

## Legislative Assembly of Alberta

Title: **Monday, March 15, 1999** 1:30 p.m.

Date: 99/03/15

[The Speaker in the chair]

head: Prayers

THE SPEAKER: Good afternoon. Let us pray.

As we begin our deliberations today, we ask You, O God, to surround us with the insight we need to do Your will to the benefit of our province and its people and to the benefit of our country.

Amen.

Hon. members today in 1906 was the opening of the First Session of the Legislature of the province of Alberta. That session was held in Edmonton's Thistle curling rink. Since that time hon. members may want to know that they have spent in the last 93 years over 1,010,000 minutes in deliberation in this parliament.

head: Presenting Petitions

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

MS LEIBOVICI: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure this afternoon to submit a petition urging 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.

There are 163 individuals from Edmonton, Sherwood Park, Spruce Grove, and Gibbons who have signed this petition.

Thank you.

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

MS CARLSON: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Today I would like to present a petition signed by 494 postsecondary students from throughout this province, primarily from Red Deer and Edmonton though. They are urging the government to revise the Alberta wilderness act proposal first read Monday, March 1. They have two very excellent suggestions that I hope the Minister of Environmental Protection will take into consideration.

THE SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Castle Downs.

MS PAUL: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise today to present a petition of 105 names. Some of them are from Lethbridge and out of town. The petition is supporting public and separate schools. It's from SOS, Save Our Schools. They're imploring that the government

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. Leader of the Official Opposition.

MRS. MacBETH: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Today I would like to table petitions from 337 Albertans from Grande Cache, from the Edmonton-McClung riding, from St. Albert, and from Spruce Grove, part of the Save Our Schools petitions that we of course have been bringing forward as we receive them. It's interesting to note that the total to date is 2,801 names.

Thank you.

head: Introduction of Bills

THE SPEAKER: The hon. Provincial Treasurer.

### Bill 19

#### Appropriation (Interim Supply) Act, 1999

MR. DAY: Mr. Speaker, as is usual at this time of year, I request leave to introduce Bill 19, the Appropriation (Interim Supply) Act, 1999. This being a money bill, His Honour the Honourable the Lieutenant Governor, having been informed of the contents of this bill, recommends the same to the Assembly.

As the bill clearly points out, this deals with various capital and operating expenses and capital investment from the general revenue fund and is presented and tabled now.

[Leave granted; Bill 19 read a first time]

head: Tabling Returns and Reports

THE SPEAKER: The hon. Minister of Transportation and Utilities.

MR. PASZKOWSKI: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It is my pleasure to table with the Assembly today five copies of Alberta Transportation and Utilities' three-year primary highway construction and rehabilitation program covering the years '99-2000 through to 2001-2002. Also included is the annual secondary highways construction program for the year '99-2000. Each rural MLA has received a copy of the project listing that applies to their individual constituency. Those MLAs whose constituencies are within a city have received information relating to the entire city. If any members would like a further copy of the report, they'll be available at my office.

We announced last year that we would early tender '99-2000 construction projects to the extent of 75 percent. We were actually successful to have 80 percent of the projects tendered by December of '98. Further to that we also announced that we would have half of our secondary projects tendered by that time, and indeed we've also done that.

So, Mr. Speaker, I'd like to table the five copies of our plan.

THE SPEAKER: The hon. Minister of Family and Social Services.

DR. OBERG: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I rise today to table four copies of the letter and the copy of the action plan that went to every AISH client as well as a summary of public consultations and the Angus Reid poll results.

THE SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Grande Prairie-Wapiti.

MR. JACQUES: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. With your permission I'm tabling five copies of the March 8 letter from Darlene Urness of Grande Prairie to myself. The letter expresses her concern regarding the loss of her WC pension upon remarriage.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

MRS. McCLELLAN: Mr. Speaker, today I have four tablings. First is a congratulatory letter to Team Alberta skip, Ken Hunka, and his team members congratulating them on their performance in the '99 Brier.

Second is to the Canadian Women's Hockey Team, who won the gold medal yesterday in a very exciting game in Finland, if any of the members were able to watch it.

The third is a letter to another University of Alberta Pandas team, this time the basketball team, who yesterday won their first Canadian

Interuniversity Athletic Union women's basketball championship.

Mr. Speaker, in addition I'm tabling with the Assembly five copies of the written responses to questions raised in lottery fund supplementary estimates on March 1, 1999.

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

MRS. FRITZ: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased to table five copies of a list of numerous community events and activities that are to be held throughout our province this week in recognition of the United Nations International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, which will be held this Sunday, March 21.

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

MRS. SOETAERT: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. With your permission I have two tablings. One is a letter to the chair of the funding framework review, the Member for Grande Prairie-Wapiti. It's requesting that the funding formula change to address the experience and education of teachers.

My second tabling is from l'école Woodhaven junior high school in Spruce Grove asking for these changes and what it will mean to their school unless the funding formula changes.

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

MS LEIBOVICI: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'd like to table this afternoon copies of the Calgary regional health authority news release wherein they indicated that with this new money Calgary will be able to sustain those service increases started in 1999 as we try to keep pace with the increased health care needs of a growing and aging population, but if the present growth and cost trends continue, we will not be able to meet everyone's needs and expectations.

Thank you.

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

MS CARLSON: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I have four tablings today. The first is a letter from the Alberta Wilderness Association, Peter Sherrington, the president, giving some clear examples to all Members of the Legislative Assembly about what is wrong with Bill 15, the Natural Heritage Act, in the Lakeland area.

The second tabling is a letter to the Premier with regard to Bill 15, the Natural Heritage Act. It is from R.D. Robinson, convener, who is writing on behalf of the environmental group Canadian Federation of University Women, Edmonton branch. She and the organization are also very concerned about Bill 15.

1:40

My third tabling is from the Sierra Club, prairie chapter. They have concerns about Alberta's current mandate regarding endangered species, in their protection and how they will be handled under Bill 15, Mr. Speaker.

My fourth tabling is from Elena Cecchetto, and she's writing about concerns of the loss of habitat that is resulting in the highest number of species becoming endangered and extinct in Alberta and across Canada, also concerns that won't be addressed in Bill 15.

