staff in the Edmonton-Centre constituency office, because we've worked hard to get some people into the hospital, and it's taken us a long time. I'm thinking of one woman in particular, a cardiac patient, who we worked really hard to get into the hospital. She was very ill and getting more ill by the day, and the Capital health authority was very honest and said: I'm sorry, but there are 15 people on the waiting list in exactly the same shape; she'll have to wait along with everybody else. We no longer have that woman with us. Very difficult for the staff in my office, very disappointing to live in this province of abundance, to know that we're proud of our health care system in Canada, and to lose people like that. It's heartbreaking.

I'd also like to talk about the environment. I should table something because I'm going to refer to it. Sorry, Mr. Speaker; I should have done this earlier. So I'm tabling a letter from Jeremy

Neufeld, who wrote to me about Special Places 2000 and his concern with what's happening about environmental protection in this province. Mr. Neufeld was particularly concerned about the fact that he works in the resource business. I'm just going to quote briefly from his letter.

These areas are truly exceptional and participating first hand in the development surrounding them actually scares me. My family's livelihood relies on my employment in a healthy resource extraction industry, however, equally important to us is retaining the peace of mind for our selected wilderness areas -- for in the least, it is part of our heritage.

I know that it may seem odd that the central core of a large, metropolitan city has people that are so concerned about the environment, but it is absolutely true. This letter is one indication of many people that have spoken to me about their concerns with this province's and this government's stewardship of our natural resources and our wilderness areas.

This is a long-term concern. It is about stewardship. We are responsible for managing this on behalf of the future generations. Aside from the royalties that we are able to negotiate now, what will we be left with in 20 years in this province for our natural resources, given some of the policies we are seeing being put in place and some of the legislation that may well be forthcoming? Will we have any natural areas anymore within my lifetime, never mind a future lifetime? This is an issue of real concern to people in Edmonton-Centre, and I'm afraid I am having a hard time justifying the direction I see the government moving in.

Summits and the concept of democracy. This has been interesting. I have jokingly referred to myself as the queen of summits because I've now attended three of them.

MRS. SOETAERT: The Premier's the king. Be careful.

MS BLAKEMAN: Okay.

But I have to question. I sense that this government doesn't really want to be here if they are not allowing the MLAs to do the job that we were elected to do on behalf of the people. We're charged by them to gather information, to develop policy, to review that policy with our constituents, to debate it in a thoughtful manner in this Legislature, and to make decisions on that and to move forward. I know that there's a nasty rumour out there that I've heard once or twice that some members would really only like to sit in this Legislature once every two years. Based on the rate that we're having summits and supposedly relying on them, I can believe that. Having been to three of the summits now, I'm aware that the random public participation is there to balance the special interests or the special interest groups of the other stakeholders.

8:30

But I find this to be a kind of pinball democracy. We bang around inside the brightly coloured lights, smacking up against the buzzers and the bumpers in an attempt to have a summit, a workshop, a focus group, and are we really developing strong policy that will carry this province through for a number of years? I'm not seeing that. We've had the roundtables I think discredited. We've had a number of other inventions of the government that were to be consultative highly questioned, and now we have the summits. In some cases we have decisions and legislation and policy being brought before this House before the summit has even been held, which truly brings into question what the summit is for.

I really question whether this is meaningful consultation with people. I am a process-oriented person, and you look at the workshop books and the documents that are given to people prior to the summits, and I can tell you exactly what is going to come out of

the summits now because it's what's laid out in those originating documents. People follow them, the facilitators follow them, and out comes on the other end I presume exactly what the government was looking for. But I don't find that this is truly a democratic way of consulting all the people. This is pretty selective, and it's very focused in its process and what people can debate or cannot debate.

Okay. Onward. On to housing, housing in Edmonton-Centre. We have a very large number of rental accommodations, and as the rental market heats up, our subsidized and low-cost accommodations are starting to disappear. People are being required to move, and it's reaching a critical point for a number of people. Part of that is we have had problems with people enjoying the peaceful enjoyment of their rental property as the owners renovate around them to try and get more attractive premises to rent out at a higher rate to the next series of tenants. So I was looking forward to the legislation being brought forward, having only seen the title of it. I was hoping that this was going to open up the whole idea of landlord and tenant relations and the area that the government has jurisdiction in. That legislation has not accomplished that in my opinion, and I urge the government to consider doing a thorough job on that.

I'm also wondering where the condominium act is, the condominium amendment act, the one that was passed before I was elected. It still isn't proclaimed. We're still waiting for regulations. There are a number of people very uncertain about what's to happen there, and it would relieve their minds if we could actually see the regulations put in place on that.

Inner-city schools. As I said, we don't have many schools in Edmonton-Centre, but those that we have are filled with very determined young students trying to do their best with a fair disadvantage against them now, I think. Most of the schools in Edmonton-Centre are considered inner-city schools, and poverty is a huge issue. That poverty is the poverty of the families, but it's also the poverty of the school. There's been a lot discussed in this Legislature about the download on to families to provide additional funding for the schools, and this is very difficult when you have families that are working at minimum wage at a couple of jobs. They just don't have the resources to work the bingos or casinos or sell the chocolates or whatever else is necessary. So I would like to see more focus on the inner-city schools and what can be done to assist them.

One short story. I was in one of my schools and was told that they had done the research and found that there was a particularly good way of helping children who were having a deficit disorder problem. They created what they call sound rooms, which has to do with having a microphone on the teacher and speakers on the four walls so the kids are hearing the audio from more than one direction, and it really helps with their concentration, their ability to hang on to the information. Only \$1,200 to do this for a room. Can they afford to do it in that school? No, they cannot, and that would have helped the 30 or so students in that classroom immensely, and we can't give \$1,200 for that class. I think we're going to pay for that down the road.

We have a number of seniors' issues. There was nothing in the throne speech aside from a discussion of long-term care, and I have to say that the seniors that have contacted me are pretty angry with the government. They feel that they sacrificed. They were asked to help and they did, and they're not seeing the payoff.

Just very briefly some of the things that have been mentioned to me: the Blue Cross program for seniors, reduced; Alberta assured income plan, gone; Aids to Daily Living, reduced; exemption from health care, reduced; extended health benefits, reduced; long-term care, reduced; senior citizens' renters assistance program, gone; seniors' independent living, gone; seniors' emergency medical alert

program, gone; housing registry program, gone; lodge assistance, reduced; property tax reduction, gone. These are issues that have been raised by these seniors. [interjections] Oh, I can see that I have engaged the hon. members opposite. I must have hit a nerve. All right. But this is an issue with the senior citizens there.

