

Legislative Assembly of Alberta

Title: **Tuesday, March 9, 1999** 1:30 p.m.

Date: 99/03/09

[The Speaker in the chair]

head: Prayers

THE SPEAKER: Good afternoon. Let us pray.

O Lord, guide us all in our deliberations and debate that we may determine courses of action which will be to the enduring benefit of our province of Alberta.

Amen.

Please be seated.

head: Presenting Petitions

THE SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Lac La Biche-St. Paul.

MR. LANGEVIN: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. With your permission I'd like to table today a petition signed by 948 constituents of Vilna and area regarding the funding of Our Lady's health centre in the town of Vilna.

Thank you very much.

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

MR. SAPERS: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Keeping with a time-honoured tradition of presenting petitions to the Assembly, with your permission I would like to present the following petition signed by 105 residents of Edmonton:

Whereas excellence in public education is the cornerstone of our future, and students, parents, teachers and community volunteers are being exhausted by endless fundraising for basic educational materials and services;

We the undersigned residents of Alberta, petition the Legislative Assembly to urge the Government to increase funding of children in public and separate schools to a level that covers increased costs due to contract settlements, curriculum changes, technology, and aging schools.

Thank you.

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

MR. LOUGHEED: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'd like to present a petition which was given to me when I visited Wye school on Friday. It asks for increased funding for education. It's signed by 40 residents of Clover Bar-Fort Saskatchewan.

Thank you.

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

DR. MASSEY: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. With permission I'd present a petition signed by 84 constituents on the SOS petition.

We the undersigned residents of Alberta, petition the Legislative Assembly to urge the Government to increase funding of children in public and separate schools to a level that covers increased costs due to contract settlements, curriculum changes, technology, and aging schools.

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

DR. PANNU: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I would like to have your permission to submit this petition signed by 101 residents of Alberta which urges

the Government to increase funding of children in public and separate schools to a level that covers increased costs due to contract settlements, curriculum changes, technology, and aging schools.

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

MRS. SLOAN: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I also this afternoon would seek your permission to table petitions including 112 names urging the Legislative Assembly to urge the Government to increase funding of children in public and separate schools to a level that covers increased costs due to contract settlements, curriculum changes, technology, and aging schools.

Thank you.

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

MR. WHITE: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise to present a petition signed by some 105 citizens of Edmonton and area.

We the undersigned . . . petition the Legislative Assembly to urge the Government of Alberta to conduct a comprehensive public commission on k-12 education and to increase funding for children in public and separate schools.

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

MS CARLSON: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I, too, rise to present an SOS petition. It's signed by 140 parents in and around the Mill Woods area, although a couple of names here are from Calgary. They

urge the Government to increase funding of children in public and separate schools to a level that covers increased costs due to contract settlements, curriculum changes, technology, and aging schools.

head: Presenting Reports by
Standing and Special Committees

THE SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Calgary-Lougheed.

MS GRAHAM: Yes, Mr. Speaker. In accordance with Standing Order 94 I have reviewed the petitions that I presented yesterday, Monday, March 8, 1999, and can advise the House that all but one of the petitions comply with Standing Orders 85 to 89. The Standing Committee on Private Bills has considered the remaining petition and recommends to the Assembly that Standing Order 89(1)(b) be waived for the petition for Shaw Communications Inc. Amendment Act, 1999, subject to the petitioner completing the necessary advertising before the committee hears the petitioner. That is my report.

THE SPEAKER: Does the Assembly concur in the report as presented by the hon. Member for Calgary-Lougheed? All those in favour, please say aye.

HON. MEMBERS: Aye.

THE SPEAKER: Opposed, please say no. Carried.

head: Notices of Motions

THE SPEAKER: The hon. Deputy Government House Leader.

MR. RENNER: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Pursuant to Standing Order 34(2)(a) I'm giving notice that tomorrow I will move that written questions appearing on the Order Paper stand and retain their

places with the exception of written questions 1, 2, 3, 5, 19, 26, 27, 29, 46, 48, and 50.

I'm also giving notice that tomorrow I will move that motions for returns appearing on the Order Paper stand and retain their places with the exception of motions for returns 11, 12, 13, 15, 17, 18, 77, 108, and 109.

head: Tabling Returns and Reports

THE SPEAKER: The Minister of Intergovernmental and Aboriginal Affairs.

MR. HANCOCK: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased to table with the House today five copies of a news release issued by Capital City Savings & Credit Union in Edmonton, a news release and backgrounder which announces a loan program which they have to assist people in our community who have trouble financing the replacement of their roofs which have pine shakes. It's a good example of a community organization stepping forward to assist with a problem in the community, and I'd like to table this for the benefit of the people in the House.

THE SPEAKER: The Minister of Justice and Attorney General.

MR. HAVELOCK: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I am pleased today to table five copies of my letter to the Hon. Anne McLellan, federal Minister of Justice, dated March 9, 1999, with respect to the proposed replacement legislation for the Young Offenders Act.

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

MS CARLSON: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I have two tablings today. Both of these tablings are opposed to Bill 15, the Natural Heritage Act. The first one is a cowboy poem entitled Save our Parks, from Sixty-One Ranch Ltd.

The second is a letter from Christyann Sloan to the Premier voicing her concerns regarding resource development and inappropriate commercial development in protected areas of Alberta.

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

MR. BONNER: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I beg leave to table the appropriate number of copies of the Alberta Strategic Tourism Marketing Plan.

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

MRS. O'NEILL: Yes, Mr. Speaker. I wish to table today a letter sent to me by Nora Biggs, who is one of the widows who lost her WCB pension when she remarried in 1993.

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

MR. MacDONALD: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise to table the appropriate number of copies of a letter from a constituent of mine, Phyllis La Fleur. She's outlining her concerns once again about the publicly funded health care system and the direction we're going in this province.

Thank you.

head: Introduction of Guests

THE SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Athabasca-Wabasca.

MR. CARDINAL: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I would like

to introduce to you and through you to the members of the Assembly George Cardinal and Professor Earle Waugh. Dr. Waugh is the project director and editor of the *Alberta Elders' Cree Dictionary*, and George Cardinal is one of the participants in writing up the dictionary.

[Remarks in Cree] I am honoured to introduce these two individuals who worked many hours to complete this Cree dictionary. [as submitted]

Mr. Speaker, all royalties from the sale of the book go to the Cree language research fund, and these members are seated in the members' gallery. I would like them to rise now and receive the traditional warm welcome of the Assembly.

THE SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Lacombe-Stettler.

MRS. GORDON: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I would like introduce to you and through you 14 visitors from Lakeview Christian school in Stettler, Alberta. With the students are teachers Mavis Toews and Suzanne Duerksen and parent helpers Ray and Florene Wohlgemuth. They're seated in the members' gallery. I would ask that they all rise and receive the warm welcome of the Assembly.

1:40

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

MS CARLSON: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm happy today to introduce to you and through you to Members of the Legislative Assembly 60 students from Ekota elementary school. They are accompanied today by teachers Mrs. Robertson, Mr. Laue, Ms Brar, Ms Moore, and Mr. Auch and parent Mrs. Dosman. I would ask that they now rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of this Assembly.

THE SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Redwater.

MR. BRODA: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It is my pleasure to introduce to you and through you to the members of this Assembly 18 students from the Waskatenau school, which is in my constituency. Accompanying them are teachers Mr. Stacey Boyko and parents Mr. Bernie Rozak, Mrs. Sharon Page, Mrs. Barbara Rosa, Mr. Brian Starchuk, Mr. and Mrs. Gillespie and family. I would ask them to please rise and receive the warm welcome of this Assembly.

THE SPEAKER: The hon. Minister of Intergovernmental and Aboriginal Affairs.

MR. HANCOCK: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure today to introduce on behalf of the Member for Vermilion-Lloydminster and on behalf the Premier, first of all, two people from the constituency of Lloydminster, Jim and Judy Reinhart, and, secondly, the father of our Premier, Mr. Phil Klein, all three of whom are in the members' gallery. I'd ask them to rise and receive the warm welcome of the House.

THE SPEAKER: The hon. Member for West Yellowhead.

MR. STRANG: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It gives me great pleasure to introduce today through you and to the Assembly a young gentleman from West Yellowhead by the name of Arlan Delisle, and the age is not indicative of what this gentleman does. He's the youngest councillor in the town of Edson, and he does a very great job. So at this time I'd like him to stand and receive the warm welcome of this Assembly.

THE SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Banff-Cochrane.

MRS. TARCHUK: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased to introduce to you and through you to the members of the Assembly a constituent of Banff-Cochrane, Mr. David Forbes, who also happens to be the editor of *Cochrane This Week*, and if I could ask Mr. Forbes to stand up in the members' gallery and please receive the warm welcome of the House.

head: Oral Question Period

THE SPEAKER: First Official Opposition main question. The hon. Leader of the Official Opposition.

Poverty

MRS. MacBETH: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Yesterday when asked about the growing incidence of poverty in Alberta, the Premier deflected the issue by talking about the rest of Canada. He boasted that Alberta's poverty rate was "the best in Canada," his words, at 11 percent. The real concern is why there is as much poverty in Alberta, and what actions can be shared by Albertans to address it. My question is: how can the Premier dismiss the Statistics Canada research when he has no contrary data to refute it?

MR. KLEIN: Mr. Speaker, I believe we do have contrary data, and I'll have the hon. Minister of Family and Social Services reply.

DR. OBERG: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Yesterday the Premier was talking about incidence of child poverty, which, using the market-basket measure, approaches 11 percent in Alberta. Eleven percent is certainly nothing that we are extremely proud of -- obviously zero percent would be the best -- but that is the lowest in Canada. For the fifth year in a row Canada was picked by the United Nations as the best place in the world to live.

Mr. Speaker, the numbers that I gave the Assembly yesterday, showed that the overall incidence of poverty was around 9.1, 9.2 percent. Neither the Premier nor myself are belittling that number. We are stating the facts that HRDC Canada brought out, which stated that we have the lowest incidence of poverty in the country. It's not that we're proud of having any poverty at all, but it is the lowest in Canada.

MRS. MacBETH: Mr. Speaker, Albertans want to know what steps the government is contemplating to narrow the gap between rich and poor, which is growing in this province.

MR. KLEIN: Mr. Speaker, that is a very good question. I will have the hon. minister respond.

DR. OBERG: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. As I stated yesterday, the majority of programs in my department that are aimed towards poverty, that are aimed towards the poor, are to increase the poor's and the people who are living in poverty's ability to get out into the workforce.

Mr. Speaker, there is no cure for poverty. However, there's tons of research out there. There's tons of common sense out there that shows the best way to battle poverty is to have a good economy that functions well. Our unemployment rate is the lowest in Canada, or as the Minister of Labour has said on numerous occasions, our productivity is the best.

Again, I feel that we are doing the most of any province in Canada when it comes to fighting poverty, and we're doing that by having a good economy, by making good solid political decisions to keep the money in the pockets of the people who need it.

THE SPEAKER: Hon. Leader of the Official Opposition, are you prepared to defer your next question to the hon. Member for Spruce Grove-Sturgeon-St. Albert, who has had repeated interjections here? If not, please proceed.

MRS. MacBETH: Mr. Speaker, as a result of these programs which the minister has outlined, can he indicate how many of the 154,000 children living in poverty in this province he expects to see removed from the condition of poverty as a result of his programs?

MR. KLEIN: I'll have the hon. minister supplement, but I would advise the hon. leader of the Liberal opposition to stay tuned for the budget on the 11th. She might be mildly surprised and, for a change, might be supportive.

DR. OBERG: Mr. Speaker, I wouldn't go quite that far.

Mr. Speaker, first of all, 154,000 children is I think something that we have to look at realistically. That number was arrived at by using LICOs, which the Prime Minister, the Prime Minister of this country, has said is a lousy figure when it comes to measuring poverty. When you use the market-basket measure, which we are in the process of developing -- we being the provinces, we being the federal government, we being the territorial governments -- it shows that we have the lowest level of child poverty in Canada.

To give you an example, we recently brought in the child health benefit. That will directly benefit 138,000 children in this province. Our programs, when it comes to the child and family service authorities that the hon. minister is looking after, are geared towards helping these children that need help the most. That's what this government is about.

THE SPEAKER: Second Official Opposition main question. The hon. Leader of the Official Opposition.

MRS. MacBETH: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. At the start of his keynote address to the health summit, Dr. Tom Noseworthy made a very key observation, and that is that a gap in wealth as we see in this province equals a gap in health. My question is: why is the Premier resigned to accept a level of poverty that shows that two-parent families in Calgary living below the poverty line has increased by 20 percent?

MR. KLEIN: Well, again, that is a very subjective question to which an objective answer is required, and I'll have the hon. minister respond.

DR. OBERG: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Again, first of all I'm not belittling poverty at all. I am, however, belittling the measurement of poverty. The measurement that the hon. member was referring to has been LICOs. LICOs is something that this government has been against right from day one. LICOs is something that all provincial governments and the Prime Minister have been against.

Mr. Speaker, it's easy to throw around figures. It's easy to throw around numbers, but this government's main concern is to do something about that. Getting these people into the workforce, having an unemployment rate of 6 percent: those are the best things we can do for poverty in this country.

MRS. MacBETH: Well, the measurements are those of the Calgary regional health authority, Mr. Speaker.

Will the Premier confirm that the government is surrendering its role in fighting poverty and intends to drop it all onto the nonprofit and volunteer sector?

MR. KLEIN: Mr. Speaker, again that's a very interesting question. The answer is no. We are not abandoning our responsibility to children. Secondly, relative to what is happening with respect to the devolution of child welfare services and how this is going to bring more parental and community responsibility as it affects children, I'll have the hon. minister responsible for children's services reply.

1:50

MS CALAHASEN: Thank you very much, Mr. Premier. First of all I'd like to talk about what it is that we're doing, and it's very important to talk about, when we're dealing with poverty, what we are taking in terms of proactive supports. The Alberta family employment tax credit is one way. The child care subsidies is another. The Alberta child health benefits is another. The national child benefit is one. Building strong healthy communities, which is what we're doing with the 18 regions, where the community takes over control and authority of children and families: who better to be able to decide what programs are needed at a local level, and who better to decide what's best for those families at that point?

When we're talking about needs, we talk about those kids, and when we focus on the child, there's nothing better than for the families within that community to be able to make that decision, and it's a wonderful system to make sure that whatever happens, they're a part of the decision-making process.

MRS. MacBETH: Mr. Speaker, what steps is the government taking to address and reduce the incidence of low birth weight babies, a key poverty indicator, which has increased by 15 percent in Calgary over the last four years?

MR. JONSON: Mr. Speaker, could I ask for clarification? I thought I heard the hon. leader indicate overweight babies?

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Low weight babies.

MR. JONSON: Low birth weight. Okay.

Mr. Speaker, with respect to that particular measure or indication of a difficulty in the health care system, we have increased our overall funding with respect to provincewide health promotion programs. I think one of the most successful has been the You're Amazing program, which has been aimed at young families in the ages of 18 to 30. It's been well received, and in that overall package of information and advice is considerable emphasis on child care. The other area that we're working hard on is of course the whole area of prenatal screening through our public health care system. We do recognize that it is an issue, particularly in certain parts of the province.

THE SPEAKER: Third Official Opposition main question. The hon. Leader of the Official Opposition.

Health Care Funding

MRS. MacBETH: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Today the government announced the 12th in a series of health care fix-ups in this province. The money is good, but a plan would have been even better. When will the government learn that blind spending is just as bad as their blind cutting? My questions are to the Premier. How much of the billion dollars in health care spending announced today will specifically target the relationship clearly stated and understood by people in this province of health care costs and poverty?

MR. KLEIN: Well, Mr. Speaker, I'll have the hon. Treasurer supplement my answer, but relative to a plan, there was a plan in

1989. It was called The Rainbow Report, and the hon. Minister of Health at that particular time, who happens to sit across the floor right now as the leader of the Liberal opposition party, did nothing other than adopt two of the very, very minor recommendations. The rest had to be fulfilled by this government.

MR. DAY: Mr. Speaker, the question continues to attempt to tie-in poverty and having a target and the effect of that on health and other areas.