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

MR. BONNER: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I beg leave to table the appropriate number of copies from Mrs. Corrinne Christopherson,

who's a member of the Disenfranchised Widows Action Group, urging the government to change their legislation and reinstate their pensions, as has been done in other Canadian provinces.

Thank you.

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

MR. MacDONALD: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I would like to table this afternoon five copies of a letter from the Schizophrenia Society of Alberta. Its president, Sharon Sutherland, outlines in this letter her concerns about the delivery of the AISH program across the province.

Thank you.

head: Introduction of Guests

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

MR. THURBER: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's a distinct pleasure for me to introduce to you and through you to the members of the Legislature a group of fine young citizens from Drayton Valley from the Eldorado elementary school. They were very polite and well mannered when I spoke to them earlier in the foyer. There are 57 of them, and they're accompanied here today by teachers Mrs. Hickman, Ms Kurylo, and Mrs. K. Wasylenchuk and parents Mrs. Balen, Mrs. Dusterhoft, Mrs. Westland, Mrs. Mikulin, and G. Waayenberg. I hope I got your names correct. They're in the members' gallery, and I would ask them all to rise at this time and accept the traditional warm welcome of this House.

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

MR. BONNER: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I'd like to introduce to you and through you to Members of the Legislative Assembly 17 students from Archbishop O'Leary high school, which is situated in Glengarry constituency. They're accompanied by their teacher, Mr. John Gagliardi, student teacher Mr. Scot McGhee, and a faculty adviser from the University of Alberta, Mr. John Sikora. They are seated in the public gallery, and with your permission I would ask that they now rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of the House.

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

DR. MASSEY: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure to introduce to you and through you to members of the Assembly three teachers, Mary Johnston, Julia Kendal, and Andrea Mercer, and 24 students from J. Percy Page high school. These are English as a Second Language students. They're in the public gallery, and with your permission I'd ask that they stand and receive the traditional welcome of the Assembly.

THE SPEAKER: The hon. Minister of Transportation and Utilities.

MR. PASZKOWSKI: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure this afternoon to introduce to you and through you to all the members of this Assembly Daniel Loughney, director of marketing with the port of Vancouver in Washington state, and Jerry Klein, vice-president of sales, and Ken Edwards, operations, with Marine Terminals Corporation in Vancouver, Washington. They're visiting Alberta, sharing with us some of the options that are available in moving products into export position. I'd now like to ask the honoured gentlemen to rise and to receive the usual warm welcome of this Assembly.

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

MRS. SOETAERT: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure to introduce to and through you to the members of the Assembly two young women who go to Nellie McClung school. They are Erin Payne and Amanda McNabb. They're doing a project on women in politics, and we had quite an intensive interview this afternoon. They are here also with Ron Williams, a good friend of many people in this Assembly. I would ask them all to please rise and receive the warm welcome of this Assembly.

THE SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Olds-Didsbury-Three Hills.

MR. MARZ: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's a real pleasure today to introduce to you and through you to the members of this Assembly the wife and daughter of a good friend and colleague of all of ours from Wetaskiwin-Camrose. I'd like to ask that the wife, Dianne Johnson, and daughter Lana Durand, who hails from Victoria, B.C., and teaches in Duncan, please stand and accept the warm welcome of this Assembly.

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

MR. HERARD: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's a real honour today to introduce through you to the members of the Assembly three constituents of mine who are here to watch the procedures with regards to democracy: Jerry Spotowski with his wife, Jean, and daughter Jessica. I'd like them to rise and receive the warm wishes of the Assembly.

Thank you.

head: Oral Question Period

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

### **Tax Reform**

MRS. MacBETH: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. By now Albertans are well aware that the only tax cut they'll be getting in the upcoming fiscal year is the one that the federal government will be giving out. Yet in last Thursday's budget the government claimed that its reformed tax plan is designed to reward working people. In fact, the Alberta Tax Reform Commission pointed out that 688,000 Albertans earning between \$30,000 and \$100,000 pay 63 percent of the tax bills in this province. My questions are to the Premier. Why is the Premier telling these 688,000 Albertans who earn between \$30,000 and \$100,000 and pay 63 percent of the bills for this government that they are less important under the government's reformed tax plan than the 7,000 Albertans who are earning a quarter of a million dollars or more?

MR. KLEIN: Mr. Speaker, it seems that the hon. leader of the Liberal opposition is taking her lead again from the New Democrats.

MS BARRETT: My numbers are better.

MR. KLEIN: She says that her numbers are better.

Mr. Speaker, this is a three-year plan that will significantly reduce taxes across the board. I can tell you that the greatest beneficiaries of this plan will be those people earning less than \$30,000 a year.

I'll have the hon. Provincial Treasurer supplement.

MR. DAY: That's exactly correct, Mr. Speaker. I'll table -- and I

should have done this earlier, but since I'm referencing it, I realize I have to table it right now -- the actual calculation on personal income tax under our new system. When the plan is completed -- and I'm using the same comparison numbers. The only thing the Liberals got right in their panicked press release on Friday after the budget was well received even by Liberals in Ottawa was the date. I'm using the same date comparisons, and basically if you go from \$0 to \$100,000, there's a hundred thousand different levels of income.

I'm breaking it into three groups, the high income first. If you are a family bringing in about \$100,000 -- that would be two teachers, for instance, or a teacher and a nurse. That family will experience overall by the time the plan is fully implemented a reduction of about 9 percent. For the larger middle-income group just referenced by the opposition leader, those families will experience a reduction on average -- because it varies whether they're at the \$35,000 end or, say, at the \$75,000 end -- of about 18 percent in their income, so twice, then, what the high-income earners are receiving in terms of reduction. At the low end, \$30,000 approximately of family income and down, some of those families, about 78,000 people, will no longer have to pay any provincial income tax at all. Overall that group will be receiving a reduction in income taxes on average of 132 percent.

I know they don't like this, and I know that today the federal Finance minister has come right out, according to the newspapers at least, and said: you know, we want to also do something for those low-income families. So I'm glad we're having a little influence there, Mr. Speaker.

1:50

MRS. MacBETH: Mr. Smoke and Mirrors.