One fellow calculated what his costs were going to be once he retired. Since he's retired, this government has revamped these programs, and it's now costing him an extra \$3,000 to \$4,000 a year, which is a tough haul when you've got a limited income. He doesn't get an extra 3,000 or 4,000 bucks to cover this. He's had to reduce everything he's doing because of that, because he's on a fixed income.

I would also like to talk about human rights, vulnerable people, minimum wage, but I think I'll end up talking about the ideological versus the economic agenda. In my work I have always had to be very aware of when I was working with taxpayers' money and to be very careful with the spending of it. So I'm certainly not in favour of wild, out-of-control spending. I am very much in favour of good management, but I find that this government has put in an ideological agenda under the guise of an economic agenda, and there under this great cry of reduce the deficit, pay off the debt, we've cut a number of programs.

I'm out of time, and I had two more pages. I'm so sorry. I will try and do more later. Thank you.

THE SPEAKER: The hon. minister responsible for children's services.

MS CALAHASEN: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It is indeed an honour and a privilege to speak to the Speech from the Throne, and I want to speak as a MLA as well as the minister without, responsible for children's services. [interjections] They just got it.

As the MLA for Lesser Lake it has been a while since I last spoke to the throne speech. [interjection] It has been a long time. Mr. Speaker, I'm glad to say that unlike the Official Opposition leader, being an Indian maiden this makes me make an Indian maiden speech. This is definitely a maiden speech for me.

8:40

Since I gave my last maiden speech, Mr. Speaker, the constituency of Lesser Slave Lake has grown and much has changed. I now have 90,000 square kilometres, 45 communities, six school boards, three towns, four municipal districts, three regional health authorities, three child and family service authority boards, and every now and then approximately 560 woodland buffalo. They move back and forth between the constituency of my colleague the hon. Member for Athabasca-Wabasca and mine, so we kind of share those.

We in Lesser Slave Lake have many advantages others only dream about, and one of those advantages is our lake, Lesser Slave Lake, otherwise known as the Jewel of the North, where you see miles and miles and miles of class A beaches. In fact, Lesser Slave Lake was the first area of the province to have a movie filmed there. In fact, Mr. Speaker, I do believe the movie was called *Back to God's Country*. I'm very proud that we in Alberta continue to support the film industry. Now, I only need to lure the industry back to where it began, to God's country in Lesser Slave Lake, and I think it's possible.

My constituents agree that we are striking the right balance and that we are on the right track. Fiscal responsibility is very important, and they want us to make sure we pay down the debt, but when we have the dollars available to reinvest, we do it in targeted areas, most specifically in health, education, infrastructure, and our children and families.

I'll indicate why, Mr. Speaker. Health care is a priority in Lesser Slave Lake. In fact, we had a mini health summit just this last Friday, on the 19th, in the evening, where there were many people who came to discuss issues of health care.

It is very important to them to realize that, yes, we are looking at different areas within the throne speech that we are going to concentrate on. One of the biggest concerns we have, Mr. Speaker, is long-term care so that we can continue to ensure that the people do not have to leave the community where their support network is. That is very important. We did not have that for a long time, and I am very proud to see that we finally have put it where it is going to be a priority and that this government is making that priority.

Mr. Speaker, access to health care is another issue, making sure that the people of the north -- and in my area there's a lot of sparsity -- continue to have access to health care. When you're in a community that's at least eight hours away from the nearest hospital, it's very difficult to be able to get the health care that you require. So for them telehealth or a way of being able to work with people from Edmonton to look at possibilities of diagnosis that could happen in their communities is very important. So I think those kinds of things are very important for the people in my area.

Education. There are many needs in Lesser Slave Lake, which normally show up in education, from illiteracy to special needs, whether it's mild, moderate, or high needs, that require more and more attention. I am so pleased, Mr. Speaker, that my colleague the Minister of Education has looked at what possibilities can be taken care of in terms of priorities in education, and he's taking action on these. In fact, he was in my constituency a couple of weeks ago to go and meet with school boards and all stakeholders, whether it was teachers, students, anyone who wanted to meet with him, to discuss the issues of what the priorities are in the education system within my constituency. He heard lots, and I'm really proud to say that he was there listening and is making sure that he's going to follow up on issues, and I'll make sure that he follows up on those. We had a productive day, and I was really pleased to see that.

Advanced education is a key requirement to ensure my constituents have access to this level of learning, Mr. Speaker. The Alberta Vocation College situated in my area is vital for this, and the AVC board is doing a marvelous job. When we're talking about advanced education, we are dealing with the skill development that is required within the constituency of Lesser Slave Lake. I want to congratulate them today. I think it's important when people do a good job that we say thank you. Thank you.

Infrastructure. My constituency has hundreds and hundreds of kilometres of roads: primary roads, secondary roads, local roads, and even corduroy roads. Some people would not understand that because they've never traveled on corduroy roads, but, Mr. Speaker, we have a few miles of corduroy roads. A corduroy road is one that has been built with little trees and covered with whatever it can be covered with to be able to be passable.

Mr. Speaker, I continue to say that we need to put more money in infrastructure. Yes, we are doing that, and it's time that we should continue to do that, because without the road networks people cannot leave or cannot go to these areas where we expect economic development to occur or even desolation of communities. In fact, one of my colleagues -- and I won't name who it was -- was complaining about not getting enough gravel on their roads. At that point I said: at least you get gravel; I don't even get gravel. I still have a lot of work to do regarding roads to be built and roads to be graveled.

So investing in roads, water, and sewer is very important to many of my constituents, very, very important in northern Alberta, Mr. Speaker. It's easy to laugh and jeer about the needs of northern

Alberta, but it is a very important part for the constituency of Lesser Slave Lake. The reference in the Speech from the Throne is very welcome news, so look out, Mr. Minister of Transportation and Utilities.

Mr. Speaker, my constituency also has diverse interests and people. I have loggers, fishermen, oilmen, farmers, tourist operators. I have preachers, lawyers, teachers, business owners, doctors, and Indian chiefs. I have pioneers, new immigrants, and the First People. All these people want the best they can get for their children and families. So to read in here all that is to happen in the government's plan in the areas we have identified as priorities is important.