I'm surprised that the Leader of the Opposition has not read Measuring Up, the fourth annual report on the performance of the government of Alberta. This is an audited statement, and the Member for Edmonton-Glenora and others have had good input, some of which we've actually taken to, in terms of coming up with goals and targets. Goal 4, a core measure of family income distribution: a target is "to reduce the percentage of households with average family income under \$20,000 to 10 percent by the year 2000." The member has obviously not read it, because it's very clear that in 1992, just before our Premier became Premier, the number of families with income under \$20,000 was rapidly increasing, and every year since then it has gone down, and we have already achieved the year 2000 target.

MRS. MacBETH: Mr. Speaker, I have read the document, and it's interesting to note that the government has missed 122 of its own goals.

Why does today's announcement deal only with the dollar inputs and not with the building of a framework by which government will be accountable to Albertans for their health status as a result of the infusion of this billion dollars?

MR. KLEIN: Well, Mr. Speaker, I would like to first of all see the documentation, and along with that documentation I would like to see the documentation relative to all the goals that we have achieved. I would think they would be 10, 20, 30, 40, 50 times that. But I'll tell you something, these people across the way have achieved no goals. None whatsoever.

MRS. MacBETH: Mr. Speaker, why has the government pre-empted the blue-ribbon panel report and its own budget by announcing what's contained in the budget here today?

MR. KLEIN: Because we think it's prudent, it's honest, it's open, and it's transparent.

THE SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona, followed by the hon. Member for Lacombe-Stettler.

University Autonomy

DR. PANNU: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. With respect to the concerns I raised yesterday in this House about the Premier's letter to the president of the University of Alberta, I want to make it crystal clear that I affirm and support the Premier's right to free speech and the right to free speech of every member of this Assembly. However, I maintain that the Premier failed to exercise his right to free speech appropriately by writing a letter that crossed the boundaries of fair comment and responsible free speech. My question is for the Premier. Given that even his friends at the *Edmonton Sun* have said today that he was out of line, why does the Premier continue hiding behind this spurious defence of freedom of speech rather than simply acknowledging that he messed up and overreacted in a letter to the president of the University of Alberta?

MR. KLEIN: Is the hon. member saying that I as the Premier do not have the right to speak? [interjections] No, no. I mean, is he saying that? You know, Mr. Speaker, even in the letter to the editor -- and, you know, I accept the criticism; I've been called a lot of things in my life. But I read the letter from Wayne Renke. Is that the name? Right. And he says:

Certainly the Premier has the right to his opinion and to communicate his opinion, and certainly the Premier has a duty to preserve Alberta's reputation. Moreover, no academic would deny that arguments about social policy in Alberta should be informed by all the evidence. To this extent, the Premier cannot be faulted.

DR. PANNU: How can the Premier justify singling out the Parkland Institute for a scathing and unwarranted attack in a letter to the university president at the very time that the institute's relationship with the university is up for review?

MR. KLEIN: Mr. Speaker, I would suggest -- and he can take the media up there along with him -- that this hon. member pick up the telephone, talk to the president of the university, and see how upset he is.

DR. PANNU: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My second supplementary is also to the Premier. Given that the faculty of arts set up a second recent institute at the same time as the Parkland Institute, will the Premier also be sending a letter to the university president sharing his thoughts about the centre for public economics, of which Dr. Paul Boothe is managing director?

2:00

MR. KLEIN: You know, Mr. Speaker, Friday evening I was at Olds College, a really good, fine institution, one of the many wonderful institutions of advanced education in this province. If the university does something good, I'll tell them. If the university does something bad, I'll tell them. That, you know, is my prerogative. It's also the prerogative of this hon. member who was a professor. If he didn't . . .

MR. DAY: He's still got a pension; doesn't he? How's your pension?

MR. KLEIN: Well, if he didn't like his pension at the university, would he write a letter? If he didn't like something that was going on at the university, would he go to the faculty association? I'm sure that he would. Would you not? Well, give me a sign. Give me a sign. Because as the hon. Minister of Labour says: you're free to do this. You're free to speak out. Even the Premier can speak out, and I'm glad that we have that freedom in this province.

THE SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Lacombe-Stettler, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods.

Health Diagnostic Equipment

MRS. GORDON: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My questions today have to do with MRI services and are directed to the Minister of Health. At present in the David Thompson regional health authority patients are being forced to wait up to three months for needed high-tech scans. Cat scans ordered in February are not being scheduled until April. Physicians are complaining bitterly. They are tired of gathering the information needed to argue that their patients' emergencies require a priority position. Mr. Minister, why is this situation so bad, and what can be done about it?

MR. JONSON: Mr. Speaker, we have done an overall review of the

diagnostic imaging situation in the province. First of all, with respect to cat scans, over the past period of years since 1996 we've increased capacity about 30 percent in this province. Interestingly enough, although I note the concern that the member brings up, the people who are well qualified working on this particular review felt that overall in the province there was adequate cat scan capacity, although they did identify the fact that the existing machines, if I could use that term, will need to be replaced, upgraded, modernized in the fairly near future.

With respect to magnetic resonance imaging, MRIs, once again the number of MRI scans has increased by 70 percent since 1996, and in the coming year we are planning for another 25 to 30 percent increase in capacity in the province. I think the most recent example of that being actually done is the recent installation and bringing into service of the MRI at the Royal Alex here in Edmonton.

MRS. GORDON: Again, to the same minister: why haven't the lottery dollars, the \$7.2 million identified in a news release dated December 11, 1998, for the purchase of high-tech medical equipment, been allocated? Must the David Thompson regional health authority wait until the end of the year for their much-promised and needed-now MRI machine?

MR. JONSON: As I understand it, Mr. Speaker, we require that regional health authorities have an overall plan and time line and indication that they are able to assemble the proper medical and nursing team, and then the money flows. I know that a number of the different pieces of equipment that were approved are on order or have, I assume, arrived by now. As soon as that planning effort comes together in Red Deer, I'm sure the money will be paid.

MRS. GORDON: Mr. Minister, where are you at in regard to the announced establishment of a provincial diagnostic imaging secretariat?

MR. JONSON: Mr. Speaker, I hope that that overall organizational effort will be concluded shortly. We have, as I've indicated, taken action both in our budget planning and in the specifics that I've mentioned to address some of the immediate needs as far as diagnostic imaging is concerned. Quite frankly, there is a certain amount of negotiation and work to be done to bring the types of people named in the report together into that secretariat.

THE SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Creek.

School-generated Funds

DR. MASSEY: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. "We are kept afloat by community fund-raising, casinos, and increased school fees," comments a parent. Audited financial statements for Alberta's public and separate school boards show that parents are now paying over \$120 million per year in school-generated funds, over \$23 million in instruction fees, and 12 and one-half million dollars in transportation fees. My questions are to the Minister of Education. How can increases of 20 percent, 30 percent, or even 40 percent in school-generated funds in a single year be explained in terms of yearbook sales, locker rentals, or cafeteria sales?

MR. MAR: Mr. Speaker, I'm surprised that the hon. member would ask this question, he having raised it on an earlier occasion. He knows that the reporting of the \$120 million in school-generated funds relates to exactly those points he raised. The actual amount of fund-raising that is a percentage of that \$120 million reported is a

very small percentage. The hon. member has raised this question. I'll be happy to undertake to look for my previous response in *Hansard* if he wishes to be reminded.

Schools are not using fund-raising or fees to raise dollars for core programs. They're using them to offset primarily noninstructional materials, things like field trips. He did say in his earlier question and he said again today that parents are paying this \$120 million in school-generated fees. He makes it sound as if that were fund-raising, and it's not. Cafeteria receipts is an example of a service that is provided by a school that is recognized under school-generated funds, so it would not be appropriate for anybody to leave anybody with the impression that this \$120 million is somehow fund-raising.

Mr. Speaker, school-generated funds include cafeteria and school sales, noninstructional activities such as student council or graduation council, athletics, and trips. It might include lockers and yearbooks. It might include also things such as continuing education fees that adults pay for programs that are hosted at schools. So there are many fees that are included in this \$120 million, and the hon. member should not leave anybody with the impression that those are fund-raising.

DR. MASSEY: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Given that government claims that there is an equitable distribution of funds among school boards, why is it, then, that some boards need raise only 1.7 percent of revenues from school-generated funds and user fees while others raise over 7 percent?

MR. MAR: Well, Mr. Speaker, the hon. member issued a press release on this matter. As an example, in the Peace-Wapiti school board the dollars per student that were generated from school-generated funds were \$45 per student per year, the lowest in the province. The highest, to the best of my recollection, I believe was the Elk Island public school board. In looking at the dollars that were spent in the Elk Island board, which again was the highest average in the province, it was in reference to the types of school-generated funds that I've already enumerated in my original answer to his first question. So school boards do have the authority to raise such fees for things like textbooks, for things like transportation, also tuition fees for nonresident students.

2:10

Mr. Speaker, it's important to know that school boards themselves are elected by individuals within their jurisdictions, and if they have a fee, it is incumbent upon the school board trustees to be accountable to the people who elect them and charge those fees. We do not have a provincewide fee policy. What we do allow, however, is for school boards to make those decisions about the types of services that their particular constituents would choose to have. So on the subject of school fees, again it is a board decision. It is contained within board policy. In reviewing the types of fees that boards are charging, I think it's appropriate that those boards be accountable to the people who elect them.

DR. MASSEY: Thank you. Given those claims about fund-raising, how does the minister answer parents in the Townsend report, which claimed that with 68 students, parents were forced to fund-raise \$18,000 to keep the doors open, \$265 per student?

MR. MAR: Well, Mr. Speaker, I'm not familiar with that particular circumstance, but I'm going to refer to *Hansard*, May 5, 1988, page 834. The former Minister of Education, now Leader of the Opposition said . . . [interjections] You know, hon. members are often in the habit of writing on the inside of the drawers of these desks. I

note that the hon. Leader of the Opposition once occupied this desk and all this information was in the back of the desk.

Mr. Speaker, this is what the Leader of the Opposition said back then.

Whether there should be a limit on user fees imposed on students is a question which I have every confidence school boards are reviewing. I do not believe there should be a provincial limit. I think the ability of school boards to represent their own constituency -- and recognize that some school boards do not impose user fees, which is certainly their choice.

THE SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Creek, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Glenarry.

Young Offenders Act

MR. ZWOZDESKY: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Ever since the tragic murder of one of my constituents, Barb Danelesko, in 1994 I have risen often in this House and spoken beyond as well with respect to much-needed changes to the Young Offenders Act. Now, recent reports suggest that the federal government is indeed ushering in some very long-awaited changes to the act, and I sincerely hope they are good ones, but I do note that many provinces are expressing some concerns about the proposed changes. My questions are to the hon. Minister of Justice. Can he please explain to Albertans what type of consultation exactly has taken place between the federal government and the province of Alberta, and are the concerns of Albertans reflected therein?

MR. HAVELOCK: Well, unfortunately, Mr. Speaker, to date there's been very little real consultation with provincial ministers. As I have advised this House previously, the federal/provincial/territorial ministers met in Regina last year, and the Young Offenders Act was the number one issue on the agenda.

Subsequent to that date, last December senior officials were provided with a copy of the initial draft legislation. However, they were instructed that they could not make a copy of the legislation. They had to remain in the room, and they were thus not allowed to share that draft legislation with either assistant deputy ministers or in fact ministers of the provinces. Senior officials have not been shown any further drafts of the legislation since that date. In fact at a recent deputy's meeting the federal minister provided a general outline of the changes, but that essentially ended the consultation process.

It was my understanding, Mr. Speaker, and that of other ministers who attended the federal/provincial/territorial meeting that we would be provided with a copy of the draft legislation prior to it being tabled in Parliament. This has not occurred.

Now, based on what I have been able to glean from reports and some public comments, some of the changes described to the deputy ministers appear to reflect some of the concerns which were raised by certainly Alberta and by other provinces. Other changes seem to be entirely new. Nevertheless, given Alberta's success rate in dealing with young offenders -- in fact we have one of the lowest incarceration rates in Canada and one of the most successful alternative measures programs in the country -- I have to say that I'm very surprised and disappointed that we as a province and other provinces have not been provided with a meaningful role in the drafting of this legislation.

MR. ZWOZDESKY: Mr. Minister, given what bits of information you do know and do have with respect to the forthcoming changes, are there at least some changes there that we as the government of Alberta might be prepared to accept and endorse?

MR. SAPERS: Are you part of the government?

MR. HAVELOCK: Well, there was a comment just made across the way by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Glenora, I believe, who said: are we the government? We aren't the federal government, Mr. Speaker. However, we are charged as a provincial government with administering the Young Offenders Act, and therefore it has a significant impact on Albertans.

What I would like to indicate to the hon. member is that the new legislation apparently, from what I've been able to determine, will streamline the transfer of young offenders to adult courts by placing the transfer decision after conviction. We certainly support that. In addition, we're looking at an expansion of the categories and age limit for transfer to adult court. Finally, there seems to be more flexibility in pursuing alternatives to the formal court system for low-level offenders, and also I think they're considering at this stage expanding the categories and means to provide reparation to victims. There's also the provision of better sharing of information with victims, which we certainly are very supportive of. We consider these to be positive steps forward.

MR. ZWOZDESKY: Are there any proposed changes to the Young Offenders Act which we as a province submitted to the federal government that have been shelved or rejected or perhaps otherwise ignored?

MR. HAVELOCK: Well, Mr. Speaker, unfortunately there are many changes which we have argued for that have been entirely ignored by the federal government. Among these are concerns pertaining to the provision of transfer to adult court. We don't feel they've gone far enough.

Some other specific areas. There will be no reduction in the age of criminal accountability for the most serious offences including murder. We would like to have the treatment of chronic property offenders re-examined because the act doesn't seem to be dealing with that at all. Youths who are transferred to adult court will not have the same parole eligibility as adult offenders. There's no restriction on court-appointed counsel even if the youth is over 18 years of age at the time of charging.

Finally, Mr. Speaker, something that's critical: the federal minister has indicated publicly that she does not intend to live up to the federal government's initial commitment of sharing in the cost of implementing the Young Offenders Act up to 50 percent. She has stated that there may be some additional dollars available. Nevertheless, at this time Alberta is supporting the young offender system by approximately 59 percent of the total cost, and this is inconsistent with the commitment that the federal government had made some years ago.

It's also unclear to us at this stage what additional costs we will have to incur as a result of these unknown changes, which seem to be leaking from the federal government much like the *Titanic*.

THE SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Glengarry, followed by the hon. Member for Calgary-Fort.

Strategic Tourism Marketing Council

MR. BONNER: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The goal of a \$4.2 billion tourism industry has been set for Alberta by the year 2002. It is my understanding that the Alberta Strategic Tourism Marketing Council will be adopting the Canadian Tourism Commission's vision for tourism in Canada until an Alberta-made vision is arrived at by government and industry. My questions today are to the Minister of Economic Development responsible for tourism. What is the

relationship between the Alberta Strategic Tourism Marketing Council and the Canadian Tourism Commission?

MRS. NELSON: Mr. Speaker, the newly founded strategic marketing council in Alberta is the body that has come together with the industry players being at the table with government to create a strategic marketing plan for promoting Alberta as a place to visit, a place to come to, a place to have recreational tourism and industrial tourism. What we've been able to do in the change in structure is have the other provinces also look at creating strategic marketing plans for their jurisdictions and come together and feed the overall strategic marketing plans up through the federal government through the Canadian Tourism Commission -- it's actually going to be a corporation now as opposed to a commission -- to create an overall Canadian strategic marketing plan that will have provinces from coast to coast for the first time feeding into an overall Canadian plan.

2:20

This only came about this fall, Mr. Speaker, as a result of the tourism ministers meeting continually to put a new framework in place for promoting Canada and recognizing that provinces sitting side by side were not the competitors but that in fact the international marketplace was the competitor, that we should be able to come together with overall strategic marketing plans to promote this country and the jurisdictions within it. So the relationship is somewhat changed, I think for the better, because now we have a direct relationship that will feed up into that overall Canadian plan as opposed to everyone doing their own thing in isolation.

MR. BONNER: Thank you. Mr. Speaker, what is the time line for producing a made-in-Alberta tourism strategy?