Mr. Speaker, let's make it really, really simple. Why are a quarter million dollar earners in this province getting 35 times the tax cut of those earning between \$30,000 and \$100,000?

MR. DAY: I'll have to check, but if they're getting -- you know, you try and do all things with numbers. They're probably paying 40 times the amount of tax also.

Somebody at \$30,000, Mr. Speaker, we say that a family at \$30,000 should not be burdened with a tax load. Their kids will be educated, they will have health care services, they will drive the highways of this province, and they will pay no tax whatsoever for those services.

MRS. MacBETH: Thanks, Mr. Speaker. So why do 220,000 seniors get an average tax cut of 53 cents a day under the reformed tax plan when the average tax cut under the government's plan is \$1.05 per day, twice the amount?

MR. DAY: Mr. Speaker, I'll tell seniors, including my parents and others, that by the end of this plan we'll be able to say to seniors also: you are paying less taxes than before, when this particular plan started. I would actually challenge the historians to find another time in history when after three or four years you could look back and say: I'm actually paying less taxes than I was three or four years ago. I think that's a historical rarity.

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

MRS. MacBETH: Mr. Speaker, the reality is that the tax changes don't occur, and he's binding a future Treasurer to do it. So let's get it clear.

### Property Taxes

MRS. MacBETH: My second question is about a statement that's taken directly from the government's own budget documents, and it said, "There is no short-term fix for the infrastructure issues that have been identified." However instead of taking steps towards developing a forward-thinking plan to preserve and replace infrastructure in our local communities, this government has embarked on another short-term fix in the area of provincial/municipal funding. A government which claims that it wants to reduce the tax burden on Albertans will in fact be taking in an additional \$105 million in education property taxes from communities over the next three years. My questions are to the Premier. My first question is: why does the government continue to ignore the recommendations of its own planning committee and the Alberta Urban Municipalities Association to develop a long-term plan for infrastructure renewal?

MR. KLEIN: Mr. Speaker, we're doing precisely that. That's why I took the initiative along with the mayor of Calgary to put together the Premier's Task Force on Municipal Infrastructure. It involves the mayors of Calgary and Edmonton, the president of the Alberta Urban Municipalities Association, the executive director of the Alberta Association of Municipal Districts and Counties. It involves the minister of transportation, the Minister of Municipal Affairs, the Provincial Treasurer. It involves myself. It involves numerous officials from all of the departments and the municipalities and the municipal representatives involved. The goal is to develop a long-term plan to ensure adequate infrastructure for municipalities. Now, on the short term we said, yes, we can understand the pressures.

I read in the *Globe and Mail* today, for instance, where Calgary is the best place in Canada. Out of 10 cities Edmonton ranks number 4, Mr. Speaker. The *Globe* story alluded to the tremendous tax regime we have in this province, the highly educated and skilled workforce we have in this province, good health care system, good education system, generally the climate that has been created by this government to attract new people, new businesses here to contribute to our economic growth and prosperity.

But with that comes pressures, pressures on infrastructure, and to address the immediate pressures we allocated \$140 million last year, which included \$130 million generally across the board and an extra \$10 million to the capital region. We have committed \$150 million each year for the next three years starting this year, and we have committed, as the hon. leader of the Liberal opposition suggests, to develop a long-term strategy to provide for municipal infrastructure over the long term.

MRS. MacBETH: Mr. Speaker, why did the government abandon its practice of reducing the education property tax mill rate to cover growth in favour of a \$105 million increase in education property taxes?

MR. KLEIN: We didn't abandon anything. The only thing we abandoned was a system that created such inequality in this province. By the way, Mr. Speaker, I can tell you that when this hon. member was the Minister of Education she did absolutely nothing to make sure that kids had the opportunity for an equal and equitable education across this province. There were some school jurisdictions in this province that were able to spend up to \$12,000 a kid because of a very strong industrial and commercial tax base, and there are other municipalities that could only spend the minimum. We took dramatic steps to equalize it so that all kids across this province have an opportunity to the same education.

MRS. MacBETH: Thanks, Mr. Speaker. My third question is: why did the government choose to ignore the rising property taxes faced

by taxpayers now in favour of devoting all its attention to a reformed tax proposal which may never see the light of day?

MR. KLEIN: Mr. Speaker, we're constantly working on suggestions for tax reform, including tax reform as it affects municipalities, but I would point out -- and again I allude to the *Globe* story -- that one of the reasons people like Calgary as the number 1 city and Edmonton as the number 4 city is because of a low tax regime, not only provincial income tax and corporate income tax paid to the provinces but also because of reasonable and equitable property tax regimes.

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

### Calgary Regional Health Authority

MRS. MacBETH: Thanks, Mr. Speaker. So let's turn to Calgary then. This weekend it was the government-appointed Calgary regional health authority's turn to get attacked by the Premier after they said that his budget did not meet the health care needs of Calgarians. In fact the Premier went so far as to suggest that the board may suffer the same fate as the Lakeland regional health authority, and he asked Albertans to blow the whistle on waste in government. As well, we know that there is an administrative review under way for the Calgary regional health authority, which is expected to be completed soon. My questions are to the Premier. Why is the Premier threatening to fire regional health authority boards who refuse to heap praise on the government?

MR. KLEIN: Mr. Speaker, I would like to see verbatim the quote, and then if what the hon. member says is not the same as what I said, will she stand up in the Legislature and apologize for not telling the truth?

2:00

MRS. MacBETH: Mr. Speaker, if the Premier is so serious about knowing of waste in government, then why has he refused to enact whistle-blower protection legislation?

MR. KLEIN: Mr. Speaker, whistle-blower legislation has nothing to do with waste in government. I said this on my radio show. If anyone wants to write me a letter and they can show me evidence of waste in government, then we will deal with that. We don't have to have legislation in place.

This is an open, transparent government. I make myself available to the public at least once a month through the radio show. I get tons of correspondence each and every day, people who lodge complaints. If those complaints are deemed to be valid, Mr. Speaker, they will be investigated. Many of those complaints and many of those inquiries come from the Liberal Party, and I answer their letters openly and truthfully and as completely as I possibly can. That applies not only to the Liberal Party but to every citizen in this province.

MRS. MacBETH: Boy, there's lots of material in that answer.