Grain hauling is one of the areas we have to deal with, and I'm very pleased to see that we have that in the throne speech. When you live four to eight hours away from the main city, which is Edmonton, it is very difficult to be able to transport your goods from those areas. That has always been an issue for, I would say, remote or northern Alberta.

The energy sector is survival in my area. Very vital.

Justice has been front and centre in Lesser Slave Lake, Mr. Speaker, because of a number of issues that have come to light. Victims feel victimized by the system, and I know my colleague the Minister of Justice has taken on a very key challenge that the people of Alberta have identified to him. We still have a lot of issues there that we have to take care of in Justice, and I'm very pleased to see that we are going to move in that direction, to make sure through the Justice Summit that we continue to move those priorities and those recommendations that are going to come forward.

Flood-prone areas have continually plagued areas in High Prairie, Kinuso, and Slave Lake. I'm sure you know what I'm talking about, Mr. Speaker. I believe that for the last 35 years these have been ongoing, and I'm really pleased to see that the minister of public works and the minister of the environment have really worked to see what can be done to resolve the issue of flood-prone areas. I'm hoping that we can finally put at rest at least the many generations of people who have suffered as a result of the floodplain areas.

The economy, Mr. Speaker. I'm very glad as minister of children's services that we are addressing the very important issue of the economy, because this province places its children's needs as a priority, and we have to ensure that all Albertans can provide for themselves. When they can provide for themselves, we have a healthy economy, and we can have healthy children and healthy families.

Other initiatives which are important for my area. Treaty 8 is celebrating the centennial year of the signing, and I think this is a very key point. In this year of the rabbit in the Chinese way I'm really pleased to see that the Indian people are multiplying so they can continue to inhabit this Earth.

In my area, Mr. Speaker, we have many areas of outstanding land claims yet which need to be addressed. We need to be able to ensure that those people who want those land claims settled can finally settle their life but also that we can get on with life in Alberta in terms of the economic development initiatives.

8:50

Outstanding claims affect each and every one of us, and I think it's important for everybody to make sure that we continue to work on those. It sure would be nice, Mr. Speaker, if in this year of what we call the Treaty 8 centennial we can see people maybe get those land claims finalized so that we don't have to worry about them as we go further. I think that's a very important step, so I thank the minister of aboriginal affairs for making sure that we continue to move in that direction.

Children's services, Mr. Speaker. As the minister responsible for

children's services, the Speech from the Throne makes a clear statement of support for children and families in Alberta. First, it ensures we are fiscally responsible by ensuring that we continue to respond to the challenges of economic growth. Secondly, we are committed to working together to improve the lives of children and families via the children's services initiative and the redesign.

I want to say a special thanks to my colleague who was the Minister of Family and Social Services when he started this whole process, because what it has done is that it has provided an opportunity for people in the province of Alberta to become part of the solution. The solution is to see how people can take on responsibility for their children and families in this province and bring back those family values that have been missing for so long, Mr. Speaker.

Our basic premise is that we are stronger when we work together, and I think that can be seen as we move forward. People in communities can solve problems better when they work together and when they're given the opportunity to be able to do that, Mr. Speaker. People in government are more effective when they break down artificial barriers and work together. I'm very proud that with the children's services initiative that will make that possible.

In changing how we deliver services for children and families, we are acting on the wishes of the people in my constituency and the people in Alberta right across this province. In fact, Mr. Speaker, I don't think there's another opportunity where there has been 12,000 people who've worked very tirelessly throughout this province to be able to build a plan, a better plan for their children and their families, to be able to meet the needs of their community as they take on that responsibility. They've told us that sometimes for us to work together is better than always relying on whether or not there's more money thrown at problems. They've told us that the old way of doing things is not working. They've told us that each community is different and that each community requires a different approach. What works in Grande Prairie will not necessarily work in Lethbridge, and what works in Lethbridge won't necessarily work in Calgary, and so on and so on.

Mr. Speaker, we listened to the people in communities throughout the province. We committed to working with them to create a better system and to put children and young people first. This year we will complete a new system of delivering more integrated and preventative services for children and families through 18 regional authorities as they assume responsibility for service delivery in April 1999.

The Agenda for Joint Action recognizes that many people play important roles in the lives of children and families. The initiative taps the talent and commitment of health care workers, educators, social workers, child care workers, parents, volunteers, and many, many other people wanting to be involved. The Alberta Children's Initiative ensures that people in government work together to respond to community interaction. The Child and Family Services Secretariat is working with the ministries of Education, Health, Community Development, Family and Social Services, and Justice to hopefully break down artificial barriers and improve services for children and families. Other ministries, such as Intergovernmental and Aboriginal Affairs, are also very supportive.

I'm pleased that this government will continue to invest carefully in health, education, advanced education, and social services. We will continue to break ground on numerous priority projects, and we will review mental health services for children and improve the delivery of mental health services in our communities. Mr. Speaker, an issue which has been coming up continuously across the province is the mental health needs of children, and I'm very, very proud to say that the Minister of Health has certainly seen that and taken it on as an issue and a project which has to be dealt with, and I applaud him for that. I'm very pleased to see that the Speech from the

Throne addresses that issue so that it can continue to be a priority.

Working together will ensure that resources are shared to achieve common goals, goals we can all believe in. Our goals are that children will be well cared for, our children will be safe, our children will be successful at learning, our children will be healthy.

Mr. Speaker, we have worked together to develop specified performance measures to track our progress. We will monitor key indicators such as births to mothers under age 18. We will monitor the rate of youths charged with criminal offences. These measures will be refined and new ones added as the initiative unfolds.

Every child needs a strong start in life so they can reach their full potential. Our government is leading the way in empowering communities. Other jurisdictions are now looking at Alberta as an example of a province that has succeeded in including communities in delivering, planning, and evaluating services and programs.

Throughout the province schools serve as central locations for local health promotion, child welfare, mental health and early intervention programs. Schools and health care workers join with police officers and parole officers to give young offenders more complete supports as they move back into community life. This includes opportunities to upgrade their education, to get involved in local recreational opportunities, and to gain leadership experience.

Professions are working together to manage specific cases. A foster child may now have a team working with him: perhaps a teacher, a social worker, a counselor, a doctor, and their foster parents. Children with special needs also get this kind of team support, Mr. Speaker. By moving decision-making closer to the community, local communities are able to come up with approaches tailor-made for their area.