MRS. NELSON: Well, Mr. Speaker, the strategy has moved forward. In fact the request for proposals has been out for quite some time. The RFPs actually closed last Monday, a week ago, for the resident campaign. Yesterday the RFPs closed for the international and national campaign. So it is launched right now as we speak. In fact Travel Alberta has put out an entire promotional package that is very comprehensive. If you'd like a copy of it for your constituency office, I wish you'd show it to your constituents. It is being flooded throughout the globe right now. It's a tremendous package, and I have to say that this industry group and the Travel Alberta staff have done a tremendous job of putting the elements together to promote this province as the place to be. [interjection] It's out now.

MR. BONNER: Mr. Speaker, given that outstanding scenery, clean air, wide-open spaces, abundant nature, wildlife, and untouched wilderness are identified as cornerstones of Alberta's tourism marketing strategy, how does the minister plan to protect these tourism assets from the ministers of Energy and Environment?

MRS. NELSON: Mr. Speaker, I'm delighted to see that the member opposite recognizes the wonderful things that are in this province and how we all work as a team to make sure we promote that throughout the world. I hope that you will look at the marketing plan and see how clearly we have demonstrated all the benefits in Alberta, not only from the recreational side but also from the industrial side.

There are two elements of tourism. Let's be very clear. There's pure recreational tourism, but there's also industrial tourism. As Minister of Economic Development I can tell you that when people come to look at investments in Alberta or to entice their companies to relocate to Alberta, which we've been very successful at doing, Mr. Speaker, naturally the first question they ask me is about the

framework on the economic side for the decision-making model or the business case that they're going to use on that decision. But the second question is: what am I going to do if I have people from my company coming to Alberta? All of the venues that you talked about throughout this province are actually key to economic development, because they go hand in hand.

All of the elements, whether it's investment in the oil sands or the forestry industry, whether it's investment in petrochemicals, whether it's in our technology, whether it's in our service sector, imply that there has to be a relationship with our tourism industry. So it has to be recognized as economic development takes place in this province in an environmentally friendly way. That's one of the big sells we have, Mr. Speaker.

MR. LUND: Mr. Speaker, the opposition clearly identifies that Alberta does have all the clean air, clean water, lots of open spaces, lots of protected areas and that in fact it is important that we protect those. We agree with that, and that's exactly what we're doing. How are we going to protect it in the future? Well, number one, we're going to start by passing Bill 15, and that will protect even more land than is currently protected, all the way into the future.

The fact is that we are already well ahead of other provinces. We have the second highest percentage of protected land in Canada, the second highest, and we're not finished. We have the most aggressive program in the country for protecting areas, and when we are finished, we will have more than double the size of Prince Edward Island right within our province totally protected. That's how we are going to work with tourism and all of the other industries so that we have a sustainable industry for the future.

MRS. NELSON: Mr. Speaker, this is the package. This is the tourism marketing plan that has been launched for Alberta, and I would be delighted to send this over to the hon. member so that he can have it in his constituency office right now.

THE SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Calgary-Fort, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Glenora.

Education Funding

MR. CAO: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. In my recent visit to schools and attending a public forum on housing students organized by the Calgary board of education, there have been questions raised by my constituents on education funding, how education is funded to ensure equity and fairness based on needs. My question is to the Minister of Education. Can the minister explain how this government addresses the unique needs of school boards throughout the province within a single funding framework?

MR. MAR: Well, Mr. Speaker, I'm always pleased to speak about the funding framework and specifically how it treats not only the constituents of the Member from Calgary-Fort and the Calgary board of education but how it treats all the school boards in the province fairly and equitably. Under the funding framework every school board receives the same equal per student amount for basic instruction and then additional per student funding to meet the special needs of their students. These special needs might be, for example, students with severe disabilities. It might be students with needs for English as a Second Language programming. It might be young children with severe special needs in ECS. As an example, the demographics of the Calgary school board show that they have a higher percentage of students that need English as a Second Language programming than other boards in the province, and

accordingly they receive more money for ESL dollars, about \$3 million in 1998-99, to meet the needs of those particular students.

MR. CAO: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. To the same minister: what is the government's position on student enrollment options in the province, especially the Calgary board of education, where its projection of enrollment is downward?

MR. MAR: Well, Mr. Speaker, we have an open boundaries policy that allows students to attend schools outside of their community providing that there are resources and facilities available elsewhere, and I think that gives parents the flexibility to choose the school that best meets the needs of their children among all school board jurisdictions. Our government also encourages a partnership approach with school boards, parents, and stakeholders. Finally, just on the matter of the funding framework again, the funding framework was interestingly reviewed by KPMG, and the KPMG report cites our model of funding education as a model that should be considered for other types of provincial funding.

MR. CAO: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My third question is to the same minister. Are there other ways that the Calgary board of education could increase its overall enrollment?

MR. MAR: Well, Mr. Speaker, certainly providing choices to parents is one key way of encouraging parents to choose the Calgary board of education. Alternative programs, as they're often referred to, are good examples of how school boards have actually increased their overall enrollment, and there are dozens of alternative programs that are being offered by the 60 school boards across the province of Alberta. These initiatives are school board driven, and they're used by both the Calgary public board as well as the Edmonton public board and other public boards throughout the province.

In closing, Mr. Speaker, there would be, for example, here in Edmonton the Logos Christian school and Nellie McClung junior high school for girls. In Calgary examples would include alternative programs such as French immersion, the Mandarin bilingual program, and modified school calendars.

THE SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Glenora, followed by the hon. Member for Calgary-Fish Creek.

2:30

Provincial Tax Reform

MR. SAPERS: Mr. Speaker, last night's action/adventure, comedy, drama, action/fantasy -- I'm not sure what to call it. The Access session on the budget didn't mention tax reform in spite of the Treasurer saying that consultation is one of the key components of his reform agenda. My questions today are to the Provincial Treasurer. Is the Provincial Treasurer committed to implementing tax reform as outlined in the October 1998 report of the Federal/ Provincial Committee on Taxation entitled Tax on Income?

MR. DAY: There'll be items along those lines in the budget, Mr. Speaker.

MR. SAPERS: Okay. What consultations will the Treasurer have with Albertans regarding the addition of provincial supplements to federal credits such as pension income, disability, tuition, education, medical expenses, and charitable gifts?

MR. DAY: Mr. Speaker, 78,000 Albertans responded in record numbers to a brochure which was sent out to every household in the province. That was one of a number of initiatives that we've used.

I won't pretend to be able to cover with taxpayer dollars every area that the federal government tries and pretends to cover. It simply can't be done. There isn't enough money in the world to cover every urge and every need, but I can tell you that of the almost 80,000 who responded to the brochure and tens of thousands with whom at least government MLAs consult on a weekly basis -- there will be things there that will be reflecting not only the needs but the priorities of Albertans.

MR. SAPERS: Will the Treasurer confirm, then, that there will be no specific consultations on the tax reform initiatives including the move towards a single-rate flat tax in Alberta?

MR. DAY: Mr. Speaker, I appreciate that members opposite are busy -- I think they are; I'll give them that credit -- so busy that they haven't been able to read some of the documents. The Leader of the Opposition yesterday stood in the House and said that there's no goal or no target in terms of family distribution and the poverty index, and clearly there is, and I showed it today. [interjection] The Member for Edmonton-Glenora here is obviously saying: will there be any consultation? [interjection]

You know, that member from St. Albert just continues to chirp away nonstop despite the constant . . . Sturgeon-Spruce Grove-St. Albert. Sorry to the good, attentive Member for St. Albert.

If she could just be quiet for a minute, I'll try to explain this, because I think her constant chirping drowns out the information so that the Member for Edmonton-Glenora doesn't hear any of this stuff.

I can tell you that it's very clear, and I'm surprised that I'm getting a question from the Member for Edmonton-Glenora. There was a very specific line of questions in the brochure that went out. A simpler, flatter tax system was put before Albertans, and 80,000 of them responded. I'll send them a copy. It's good reading.

head: Members' Statements

THE SPEAKER: Hon. members, today we have three hon. members who will rise under Members' Statements, and we'll proceed in this order in 30 seconds: first of all the hon. Member for Wetaskiwin-Camrose, then the hon. Member for Edmonton-McClung, and then the hon. Member for Innisfail-Sylvan Lake.

Camrose Youth Athletics

MR. JOHNSON: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. While the eyes of Canadian curlers are on Edmonton this week, Alberta high school curlers held a Brier of their own in Camrose this past weekend. Twenty-four of the best high school curling teams from across the province participated in the Alberta Schools' Athletic Association provincial curling championships.

From the opening ceremonies, bagpipes and all, some of Alberta's best young curlers displayed outstanding skill and sportsmanship through to the final championship round. In the end gold medals were awarded to skip Ed Hancheruk of Camrose, representing the boys' division; skip Bonnie Schmidt of Oyen, representing the girls' division; and skip Dean Rook of Morinville, representing the mixed division. My congratulations to Camrose composite high school staff and students and especially to principal Max Lindstrand for hosting this outstanding event, making the 1999 provincial high school curling championships a memorable experience for all the participants.

There was more than youth curling excitement in Camrose last weekend. There was also a welcome home party for athletes participating in the Canada Winter Games in Corner Brook, Newfoundland. Two players from the Camrose Kodiaks hockey

team played on the Alberta men's hockey team, and two athletes participated in the biathlon competition. In hockey, contributions of talent and team spirit resulted in an outstanding team effort, and along with their Team Alberta compatriots forward Richard Hamula and defenceman Brennan Evans from the Wetaskiwin-Camrose constituency received gold medals for the championship win in the final round in an overtime battle with the Quebec team.

The city of Camrose is also very proud of Alberta's biathlon team, who garnered individual and group medals in a tremendous showing of team effort. Congratulations especially to David Leoni and Charmion Rebus, both from the city of Camrose and both medal recipients. Congratulations to the Alberta biathlon coach, Darren Groskey, also from Camrose.

It is always an honour to pay tribute to young athletes who represent their schools and their province with pride and sportsmanship. We are proud of their achievements, and we recognize with sincere gratitude those who make these competitions possible. Through the dedicated efforts of volunteer organizers, with support from groups such as the Alberta Schools' Athletic Association and the Alberta Department of Community Development . . . [interjections] [Mr. Johnson's speaking time expired] Thanks to all.

Alberta's Human Rights Record

MRS. MacBETH: Mr. Speaker, Alberta was established upon the principles of tolerance and acceptance. This province has a proud tradition of accepting with open arms people from all over the world who are fleeing persecution or simply looking to make a better life for themselves and their families. That proud Alberta tradition of acceptance and tolerance has been eroded and tarnished over the last six years.

The government has refused to make the Human Rights and Citizenship Commission independent. It attempted to extinguish the basic rights of sterilization victims through the use of the notwithstanding clause. It refused to amend its human rights legislation to prohibit discrimination based on sexual orientation. Yesterday a government member pulled a motion targeted at Hutterites in this province, yesterday the government voted against a motion to support the United Nations convention on the rights of the child, and throughout all of the last six years we have seen and listened to hurtful comments and insults from a variety of government members.

The highest duty of this Premier and of every member of this Assembly is to provide leadership in actively promoting tolerance and acceptance. It starts right here. It starts with the actions, the words, and the attitudes of every member of this Assembly.

Thank you.

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

Youth Heritage Project

MR. SEVERTSON: Thank you. Mr. Speaker, I rise today to inform the members of the Assembly about a wonderful new program called the Alberta youth heritage project. This initiative will help educate Alberta high school students about the heritage of their province and their communities.

The project is designed to increase students' historical knowledge, sense of community, and research skills. The program will also develop the students' ability to apply these concepts and skills locally and globally to help build sustainable communities.

Students in urban and rural areas will identify and participate in a variety of research projects such as collecting stories from local seniors and then documenting these stories as part of their community heritage. The project hopes to preserve local traditions, promote

cross-generation and cross-cultural links, and develop relationships between individuals and their communities.

The Alberta youth heritage project is a partnership involving Museums Alberta, Alberta Community Development, Fort Edmonton Park, the Historical Society of Alberta, the Alberta Society of Archivists, Visual Arts Alberta Association, and a number of Alberta schools: St. Joseph Catholic high school, Strathcona composite high school, and Victoria composite high school in Edmonton and Will Sinclair high school in Rocky Mountain House.

Funding for the Alberta youth heritage project has been provided by Museums Alberta, Alberta Community Development, and through the Alberta Historical Resources Foundation. As well, Alberta Community Development staff will make a valuable contribution by acting as mentors to the participating high school students. This will be a vital link in their learning process and will provide the students with firsthand knowledge of heritage research, documentation, and program delivery. I would like to commend the staff and volunteers of Museums Alberta for their leadership role in organizing and funding this innovative and worthwhile project.

Thank you.

head: Orders of the Day
2:40

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

Bill 204 Medicare Protection Act

Mr. Stevens moved that the question for second reading be amended to read that Bill 204, Medicare Protection Act, be not now read a second time because the Legislative Assembly believes that the report that is pending for the health summit should be reviewed before proceeding with this bill.

[Adjourned debate March 3: Mr. Stevens]

THE SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Bonnyville-Cold Lake.

MR. DUCHARME: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It is a pleasure to enter into the debate on Bill 204, the Medicare Protection Act, and to support the reasoned amendment moved by my hon. colleague the Member for Calgary-Glenmore.

Mr. Speaker, medicare protection is something all Albertans support. We heard this very clearly at the health summit in Calgary last week. The health summit has furnished our government with many valuable suggestions that we as a government must examine before we take any significant steps to changing health care as we know it in the province of Alberta.

There are other reasons why our government cannot proceed with Bill 204 at this time. The leader of the New Democrat opposition seeks to accomplish many goals with her bill. However, most of them have already been undertaken by our government. For that reason, Mr. Speaker, I cannot support the bill introduced by the leader of the NDs. First of all, this bill would seek to affirm Alberta's commitment to the principles contained in the Canada Health Act. The principles of universality, portability, comprehensiveness, accessibility, and public support are principles our government supports. Our government believes in access to quality health care for Albertans. We have worked hard to ensure that the system is appropriately funded so that Albertans can access the emergency facilities, diagnostic services, surgeries, preventative care, and long-term care facilities that they need.

Mr. Speaker, through the efforts of our Premier and Canada's

other first ministers an arrangement has been reached with the federal government to return health funding to the provinces that was originally cut from the Canada health and social transfer in 1993. Moreover, through the careful budgeting efforts of our government, we were able to boost health spending on our own and did so every year for the last three years. Over that time we added an additional \$750 million in new health funding to the core health budget. That is an increase of around 20 percent over that period.

Mr. Speaker, our efforts to increase access to the public health system have been successful in key performance areas. Waiting lists for important procedures such as open-heart surgeries have decreased. In just two years we have reduced the waiting list for open-heart surgeries from 586 to 413. This year the number of open-heart surgeries performed will be greater than the amount of people added to the annual waiting list. Moreover, Statistics Canada shows that Alberta has the highest rate of bypasses and angioplasties performed in Canada. Our injections of new and returned health funding and leadership in key health areas such as heart care will continue to contribute to the high-quality and supported health care services available in Alberta.

Secondly, Mr. Speaker, Bill 204 would suggest a need to increase public consultation to find long-term strategies for health care in Alberta. Once again, this is a sound idea but one already undertaken by our government in several different ways. Our government recognizes that the best way to develop a health strategy is to involve Albertans, health care professionals and stakeholders, in the development process. That is why our government held Health Summit '99 last weekend. The health summit fulfilled many goals of Bill 204. It was open to the public, it made clear recommendations to the Minister of Health, and it made our government accountable for health care direction and spending.

I know that our government is very much looking forward to reading the health summit report and to making changes to the system that reflect what Albertans have been telling us. Right now our government needs that time to process the results of the health summit and move forward from there rather than to deal with Bill 204 and then the health summit recommendations.

Mr. Speaker, unfortunately Bill 204 seeks to reduce health care options available to Albertans. Canadians have recognized for some time that private care facilities play a role in Canadian health care. Private facilities are established all over Canada, performing a variety of services as we speak. Services that are not normally covered by a provincial health insurance plan are available at and performed by these facilities. As well, some facilities also offer many parallel services to public facilities and, in doing so, work to further reduce waiting lists for items such as diagnostic services and certain operational procedures.