Mr. Speaker, will the Premier make public the results of the administrative review that's currently under way for the CRHA?

MR. KLEIN: Mr. Speaker, there is, in fact, an administrative review under way, and this happens from time to time relative to situations in regional health authorities as they occur. In the case of the Lakeland situation there was an administrative review, and it was deemed appropriate to suspend the board and put in a public administrator. I'm not saying that's going to happen with the

Calgary regional health authority, but I do think that the review needs to take place, and we have to get fundamentally to the bottom of what could or might be deficient. Perhaps the review will come out and say: hey, this authority is a finely tuned operation, and there's nothing wrong. But fundamentally we felt that we needed to undertake a review.

As to what's going to be done with that review, I'll have the hon. minister respond.

MR. JONSON: Mr. Speaker, we have certainly been in communication and been apprized of the review and are very interested in its outcomes. I think it's important to note for the Assembly and particularly it would seem for the Leader of the Official Opposition that the administrative review was commissioned by the Calgary regional health authority board, and it will be up to them to decide on its disposition once they've received the report.

MS LEIBOVICI: You're not getting a copy?

MR. JONSON: Oh, I will certainly ask for a copy.

Mr. Speaker, I think it is a constructive move on their part, and we look forward to the recommendations and results of the deliberations.

THE SPEAKER: The hon. leader of the ND opposition, followed by the Member for West Yellowhead.

### **Tax Reform** (continued)

MS BARRETT: Mr. Speaker, last week Catherine Ford aptly described the government's flat tax plan as a ticking time bomb ready to explode under this government's feet. The flat tax plan represents nothing less than a massive shift of the tax burden from high-income earners onto the already overtaxed middle class. My question to the Premier is this: how can he and his government defend a flat tax plan which gives a \$16 a year -- take that to the bank -- tax break to a single person whose income is \$30,000 while a single person making a quarter of a million gets a tax break of over \$6,000?

MR. KLEIN: Mr. Speaker, the simple fact is that people earning \$30,000 or less will be paying no provincial tax whatsoever. Yes, they will be paying federal tax. This doesn't link us to a federal government taxation system, where if taxes go up, our taxes would automatically go up. We can deal with our taxes in accordance with the wishes and desires of Albertans and in accordance with the policy of this government, which by the way is a very simple policy. That is a policy that the only way taxes are going in this province is down.

MS BARRETT: I didn't argue about the segregation of the taxes, Mr. Speaker.

What I want to know is how the Premier and this government can defend a flat tax plan that gives a \$198 a year tax break to a two-income family with an income of less than \$20,000 while giving more than \$5,000 in a tax break to two people whose incomes are \$250,000.

MR. KLEIN: Mr. Speaker, a two-income family earning less than \$20,000 will be paying no taxes whatsoever. I doubt if they'd even be paying any federal tax.

MS BARRETT: Well, bottom line, what I don't understand -- maybe the Premier's going to clarify this -- is how the government justifies giving a 38 percent tax break to Albertans making more than 100,000 bucks a year under his government's flat tax plan while giving middle-income earners the shaft?

MR. KLEIN: Mr. Speaker, I just don't understand how the hon. leader of the ND opposition arrives at those figures.

MR. SAPERS: It's called math.

MR. KLEIN: Well, it's not called math. It's called socialist arithmetic. That's what it's called.

Mr. Speaker, relative to someone who knows something about math, I'll have the hon. Provincial Treasurer respond.

MR. DAY: Well, Mr. Speaker, as usual, I think I can respond no better than the Premier did. That really sums it up, and it's really part and parcel of the style, which I compliment, of the leader of the ND opposition. Explosive language: last week we were accused of striptease; this week we're accused of setting off time bombs. I'll tell you what's explosive is the news that rocketed across Canada that we were moving to this type of system. We're going to see even more population growth in this province because of it.

THE SPEAKER: The hon. Member for West Yellowhead, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Glenora.

### **Grande Yellowhead Regional School Division**

MR. STRANG: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Recently I met with the parent advisory council and the students of the Grande Yellowhead school division in Hinton to discuss the board's financial situation. My constituents are concerned about the deficit situation developing in Grande Yellowhead. My main question today is to the Minister of Education. Can the minister explain why this board has an accumulated deficit?

MR. MAR: Well, Mr. Speaker, obviously I'm also concerned about the situation in Grande Yellowhead, and I've looked into it. In 1996-97 the Grande Yellowhead board had an accumulated surplus of \$1.1 million, and then in the following year, just a year later, they had an accumulated deficit of \$868,000. I am concerned about this, and I've asked the people in my department to work with the board at Grande Yellowhead on this particular issue.

The Grande Yellowhead board has had steady funding increases since the 1996-97 year, the year they had a \$1.1 million accumulated surplus. For example, its operational funding for 1998-99 is 5.5 percent higher than it was for 1997-98 while its enrollment numbers for that particular school division have remained roughly level.

Mr. Speaker, the bottom line is this. School boards receive funding from the province, and each board makes its own decisions about how those funds are spent. Boards negotiate salary levels and benefits, and they also decide which projects they pay for either now or later. So, in concluding, school boards, like this government, are charged with the responsibility of having so much money that comes in, and we must all keep in mind that we cannot spend more than we have.

MR. STRANG: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My first supplementary question is to the same minister. Can the minister tell this Assembly how many other jurisdictions are facing this same situation?

2:10

MR. MAR: Mr. Speaker, I've looked at the issue of how many boards out of the 60 in the province are in an accumulated deficit position. There are four out of 60. But we feel that with our new investment in education, \$599 million, or 19 percent, over the next three years, these boards will have been provided with sufficient new funding to deal with the cost pressures they have.

MR. STRANG: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My second supplementary question is to the same minister. What is his department doing to assist these boards in dealing with this situation?

MR. MAR: Well, Mr. Speaker, Grande Yellowhead is one board, but there are, of course, many boards that we're prepared to work with. In fact, we're prepared to work with all these boards to make sure that they put fiscal plans in place to deal with any deficits, but boards must also be prepared to make the necessary decisions to match their expenditures with available resources.