Mr. Speaker, we will build on this new approach. This fall we will bring people together for a forum on children. Children, after all, are our future, and this forum will give Albertans the opportunity to discuss important issues facing us as we work together preparing for the new millennium.

The Speech from the Throne also highlighted other important areas that will benefit children and families in Alberta. Review of the mental health services for children is very important. The idea of being able to work with children in a classroom is also one of the areas that we will work on. Health needs for school children is another important area.

Mr. Speaker, the Speech from the Throne sets the stage for a new era for children and families in Alberta, and I'm very proud that this government is taking the leadership role in everything that's being done for children and families.

Thank you. I adjourn debate.

THE SPEAKER: I'm sorry, hon. minister responsible for children's services; I did not hear the last line.

MS CALAHASEN: I move to adjourn debate.

THE SPEAKER: Having heard the motion by the hon. minister responsible for children's services, would all those members in favour please say aye.

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Aye.

THE SPEAKER: Opposed, please say no.

SOME HON. MEMBERS: No.

THE SPEAKER: The motion is carried.

head: Government Bills and Orders  
head: Second Reading

**Bill 3**  
**Agriculture Financial Services**  
**Amendment Act, 1999**

[Adjourned debate February 22: Mrs. Sloan]

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Question.

THE SPEAKER: Having heard the call -- we're on the motion for second reading -- would all those hon. members in favour of second reading of this particular bill, Bill 3, the Agriculture Financial Services Amendment Act, please say aye. Opposed, please say no.

[Motion carried; Bill 3 read a second time]

**Bill 1**  
**Fiscal Responsibility Act**

[Adjourned debate February 22: Ms Barrett]

THE SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Norwood.

MS OLSEN: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I am pleased to speak to this bill this evening. As I understand, the bill is designed to legislate the government to a 25-year plan to pay off the accumulated debt once the net debt has been eliminated. That, I believe, is a past Liberal plan, so I'm really happy to see the Treasurer adopt that.

It continues with the prohibition of an annual deficit, reduction, and on to a new government. It also establishes an economic cushion of 3.5 percent of estimated revenues to protect against potential deficits. Also new is the reduction of the hundred percent rule to ensure that all excess forecast revenue is dedicated to debt reduction. It appears now that 25 percent in excess of forecast revenue above the estimated program expenditures can be allocated to year-end spending or revenue reductions.

9:00

This is all very noble, Mr. Speaker. Most provincial Legislatures have passed some form of deficit elimination act in the past few years. Much of this is predicated on the notion that the public is tired of hearing the political rhetoric and not seeing visible action when it comes to government debt. Citizens are often led to believe that a given government is responsibly and feverishly attacking the debt or deficit and balancing budgets, especially at election time, and then finding out after taking the government at face value that they've been manipulated. British Columbia is a prime example where the NDs said, "Elect us, and we'll give you a balanced budget," only to find out later that the deficit was much greater and the budget was not balanced. This only breeds contempt and distrust of elected representatives.

The Alberta government has taken somewhat of a lead in the charge, putting forward politically palatable legislation in relation to debt and deficit elimination. Yesterday my colleague from Edmonton-Glenora talked about Bill 1 as a political slogan bill. Well, the government shouldn't be so defensive about this. As I've stated before, this government's poor fiscal management in the past has led to the need for this fiscal and political bill from this Conservative government and in fact all of the ones before it as well.

What I find so fascinating is that we've had all of these different bills. In 1992 the Conservative government of the day enacted the Spending Control Act. This bill was supposed to align with the apparent, well understood fiscal policy of the government. It was supposed to reflect the move toward a balanced budget. However, upon closer scrutiny, it accomplished nothing.

Next the Deficit Elimination Act. This was introduced in 1993 and was a move by the provincial government in Alberta to fall in line with other provinces in relation to eliminating the deficit. This bill was apparently a very comprehensive piece of legislation that moved the government towards creating more flexibility, something that was lacking in the Spending Control Act. The Deficit Elimination Act also dealt with the need for more accountability and more thorough disclosure.

The next piece of legislation was hailed by then Treasurer Jim Dinning as "a Bill that stands for balanced budgets, balanced budgets forever." It sounds like a charge or something. However, the Balanced Budget and Debt Retirement Act was introduced in 1995. This bill was drafted to complement the earlier statutes that I've already addressed. The bill continues with the government's fiscal management mandate. It states explicitly that expenditures cannot exceed revenues in a given fiscal year. It mandates the government to apply any revenue surplus to the debt.

This is where the new Fiscal Responsibility Act differs. The Premier now allows for 25 percent to be used as a program expenditure. This is a significant change in that I believe the government has determined that it cannot violate its own law; therefore it is necessary to build in an even more flexible escape clause. It will also allow the Premier to give taxpayers a little pre-election present. He will be able to state in his droning, patronizing tone that Albertans have helped the government with its fiscal plan and now it's time to give back a little. It'll be something like that. Or, Mr. Speaker, maybe the government has realized that with the low commodity prices and subsequent future reductions in its royalty revenue, they won't be able to balance the budget, and they need this flexibility. This is not a bad thing. In fact, it's this very flexibility that makes this type of legislation more acceptable. I don't want the government to tie its hands, given the fluctuation in our economy.

We have had four pieces of legislation now in six years, and to me that's evidence that this government can't quite get it right. What's next? In two more years we have another one? How about just before the election we have another debt retirement act, balanced budget act?

There are many sides to the argument for the need of balanced budget legislation. The U.S. government has been battling the issue for a number of years. The debate in that country is whether or not to make a constitutional change. Missouri Senator, John Ashcroft, challenged Congress, and I quote, to have a backbone implant by adopting a balanced budget amendment to the Constitution. Ashcroft states that it addresses the concern about the integrity of fiscal issues. This debate will likely continue as those in Congress cannot agree on the wording and the scope of the amendment.

The European Union has a treaty that includes deficit reduction provisions. According to Michael Geist in an article he wrote for the *Ottawa Law Review*, these provisions are extremely powerful. Article 104(c) of this treaty, known as the Treaty on the European Union, states that member states must meet specific criteria in order to join the European monetary union. This policy statement says that member states shall avoid government deficits.

New Zealand also introduced a Financial Responsibility Act in 1994. This act meets much of the criteria identified by Geist in his article. He states, and I quote, that the New Zealand reform has two impressive elements: it establishes stringent economic goals and does so in a manner that allows for flexibility. These goals are intended to last more than one year. There is a long-term view to this legislation. It's expected that it won't be repealed or amended every two years.