These facilities offering parallel services are accountable to government, Mr. Speaker. Through contracts with local RHAs or under the auspices of the Alberta health care insurance program safeguards are in place to ensure that services offered at private facilities are of the same quality as those available in government-run facilities. Unfortunately, at this time only the Alberta College of Physicians and Surgeons needs to approve the establishment of new facilities in our province. Our government can only have a significant amount of influence if the facility offers services that are also offered by public facilities.

Of course, Mr. Speaker, Albertans are concerned about the proliferation of private facilities in our province and that those institutions be more accountable to government. We share these concerns and for that reason wanted to increase accountability when establishing a private facility in Alberta. The Minister of Health brought in Bill 37 last session to solve those concerns. If passed,

Bill 37 would have answered a great many of the concerns that the leader of the NDP raises in Bill 204. It would have made it illegal for private care facilities to offer services that public facilities did. Moreover, it would have given the Minister of Health the opportunity to halt the establishment of new private facilities, actually decreasing rather than increasing the proliferation of private care facilities in Alberta. Sadly, the opposition sought to oppose introducing these safeguards into our health system. I hope that when safeguards such as the ones dealt with in Bill 37 are reintroduced this session, the opposition will support their passage.

Once again, Mr. Speaker, private health care was another issue brought up by the health summit, and its recommendations must take precedence over the suggestions in Bill 204, suggestions which would hurt rather than heal our health system.

Mr. Speaker, our government is working hard to protect medicare and our entire health system for the future and the changing needs of Albertans. We are protecting medicare by increasing health funding over the past three years and ensuring that additional funds go to improving patient care for the future. We are protecting medicare by working with the other provinces, territories, and the federal government to regain lost transfer payments. We are protecting medicare by implementing legislation that will limit the scope of private care facilities and give the Minister of Health the final say on which of those facilities may be allowed to operate. We are protecting medicare by working with the public and health professionals to find long-term solutions to deal with the changing health needs of our province. This should be our number one priority and can only be if the reasoned amendment is supported by the other members of this House. I would urge all members to support the motion from the Member for Calgary-Glenmore.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

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

MRS. SLOAN: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I am pleased this afternoon to rise and offer my thoughts and analysis on Bill 204, the Medicare Protection Act, sponsored by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands.

I think, to begin, that the bill is a commendable attempt, as was Bill 201, which was introduced by the then Leader of the Official Opposition, the Member for Edmonton-McClung, in 1998. It is also very much aligned with Motion 504, which is also before the Legislature I believe this week. The tenets of this bill I think are very similar and aligned with the previous bill and the motion that I speak of.

Where I am at this afternoon, Mr. Speaker, is that after spending almost 20 years in the health system in this province, I believe I could almost recite the rhetoric that I hear on a daily basis from this government about how they are attempting to protect our public system of health care in this province. The reality is that I feel, as thousands of others do in the health care system, that this government has completely lost sight of their responsibility in this sector and that their actions speak louder than their words.

We know that from the early 1990s . . .

THE SPEAKER: Excuse me, hon. member. The debate now is on the reasoned amendment, not the bill.

2:50

MRS. SLOAN: I'm aware of that, Mr. Speaker, and I am aware that the amendment before us is proposing that we defer the debate on this bill until, I believe, after the blue-ribbon panel reports. The point of my introductory remarks was, sir, that we've had all kinds

of committees, we've had all kinds of summits, we've had all kinds of roundtables, and we have no end of rhetoric in this province. To me, to defer the debate on this bill to await the report from yet another committee, which will ultimately come out with either recommendations the government will ignore or predetermined recommendations that the Minister of Health has already determined, is completely irrational.

We know today in the hospitals, the long-term care facilities, and the homes of Albertans in this province that health care is in a crisis. It's in a crisis because it's been underfunded. The reason it's been underfunded has been because this government intended from the beginning that it be underfunded to cultivate a fertile bed for private, for-profit delivery of health care in the province. Mr. Speaker, despite all of the things they might say to defend it or to say that's not the case, the reality speaks otherwise. So after their allocations, the cuts that they made to the budget, which they've admitted now were without a plan, now we see them reinfusing dollars still without a plan. I believe, as Bill 201 does, as Bill 204 does, and as Motion 504 says: let's have some hard factual analysis about what privatization does to the human services area and specifically to health care.

I guess the government wants to say as well that we should wait until we hear from the blue-ribbon panel. Well, I suspect, Mr. Speaker, that the blue-ribbon panel has not reviewed any of the research or literature surrounding the privatization of human services. I would like to quote this afternoon from a major paper that was conducted right here in Alberta on that very topic. The author was Helen Stacey. She was a student at the University of Alberta in the department of public health sciences, and she fulfilled the paper as a partial fulfillment of her degree, a master of health sciences administration. I would just speak and reference some of the aspects of her research on this matter.

She cited at the very beginning of her report the number of times this government has referred to privatization over the course of the last, roughly, seven years. She cites from the throne speech in 1993 when the government cited its promise to "get out of rather than into the lives of Albertans" and that privatization was seen as a viable strategy for the Alberta government to reduce spending, improve efficiency, and pare down government services to the essentials.

Further, from 1994, the first budget speech, February 24, 1994, Stacey references that the budget

informs Albertans that there will be a return to "basic . . . service with no frills" and a need for everyone to make sacrifices to ensure that the economic crisis can be terminated.

Well, we all know, Mr. Speaker, what those sacrifices entailed, and many of us and many of our constituents have paid that price over the course of the last five years.

Further, in the Speech from the Throne in 1995 the government emphasized a shift from systems to people and the achievement of efficiency and effectiveness from regional decision-making and community delivery. Further in response to that, the government instructed each department to develop their three-year business plans, which of course we all know occurred. In a number of areas, specifically in Family and Social Services, there was a major initiative arising from that to contract out services. All of these things have occurred, and somehow today this government wants us to ignore, wipe out that reality and somehow believe that that agenda doesn't exist in health care, when we've seen through Bill 37 that they were definitely committed to creating a legislative framework.

We've seen through the discussions at the College of Physicians and Surgeons that they are embarking on developing the medical framework to make private, for-profit facilities a reality in this province. So why would the blue-ribbon panel, Mr. Speaker, conclude any different outcome? I would suggest that we are well

within our purview this afternoon to suggest that we need a legislative framework in this province to protect private health care because all of the steps the government has taken have been exactly to the contrary.

One of the additional references with respect to this that is also maybe of some benefit to the government members as they embark on this path of privatization is a report that was written by Steven Rathgeb Smith, *Transforming Public Services: Contracting for Social and Health Services in the US*. This report, Mr. Speaker, provides an excellent analysis of the micro and macro issues associated with contracting out.

I would just cite from a section, *Government in the Contracting Regime*. This is speaking about the relationships that develop as a government proceeds down the road of increasingly contracting services. It says:

Some providers represent politically influential constituents, leaving the purchasing agency with little choice but to continue the contract. But many long-term relationships are desired by purchaser: the supply of providers may be scarce, and the purchaser may trust the providers due to years of dealing with him or her on a regular basis. Providers with less experience and personal ties are at a decided disadvantage in luring away a contract from an established provider. Further,

as the contracting regime develops, an exchange of personnel [occurs] between government and the non-profit sector.

And, I would suggest, the private sector in this case.

Many government staff are professional colleagues and personal friends with private agency staff. Consequently, government officials may be understandably reluctant to seriously disturb the contracting relationship [once it's established]. Disruptions in contracting such as switching contracts to another agency are also avoided because volatility in the contracting relationship can be politically threatening. Service providers who lose a contract may take their case to the legislature or the press. Moreover, switching contracts may entail expensive and perhaps inadvisable shifts in clients from one provider to another. The ensuing publicity might give ammunition to opponents of the [province, in this case] in the legislature or elsewhere . . . At the very least, it would require the purchasing agency to justify its decisions under the glare of public scrutiny. Terminating contracts can be difficult to defend because of the elusiveness of outcome measures. Many service providers could legitimately challenge contract terminations on the grounds that they are being held accountable on the wrong measures or the purchasing agency failed to give them sufficient resources.

In this case, in both of these references the authors point out that the point of contracting out to the private sector is complex. I don't see and have not seen any evidence, Mr. Speaker, that this government has done any analysis, any research into the matter at all. They would rather just ask that Albertans trust them to privatize yet another aspect of our public services with really no idea of the consequences.

3:00

In that respect I guess I would agree with the premise of delaying, which is proposed by this amendment, however not in the context that the government is seeking this afternoon. I don't think the government has done enough analysis about the impact of privatizing health care in a for-profit context. Until we see that kind of analysis done or that they in fact have researched the studies that are out there, the idea and premise of having a legislative framework to protect the public health care system is extremely timely, and we should proceed to debate that this afternoon. In this respect I am voting against the reasoned amendment because I don't believe the government is sincere and because in fact it's just yet another measure attempting to delay our protection of the public system.

I think as well that the hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands has

provided in this bill some mechanisms which are very timely, particularly given the announcement this afternoon of millions more dollars being infused into the system. There are some accountability mechanisms that have been proposed. Why should those not be put in place before the expenditures and before the dollars are reinvested? We unfortunately see on a daily basis, Mr. Speaker, that the measures, the mechanisms that the government has put in place, mechanisms like the Provincial Health Council -- they don't listen to them. Their report last year sounded the alarm, as had many other sectors and groups, and talked about how we had a crisis in our health care system and that there was no plan. Yet here we are -- how many months after the fact? -- probably almost six months since the release of that report and still groping to determine what we should do and still, as the hon. member across the way, trying to delay doing something that would in fact protect the public system.

So I would say: why wait? We have gone in this province for far too long without a framework, without mechanisms for accountability. I'm not convinced the blue-ribbon panel is going to provide any of those things. I may be proven wrong, Mr. Speaker, but I can only draw those conclusions based on my own experience in the system and in the position of watching this government fumble and punt the responsibility for health care to anywhere and everywhere over the course of the last six to seven years.

I'm not in favour of the amendment, Mr. Speaker, and I look forward to the remaining debate this afternoon on that and also to the remaining debate on the bill itself. Thank you very much.

THE SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Calgary-Fort.

MR. CAO: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I am pleased to rise this afternoon to join the debate and speak in favour of the reasoned amendment moved by the hon. Member for Calgary-Glenmore. I'm going to deliberate on the reasons for my support of the amendment.

Mr. Speaker, I firmly believe in the direction that our government has taken by supporting the health summit process, and I cannot see one part of Bill 204 which is crucial that we should derail the summit process in favour of supporting Bill 204. There are elements in the Medicare Protection Act on which I believe all members of this House can agree, the five principles of the Canada Health Act for example. Comprehensiveness, universality, portability, accessibility, and public administration are adhered to and supported by this government and by the vast majority of Albertans. Having the bill adds nothing to legislation at the provincial level which is not already the law across all of Canada. It would be pointless in Alberta to copy into our legislation those principles contained in federal legislation, and doing so would fail to provide an adequate reflection of our government's commitment to health care in this province.

Mr. Speaker, Alberta already meets the program criteria of the Canada Health Act by supporting the principles of comprehensiveness, universality, portability, accessibility, and public administration. Our system is administered by government. The coverage offered is comprehensive in scope. The principles of universality, portability, and accessibility govern the care received by Albertans and non-Albertans alike. All Albertans have access to health care when they need it regardless of where they are in this province or elsewhere in Canada.

The expectations of Albertans are high when it comes to health care. Health care was the focus of much of the reinvestment that has taken place since our government balanced the budget and found itself in better financial shape. In the recent Speech from the Throne our government's commitment to health care was outlined in the form of new and ongoing initiatives. The speech discussed funding

for regional health authorities, plans for long-term care for seniors, mental health, surgeries and diagnostic services, and access to and the protection of health information. As you can see, Mr. Speaker, Albertans and the government are committed to the five principles of the Canada Health Act. Further reaffirming our support of these principles through legislation is unnecessary.

The Canada Health Act applies only to insured health services. This is not the same thing as medically required services. The term "insured services" includes all the hospital services, physician services, and surgical dental services. It does not include all the health services that a person is entitled to and eligible for. Alberta has its own measures in place which go beyond the requirements of federal legislation. For example, the Alberta Health Care Insurance Act already governs the provision of medically required services through a publicly administered, accessible health insurance system.

On top of Canada Health Act's narrow requirements our government funds Blue Cross for seniors, home care services, and community rehabilitation and physiotherapy services. Additionally, Mr. Speaker, our government is beginning to focus more on medical treatment and on exploring new and proactive initiatives targeted toward prevention of illness and injury and the promotion of active and healthy lifestyles. These programs are targeted toward all Albertans but especially toward young families through the program called You're Amazing. Certainly the commitment of this government to go above and beyond the requirements of the Canada Health Act does not mesh well with the arguments the member opposite is apt to make. The initiatives I have just described and those outlined in the throne speech are a far cry from representing a government which lacks commitment to public health care in this province, as the leader of the NDP opposition has tried to suggest.

But there are other elements to Bill 204 which make me lend my support to the reasoned amendment. Mr. Speaker, the bill advocates the establishment of a medicare protection advisory committee to oversee ongoing public consultation and give advice to the minister on a number of issues. While this committee has a catchy title and an interesting mandate, its duty is already performed more than adequately by regional health authorities and community health boards.

It makes little sense to add miles of red tape to a system that already performs better at the community level consultation and a supposed medicare protection advisory committee. In fact, Mr. Speaker, this will serve only to confuse health professionals and Albertans generally by making it unclear to whom they are to consult when they have issues and questions or recommendations.

3:10

Mr. Speaker, this bill is not clear on the terms for which these committee members will be appointed. The bill's silence on the matter suggests to me that this committee is to be permanent, with permanent members. Not only does this make the committee even less accountable and democratic in my opinion; it may also be dangerous if one examines the extent of power which this committee holds.

Mr. Speaker, the decisions to be made by the committee are often technical and complex in nature and require a level of experience and expertise that members of this committee, being drawn from a diverse range of backgrounds, may not possess. Will the members of this committee have the skills required to make important decisions about the distribution of health care dollars?

This brings me to another point, Mr. Speaker. The bill, so far as I am aware, does not consider that financial resources are limited. This government cannot purchase or fund everything that everyone in this province may desire any more than a family household can

buy everything that a mom or a dad or the kids may wish for. We must make choices about how best to manage the resources we have for the ultimate benefit of Albertans. I'm not convinced that this committee would recognize this need or be able to make the best choices regarding health care resources.

Mr. Speaker, I would like to conclude today by indicating one final reason which demonstrates the lack of need for legislation such as Bill 204 and support for the reasoned amendment. The vast majority of Albertans feel that our health system is already providing excellent quality of service. Eighty-six percent of Albertans currently rate the care they are receiving as excellent or good. Eighty-three percent of Albertans feel that the effect the health care system has on their health is excellent or good. Three-quarters of Albertans rate access to health care they require as easy or very easy, and 93 percent report that they were able to access health care when they need it.

Having said that, Mr. Speaker, we know there is pressure in the health system. These problems are not felt in Alberta exclusively but in all other provinces as well. It is our duty as a government to explore innovative ways of dealing with those pressures within the economic reality we face. We need to move forward, not backwards. Bill 204 will only move us backwards.

It is clear, Mr. Speaker, that our government is committed to maintaining a health care system that complies with the Canada Health Act and that Albertans are being served well by this system. It is also clear that while changes need to be made, changes should reflect the views of the hundreds of Albertans who took time to participate in the health summit, not the views of the two members of the ND opposition, who sit in the far corner of this Assembly.

Mr. Speaker, I urge all members to support the reasoned amendment. Thank you very much.

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

DR. PANNU: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I've been listening intently to the very unreasoned arguments to this reasoned amendment put forward by my colleagues across the way. This is an opportunity I want to take, with your permission, to redress some of the misunderstandings and the misinformation that may have been put on record in speeches made in support of the reasoned amendment.

I will obviously be speaking against the reasoned amendment, which is asking that

Bill 204, Medicare Protection Act, be not now read a second time because the Legislative Assembly believes that the report that is pending for the health [care] summit should be reviewed before proceeding with this bill.