Grande Yellowhead now has in place a plan on how it proposes to eliminate its deficit. My department will look closely at the strategies that are outlined in that plan. Mr. Speaker, our government's commitment to resolving deficits and debt is very clear, but we ask boards to do no more than what we do ourselves. As I've said, boards have the responsibility of making sure that they spend within their means.

THE SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Glenora, followed by the hon. Member for Olds-Didsbury-Three Hills.

### **Tax Reform** (continued)

MR. SAPERS: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The Provincial Treasurer has found a tax that he really likes. In the government's reform tax plan the Treasurer is choosing to cut the high-income surtax before he cuts the flat tax. Now, the Treasurer seems to have some strange attraction to flat taxes. This explains why he's on record on June 11, 1987, as voting against an amendment to eliminate the flat tax when it was first introduced. My questions are to the flat-tax-loving Provincial Treasurer. Will the Treasurer confirm that under his reform tax plan the revenue recovery from eliminating the half percent flat tax would be greater than the recovery from eliminating the 8 percent high-income surtax?

MR. DAY: Mr. Speaker, I'm fascinated by that. I am really fascinated that the Liberals are apparently upset because we want to eliminate the surtax, which starts cutting in when a person is making about \$47,000 a year. Those great big, greedy, fat-cat \$47,000-a-year people are going to be helped, and we're not apologizing for it.

MR. SAPERS: Mr. Speaker, I was speaking slowly on purpose, and I'll do that again. Why would the Treasurer choose -- I want you to get the question right, so will you just listen? Why would the Treasurer choose to cut an 8 percent surtax that applies to only 20 percent of taxpayers before cutting a regressive flat tax paid by virtually 100 percent of taxpayers if the government's objective was really to create increased activity across the entire economy?

MR. DAY: Mr. Speaker, it's very clear that when you lower taxes, you create a more vibrant economy. And why are we dealing with this? Because we asked Albertans. In one survey alone, one of a number that were done, 78,000 Albertans said that they don't like the so-called temporary deficit elimination taxes, so we start on the

first tax. In the first year, half of that goes. In the second year, right after that, the surtax and the flat tax go all in one swoop.

We've said very clearly that if revenues were to exceed what we hoped and if as a government we were to so decide, we could move the entire plan up. It's also like saying the unhooking from the federal basic rate -- that is possibly year three or maybe year two. Does that mean one is ahead of the other?

You know, the next thing he's going to say is: why isn't getting rid of income tax creep number one? We're getting rid of a whole pile of taxes. We're getting rid of all of those taxes that we've identified, all of them, Mr. Speaker. Now, the Liberals are furious at that. They don't like that. The federal Finance minister is apparently on record as giving modest praise -- and I appreciate that it's modest praise -- for the Alberta plan, and today announced, after having tabled his budget, that he's going to take measures that simulate ours. It's not perfect, but it's not too bad, Mr. Speaker.

MR. SAPERS: Well, given that the Treasurer wants to talk about tax creep, maybe he'll answer this. Will he confirm, Mr. Speaker, that there will be at least a \$17 million increase in revenues from his flat tax creep over the next two years, before the government even chooses to eliminate it?

MR. DAY: It's very clear that until taxes are eliminated, you continue to take in those revenues. That's why we've said very clearly that we want to eliminate them, but to do it all in one year -- a \$600 million effect on our bottom line this year. The Albertans that we talked to, Mr. Speaker, said yes to tax reductions but not if it puts health at risk, not if it puts education at risk, not if it puts us into a deficit. So I don't know if he's advocating to do it all in one year as a \$600 million hit on our bottom line right this year. I don't think that's the responsible thing to do.

We will accelerate it if we can, though, Mr. Speaker. We can give Albertans assurance of that. The bottom line is that all Albertans -- all Albertans -- are going to be paying less tax by the time this is over, and with what we see it doing already to the Liberals in Ottawa, it looks like they'll be paying even less tax than we'd imagined. So we're kind of excited about how it's going.

THE SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Olds-Didsbury-Three Hills, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Norwood.

### **Taxidermy Permits**

MR. MARZ: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My question today is for the Minister of Environmental Protection. Taxidermists in this province are required to obtain provincial and federal permits in order to export their completed products of bears, wolves, and cougars to customers outside of Canada. Acquiring the provincial permit from Alberta Environmental Protection is straightforward and timely, but acquiring the federal permit from Environment Canada takes six to eight weeks, by which time the provincial permit is no longer valid and the taxidermist must reapply for another provincial permit. The provincial department responsible for wildlife used to also provide the federal permit, which made conducting the taxidermy business practical. Why is it that taxidermists cannot obtain the federal permit any longer through Alberta Environmental Protection?

MR. LUND: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. First of all, I want to assure the hon. member that we do recognize the very important business of taxidermy in this province. The permit that the hon. member is referring to is what's known as CITES, the convention on international trade in endangered species. As the hon. member mentioned,

the wildlife that is covered under that -- since it's not endangered species in Canada, we have some difficulty with the fact that the federal government seems to think that they are the only people that can issue that permit.

It's true that at one point we were issuing the federal permit. We found that it took an awful lot of staff time. We believe that the provincial permit that we issue today should be sufficient, and we've been after the federal government to harmonize so that in fact that would be the case.

MR. MARZ: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and I thank the minister for identifying that process, but why can guides and outfitters obtain this CITES permit for export and wildlife products through preapproved copies?

MR. LUND: That's a very good question. Somehow the guides and outfitters have been able to convince Environment Canada that when somebody comes in and they take an animal -- I guess it's a fresh kill -- they're able to have the inspectors at the airport move the carcass along, and there doesn't seem to be any problem with it. But, Mr. Speaker, that is an arrangement between the guides and outfitters and Environment Canada.

MR. MARZ: My last question to the same minister: what can be done to address this problem faced by taxidermists in this province?

MR. LUND: Well, Mr. Speaker, as I indicated in my first answer, we are still trying to convince the federal government that these permits should be harmonized, that we should be able to issue those permits, and we would urge taxidermists to contact Environment Canada. We recognize that in Alberta there are only, I believe, two people who are working for Environment Canada in this particular field. So it is a real problem, and we would urge folks that are concerned about the issue to contact their MPs and to contact Environment Canada and see if we can't get this harmonized so that it only requires one permit issued by the province of Alberta.