The second is a level of disclosure required by this act. I'm particularly impressed with this section of the act. The level of disclosure is such that it avoids temptation for pre-election tax cuts

and spending promises. If an act is to be taken seriously, then this type of disclosure is necessary. Geist suggests that the avoidance of these temptations, and I quote, shows the benefits of an open, nonsecretive approach to fiscal planning, something that we need to see out of this Legislature.

The *Atlantic Monthly* published an article called *The Bridge to a Balanced Budget* by Paul Simon, a former U.S. Democratic Senator for Illinois. The debate in the article was for the President of the U.S. to accept and support the balanced budget amendment or, on the other side, to urge Congress to reject the amendment.

The article states that there are five fundamental reasons for voting in favour of the amendment.

1. Deficits are doing substantial harm to the economy . . .
2. As our financial obligations to others grow, we diminish our own independence as a nation.
3. Our tax dollars are being wasted on interest.
4. "We can balance the budget without a constitutional amendment" is an old saw that is being disproved regularly.
5. Without a constitutional amendment [proponents say] we are headed toward what economists call "monetizing the debt" -- printing worthless money.

This is based on the notion from Adam Smith in his 1776 book *Wealth of Nations* that the more debt is piled up, the more currency is debased.

The second option touts that the case for a balanced budget rests on a fallacious analogy. This option argues that proponents of the amendment should be happy that it was not in place before the Second World War as it would have prevented the production of several aircraft carriers, as they were built through deficit spending. This would have precluded the battle of Midway from being won by the U.S.

The argument -- and I hope the minister listens to all sides here; I'm not making a judgment -- that the interest paid to the national debt, and I quote, would eat up all the federal revenue, doesn't address that a prolonged recession would swell the deficit as well. The article goes on to say that the debate is not the acceptance of deficit versus nondeficit; it's economic stability versus economic free fall. I note that the U.S. deficit has been reduced in recent years, and the U.S. continues to take on the challenge in a responsible way without legislation.

Michael Geist outlines four criteria for effective legislation. The need for a balanced approach. The first act in this province focused on spending control. Legislation must account for both control in spending and revenues in order to have a significant impact on debt and deficit.

A need for flexibility. To achieve this target it appears essential to avoid the use of dollar figures. This would avoid getting caught in the trap of paying off debt or deficit and not being able to fund necessary programs. This flexibility would also allow for the repeal or amendment of particularly binding legislation.

The need for a penalty clause. This is where this government fails miserably. How much credence can be given to legislation without a penalty clause? Interestingly enough, Manitoba had the political will to make their legislation more acceptable to citizens. The penalties are fiscal in nature and are applied as a result of failing to comply with the act. Section 7(1) of that act states: members of Executive Council face a 20 percent pay reduction for a one-year noncompliance and 40 percent reduction for failure to comply in subsequent years. The EU also has penalties, that being that member states cease to become a member of a very powerful organization.

#### 9:10

Number four is the need for openness. Michael Geist states that a by-product of this type of legislation is more openness in govern-



ment. We now see semiannual or quarterly reports produced as a result of the new disclosure requirements, something that this government does do as a result of their legislation.

I would like to say that for the most part this government has attempted to produce comprehensive legislation. However, it lacks the necessary penalty clause that would let Albertans believe this is a serious law and not just a slogan bill. The flexibility criterion is not satisfied. That's reflected in the fact that percentages and dollar figures are used as a benchmark.

I would also like to point out that the Provincial Treasurer and the Premier have recently complimented an outstanding politician, the Hon. Paul Martin, on his recent budget. Mr. Martin allowed the Spending Control Act to lapse in 1996. He was able to balance the budget, address critical health care funding issues and other program expenditures, and pay a substantial portion of the national debt -- he's not in a race, Mr. Speaker -- all this without legislation or pressure to introduce it. On another note, New Zealand, that has legislation, will in fact have a deficit this year.

Mr. Speaker, I'd like to just close with another quote from the *Ottawa Law Review*: we talked about the criteria and the need to include penalty provisions with effective consequences, referencing the legislation to both revenue and expenditures, flexibility with regard to budgetary periods and deficit targets, and increased clarity and disclosure of the budgetary process; ultimately, however, deficit reduction and the maintenance of a balanced budget require good political leadership, a quality that legislation, no matter how well drafted, does not guarantee.

Mr. Speaker, I would like to close my observations. I look forward to the government debate on this bill. Thank you.

MR. DAY: Mr. Speaker, as usual I was paying close attention to the member opposite. Usually I'm fascinated by the things she has to say, and from time to time she makes good comments and observations and brings insights to bear that I think we should take into consideration in our policy-making and even in some of our legislation. However, I was trying to discern, as she was speaking on this particular occasion, if in fact she was for the bill or against it. It's going to be interesting, when it does come to a vote, to see where members are on that particular bill, because I hear from some members across the way that they are supportive of the principle and, of course, have problems here and there with elements of the bill, and that's understandable. But it wasn't clear to me what exactly she was saying in terms of supporting it or not.

I think we need to do just a quick bit of history and go back to 1984-1985, actually the first year that the Alberta government incurred and showed a deficit. That was in the final year of Premier Lougheed's tenure as Premier, and the books that he handed across to Premier Don Getty were the first recorded moment in quite a few years in Alberta history that there in fact was a deficit that was predicted to be on the books.

From there, from '86, for about seven successive years we saw deficits continue to mount. If you remember, in 1986 the price of oil crashed and thundered below \$10 a barrel. Overnight 30 percent of revenues to the government were lost, and the government was in a perilous position. We saw then, for reasons which we can debate another time, seven years of borrowing just to run the show, not to invest in capital but just to run the operation every year.

There were deficits, and of course every year you borrow, the debt piles up. You had an accumulated debt by 1993 of about somewhere between \$21 billion and \$22 billion. At that point in time, with Albertans being very fed up with this latest attraction that the Alberta government had had with deficit financing, being the last government in Canada to even engage themselves in the practice of

deficit financing, and finding that you can't avoid a simple little thing called compound interest -- it eventually gets to you -- it was Alberta citizens first and foremost that were reacting to that, more so than citizens in other provinces.