Mr. Speaker, the reason given for seeking suspension of any further consideration of the bill is that we must wait for the report from the health summit. One unambiguous message that Albertans who attended the health summit sent to this Assembly and to this government is that they want the public health care system protected legislatively. That's one clear, unambiguous message, and that's what this bill is about: to provide that legislated protection to a publicly funded, publicly administered, not-for-profit single payer system of health care.

It boggles my mind when I hear members across the way seeking to not want to proceed immediately with such legislative protection as is sought in this bill for the publicly funded health care system. It's clear, Mr. Speaker, to Albertans, it's clear to a lot of us in this House that the government is determined, has been pursuing a determined course with the purpose of not only undermining the existing publicly funded health care system but, in fact, replacing it with a two-tiered health care system: one that'll be run for profit and

be available to perhaps the top 10 percent of the income earners in this province and the other one a frustratingly underfunded system for the rest of us.

Clearly, the citizens of this province and the citizens of the country have said in poll after poll after poll and at the most recently held summit in this province, which was held by this government under enormous pressure created by citizens of this province, for this government to stop tinkering with the publicly funded health care system by introducing and passing a bill such as Bill 37, which we still don't know where it's at and what will happen to it. The health care summit in fact was a defensive reaction on the part of this government to thwart that pressure, to thwart the unequivocal demand that was made by Albertans to ensure that there is a publicly funded health care system and no other in this province. Albertans are concerned that as soon as you begin to allow private, for-profit health care providers to emerge in this province, you will not be able to stop multinationals from across the border coming in to start trading in human illness and human suffering for no other purpose than to make a profit and to enhance their returns to their shareholders.

This bill is supposed to thwart such invasions either by Canadian multinationals who want to enter the health care field in order to provide services in a privatized health care system or non-Canadian corporations which are already notorious for doing business in the area of health care and for making enormous pressures while denying legitimate claims for even their own insured clients and whatnot. The practices of some of these multinationals that ply this trade for no other reason than to make and enhance their profits have been unethical -- they have been judged by courts to be dishonest -- such that these companies don't hesitate to take advantage of fraudulent practices in order to amass their wealth.

3:20

Is that what we want in this province? The answer, obviously, is no. Albertans have said loudly and clearly so many times no to that kind of proposal, and that's precisely what this government intends to bring in. That's why I fear what we are seeing here is an attempt to put this bill aside when in fact it's a bill which intends to provide legislated protection for publicly funded health care, a health care system that defines our nationality, our way of life as Canadians.

It is somehow a wonderment why it is that this government and the members of the government caucus would want to prevent the regular progress of the bill through debate in the House to its conclusion. Albertans would like to see this bill passed, not thwarted, not put aside, not killed. The bill, clearly, Mr. Speaker, would enshrine publicly funded, universal nonprofit health care once and for all for Albertans, and that's maybe why there is some hesitation and some second thoughts across the way among my colleagues, that they do not want to see the bill proceed.

Bill 204 would force all invasive medical procedures requiring overnight stays to be provided in a hospital run on a nonprofit basis. It would explicitly set out all the rights that the people of Alberta have vis-à-vis health care: the right to medical services regardless of where they live, the right to have medically necessary services provided in a not-for-profit hospital.

Furthermore, this bill, Bill 204, would establish a committee, the medicare advisory committee, a committee that my hon. colleague across the way said would confuse health care professionals and Albertans. How patronizing, Mr. Speaker. People who we depend on to deal with our most serious illnesses and diseases, on whose judgment we rely for our own health and life are now being told: you don't have the brains to understand what the advisory committee will do. I submit respectfully that this sort of patronizing, insulting

language is not appropriate when addressing our health care professionals and the frontline workers in the health care system.

Albertans can read through the most complex machinations of this government, and they can certainly read a clearly written bill and the provisions that this medicare advisory committee will be responsible for, the function they'll be responsible for. They are very much in a good position to judge it thanks to the wonderful work that our teachers do in order to provide education to our citizens. Their education provides them critical thinking, precisely something that worries this government, the ability to think critically. But I submit, Mr. Speaker, that we as citizens of this province are well able to understand and not be confused by any bill regardless of which direction in the House it comes from.

Another astounding observation made about this bill and what it might do: it will be moving us backwards. What a revelation. What a statement to make. Having a two-tiered health care system is moving forward? To create a for-profit health care system, is that moving forward? This is an Orwellian use of language, nothing less, Mr. Speaker. This is to mislead Albertans who refuse to be misled, regardless of these sophisticated attempts to so do. The creation of a two-tiered health system would be a step backward. Creating a for-profit health care segment of the system would be a step backwards, not enhancing the public nature of the publicly funded health care system, making it accessible to Albertans not only in terms of their use of it but their ability to shape it. That's what this bill is about. It gives Albertans, ordinary Albertans, not just a few stakeholders, the legislated ability, the opportunity to shape the future of their own publicly funded health care system.

So it is difficult for me to be persuaded by an argument made in the language of moving backward if we proceed with this bill. I think it is a terribly, terribly flawed logic. It is utter confusion. I hope members across the way can read the bill and understand it and hopefully accept that this bill is an enlightened piece of legislation, very badly needed, for which Albertans have been waiting a very long time. Mr. Speaker, I would call on the mover of that motion to withdraw it. If the member turns me down on this offer, I will have to vote against this reasoned amendment.

Thank you.

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

MR. DICKSON: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I wanted also to speak against the amendment. As somebody who went to the health summit and had the benefit of seeing what happened there, contrary to the advice we received from the Member for Calgary-Fort, who was worried about an element of the bill and proposed that the committee may not have the requisite expertise to be able to deal with the technocomplex needs -- contrast what happened at the health summit, where we had half of the people who went to the health summit who were studiously not conversant with health care issues. In the day and a half most of them spent time just trying to understand the principles of the Canada Health Act.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

THE SPEAKER: I hesitate to interrupt the hon. member, but the time limit for consideration of this matter of business today has expired.

head: Motions Other than Government Motions

3:30

Provincial Income Tax

502. Mr. Hlady moved:

Be it resolved that the Legislative Assembly urge the government to implement a single rate of provincial income tax

based on a percentage of total taxable income rather than a percentage of federal tax.

[Debate adjourned March 2: Mr. Day]

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

MS BARRETT: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I acknowledge that the Member for Lethbridge-East also rose, so I'll speak just for a few minutes, and hopefully that member will also be able to get his comments on the record.

I must say that I object to the direction this motion is headed. Even though it's worded in a way that might lead people to another conclusion, what we're really talking about here is a flat tax that is being proposed. Flat taxes have proven to be a greater burden to lower income people than they are to higher income people, which is why Canada, along with most of the developed world since the inception of their tax systems, went for a progressive tax system. What that means is that if you earn more, you pay more into the pool that provides for the common good, the institutions that provide for the common good.

Let me just give you a brief illustration. Even though the government says, "Gee, with a flat tax, you know, we could get, say, 20,000 people out of the tax system altogether," that's possibly true, but the minute the government raises that tax by even one tax point, you might have every one of those 20,000 people back in.

Now, a lower income person has less money to spend on what we call disposable items. Sometimes, believe it or not, food is considered a disposable item. If you look at social allowance rates, that's obviously the case. Social allowance rates in this province won't cover your rent and your utilities. Anyway, lower income people have a smaller amount of money to spend on disposable items, whether that's food or maybe going to a movie. Those with higher incomes have a much greater level of disposable income, which allows them to buy Rolls-Royces or yachts or what have you.

If you go to a flat tax system, the person at the lower income end is actually spending relatively more of his or her earnings on taxes than the person who's got the higher income. I say relatively more. Numerically it's true it's the same percentage, but relative to their overall income they're paying more. I remind you that in this province over the last several years we've gone upwards of 200 what I would call flat taxes or taxes by any other name, those being user fees. Those fees, those flat bills can make the difference between buying a loaf of bread or not in a lower income family, while they're not even noticed in a high-income family.

[The Deputy Speaker in the chair]

Flat taxes inevitably hurt the low- and, I should point out, middle-income earners. I'm not going to get into statistical debates about the growing gap between the rich and poor, which we know to be a fact, but I will assert that middle-income earners are the ones who are the most penalized by not our basic tax system but by all of the additional taxes that people have to pay, whether it's going into a provincial park and getting wood or whatever the tax is.

A perfect example is Alberta health care premiums. Alberta health care premiums erode the disposable income base of middle and lower income earners while not even affecting the higher income earners. If the government really wanted to engage in tax reform, the very first measure it should undertake would be to eliminate the largest single user fee that we have, and that is the Alberta health care premium.

Ultimately, when the government speaks of wanting to simplify our tax system, I say fine; then tell the federal government to

simplify it. In actually the modern day and age most people now can use computer programs to file their income tax returns and have a general handle on how much money, if any, they will be owing the government at the end of the year. The British system is probably the easiest that I've ever seen for the purposes of taxation, but I remind you that the British system remains a progressive tax system.

Let me conclude with one more thought. When the American people were wanting tax reform and the Reagan government said, "We will accommodate you," in fact the only good economic measure that I can think of ever implemented by that government was to establish minimum taxation levels, including corporate taxation levels, that had to be met. A few years later Canada adopted a similar policy but obviously not with respect to corporate taxation, a subject much too big to be handled in the time remaining.

Let me just reiterate that I oppose the nature of this resolution. I believe in a progressive tax system and funding the institutions on a fair basis, because they in turn make the difference between a quality of life and a non quality of life for our society. We do not live as islands; we live as members of a society.

I hope that the Member for Lethbridge-East will be recognized for his comments.

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

DR. NICOL: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Just a few comments on Motion 502. This is one that I've had some feedback on from a number of my constituents. Unfortunately, or maybe fortunately for me, most of them agree with my perspective. What it amounts to is that if this motion were divided into two parts, it would be easy to vote yes for one part and no for the other part. Their concern over the flat tax is sufficiently questionable that effectively it's going to mean that we have to vote no for this motion.

When we look at the idea of the process we have in Canada of collecting our taxes, where we do the calculations at the federal level and then we do an add-on to get our provincial tax, I think the move to a tax on income probably would be a reasonable option in the sense that it then gives us as a province the chance to design and develop and to vet the wisdom and the appropriateness of a tax credit policy as given by the federal government. In essence, we get to second-guess or re-evaluate what the federal government is doing in terms of their tax credit policy. But when you look at it in the context of a flat tax as opposed to a progressive tax, then what we end up with is looking at a significant change in the perspective of how Albertans agree to allow their government to deal with income redistribution, income paying for public service. Historically, we've felt that a progressive tax was very fair, very equitable.

I was very disappointed to listen to the Member for Calgary-Mountain View the other day when he started explaining that a flat tax is a progressive tax. Mr. Speaker, that is an absolute misuse of the current definitions of all of the appropriate words that are used in tax policy. A flat tax is a proportionate tax. In other words, your tax goes up in proportion to your income. A progressive tax means that as your income goes up, the rate of taxation also goes up so that the tax collected is progressively more. Those are the appropriate terminologies.

What we need to do as we go out and try and market this idea to Albertans, try and get Albertans to say, "Yes, we like it" or "No, we don't," is make sure that we've got a consistent level of definition. In the context of this bill and the explanation that the sponsor gave to it, I would suggest that was not appropriately applied in terms of the definitions.

From that perspective I think we've got to look at what it means to Albertans and what it means in the context of an overall approach

to our taxation system. A move from a progressive tax system to any kind of a flat tax system, no matter how we manipulate it, is going to bring about a redistribution of tax burden. Even though the proposals that we've seen floating around from the Tax Review Committee raise the bottom level so that a larger proportion of people do not have to pay tax, that has nothing to do with the impact of a shift in the type of taxation. It's all manipulation in terms of marketability of the recommendation.

I think we've got to really challenge everybody who talks about this to explain it in a clear, concise way so that Albertans understand what we mean by flat tax before we go about implementing it. If this is what Albertans want, then we as legislators are obligated to give it to them, but they have that right to truly understand what we're asking them first.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

THE DEPUTY SPEAKER: I hesitate to interrupt the hon. Member for Lethbridge-East, but under Standing Order 8(4) I must put all questions to conclude debate on the motion under consideration. On Motion 502, as proposed by the hon. Member for Calgary-Mountain View, all those in favour of this motion, please say aye.

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Aye.

THE DEPUTY SPEAKER: Those opposed, please say no.

SOME HON. MEMBERS: No.

THE DEPUTY SPEAKER: Carried.

[Several members rose calling for a division. The division bell was rung at 3:39 p.m.]

[Ten minutes having elapsed, the Assembly divided]

[The Speaker in the chair]

For the motion:

Boutilier	Graham	McFarland
Broda	Haley	Melchin
Calahasen	Hancock	O'Neill
Cao	Hierath	Pham
Cardinal	Jacques	Severtson
Clegg	Johnson	Smith
Day	Jonson	Stelmach
Doerksen	Kryczka	Tannas
Ducharme	Laing	Tarchuk
Dunford	Langevin	Thurber
Evans	Lougheed	Trynchy
Forsyth	Magnus	Woloshyn
Friedel	McClellan	Yankowsky
Fritz		

3:50

Against the motion:

Barrett	MacBeth	Pannu
Bonner	Nicol	Soetaert
Dickson	Olsen	White
Totals:	For -- 40	Against -- 9

[Motion carried]

Private Health Services

504. Mrs. MacBeth moved:

Be it resolved that the Legislative Assembly urge the government to immediately undertake a broad public consultation and to initiate a full debate in the Assembly on the role of private, for-profit health care providers, including hospitals, clinics, agencies, and individual physicians, in the delivery of health services.

THE SPEAKER: The hon. Leader of the Official Opposition.

MRS. MACBETH: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased to rise on Motion 504 in my name on the Order Paper. I'm going to organize my remarks on the basis of certainly the background to this motion and the reasons why it was raised, then look at some of the reasons in favour of the public health care system and try to dispel some of the arguments that are traditionally placed in terms of developing a private, for-profit system coexisting with the public system. Then I want to close by addressing the issue as to why we need a consultation of this nature.

First of all, with respect to the background it's interesting to note that the College of Physicians and Surgeons urged the government to undertake a public consultation on this issue when they refused to approve the Health Resources Group request to expand services in December of 1997, and really the government has done little to promote any real consultation on this issue of private versus public health care. Certainly it was not one of the questions at last month's health summit, although as we well know, delegates took it upon themselves to raise the issue of private versus public to the degree that they basically, I would say, reclaimed the health summit back to themselves, because they realized the questions that had been put to them were not the questions on their minds and not the questions on the minds of the Albertans that they represented.

[The Deputy Speaker in the chair]

Mr. Speaker, it's interesting to note that the percentage of privately funded health care in Alberta has risen from about 22 percent in 1992 to now over 31 percent, and this increase is something which the government appears to want to ignore. It raises some very important questions. Certainly one of the issues the government frequently throws out is their taunt about trying to argue that the position of the Official Opposition is that there be no role for the private sector within health care. As we know, that is not the case. If you look at the Canadian health care system since really its inception, there has been a proportion of the health care delivered by private physician practitioners. The disturbing thing is that that percentage has suddenly jumped in the last six years in Alberta and elsewhere in Canada, and the government appears to not want to probe the reasons why that has occurred.

Private, for-profit hospitals spend a good deal more on administration. There are many different numbers which can be cited on this matter. Those who would argue from an ideological point of view that private is a less expensive cost need only look to the comparison, of course, between the U.S. and Canada. When you look at the cost of administration of the health care systems in both countries, you'll find from the source of the Consumers' Association of Canada that in fact overall administrative costs in the U.S. system are about 4 to 1 on the Canadian costs of administration. Those are dollars spent on health care, but they are dollars that don't go anywhere near the patient. They simply are dollars to spend on the cost of administering the system and trying to have payments by multiple insurers and all of the administration that that requires.

If you add to administrative expenses not only the cost of private, for-profit hospitals but, rather, expenses for advertising, duplication of equipment and services between private and public, promoting and providing unnecessary treatments, administrative costs created by multiple payers with different payment plans, and the need to provide dividends to their shareholders, you find an undercutting and in fact a deterioration and ultimate destruction of the public system that we have been able to establish in Canada.