2:20

THE SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Norwood, followed by the hon. Member for Innisfail-Sylvan Lake.

### Judicial Appointments

MS OLSEN: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It has been said in some circles that only law-and-order men will be appointed to the bench in this province. There have been several reports produced over the last few years indicating that women are subject to discrimination in the legal profession, including appointments to the bench. My questions are to the Minister of Justice. What steps has the minister taken to ensure equal representation of women on the bench in Alberta?

MR. HAVELOCK: Well, I can indicate that at this point in time, Mr. Speaker, we've just put in a new process, and that was after we studied the recommendations from the Member for Calgary-Lougheed. We then selected members of the general public to participate in that process, and our approach was to select the best people available to serve on that committee. The committee is made up of, I believe, five males and two females.

What we've also done recently, part of that process being in place, is we would look at the recommendations from Judicial Council and select the best possible candidates available on the basis of merit. Since I've been minister myself, I can point out that there was a lady by the name of Janet Franklin who was appointed to family and

youth court in Edmonton. Again, just to reiterate, for me it's not a question of whether you're male or female. It's not a question of what you're background is. The question for me is: who should we appoint on the basis of merit? And I think that everyone in the legal community would suggest that's the basis upon which judicial appointments should be made.

Now, on the other hand, Mr. Speaker, the new criteria that we are looking at and which the new selection committee will be looking at actually tries to balance demographics. They try and balance, for example, the aboriginal community, the Métis community. So those factors will be taken into account. But I think that everyone would agree that when we are appointing members to the bench, because it's such a critical position, you select the best person.

MS OLSEN: Mr. Speaker, there are no women on the regular list, on the judicial selection committee. They're on the alternate list. Mr. Minister, why did that happen? Why are there five men and no women on that list?

MR. HAVELOCK: I think it's very unfair at this stage to criticize the committee which was just announced last week, Mr. Speaker. Critics, including the hon. member, are underestimating the ability of this group to understand and reflect the wishes of Albertans. This is a new process, it's a proactive process, and I think it's forward looking. In fact we're leading the country with respect to this process. I know there will be an opportunity for both the men and women that we've put on this committee to participate in that process.

What I'd like to do is just point out some of the criteria that we'll be using through the process. The appointments to Provincial Court will be made on the basis of merit, and again the legal community and the community generally has been pushing for that for quite some time. We've tried to remove the politics from the process. In fact, we've removed the politics to the extent that the committee which recommends names to me as Justice minister on behalf of government -- we can reject one list, but we must accept from the second list, so basically government has tied its own hands with respect to soliciting public input. [interjection] You're right. My colleague is just saying that the hon. member across the way is trying to put politics back into it. We've been trying to take it out.

MS OLSEN: Well, Mr. Speaker, my final question is to the Minister of Justice. All things being equal, Mr. Minister, will you commit to balancing the scales of justice in this province by ensuring that women are appointed to the bench?

MR. HAVELOCK: Well, I guess what the hon. member is asking is for me to disregard whatever the selection committee puts forward, and I will not do that. If that committee feels that the best candidates out there are men or women, then those are the names that will be considered by government.

I'd also like to perhaps disabuse the hon. member with respect to our record in appointing women, not necessarily to the bench, but I think in our department and in fact governmentwide we try and involve both males and females. We try and involve the aboriginal community. We try and involve all communities. In fact, since I've been Justice minister I can tell you that the chairperson of the Judicial Compensation Commission was a female. We've also appointed a female to the justices of the peace committee. The Law Society representative, after some lobbying from one of my colleagues, happens to be a female, and she's doing an excellent job. So I've tried to take into account exactly what the hon. member is suggesting. We're trying to balance.

On the bench, again, Mr. Speaker, we've tried to take the politics out of the process. We've come forward with a process which I think will work very well. Why not give the process a chance as opposed to trying to skew it in the way the hon. member is suggesting?

THE SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Innisfail-Sylvan Lake, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview.

### Grain Transportation and Marketing

MR. SEVERTSON: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Agriculture producers, especially grain producers, are having difficulty realizing a positive return on their investment. One of the largest input costs is transportation and handling charges, which are highly regulated by government. Can the Minister of Transportation and Utilities advise the members of this Assembly whether there's agreement among western provinces as it relates to the Justice Estey review of Canada's grain marketing industry?

MR. PASZKOWSKI: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Yes, indeed, the hon. Member for Innisfail-Sylvan Lake has identified one of the high-cost items related to the producer as far as grain production and marketing are concerned. That was recognized primarily because the logistics system broke down in the winter of '96. At that time it was deemed and recognized that something had to be done. As a result of that, Justice Willard Estey was appointed to review the entire process. Subsequent to that, as of December of this past year, he has brought forward 15 recommendations as to how to deal with this issue on an holistic approach.

The 15 points have been reviewed by the western provinces, and, yes, I'm pleased to say that as of Tuesday of last week, the western ministers had an opportunity of meeting with the federal minister, Minister Collenette, to further discuss the Estey report and to see what subsequent actions should be taken. There was unanimous agreement amongst the western provinces as to how the process should move ahead. There's work to be done and considerable work to be done. Nevertheless, to this point we do have unanimous agreement as far as the western provinces are concerned.

MR. SEVERTSON: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My first supplementary is to the same minister. As the necessary changes have not yet occurred to the satisfaction of Alberta farmers, what is the next step?

MR. PASZKOWSKI: We obviously have to develop a system that's going to recognize efficiencies and penalize inefficiency. At the present time the system basically all reflects back to the producer, and the producer simply picks up the additional cost no matter where they are or what they are. Consequently, we put a tremendous burden on the producers of this province as far as grain production is concerned.

Having said that, part of our discussion with the federal minister was what the next step would be. The minister has assured us that he's quite anxious to move this process ahead. He wants to initiate the further steps immediately after Easter, and the next step now is to define a process to move this whole strategy ahead.

MR. SEVERTSON: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My final supplementary is to the same minister. How will the next step be conducted so that Alberta producers will have their position heard?

MR. PASZKOWSKI: The next step is basically going to have to address the three fundamental needs that have been identified; that

is, competitiveness, commercial accountability, and maximizing the return at the farm gate to the producer. Those are the three critical ingredients.