For reasons which, again, can be a part of historical debate, Albertans are very intolerant of debt, and they're very responsible when it comes to fiscal management. They let the government of the day know that in no uncertain terms, and Premier Ralph Klein to his credit recognized that we were in trouble as a government if we didn't do something about this growing deficit and crushing debt. As a result of that, one of the items that happened from 1993 onward was a bill, in fact a law that said that when you have surpluses, you have to apply those surpluses to the debt. It was a good law, and it worked.

When you took that accumulated deficit of between \$21 billion and \$22 billion by 1993 and then took and put beside that the amount of marketable assets in the heritage savings trust fund, somewhere between \$12 billion and \$13 billion -- and that's marketable assets, not deemed assets like parks and hospitals and lakes and other things -- the difference was \$8.3 billion of debt that was not supported by marketable assets. That is what we called at that time the net debt, and we put into place a plan and a law requiring an orderly pay-down of that debt. In fact, it was a plan that said that if you do it at a minimum every five years, at least putting \$450 million per year to the debt, and you do that on an orderly basis, by the year 2010 the debt would be gone. But we've put in the accelerated provision that if there was any surplus at the end of the year, then the surplus would also go to the debt, and that's in fact what happened in the corresponding years.

Here we are in 1999 with a figure that we'll announce tomorrow of about \$471 million. So there's the scoop on the third-quarter report if any reporters are up late with us recording the event. What that means, Mr. Speaker, is the possibility of sometime in the next 12 months of the net debt becoming zero and the net debt being gone. That will be a great day in Alberta, sometime in the next year or so. If and when that happens and the net debt is then zero, there is no law in place requiring a payment on the debt. We are in effect legislatively naked before the debt, and we don't want to be in that position.

Mr. Speaker, every elected person in this room, it could be argued, is a nice person, even the members of the opposition. We're nice people. Just ask us; ask our constituents. We run for office because we're nice people, and because we are nice people, we want to help people. We do. We have this earnest desire to help people, and we have an incredible habit of wanting to help people with their own money, and oftentimes the ways in which we choose to help people in fact wind up maybe not being the most effective ways of in fact assisting people. So here we would be with the possibility of having no law requiring us to do anything with the surplus and this huge desire just to help people and a pile of money to apply to help. We would be unrestrained because of our own niceness and our own desire to help. The tendency would be there, as we've seen historically and through government after government through history, just to spend that money.

So we are in a very prudent way bringing in this Fiscal Responsibility Act. One of the main benefits of this act is that FRA is easier to say than BBDRA, which was the former title of the act. This act provides that once the net debt is gone, the remaining debt, which will be in the neighbourhood of about \$13 billion, will continue to be paid down in an orderly way. We got that instruction from Albertans, and we hear it everywhere we go: stay the course; keep putting money down on the debt. We hear it when we do polling. We heard it resoundingly in a survey which we sent out to every

home in Alberta this fall, and 78,000, almost 80,000 Albertans responded, a record number ever. They said significantly: pay down that debt.

We even asked them at what rate we should pay it down. Should we speed up the mortgage payment? Should we back off? What should we do? They said that somewhere in that 15- to 20-year range would be acceptable, and that was when they were given the figure of \$12 billion. The Auditor General has advised us to add in the pre '93 school debts, which are about a billion dollars, so we'll be looking at something like over \$13 billion. We've put a 25-year time frame in which to pay down the remaining debt. We can pay it down faster if the economic cushion is realized and we have the dollars there to do it.

9:20

We are also changing, as members have noticed, moving to a simpler calculating method in terms of how much money should be set aside at the start of the year to protect us from revenues dropping or expenses rising. We have followed advice and done a lot of research and taken advice from various quarters that the most transparent thing to do is estimate what your overall revenues are going to be and take a percentage of that out right at the start and set it aside as an economic cushion. The Liberals might call it a stabilization fund. There are different words for it. We call it an economic cushion, a safety cushion in fact, so that if during the year some things happen and in fact we run into trouble, we can draw from that cushion to protect us from unforeseen circumstances.

Based on that 3 and a half percent being set aside, if in fact year to year that cushion is realized, we will take 75 percent each year of that cushion that's left over or, if there's an increased amount, we'll still take 75 percent of that and put it towards the debt. Twenty-five percent of that will be available to us for items like infrastructure, pressures, and onetime capital spending that is in place already. There will be a plan where we can see in an orderly way what we can do to accelerate some of our infrastructure costs.

So the plan is simple yet detailed, but it builds in the fiscal discipline in terms of our own planning process. Every minister who's planning their budgetary spending has to realize that we have three-year business plans in place, that they're being reinforced by this particular act. This puts teeth in the three-year business planning process and puts discipline into our own particular planning.

The member who was just speaking to this talked about a whole lot of theorizing that was going on in different places, and she made references to a number of different individuals around the world. But it was theorizing, in the main, that she was doing, that being the Member for Edmonton-Norwood. We're not talking about theory here, Mr. Speaker. We're talking about fact and practice that we have put into practice, and we've made it work. It has worked in Alberta. A legislated debt pay-down has worked.

We've still been able to increase the priority areas of spending significantly. Health care spending alone in the last three years increased by 20.5 percent. We've seen spending increase right across the board. I think it's absolutely deplorable when we have members across the way, Liberals, stand up and say: yes, we've paid down the debt, but we've starved children. Number one, that is a total falsehood, and number two, it is unacceptable fear mongering. Absolutely unacceptable that that has happened. This particular plan has worked. It has resulted in, just in the time period from '94 to '98, some \$441 million being freed up. Because we paid down the debt, that means there's been an increase of money available to us in interest costs, and those moneys have gone into health and education and other areas of priority from being diligent about paying down that debt.

I was just amazed to hear that one of the concerns the Member for

Edmonton-Norwood had was if there had been a debt pay-down law in the United States in the Second World War, they would have lost the Battle of Midway. You know, this kind of reasoning is staggering to me. I can assure the member who used that as a concern related to the act, that somehow the United States would have lost the Battle of Midway, that there is right within the act an emergency provision. So in fact if Alberta does have to launch its navy sometime next year, we can draw the reserves to do that from this bill. We can build the submarines we need. There's six of them right here in the city, I understand. We can expand our air force. We can build more tanks. We can do what we have to to fight off the hordes which in fact might come streaming over our borders, and we can deal with it. There's a provision in the act to deal with emergencies, be they wartime or domestic emergencies. All it requires is for cabinet to declare that in fact we have an emergency situation.