Private hospitals also tend to cream off the low-cost, more profitable treatments, if you like, in the system and avoid those which are more cost ineffective, such as 24-hour emergency service, chronic diseases, mental health needs, all of those which you don't find the private sector clamouring for. There's a reason. It's because it is expensive, yet in the system of Canadian values that I was raised on in this province and in this country, it's certainly an essential part of the Canadian health care system.

As well, the evidence from all OECD countries shows that a publicly funded and administered health care system is cheaper than a mixed private/public system unless, of course, the public system is being downgraded and reduced to offset, thus causing an increase in the private-sector system. In this case the quality of the public health care system substantially deteriorates, as many will argue has occurred in Alberta.

It's interesting that today's announcement of an increase of a billion dollars in support for health care over the next three years did not contain any indicators of the outcomes of the injection of this very large sum of money. There were certainly a lot of input factors, like numbers of surgeries and numbers of days worked and all of those kinds of indicators, but no accountability factors built into those dollars.

For example, a government that was concerned about the proportion of total dollars spent towards private health care, a more probing government, a government more concerned about the maintenance of the system, would have said: let's put some outcome measures in with that billion dollars. For example, perhaps the government could make it a target to reduce the amount of private-sector involvement in the Alberta health care system over the next three years by - pick a number -- 5 percent; this would at least be constructive. Yet there was none of this indication in the announcement that the government has made today, no indication of some more traditional health indicators. You know, the government's forgotten the important information that was contained in The Rainbow Report, which actually went through a list of health indicators, which could be a very good test of putting new money into the health care system and measuring the effect on Albertans' health as a result of those dollars. None of that was contemplated, and that's what's very puzzling about the government's announcement today.

4:00

Accountability is vitally important in health, and I guess Albertans are as concerned about the way the dollars go back into the health care system as they were about the way those dollars were cut out of the health care system. However, if government is simply going to start funding and doing the very things that it cut out before, there's going to be the arriving back at the same place that it was instead of the change, the restructuring in health care which needs to occur in this province and across Canada. Alberta has immense resources, and Alberta has a very strong leadership role to play in the development of the Canadian health care system. It is puzzling as to why the province did not seize the opportunity to contribute to that role within Canada.

As well, I think it's important to put on the record that in 1971, when Canada introduced medicare, both the U.S. and Canada spent

about 7 percent of gross domestic product on health care. Today Canada spends just over 9 percent of the GDP on health care, while the U.S. is spending over 14 percent on health care. Of course, Alberta covers all of its citizens as compared to the U.S., which has a public health care system for the elderly and the poor and leaves 43 million Americans with no health care coverage at all, certainly a model which Canada can learn a lot from and which we in the Official Opposition would pray that we never arrive at in this country.

Let me go on to the arguments about the coexistence of private with public health care. One of the arguments we've heard expressed by the government is that waiting lists will be shortened. This is a traditional argument, but I guess we just need to look at experiences across the world to find out that the argument is in error. Britain has a private health care system parallel to a public system, and waiting lists in the public system continue to increase. This is because the affluent and the politically powerful have private insurance and don't consider that public health care spending is important. Therefore, funding for the public system continues to decrease. As well, the introduction of private health care systems alongside public systems in Australia and New Zealand have also led to increased waiting lists and dramatic increases in health care costs, certainly not something that we want to emulate in terms of how the Official Opposition view this matter.

One of the arguments is that patients will have more choice. With increasing costs of medical claims, of course, private insurance in the U.S. and in Britain is getting increasingly involved in treatment decision processes. Often procedures recommended by a doctor must be preapproved by the insurer, and patients are restricted to certain doctors and hospitals by their HMO. This is a very important value, if you like, within the Canadian health care system.

Some will criticize the Canadian health care system by saying that it is socialized medicine. In fact, it isn't. What it is, perhaps, is socialized insurance in that there is one payer of the insurance, but physician choice, physicians determining what is medically necessary, is at the very heart of what is the value of the Canadian health care system. Physicians in this country are not being told: you can't do that because there's not enough money to do it. Certainly there are issues of living within one's budget, but it's not an insurance company arguing with a medical judgment, a very key part of what is the value of the Canadian health system.

A third argument is the one which says that government will save money, and there's a certain amount of truth in this argument, Mr. Speaker. Government, for example, could get rid of \$4.3 billion worth of net debt if they wanted to, I guess, and they could just shut down the health care system in Alberta. That is an option which the government has. However, if we're looking at saving money, it is clear that while the government may be able to off-load or not cover certain things and therefore reduce their cost, which is certainly what Albertans have been living with over the last six years, the impact of that on Albertans, the consequences of those actions are what Albertans are living with today.

If the argument is for government to save money, government has its choice. It can get rid of certain parts of the health care system. I guess this is where there's such a demarcation between the government and the Official Opposition on this issue. The problem is that we believe that we speak for the interests of the people in this province, who want to ensure that the amount they spend collectively out of their pockets on health care is the most efficient model that can possibly be provided. The government appears to have forgotten that, when you look at the issue of user fees and costs to individuals as government pulls away from public health care. The real issue is: how will Albertans have the care they need in the most

efficient model with the least cost? Time and again it is proven that the Canadian health care system meets all of those tests and can be built on a sustainable framework.

The final argument I wanted to just touch on is the argument that employers will save money. I think it's interesting to note the KPMG study which was done in Alberta in 1995, where they compared the cost to employers for health care benefits that are being paid in the U.S. to the costs in Canada for the employers. If all of the arguments about finding a health care system that serves the needs of Albertans fall on deaf ears with the government, perhaps this argument will in fact be heard.

The finding of the KPMG study was that if you look at employers in the United States and their costs for health care for their employees, you find that on average the factor is 17 percent. In other words, employers are saying: "I've got X number of employees. This is what we're going to pay for their health care benefits." By comparison, in the Canadian system employers on average spend 12 percent on covering their employees for health benefits. Now, that's a 5 percent gradation between employers in the U.S. and employers in Canada.

If you look at that from a competition point of view, from the point of view of a business, a business would always want to minimize the costs for what it must deliver, the costs of doing business, including its employees' health care. So those that contemplate moving to a private/public system in Canada are going to have the impact of increasing employers' costs for their employees, something which will create a disadvantage in competition for Canadians, something that perhaps the government wants to advocate but that we in the Official Opposition certainly will not be advocating.

Mr. Speaker, that sort of answers at least some of the arguments that I think are important to put on the table as to why we need public health care.

The third component is really the issue of: why do we need a consultation on this matter of private versus public? The best answer, as I alluded to earlier, is that the health summit crafted by government, their own public relations people -- they had all of it laid out, and lo and behold, the people who were there decided that they wanted to talk about the issue of private versus public. Despite all of the government's attempts to avoid the discussion, it was one that came up and was raised on many, many occasions within the health summit. So a thinking government would look at that reality and say, "Gee; you know, maybe we need to do some consultation and go out and talk to Albertans about this whole issue of private versus public health care."

4:10

The poll that was given to the participants there by Michael Heffring was a very interesting poll. Of course it identified that by far and wide the top-of-mind issue for Albertans, the concern about what's happening with their government, is this whole issue of health care. Given that the government has tried to do its consultation spin arguments, it has never really gone out and talked to Albertans and listened to their concerns, their fears, their hopes, and their aspirations for the Alberta and the Canadian health care system.

You know, this government has done public consultations with Albertans in an all-party format on issues like grazing leases, prisoner voting, justice. There are many that we could list. But for the single biggest issue, top of mind for Albertans, the biggest single cost in terms of government expenditure, what's puzzling is why on earth the government refuses to go out and listen to Albertans about this issue.

We believe that an all-party committee could perhaps provide

some help to this government. Everywhere I go in Alberta, from the outskirts of Edmonton to the heart of the north, right across the province Albertans are concerned about health care. They're concerned about this government's apparent plan to disintegrate the public system in favour of the private system. We don't know what's happening with Bill 37. We don't know what's happening with the blue-ribbon panel. We haven't heard about the results from the health care summit, although the results were pretty apparent for anybody that was there.

So what we are suggesting is that there be a full and thoughtful consultation with Albertans to explore the issues that Albertans want to explore in the health care system. Certainly this issue of private versus public is one that would generate a good deal of discussion. The government might hear some things it doesn't want to hear, but surely to goodness our role as legislators is to listen to the people, not the interests, and to be able to provide to Albertans the commitment, the plan, the indication that there will be in fact a sustainable health care system in this province 25 years from now, after all of us have left this Legislative Assembly. That's what we're fighting for. That's why we believe this would be a very supportive, important discussion, to identify those parts of the health care system that can be built on perhaps a private delivery model but to save and preserve always the single-payer model of health care which has served this country and this province well and which we believe can serve it into the future.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

THE DEPUTY SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Drayton Valley-Calmar.

MR. THURBER: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise today to speak in opposition to Motion 504 sponsored by the hon. Member for Edmonton-McClung. While I do appreciate the obvious intent of ensuring that Albertans are given the opportunity to bring forth their views concerning health care in our province, I can't support this motion because much of what it seeks to accomplish or to do is already being done in Alberta.

Mr. Speaker, I would like to address two important points regarding Motion 504 which seem to have been overlooked. First, I would like to reaffirm that the present health care system in Alberta is and continues to be a priority in this province and by this government. Second, I would like to illustrate how this government is already providing much of what is proposed in Motion 504.

Mr. Speaker, in accordance with the Canada Health Act, Albertans are provided with full coverage for medically necessary physician and hospital services. The health of Albertans is one of this government's main priorities. As a result, Alberta provides and will continue to provide extra service above and beyond those required by the Canada Health Act.

Mr. Speaker, our publicly funded health system is a cherished part of Alberta's tradition of caring for the needs of its people. Over the years Alberta's health care system has grown larger and much more complex, evolving into a quality system which is amongst the best in the world and is recognized by many as that. The evolution of such a system has required the financial commitment of this government. In fact, health care spending is Alberta's single largest expenditure, representing more than 30 percent of total government program spending. This is a significant part of the provincial economy, and for this reason health care remains a main priority for Albertans and for this government.

Alberta relies on health professionals, health administrators, and users of the health system to identify pressure points and problem areas. Through consultation and discussion this government ensures

that necessary health services continue to be an integral part of the publicly funded health care constantly maintained by this government. As this also is the aim of Motion 504, I am forced to ask what purpose would be served by using tax dollars to fund a provincewide consultation when such a process already exists.

Mr. Speaker, this government realizes that there are concerns regarding the future of health care in Alberta, and it is for this very reason that public consultations and discussions have been initiated. We want to know how Albertans feel about the state of health care in this province. We want to know if the health care needs of Albertans are being met and what improvements can be made to ensure that we are providing the best possible health care services while maintaining the balance between fiscal responsibility and quality care. The issues are not simple, nor are they easy, but they can be resolved through mutual understanding, a desire to listen to the views of everyone, and a willingness to carefully analyze all of the facts and data before making the decisions.

Solutions will not be found overnight, but this government believes that through consultations the process of shared learning and examination will lead to positive improvements within the system. We will continue to work hard towards improving the quality of health care as well as increasing efficiency within the system. This is important as the population of this province continues to grow and the average age of Albertans increases. These changes translate into greater demands being placed on this health care system.

Mr. Speaker, for these reasons the very nature of health care spending has changed. Funds are now being directed towards specific areas of the health care system where clearly identified results need to be achieved. The Alberta government values our publicly funded health care system and is making every effort to ensure that as health care evolves to meet the needs of Albertans, it will be protected, not just for today but for the years to come.

Alberta has one of the best health care systems not only in North America but in the world. This fact is one in which Albertans take great pride and associate it with our national identity. We only have to look at the hard work and commitment of the many Albertans who provide health care services and support the system in many ways to fully understand the reason why we are blessed with such a quality system. Albertans also feel a strong sense of responsibility for our health care system. In co-operation with the government Albertans have always been prepared to face difficult issues and to try new approaches in health care. Mr. Speaker, Albertans are truly committed to sustaining today's health system while looking at ways of improving performance and in terms of value and efficiency. This government encourages Albertans to provide their input on the present and future roles of health care.

As we approach the beginning of a new millennium and the many unknowns that lie ahead, Mr. Speaker, Albertans are understandably concerned about the long-term viability and sustainability of the health system and the role of private, for-profit health care services within the system. It is for this reason the provincial government has initiated public consultation through the blue-ribbon panel, the Health Summit '99, and the workbooks provided to Albertans for Albertans to voice their views on paper and send back to this government. This government believes that health is everyone's business and everyone has a stake in the future of that system.

4:20

Mr. Speaker, Motion 504 urges the government to consult with Albertans on our health care system to evaluate the role of private, for-profit health care in Alberta. This government does consult regularly with Albertans on issues concerning this province. In fact,

efforts to ensure Albertans have the opportunity to share their insight and to create recommendations are one of the main priorities of this government. Recent consultations regarding health care in the province as well as debate surrounding Bill 37, the Health Statutes Amendment Act, in the Assembly last session deem this motion as clearly unnecessary and repetitious.

During the 1998 fall session Bill 37, the Health Statutes Amendment Act, generated a great deal of debate and discussion regarding the role of private, for-profit health providers in the delivery of health services. In response to concerns expressed by Albertans regarding Bill 37, a panel was organized to ensure the legislation met the stated objective of protecting the publicly funded health system from the potential negative effects of private treatment facilities. The role of the blue-ribbon panel was to review the wording of Bill 37 and provide a professional and independent evaluation of the bill. This panel is expected to report its recommendations in early March of this year. So as you can see, Mr. Speaker, this government is listening to Albertans in many ways and is ensuring that our high standards in quality health care are being maintained within the parameters of fiscal responsibility and efficiency.

Mr. Speaker, another step this government has taken to ensure Albertans have the opportunity to express their views regarding health care in the province is Health Summit '99. The goal of this summit was to have participants look at different and significant ways to improve our current system and to build a framework for the future of health care in Alberta. Stakeholders, professionals, and members of the public were brought together to analyze the current situation and make recommendations to ensure the long-term stability of our system. I have spoken to people who participated in the health summit, and they were very pleased with the process and the ability they had to input information into the whole summit. They came away feeling really good about the whole process. We all share a common goal of having the most effective and affordable health system possible and therefore have a role to play in determining the path to follow in developing our health system of the future.

Mr. Speaker, the publicly funded health system has deep roots in our society. It reflects our strongest values. For this reason we must respect it as a legacy that needs enhancement and protection as we pass it on to our future generations. The health of Albertans is one of this government's main priorities, and for this reason Alberta will continue to provide extra services in addition to those required by the Canada Health Act.

This government does value the views of Albertans and believes in consultations when the need arises. While Alberta Health and this government await the reports from the blue-ribbon panel on Bill 37 and Health Summit '99, which are expected at the end of this month, our health care system, which has served us well in the past, will continue to do so in the future.

With that said and after careful consideration of this motion, it is evident that Motion 504 will not achieve anything new. Therefore, Mr. Speaker, I will not be supporting Motion 504. Albertans have sent this government a clear message, which is to strike an appropriate balance between fiscal responsibility and maintaining a quality system to serve our province. Albertans can rest assured that we are listening to Albertans. We hear them all the time. We have many ways of consulting with them.

Again, Mr. Speaker, as I said, I cannot support this. I served in the capacity of chairman of the health caucus under this hon. member from the opposition when she was Minister of Health. I know her meaning behind this is all well and good, but I would urge all members not to support this motion at this time.

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

MS OLSEN: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. You know, I'm really disappointed that I have to rise on a motion urging the government to undertake a broad public consultation on the role of private, for-profit hospitals in health care. I find it disturbing because this government is a government who would choose to have a referendum, a form of public consultation, on whether or not to use an extraordinary clause to override the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms against minorities in this province but won't consult publicly on the most top-of-mind issue of Albertans, private health care, and discuss private versus public service delivery in the health care system.

However, it appears that it is this government's intent to start down the slippery slope of providing the climate where private hospitals become legitimized. Private hospitals have only one motive, and that's profit. It's a business, and when we look to the south and around the world, it's big business. This system separates the rich from the poor. It leads to inadequate care for those with life-threatening or debilitating diseases or to outright refusal of care. If you have money, you get the Buick with the driver. If you don't, you may be lucky if you get the retrofitted Volkswagen.