How is this going to happen? Discussions took place last Tuesday. It was thought that perhaps a facilitator should be put in place, working with various committees, because of the overreaching effect and the cross-threading that takes place, because when you make a change in one area, it directly affects something downstream in another area. Consequently the changes that have happened -- and there is agreement that changes will have to happen in an holistic approach so that, indeed, the entire logistic system is addressed at the same time.

Now, the committee of course would be structured to allow for the various changes that would have to take place, but in a structured way. The final arrangements are being worked on as we speak, and the federal minister had indicated that it was his thought and his intention to try to have the new system in place in time for the crop year 2000.

THE SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview, followed by the hon. Member for Leduc.

### 2:30 Disabled Children's Services

MRS. SLOAN: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Kevin is three and a half years old. He isn't aware of provincial budgets or even governments. Regrettably, he and his family were not among the families showcased last Thursday by the hon. Treasurer in his Budget Address. Kevin suffers from a severe speech disability, and until March 1 he received 21 hours of day care which provided speech therapy and socialization with other children. At the beginning of March Kevin's parents received notice that his funded hours would be cut by 50 percent. My questions are to the Minister of Family and Social Services. Why are reductions in program unit funding implemented without assessing the child in need, without speaking with the parents, and without any form of appeal process?

DR. OBERG: Mr. Speaker, unfortunately, because of the Child Welfare Act I can't talk specifically about that case, but I will certainly look into that case. If there were any issues as to why this child was cut off and if the child was cut off inappropriately, I will certainly look at it. I'm sure there are good, valid reasons as to why this has occurred, and if the hon. member would give me the child's last name, give me some of the circumstances surrounding the situation, I'll certainly look into it.

MRS. SLOAN: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Does the minister think that it would be cheaper for his department to continue with this policy of cutting PUF and wait until children such as Kevin enter kindergarten to address their speech disabilities?

DR. OBERG: Mr. Speaker, PUF is something that comes under the Department of Education. Perhaps the Minister of Education could answer this question more appropriately.

MR. MAR: Mr. Speaker, it's correct that PUF comes under our area, and as indicated by the hon. minister, should the matter be brought to our personal attention, we certainly can entertain to look into it.

MRS. SLOAN: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I am asking about preschool disability interventions, and I would ask both ministers, perhaps, this afternoon to commit to review this case and other cases that exist where preschool children are being denied necessary intervention for developmental delays.



DR. OBERG: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. A couple of things -- I would love to get up on that. I believe the hon. member across the way must not have heard what I said initially or must not have heard what the hon. Minister of Education said. We said that we would personally look at this example. Send over the name, give us the example, and we'll certainly look at it.

We deliver a lot of services to handicapped children in preschool. Handicapped children's services, with a budget I believe around \$100 million dollars, is something that we do consistently for these children. The hon. Minister of Education does a lot when they get to school age. I don't know what more I can answer. I've given the commitment to look at the specific cases. I will give the hon. member the benefit of the doubt that maybe there is someone that has slipped through the cracks, and I've undertaken to take a look at it.

THE SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Leduc, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

### Seniors' Programs

MR. KLAPSTEIN: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Over the weekend I had the opportunity to discuss Budget '99, tabled by the Provincial Treasurer last Thursday, with a good number of people. From what I heard, Albertans are very pleased with the substantial reinvestment into health and education announced in the budget. I was asked, however, about what new initiatives, if any, are in the budget for Alberta seniors. Therefore, my first question is to the Minister of Community Development, responsible for seniors. Can the minister outline what in Budget '99 would be of particular interest to seniors?

MRS. McCLELLAN: Mr. Speaker, as the Provincial Treasurer noted in the Budget Address on Thursday, Alberta continues to have the best seniors' programs in Canada. This government, this ministry is certainly committed to continuing that. The new business plan and budget for Community Development actually outline a number of initiatives. Specifically, I'll just mention a couple.

One is the overview, the work being done, chaired by the Member for Calgary-West, on studying the impact of growth of the seniors' population on programs and policies. This is important because it's very important that we stay responsive to seniors' needs and ensure that our programs are the best we can possibly offer. This will culminate in a seniors' summit in the fall of 1999.

It also calls for another important initiative, and that is an analysis of the special needs assistance program. What we want to do is understand better what the common areas of needs are for those low-income seniors. Also, in the Ministry of Municipal Affairs the social housing review will be important to seniors, and certainly the reinvestment in health will be of importance to seniors.

MR. KLAPSTEIN: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My next question is to the same minister. Can the minister explain how the reinvestment of nearly a billion dollars in health will benefit seniors?

MRS. McCLELLAN: Well, Mr. Speaker, certainly there is a great deal in this reinvestment in health that will be of interest to seniors. First of all, the budget for the extended health benefits program is being increased in this budget by \$2 million. This is a program that provides financial support for Alberta seniors who require dental care or eyeglasses. This is one province in Canada of very few which offers any assistance for eyes or dental care. They will also see an increase of about \$5 million in the Aids to Daily Living program. While this is not exclusively for seniors, certainly it has

thousands of seniors who receive benefit from it. The investment in continuing and long-term care will be of importance to seniors, and the home drug plan is another one that seniors are very interested in and certainly will benefit from.

MR. KLAPSTEIN: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My final question is to the same minister. Can the minister explain whether there will be any changes to seniors' income support programs as a result of Budget '99?

MRS. McCLELLAN: Well, Mr. Speaker, in the budget we have increased the special-needs assistance program by \$1 million, raising it to \$8 million a year. As this program was changed, it became very apparent that this is a very significant program for seniors where, when they experience an emergency, they can receive assistance in very short order. This program allows grants of up to \$5,000 in an annual way, and again this is the only program of its kind in Canada. Probably one of the reasons this program is so successful is that the changes to this program and the continued existence of this program are largely responsible for the input that we have received from seniors themselves. We asked them how to make this program more responsive to seniors. They told us. We incorporated those changes, and it is helping seniors.

### Recognitions

THE SPEAKER: Hon. members, a few seconds from now there will be seven members called on today for Recognitions. We'll begin, first of all, with the hon. Member for Innisfail-Sylvan Lake, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview. We'll begin in 30 seconds.