This year we did have an emergency on our hands. We had a disaster situation related to forest fires. Neither the minister of the environment nor any of us would have had the ability to predict the awful extent of those fires. So \$198 million extra was put into the forest fires. If that happened again next year, to an extent beyond which we could even imagine, we can simply state and Albertans would know that this is an emergency situation and we must do something to address it.

I had noted some other areas of concern that the member had noted, but I don't think I have to go into them in detail. I think I've reassured her on the War Measures Act. This will help us.

You know what I've heard, Mr. Speaker, a number of times? The Premier and myself being referenced for congratulating the federal Minister of Finance. And that is hurled back in our faces. You know, I think it should be abundantly obvious that we have a Premier who gives credit where credit is due, and Paul Martin did one or two good things in his budget. In his two-hour budget speech there were a couple of things which deserved credit. He lowered taxes. That deserves credit. He was responsible, I believe, for listening to provinces and listening to the Premiers -- and the Prime Minister listened to the Premiers -- and the CHST, the added allocation, is now being made available on a per capita basis. That is worth congratulations.

But you know what they do, Mr. Speaker? I find it a low-level attack. When a Conservative Premier is willing to stand up and congratulate a Liberal Finance minister on very specific items, then what the Member for Edmonton-Norwood did and what others have done is take all of the Martin polemic, the whole thing, which is filled with other areas we don't agree with, and then they say, "All of Martin's Liberal budget must be wonderful," because the Premier said one or two nice things about it. I think that is unfair. In a day when it's rare to see somebody even congratulate a political opponent, I think they should acknowledge that and not use it and abuse it and throw it back in the Premier's face. I think it was a very credible thing our Premier did in acknowledging those one or two areas that deserve notice.

I think I've covered the main elements of the bill, and I can tell you, Mr. Speaker, that in the area of paying down debt, I have shared with the federal Finance minister that one of the gaping holes in his budgetary approach is that there is no legislated provision for the federal government to pay down the debt: \$579 billion staring us in the face, \$45 billion a year in interest alone. He does not have it legislated. Believe me; the people around his cabinet table are not the fiscally conscious people that are around our cabinet table. We've got some pretty wild spenders around that federal Liberal table, and he is under huge pressure every year to spend away that surplus. There is no legislated provision. As a matter of fact, there

isn't even a budget line in his budget to pay down debt. He says that he might have something like over \$3 billion in contingency, but there is no required budget line in that.

Mr. Speaker, it has worked in Alberta. We just about have it down to zero, and we are going to have that accumulated debt down to zero somewhere in the next 25 years. It works. We've done it here in Alberta. We're proud of it. That's the essence of the bill.

[Motion carried; Bill 1 read a second time]

head: Consideration of His Honour  
head: the Lieutenant Governor's Speech  
(continued)

[Adjourned debate February 23: Ms Calahasen]

THE SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Norwood.

MS OLSEN: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

MR. DAY: We're all ears, Sue.

MS OLSEN: Thanks. You're my hero. You're my hero, Mr. Treasurer. But, Mr. Speaker, I don't want him to throw that back in my face; okay?

Thank you, Mr. Speaker, for this opportunity. I'm very pleased to rise and respond to the Speech from the Throne, and this has been my third opportunity to do so. It seems that my time in this Legislature is going by rather quickly.

9:30

I read the speech with great interest. I was disappointed to see that what was contained in this document formed part of the Premier's fireside chat, the one that cost taxpayers over \$75,000, or that it had previously been announced. I thought the Speech from the Throne was the time the government outlined its direction for the new session. It seems this government is attempting to do away with parliamentary tradition by outlining its mandate long before the speech is ever read in the Legislative Assembly, but then why should I be surprised? You see, Mr. Speaker, this is the same government with ministers who don't respect or believe in the tradition of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, nor do many of those same members respect the Canadian judicial process, another tradition. So why would this government want to protect a parliamentary tradition?

Now, on with my observations. First, I want to address health care in Alberta. In the 1997 speech Premier Klein stated that the government "will keep working to ensure high-quality, accessible, and sustainable health care with stable and predictable funding." Interestingly enough, we see in the '99 speech the government states that the first and foremost priority area of health care is predictable funding. Well, "predictable" according to *The Canadian Oxford Dictionary* means something that can be predicted or can be expected. I'm wondering when this predictable funding will be evident. The only thing health regions now know that is predictable is that if they don't follow the government's marching orders, they will be fired. Perhaps it's time to change the language to reflect what is really going on with the health care system.

According to the '97 speech, this predictable funding was to address "current and future pressure points." However, we just heard last week that the pressure points weren't addressed. The Premier himself made that comment. In fact, there are still folks lying on stretchers in hallways, in closets made into makeshift private rooms, and the hospitals still have a high number of red

alerts. You will recall, Mr. Speaker, we had an emergency debate on that issue last session, and this government still can't figure out that this is a serious issue, not one manufactured by the opposition for the sake of being critical of the government.

Another issue that was articulated in the 1997 speech was long-term care for seniors. We had a discussion today on that. But guess what? The 1999 speech states that the government will complete its review at some point -- we're two and a half years later -- and that "this review will feed into a broad initiative to assess the impact of an aging population on all government programs for . . . seniors." But, Mr. Speaker, you know what? You'll be a senior requiring a bed at the rate that this long-term care plan is moving.

Mr. Speaker, many of the baby boomers will be entering their senior years soon. The impact alone on health care will create a greater funding crisis if this government does not respond with a well-thought-out plan for the future, something that goes beyond one-year outcomes. A longitudinal view would be very helpful. The government assured Albertans in '97 that they would continue to modernize health information, the same in speeches from '98 and now again in '99. This government has yet to achieve this goal.

I recognize this government is not a great saviour for the protection of privacy, but they promised to protect health information through legislation in 1997, 1998, and again in 1999. Help me out here, Mr. Speaker, but I don't think they've achieved this goal either. This hasn't happened yet. I think these challenges are proving too much for this government, and I would suggest that's creating a problem.

The next area of concern I have is education. The government has focused on computer technology in speeches from 1997, 1998, and 1999. This in itself is not a bad thing, Mr. Speaker. We want our children to move ahead in this area. However, the government consistently creates environments where technology is a must, but then they fail to provide the computer equipment to do the job. It's much like not providing the textbook. Parents are fund-raising for this technology that the government mandates. In fact, this government is so driven by technology that its only focus in advanced education was in this area: 23,000 more seats for students in the technology field. What about the thinkers of society? Not all youth will be involved in science, research, and technology.