I am concerned that if this government continues to privatize health care, Albertans will never be able to look back. We will have a private system that will progressively creep into the overall health care environment, lessening the need for public health care. This government will be responsible for creating a private system that will mirror the U.S. and Great Britain and Australia. It will also be riddled with the same problems that exist in those countries.

Health care was a major issue in the 1997 election in Britain. Christopher Graffius wrote in his book, *Election 97: A Christian View of the Major Issues*, that there was no consensus by anyone on the state of the national health care service. Roy Lilley, the former chair of Homewood Trust and a pioneer of health care reforms in Britain, stated that the NHS would collapse in the very near future, apparently due to its inability to fund costly treatments and escalating demands. Philip Hunt refuted Lilley's comments. Hunt, the director of the National Association of Health Authorities, claimed that the NHS was one of the most robust health systems in the world. However, another health care professional, outgoing chair of the NHS Trust Federation, stated that the future of the universal provision of free hospital care is under threat from the growing demand on services. His comments were then contradicted by yet another health care professional, Peter Lilley. Finally, Sir Duncan Nichol, a former chair of the NHS, stated that the gap between demand and provision is unlikely to close. He has called for the prioritization of services and the increased use of private health care.

You may wonder why this is relevant. Well, I sense that Albertans are as confused about the contradictory messages they are getting from this government. Then last year Bill 37 came into the mix, causing further concern or furor. If the Premier doesn't keep his ministers informed of what decisions he's making, why should Albertans trust this government to give them the right information? This was exemplified by the Premier's announcement on the Dave Rutherford show -- that is, PC public radio -- that he would be holding a health summit. But guess what? He forgot to tell the Health minister. Minister Jonson was on the news quoted as saying: this is the first I've heard about it.

Albertans won't be bamboozled, Mr. Speaker. We recognize privatization in this province. It's not like it hasn't happened before; it's a continuation of a trend. We have seen this government argue with the federal government, doctors, nurses, and other health care workers about defining essential services. We also know that this Conservative government was going down the private road. According to Mark Lisac, in a report entitled *Starting Points* released

in 1993 . . . [Ms Olsen's speaking time expired]

Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I will continue my debate at another time.

THE DEPUTY SPEAKER: I regret having to interrupt the hon. Member for Edmonton-Norwood, but the time limit for consideration of this item of business has concluded for today.

head: Government Bills and Orders
head: Third Reading
4:30

Bill 1
Fiscal Responsibility Act

MR. HANCOCK: Mr. Speaker, it's with pleasure that I move on behalf of the Premier Bill 1, Fiscal Responsibility Act, for third reading.

This is a very significant act in the life of Alberta and the life of this government in that we're moving now from a period of time under the old Balanced Budget and Debt Retirement Act, in which the government has achieved fiscal stability in this province in a record period of time, into a new era where we're trying to achieve the balance between the continuing requirement for fiscal responsibility, keeping the books balanced and keeping our fiscal house in order, with the responsibility that we have as a government to deal with the pressures related to a growing population, a growing population because of the advantage that we have in Alberta, both a tax advantage and the environmental advantage, the advantage that we have from our natural resources and the advantage we have from our communities being a great place to live.

It's entirely responsible and important that we move with Bill 1, Fiscal Responsibility Act, into a process where we legislate a 3 and a half percent estimated revenue cushion, a cushion which protects us from some of the wild variances we've had in revenue estimations and in actual revenue received in this province, because to a great extent we're still moving from an era where we relied on income from our natural resources to the new economy where we're relying on a much more balanced structure, which has been achieved because of the fiscal responsibility that we've had over the past three years.

So it's a very important act, and I trust that members will see fit to pass this act into law at the earliest possible opportunity. I look forward to comments perhaps from the members opposite and perhaps from the Provincial Treasurer.

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

DR. NICOL: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's a real privilege to stand this afternoon and address third reading of Bill 1. This is an interesting piece of legislation. I recollect coming into the Legislature in 1993 and everybody then was talking about fiscal responsibility and what it meant: what it meant in the context of balanced budgets, what it meant in the context of providing services that are the mandate of government in an effective way, in an efficient way, and in a way that is open and transparent. This is kind of the basis against which I look at fiscal responsibility. But then I also have a detriment, I guess, or a flaw in my character: with my economic background I always look at it in the context of "Is it right?"

[Mrs. Gordon in the chair]

We look at how the government is proposing to deal with their fiscal management in the context of Bill 1. I could go down the different areas of it. Yes, paying off our debt is a good program.

It's a good idea, something we should all vote for. It's the kind of thing that a province should maintain a reasonable approach to in terms of the rate that it commits to paying off that debt. It then goes into an issue of continuing the prohibition of annual deficit anytime during the course of the fiscal year, that kind of thing, and you run there into the problem of trying to put a balance: how do you have a cushion that allows for unexpected changes in revenue?

The government has basically taken the approach of using a 3 and a half percent -- what do you want to call it? -- built-in surplus that they have to deal with. While we still have a debt, this is a very effective way, I guess, of doing it in the context that you're always going to be able to accelerate your debt payment. Then you'll be able to stand up and say: oh, wow; we paid off our debt faster than our plan; we didn't need our cushion at the end of the year, so we can put it into the debt, or we can buy a few votes with onetime expenditures.

The proper way to do that is to put in place a savings account, like you and I do as individuals. We make a commitment that we're not going to borrow the money to do it, which means we go into debt. Well, we've made a commitment here not to go into debt, so the other thing to do is save and use our savings account for unexpected contingencies.

We had an amendment to this act that would have allowed the government to balance their revenues, balance their expenditures in a rational, objective way but build a stability account or a savings account they could use as a cushion in years when their expected revenue projection -- because of the uncertainty and the recognition by almost all Albertans of that uncertainty, there needed to be this cushion. So we had to deal with that. We talked about a stability fund amendment. Unfortunately, the government defeated it.

What we've got now is a situation where if in 25 years the debt is paid off, this mechanism we have for fiscal responsibility, for fiscal management will continuously create a surplus fund in the province of Alberta. What do we do with that surplus from one year to the next? We can't build it into our revenue. So what do we do? Give it back to the taxpayers every year as a tax rebate? Basically, that creates an awful lot of administration and an awful lot of delay in providing Albertans with the consumer dollars that they can spend and effectively keep our economy running. So from that perspective, there are really good arguments as to why a stability fund is better than this revenue cushion, the way the government has put it out.

We also end up with a proposal in this bill that would allow for a contingency. In essence, if the 3 and a half percent cushion that is defined here isn't quite enough, the government can dip into the interest returns of the heritage fund and take away the legislated part of the heritage fund that is required to maintain its inflation stability, to keep it in real dollars.

Effectively what they've done is they've created a stability fund in the context of the inflationary payment that is being legislated for the heritage fund. So what they've done in essence is put both of the systems together. The problem is that there's no way to pay back what they take out of the heritage fund in one year. So what we're going to see is that over time the heritage fund, which was put away -- and I think this is what Albertans expressed when the heritage fund review was there, that it be put away to allow for future generations to have some of the amenities and some of the benefits and some of the resource earnings that we have now from our depletable resources in the context of our oil and gas in this province.

What we're effectively going to do is over time either build a surplus, if the government is constantly optimistic in their balance between revenue and expenditure projections, or they're going to gradually erode the heritage fund as they continue to take away that inflation-proofing component and use it as part of their expenditure pattern.

I guess what we have to do is look at this in the context of how fundamental it is as a statement from government. As I mentioned at the start, fiscal responsibility is important. Fiscal responsibility is important in the context of my constituents. Even though a number of them are concerned about how this operationalizes itself, they recognize that it's only legislation. Madam Speaker, I've convinced them that when we get to be government after the next election, we can change this into a really effective piece of legislation, and then we'll have the kind of fiscal responsibility that we need. In the meantime, this is probably acceptable, and we can let it be put in place in the interim.

Thank you, Madam Speaker.

MR. DAY: I didn't know if the Member for Lethbridge-East was talking about coming over here because he wanted to be in government. I don't know if I heard that correctly, but there was some reference about him being in government.

Madam Speaker, from my perspective, concluding remarks on this particular bill, the Premier's bill. The Premier has always been and continues to be focused on the priority of Albertans, and Albertans have said so clearly, so strongly, and so consistently that debt pay-down is an absolute priority for them. Albertans know and understand that carrying that debt and carrying the interest payments is not productive. Just this last year we've seen in fact the exchange rate, where it had been predicted to be around 74 cents, averaging about 66.3 cents or somewhere in that neighbourhood. That alone, on top of the \$1.2 billion we were already paying or plan to pay this year just on interest costs, ballooned up another \$177 million. Debt makes us vulnerable. There's no doubt, no question about that. I think members opposite and the Member for Lethbridge-East agree with that. So we're talking about some differences of opinion in a minor way with the actual bill.

Looking at the broad brush, this particular bill will guarantee that debt continues to remain a focus. As a matter of fact, it puts more bite back into the business planning process. Each minister individually and the government corporately have to be very careful about their initial budget projections because that will have a profound effect on what happens to the revenue cushion as we move through the year.

I think, Madam Speaker, it's an item of concern that has been raised related to the heritage fund. I've explained it to members at different times. I'll try just one more time. The act itself, when the revenue cushion in those times increases, allows for the possibility not just of paying down debt but in fact of increasing assets. That was put in there very specifically with an eye to the heritage savings trust fund as an asset. That asset can be increased if there's an increase in that revenue cushion and -- I'll be careful to underline this -- if the inflation rate should warrant it. This last year it wouldn't warrant it, coming in at about .8 percent.

I share the concerns of the Member for Lethbridge-East in terms of the fund being eroded. That's something we don't want to see happen. We think that by the end of this year we will take in interest alone on that fund some \$774 million, and that goes straight to health and education and the other priority program areas for Albertans.

4:40

This particular act, Madam Speaker, guarantees that debt will be paid down. It puts, as I said, an extra bite into the business planning process and allows for our infrastructure needs to be addressed. As you know, there is somewhere in the neighbourhood of a billion dollars presently being spent on capital and infrastructure across government. The capital infrastructure committee has identified the

areas of need that continue to be out there, and on a onetime basis those particular areas of need can be addressed and accelerated if we in fact, as we move through here, realize and are able to maintain this particular revenue cushion.

So it's a matter, as we've said -- we talk about striking the right balance. We've already put significant dollars into infrastructure and capital to handle the explosive growth we've had in the province. We'll be able to continue to do that. We'll take 25 percent of that cushion and do that and in a planned way. The priorities for spending there, in terms of whether it's health facilities or road infrastructures or our waterway infrastructures -- whatever those might be, there's a planned approach to dealing with that. A number of those projects each year, if the revenue cushion is realized, can be accelerated. All in all, it is striking the right balance, Madam Speaker.

I think it's a very exciting act. It shows, demonstrates to the federal government that, in fact, legislating your debt pay-down does work. I've tried to convince the federal Finance minister of this. We've proven it with the Balanced Budget and Debt Retirement Act. It looks like we will eliminate the net debt well before the year 2010, as was required; this, Madam Speaker, as we've gone out to Albertans and received their priorities from across the province and also some 80,000 responses, in terms of the brochure which we sent out in October, suggesting we should keep approximately the same pace of pay-down.

I think it's exciting that we are one province that certainly stands out by having this type of legislation. We encourage the federal government to also follow it. It does work. It's going to continue to work. It's what Albertans want.

THE ACTING SPEAKER: The hon. leader of the ND opposition.

MS BARRETT: Thank you, Madam Speaker. I won't repeat all of the statistics that I read into the record at second reading of this bill. Let me just remind members and anybody reading this record of debate after the fact that for every year that the government was engaged in deficit and debt hysteria, it was also presenting budgets that were way off the mark in terms of overestimating expenditures and underestimating revenues, to the point that every single year the government turned in a surplus of \$2 billion and one year more than \$3 billion between 1993-94 and '98-99. Because of the government's previous legislation that said that all pennies accrued in surplus must go exclusively to net debt pay-down, there was no money left over for contingency requirements such as to fill the gaping holes that appeared in our health and education systems and in programs for seniors and social services in general.

That being said, I remind members that the government could not by accident have just turned in multibillion dollar surpluses for seven consecutive years. That was not an accident. I believe it was deliberate. It was meant to fast-track what the government said in the 1993 election would be an orderly pay-down of the net debt. It is for that reason that I again state my objections to this legislation. The government says it wants an orderly plan for the pay-down of the accumulated debt, but I have every reason to believe that the government will also fast-track this.

Now, I'd like to look at some figures that a volunteer researcher, a former MLA actually, Alex McEachern, put together for me. He makes a very good point. If you've got a heritage trust fund that's worth about \$12 billion and you earn interest on it of about \$500 million, that gives you an asset worth \$12.5 billion. Mind you, if you look at the accumulated debt and you say that that is \$12 billion, if you pay down \$500 million, then what you end up with is a \$11.5 billion debt.

The argument that I'm putting forward here is that it makes just as much sense to use money that you're making from your trust fund investments as opposed to funneling surplus dollars that you know the government is going to come up with into a very restrictive channel, that being net debt pay-down. The reason I make this argument is of course because of the damage that was done to people services during that breakneck-speed race to pay down the net debt, which you would have thought was the beginning and the end of the story if you read *Hansard* between the years 1993 and 1997. I never bought into that and in fact did several editorials against supporting that kind of legislation because it went hand in hand with severe cuts.

I contend that the announcement released by the Ministry of Health this morning of the health care funding plan for the next three years is an admission that more money now needs to be spent to fix health care than would have been required had it been stable between those four years that I've cited. In other words, it costs more to fix it than it would have to just fund it properly to begin with. I don't want to see Alberta stuck in that situation again. I don't want to see the people of Alberta stuck in that situation. I frankly don't care about the government itself, when it has demonstrated the absence of leadership when it comes to quality of life and support for the institutions which provide for the common good, which is the sole purpose that we collect taxes for.

Oh, dangling participle; sorry. I'm almost done, though, so I'll try not to repeat the offence. I see no points of order being raised, Madam Speaker, so I'm probably okay. [interjection] I had a dangling participle. I'm sorry.

In any event, I will not be supporting this bill at third reading not because its essence isn't decent but because the details are not decent. At the very least it should be a 50-50 split. At the very least it should have an escape clause, and at the very least it requires government demonstrating for the first time in a long time that it's doing its accounting properly in the budget and not accidentally coming up with multibillion dollar surpluses, a savings account to which Albertans have no access. That makes no sense. It's a forced savings account. The 25 percent that they're saying may be available is completely arbitrary. It's up to the government, not the Legislature, as to whether or not that money, that spare 25 percent, would be spent on people programs, on any programs that the government offers, or in fact the whole amount put into accumulated debt repayment. Ultimately, if the plan were to guarantee that this would be done over a 25-year period on an equal-footing basis -- in other words, let's say \$500 million a year -- I'm sure I could go along with that.

But there is no statutory safeguard against the government deliberately accelerating the process by cooking the books. I used to say that before about the other Provincial Treasurer, who cooked the books in the other direction consistently year after year. I have no faith that the government's budgeting process won't result in multibillion dollar surpluses in the coming years that will be dedicated to worse than accumulated debt pay-down. It's worse than that, because we still have the trust fund as an asset, a forced savings account to which Albertans have no access.

4:50

Let me conclude by saying that I ultimately say this on behalf of the poorest people in the province. I believe the riding that I live in and represent has the poorest people in the province and the largest amount, with those people having to try, if they're on social allowance, to live on just \$400 a month or a bit more and living in the shacks and the disgusting tenements that they live in. If they were aware that money was going into a forced savings account

while we've already got a very healthy trust fund, they would be very unhappy. I speak on their behalf because I believe they deserve a better crack at life and a better standard of living than what this government has been prepared to eke out and cut back over the last seven years.

[Motion carried; Bill 1 read a third time]

head: Government Bills and Orders
head: Second Reading

Bill 12
Domestic Relations Amendment Act, 1999

[Adjourned debate March 4: Ms Olsen]

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

MR. WHITE: Thank you, Madam Speaker. It's not really a pleasure to rise to speak to this item. This item of business is a poor exercise in fence building, to say the least. It goes out of its way to carve differences between Albertans. It does nothing to find solutions for those.