The three throne speeches that have been delivered while I have been elected deal with technology advancements in society, but the kids have to know the alphabet in order to use a computer, Mr. Speaker. Literacy in language should be first and foremost. Schools should not have to count on over 160 volunteers -- and the hon. Member for Lesser Slave Lake knows this to be true - 160 volunteers that need to be present in a school weekly to assist the staff with literacy instruction.

In 1997 the government stated that it was going to change the curriculum to emphasize problem-solving skills in math, which helps students relate math to actual situations. It's this initiative that is behind the current math anxiety in the province, a change because the government needs to promote its technology mandate, change that will cost a few million dollars to fix, Mr. Speaker. The minister has missed the mark here. Teens are having difficulty or failing pure math, and the pilot programs for applied math show it is as difficult as pure math. What in heaven's name is the government going to do with the midstream youth?

Well, I guess we could view this as a cost-effective tool related to Alberta education. You see, there will likely be fewer kids qualifying for the Rutherford scholarships as a result of this move. Many schools are running deficits. The one my son is going to has a deficit. This is a result of having to purchase computers for a new

math lab. Technology is great. My son and his pals love the TLE math on the computer, but this is costly to schools and should be supported by the government.

I note, Mr. Speaker, that last year the government took a left turn from the main road that they usually drive on. Last year they spoke of people development, and that's not to be confused with People-Soft, the albatross computer program that has exceeded somewhere in the area of \$24 million for its cost-effectiveness to the government. This year they veered back to the right and put up front and centre another fiscal responsibility bill, the fourth such document since 1993. This bill allows Premier Klein to put forward another slogan bill.

I wonder why the Premier insists on legislation to keep his government in line fiscally. How are we supposed to take this bill seriously? As I've just stated, it doesn't have a penalty section. Nobody's held accountable or responsible. At least Manitoba, another province run by a Conservative government, had the political fortitude to embrace the reality of its legislation by imposing a penalty on cabinet members who fail to abide by the legislation.

You know what, Mr. Speaker? We already talked about the public endorsement of the Hon. Paul Martin and the Liberal budget by the Premier and the hon. Treasurer over there. I'm wondering if the Premier is aware that the minister was able to balance the budget, as we've said before, increase funding for health care, and pay down a portion of the debt without a Spending Control Act. My goodness. I have membership forms, though, for those who are interested in the federal Liberal Party. All that was done without legislation. Sounds like good leadership on behalf of the federal government to me.

I wonder if the government will understand the need for balance. You see, the Premier has decided to choose the slogan of striking the right balance. The right balance definitely differs from the centre, the real balance, a place where the Liberals are and will continue to be. You see, Mr. Speaker, we don't move all over the political map in order to be politically correct. Our core values are inherent within Liberalism, unlike this government. Premier Klein can't decide whether he represents Reform, Conservative, or now even back to Liberal values.

Mr. Speaker, I'm concerned that sloganism is often marketed as action. As you can see from the scan analysis I've done, the Premier continues to use the same language and promise the same thing every year. Albertans want more than promises that are not kept. They want action in order to be balanced or even think about striking the right balance. The government must act. It has failed to do that.

Balance means ensuring there is a plan to reform health care in a fiscally responsible way, not by continuing to throw money at it in, believe it or not, a spend, spend, spend fashion. That's what the Treasurer has done.

**9:40**

Balance means that schools are adequately funded so that deficits are not downloaded from government to the boards. The government must have an action plan for a public education system, a plan that is beyond technology, Mr. Speaker, a plan that includes infrastructure and operational needs, needs that are not forsaken one for the other. That can't happen. Balance means paying down the debt in a reasonable time without compromising services or downloading to municipalities. Balance means accepting responsibility for your poor choices and not blaming everyone else for those choices. Guess what? It's not Nancy's fault. It's the Premier's fault and his alone.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker, for the opportunity to respond to the Speech from the Throne.

THE SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Spruce Grove-Sturgeon-St. Albert.

MRS. SOETAERT: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I am pleased to reply tonight to the Speech from the Throne. I didn't want to lose . . . [The sound system malfunctioned] I think somebody's unplugged over there. Well, I think I'll try again, if I may. I think that was applause from the other side.

You know, it's an honour to have this job. I think there are 83 people in this room that are very fortunate that we have the jobs we do. [interjection] I am always awake in this Chamber, unlike Calgary-Mountain View sometimes.

I am very fortunate to represent three health authorities, five school boards, four municipal councils, Alexander First Nation, and a Hutterite colony. Part of my constituency is rural; part of it's urban. I think it's quite a wonderful mix that I have, and I'm very proud to represent Spruce Grove-Sturgeon-St. Albert.

I had several phone calls this past week in my constituency in response to the Speech from the Throne about what's being dealt with in the Legislature. Some of the things they're disappointed with in the Speech from the Throne -- the first thing, right off the bat, in the Speech from the Throne was fiscal responsibility. Well, I have on my notes on the side . . . [The sound system malfunctioned]

THE SPEAKER: Sergeant-at-Arms, would you check into that and remove it from the Assembly, whatever it is.

MRS. SOETAERT: The first thing in the Speech from the Throne is fiscal responsibility. Oh, my mike isn't on, Mr. Speaker. [interjection] I don't think she can. Not that I've ever needed one in here, though. I could go without one, but I think I'd like my speech recorded. I may market it all over my constituency.

THE SPEAKER: Hon. member, would you just take your place, please. If there's a problem here with the system in the Assembly, I'm going to look to the hon. Government House Leader for some advice with respect to this. One alternative is to ask the hon. Member for Spruce Grove-Sturgeon-St. Albert to adjourn the debate. Hon. member, you'd be recognized next.

MRS. SOETAERT: Yes, Mr. Speaker, I move to adjourn debate in the hopes that I'd get to continue the next time the Speech from the Throne is brought forward.

THE SPEAKER: You would.

Having heard the motion by the hon. Member for Spruce Grove-Sturgeon-St. Albert, would all those in favour please say aye.

HON. MEMBERS: Aye.

THE SPEAKER: Opposed, please say no. The motion is carried. The hon. Government House Leader.

MR. HANCOCK: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. We'll try and schedule the speech again at another time when the hon. member is available.

[At 9:45 p.m. the Assembly adjourned to Wednesday at 1:30 p.m.]