Let's review first the history of this matter. Those of us who were in this House -- and I don't think we've had any by-elections since then -- will remember the Vriend case, the case where the Alberta government through the Alberta Human Rights Commission would not recognize sexual orientation as a basis of discrimination. The case was the laughingstock of central Canada and does nothing to enhance the image which is currently held of us here, I believe: that Alberta is just chock-full of rednecks.

Well, the facts are that there's a great number of people here that do understand that tolerance and understanding is a way of life and it needn't be legislated in the proper sense, although the violations of that must be legislated. That's where a simple inclusion in the Human Rights Commission's valid reasons for hearing cases was in order and was proven to be in order by the Supreme Court decision. That decision went further than I thought necessary, but that's a personal opinion and certainly not an opinion that is shared by all.

Certainly since this House was reconvened this year, you'll remember some of the statements that have been made in this House. It is absolutely disastrous for any kind of public image afar and our own personal image right close at hand. It's difficult to explain to my children how they should be tolerant and understanding, as they are teenagers. It's easy for them to see differences and to call names and to be generally hurtful. Fortunately my two sons are not like that, in general, because we've had the opportunity to do some travel and have been in places where we were in the minority and easily discriminated against because of our skin colour or eye colour or our height. Fortunately they have learned.

Others in this House don't seem to have done so. We heard the comments yesterday, which I needn't repeat. We heard the comments earlier last week or the week before of a minister of the Crown yelling into the microphone something about "normal people," presumably meaning that therefore they -- the subject of the moment was gays and lesbians -- would not and could not possibly be considered normal people. Those kinds of statements are absolutely hurtful.

We heard earlier this week of a motion that was withdrawn because it again divided citizens on one side of the fence or the other. It was Motion 503, I believe, something about communal rights and, as I understand, was aimed at some Hutterite colonies around the province, which do have a right to exist. And I might add . . .

THE ACTING SPEAKER: The hon. Government House Leader.

Point of Order
Imputing Motives

MR. HANCOCK: Madam Speaker, under 23(h) and (i). The member is speaking about, for example, Motion 503 and imputing to the person who put the motion on the table and withdrew the motion what that member might have intended, when in fact that motion has never even been discussed in the House and he can't possibly know what that member was intending.

There were other items in the past three minutes. In listening to this member, he's also referred to other incidents in the House and again has made allegations and imputations. I would request that you ask the member to withdraw those improper allegations and imputations and continue on debate on the bill at hand.

THE ACTING SPEAKER: On the point of order, the hon. Member for Edmonton-Calder.

MR. WHITE: Thank you, Madam Speaker. It seems to me that that side of the House is particularly sensitive in this matter. It would be much easier if these people would deal with the actions at hand and contain themselves. It would give this member nothing to talk about if the other side had contained themselves in a reasonable manner. In speaking of . . .

THE ACTING SPEAKER: On the point of order, Edmonton-Calder.

MR. WHITE: Speaking on the point of order, yes. Madam Speaker, we were speaking about that which I recalled, and I was saying that it would not have been necessary. However, being necessary as it was to mention these things, it wasn't imputing any motive. There was in fact a withdrawal. I said, "as I understand," if you read the Blues carefully: as I understood what the intent was. Now, I may have been mistaken, and there's ample opportunity in further debate to clarify the matter certainly.

THE ACTING SPEAKER: Very, very quickly, Edmonton-Calder, please.

MR. WHITE: Okay.

There were also some statements clearly heard by all; those statements have been made in the House. They have been discussed and withdrawn.

I can't see that there'd be a point of order at all. I did not impute any motives.

THE ACTING SPEAKER: The bill that we have before us is the Domestic Relations Amendment Act, moved by the hon. Member for Calgary-Lougheed. I listened intently to her opening remarks the other day. I don't recall anything in it about Motion 503 or some other areas that you brought up recently.

Second reading is where we discuss the principles of the bill. I would ask that you stick to the principles of the bill. As I said, I listened intently to the hon. member the other day, and a lot of what you have said in the last five minutes is not in the bill.

Debate Continued

MR. WHITE: Thank you, Madam Speaker. Speaking to the principles of the bill. The principles of the bill do not contain some fundamental element that should be contained: equality of all. That's in fact what this bill is about. But it's the antithesis of that,

going in the opposite direction. It is carving differences.

I might review some history of this party, too, that members of this particular government may not remember. There was in '74 or '75 a filing in this House by a noted member at the time from Calgary-Buffalo, I believe, a gentleman by the name of Ron Ghitler. He's now a Progressive Conservative Member of the Senate. He published a report called *Tolerance and Understanding*. That report did a great deal to outline the establishment of the Human Rights Commission and lay it bare what Albertans should stand for. That came from the original bill of one Edgar Peter Lougheed, who was elected in August of 1971 to be the Premier, the first Progressive Conservative Premier of this long tenure of government. His first bill was a Bill of Rights for all Albertans. That was a very, very good bill. Those of us that remember it are really quite proud and pleased to be associated with the government of that day. I guess you can say that was then and this is now.

5:00

The change has been unbelievably great. The tolerance and understanding seems to have left this government entirely. There was a time then that all persons were regarded as equal, regardless of socioeconomic standing, regardless of station in society, regardless of religion, creed, colour, size, shape, employment standard, all of that. They were treated equal under the law. There doesn't seem to be that same inclination here.

I recall that the Premier just the other day in replying to a question I think raised by this side of the House on matters surrounding Bill 12, not Bill 12 specifically, rose and chastised this side of the House for not having a position on gay and lesbian rights. Well, he demanded that this side of the House state their position clearly at that moment, when he admitted and earlier said in his statements that he was looking to a March 18 caucus meeting of government where this matter would be discussed and they would have a position.

Well, it has always been my understanding of how this Legislature works that the government proposes and then opposition members are to oppose parts of it or to at least find holes. Now, if there aren't any holes to find, then the legislation does pass. Well, that's a strange way of demanding service of the opposition -- to have their position put first -- and it goes to show that there is some division in all Albertans on this matter and particularly the Albertans that serve on the other side of the House. There is great division on this matter, and I can understand why.

I recall a report brought to light by I think it was Mr. Geddes of the *Edmonton Journal*, and it's titled a confidential strategy paper on this matter. It outlined precisely what the problems were. The problems there for this government are really rather difficult, and they again reflect the makeup of this Legislature, where half the folks say one thing and half the folks say another. Most of us say: "Look; we didn't want to hear the question in the first place. It doesn't affect me personally. However, it does affect a lot of citizens, so we will have to make a decision here." Well, this kind of question polarizes, in the negative, citizens of Alberta to a great extent, and this piece of legislation does nothing to aid that.

This is building fences. Building fences around things means keeping something separate, keeping people separate in this particular case, keeping them different than each other and pointing those differences out. Now, I don't have to go around and do that, and I don't imagine most members of this House do. I'll point out one particular part of the poll where it says:

Whether provincial laws should treat gays the same as everyone else when it comes to marriage, adoption and foster parenting, 47 per cent [of the people] agreed, 48 per cent disagreed.

Now, it's really darn difficult to carve a line and set a law, and it's

difficult for a government to do that, recognizing that the government may not have had to do that if this government had had a simple agreement in the Vriend case. That's not to agree that that case should have been won or lost but to believe that the case should have been heard. That's the important thing. Quite frankly, I'm not sure how I would rule if I was allowed to do so, but one thing for sure is that case had to be and should be included in the Human Rights Commission's allowance to hear a case, and it was denied by this government, which was an error and was pointed out to be an error.

Some of the other findings of the report were that 52 percent of those polled said that same-sex couples should be entitled to some spousal benefits -- now, the definition of "some" could be at variance of course -- the same as heterosexual couples. It didn't define those, so who knows what the 52 percent said. Fifty-seven percent said that "gay couples who have lived together for three to five years should have same obligations and benefits as heterosexual . . . couples."

Now, how can you justify that kind of finding with this kind of bill, that specifically outlines what a marriage would be, whether it be marriage in law in the proper sense of church or state, recognized and registered, or whether it be a common-law relationship that is recognized in law over cohabitation. That would say to me that there is the line. Now, that's the intent of this piece of legislation, and quite frankly it definitely tells those 57 percent of those polled: "Hey, forget it. This government doesn't believe that. We're so right that we know exactly what the situation should be. We know how it should occur, and we don't need your advice."

If you took this bill on the road as we've had summit after summit after summit, take a minisummit, take a small group around to hear what the folks have said on this one, you'll find out that again you'll be split. But worse than that, when you go to a place and ask people, the reasonable people won't want to respond. What you will get at a hearing is you'll get all of those people from the ends of the scale that know exactly how God, Queen, and country should be run. There's no question about it in their mind. It doesn't matter. The rest of the world can be absolutely wrong, and they know what should be done in this society and absolutely know.

Point of Order Questioning a Member

MR. HANCOCK: Madam Speaker, I'm wondering if the hon. member would entertain a question.

THE ACTING SPEAKER: Would the hon. member entertain a question?

MR. WHITE: Madam Speaker, I normally would, but in this case it cuts into the time.

THE ACTING SPEAKER: You only answer yes or no, hon. member.

MR. WHITE: If the chair would extend time for the question, then I'd be happy to. Will the chair do that?

THE ACTING SPEAKER: No. We don't extend the time.

MR. WHITE: We don't do that. Well, then, Madam Speaker, he has every right to stand in this Assembly and speak at length.

MR. DICKSON: That's right. Twenty minutes.

MR. WHITE: Twenty minutes each member is allotted. I only have 20 minutes in this particular case, and I'm less than halfway through the notes here.

5:10

Debate Continued

MR. WHITE: Why would there be need for this kind of legislation now? I wonder: is there a clamouring need for it? Is there something earth-shattering that is going to occur? I don't see that this piece of legislation has to be. There are other suggestions . . .

THE ACTING SPEAKER: You are getting into the principle of the bill. Yes?

MR. WHITE: Yes. The principle and the timing too.

There's ample evidence to say that there's some middle ground here and some that's proposed by at least one member of a federal caucus that has some of the kin feelings to those opposite, some sort of kissing cousins. We can't use that term in this Legislature, certainly not as it relates to Bill 12.

I recall that the Premier in an opening address spoke at least in part to the principles of this bill -- I have to paraphrase here a bit, I'm afraid; I don't have the exact quote here -- when he was opening the United Alternative convention, which is an honour bestowed upon him by those members. I can remember hearing it and saying: gee, that's quite reasonable. His advice then was that a party that wishes to be a minimal government -- and a minimal government meaning to impose as little as possible on the personal lives of its citizens -- should then not make law to direct personal domestic relations.

Now, remember what the title of this bill is? Domestic Relations Amendment Act. This is butting in where there didn't seem to be any need, save and except for a ruling that was caused by inaction of this government, and this bill does nothing, absolutely nothing but divide and put those people aside.

I refer you to a letter received by most members of this Legislature. It was a copy which we all received. It was sent to Marlene Graham, MLA, on the 24th of February.

THE ACTING SPEAKER: No names, hon. member. It's the hon. Member for Calgary-Lougheed.

MR. WHITE: Madam Speaker, it's quoting from a letter. I was not referring to the Member for Calgary-Lougheed. In fact, that is who was identified -- isn't it? -- if you wish to identify her as such.

It was a letter from Ian McClelland, MP for Edmonton Southwest, and I presume that is allowed. He has a suggestion. He outlines that one of his sons is gay and has this long-term relationship, so he has a particularly good understanding of this situation. He recommends a registered domestic partnership to get around the difficulty, which is a reasonable solution. There are some others of course, and hopefully we'll be allowed to put those forward unless, of course, this bill is rightfully defeated in second reading, when it should be.

If it is not, we'll be putting forward an amendment. I suspect the Member for Calgary-Buffalo will be doing so as he has been artful in that kind of endeavour. It will be a solution to allow those, not necessarily gays and lesbians, that do have a domestic relationship other than those that are described here -- and it says: being one male and one female -- that will be able to take care of each other in perhaps older years or in a long-standing relationship that may in fact be disrupted by debt or some other reason.

Although it hasn't happened yet, I point to a hypothetical case that may happen between my mother and her sister, both of which have had a second marriage, and both have been widowed by that

marriage. Both of them are living independently at the moment, but they're getting older. They're into their 80s now, and they live very close and visit often. But there will come a day when one of the two of them will have to rely on the other for some service and will cohabit. One of the two could in fact end up being destitute. In this particular case it's not likely to happen, but it could well happen.

Now, in cohabitation and sharing all of these, why could they not just write a contract to be able to share the proceeds of . . . [Mr. White's speaking time expired]

I'm sorry, Madam Speaker.

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

MRS. SOETAERT: Thank you, Madam Speaker. It sounds like people want to unanimously agree for Edmonton-Calder to continue. [interjections] Actually, I hate to step in next in line, but I'm going to anyway.

Madam Speaker, this is an interesting bill. You know, there have been other departments in this government that have invited members of the opposition to sit down, and they tell them about the legislation coming up and what it will mean. I think it helps the process of this House, and I'm very grateful to the ministers who have done that certainly for me in my portfolio.

This, however, did not happen with the Minister of Justice, and that's too bad. Maybe he would've been forewarned about some of the difficulties that we see. Maybe he would have changed some things within it. Maybe he'd have taken it back to his caucus before there was an announcement of a caucus meeting where I'm sure they'll be scrummed and comments made and all kinds of publicity over something that really could have been better legislation.

I know that this bill actually was forced upon this government in a way. [interjection] Yeah, it was. So it has to be done by June, and I can accept that fact. I'm pleased that they are doing this.

I guess what's always difficult is -- I'm married. I've been married for 23 years. Raymond says that that's just not long enough. Poor guy. [interjections] I knew I was asking for this. [interjection] To a male, yes.

That's a very respected part of my life. It is part of my religion, part of my faith. When those marriages break up, that's sad. It hurts all of us, and it hurts our society. But people that come from a marriage are protected under the law.

I think what we have to accept in Alberta is that not everyone is like me. Not everyone's like you. And everybody's going: let's hope not. [interjections] I know. However, I think that collectively we have to accept the fact that it's not our role to judge. It's our role to make good legislation that is fair and equitable.

The part of this legislation that addresses common-law couples is good. There have been people that have left those relationships and been neglected or have ended up being supported by government when actually they had a partner that should have in some way compensated them so they could continue living without being dependent on government.

I think it's no secret that we have some concerns about that. You know what? What about same-sex couples being taken care of? And then I thought: let's forget the whole issue of gays and lesbians, because it just makes some people in here go a little bit wonky. Let's think about a brother and sister in a relationship.

5:20

MR. HANCOCK: Define "wonky."

MRS. SOETAERT: Define "wonky." Can't, but I'm sure it's not in *Beauchesne* either.

Madam Speaker, just think for a second. I know of a brother and sister who have lived together forever -- it seems that way -- and she is not capable of making the kind of income that her brother has been. In many ways her brother has supported her through the years. Would they not be able to sign a contract that would take care of her if for some reason he just walked away and left her? If they can, then that's good, but why are we defining the only kind of relationships that deserve fair and equal treatment? I don't think that's our call, yet we're doing that in this.

It's going to be contentious, and it's going to get press. It's going to create heartache and difficulties, and then people are going to go to court about some ruling at some date. I guess if we can make legislation as good as we can, then we would avoid many people being hurt and spending thousands of dollars to make a wrong right.

I have some concerns about the bill. I'm glad it's here, and I'm glad it's addressing one part of the problem, but I have some

concerns that we aren't treating everyone equally and fairly. No matter how people may personally feel about it, you can't just talk about that issue of fairness and equality. You have to live it.

I have some concerns about the bill, Madam Speaker, but with those concerns, I would like to adjourn debate on Bill 12.

THE ACTING SPEAKER: Having heard the motion by the hon. Member for Spruce Grove-Sturgeon-St. Albert, does the Assembly agree with the motion?

HON. MEMBERS: Agreed.

THE ACTING SPEAKER: Opposed? Carried.

[The Assembly adjourned at 5:23 p.m.]