### Farm Safety Week

MR. SEVERTSON: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Farm Safety Week is now officially under way in Alberta and runs through to March 17. Education awareness will help reduce injuries and fatalities on the farm.

This year Alberta Agriculture has partnered with John Deere Limited and Hole's Greenhouses & Gardens Ltd. to launch Plant the Seed of Farm Safety. Rural students in grades 1 to 4 will receive a package of sunflower seeds to plant and to nurture. They can also write to the department telling them about how their farm is a safe place to grow. This project encourages children to get involved and work with their family members to make their farms safer.

The Canadian West Equipment Dealers Association in co-operation with Alberta Agriculture and Alberta Transportation is producing a publication, Make it Safe; Make it Visible, regarding the safe transportation of farm machinery on Alberta's highways. Many community organizations such as the Alberta Women's Institutes, the women of Unifarm, and a number of agricultural societies are committed to furthering the farm safety movement.

Thank you.

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

### 2:40 National Women's Basketball Championship

MRS. SLOAN: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. A popular quote says that it is a fact that, in the right formation, the lifting power of many wings can achieve twice the distance of any bird flying alone. In a similar vein, this weekend the University of Alberta Pandas won the 1999 CIAU national basketball championship. The team ranked third nationally going into the tournament. They beat the University

of Victoria to win the title with a score of Alberta 54, Victoria 46. This is the first time the University of Alberta Pandas have won the tournament.

Notable achievements, in addition to the whole team's achievement of winning the tournament, were the tournament all-star, Sara Armstrong of the University of Alberta team; the MVP for the tournament, Jackie Simon, university Pandas; and the TSN award for athletic, academic, and community service, Rania Burns. I would also like to recognize the team's coach, Trix Baker, assistant coaches, trainers, and team doctor for their tremendous performance at this tournament. Our congratulations from every member of the Assembly.

Thank you.

THE SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Olds-Didsbury-Three Hills.

#### **Shannon Marie Turnbull**

MR. MARZ: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. In our society we often hear the word "hero" to describe a celebrity or a professional athlete. Today I wish to recognize a different type of hero, one of many who perform their deeds without fame or glory as they triumph over constant adversity in their daily lives.

Last week I heard the terms "hero" and "heroic" used to describe a constituent and friend of mine, Shannon Marie Turnbull. Shannon was diagnosed at age seven with leukemia, but despite her medical condition Shannon encouraged and inspired others with the disease as well as their caregivers. Shannon had many accomplishments in her life, goals that others take for granted, like making it to their 18th birthday or their high school graduation. Shannon struggled, but she prevailed.

Shannon and her family had to cope with many hardships, especially chemotherapy, bone marrow transplants, and hair loss. Through all of the adversities she faced, her positive attitude and her love of life were inspiring to all who knew her. Sadly, Shannon passed away on March 3, 1999, at the age of 20, but her spirit will live on in the lives of those she touched, those who claim her as their hero.

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

#### **Farm Safety Week**

DR. NICOL: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. As Farm Safety Week draws to a close, I just want to take a chance to recognize all of the individuals in the province who have dedicated their activities on a year-round basis to the promotion of safety at the farm level. I can speak from experience. It only takes a fraction of a second to bring about a change in your life, in the way you have to deal with everything that you do on a daily basis.

There are a number of groups, including Alberta Agriculture, Food and Rural Development, and businesses that are helping to support it, and the media are carrying a lot of the advertising that's bringing about the awareness and the creation of a situation where everybody now can be more aware of the impact and the benefits of living in a rural environment and the risks that are associated with it.

Mr. Speaker, I just want to say that this is one of the initiatives that most people in rural Alberta talk about, that most people in many ways don't understand but in many ways stand to lose the greatest from. So I just want to say thank you to all those groups that are helping to increase that awareness.

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

#### **Dr. Victor D'Agata**

MR. AMERY: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It is with great pleasure that I rise today to recognize the achievements of a great Edmontonian. On Saturday, March 6, I had the pleasure of attending a reception honouring Dr. Victor D'Agata on his 50th anniversary of practising medicine.

Dr. D'Agata was born and raised in Cairo, Egypt, to an Italian father and an Egyptian mother. He completed his primary and secondary education in Cairo and also graduated from the medical school at the University of Cairo in 1949, where he continued to practise medicine until 1963.

In 1963 he moved to Edmonton and successfully joined the medical staff of the Edmonton General hospital. To this day, Mr. Speaker, he still runs his very successful medical practice in the city of Edmonton. Dr. D'Agata's proficiency in four different languages -- Arabic, English, Italian, and French -- made him a great healer and a super communicator.

Mr. Speaker, on behalf of the Assembly I would like to wish Dr. D'Agata a happy anniversary, good health, and continued success.

#### **Crossing of Arabian Desert**

MR. DICKSON: Mr. Speaker, I wish to salute this afternoon three Calgary adventurers who have just completed an amazing crossing of the Empty Quarter of Arabia. Leigh Clarke, Jamie Clarke, and Bruce Kirkby became just the second group of westerners to ever successfully negotiate the 1,000 kilometre span of desert, the first in more than 50 years to do so. This is the largest sand desert in the world.

Perhaps most significantly, more than 23,000 schoolchildren in the city of Calgary followed these intrepid explorers over the Internet. Ian Clarke, the father of Leigh and Jamie, updated the web site and was thus able to share this marvelous adventure with so many other Albertans. Thanks to everyone involved for expanding our own horizons and giving us a flavour of this remarkable and historic achievement.

Thank you.

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

#### **John Hume**

MRS. O'NEILL: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Nineteen ninety-eight Nobel peace prize laureate John Hume visited Edmonton on the weekend. As you know, it was John Hume, together with David Trimble, who negotiated the 1998 Good Friday agreement advocating reconciliation in Northern Ireland. On Saturday evening he was the guest speaker and, I might add, one of the entertainers at the annual Emerald Ball in support of the Ireland Fund of Canada. The Ireland Fund is a stringently nonpolitical, nonpartisan, nonsectarian charitable organization which works for the development of community in Ireland, both north and south.

Mr. Hume also delivered the second University of Alberta visiting lectureship on human rights, and at Sunday afternoon's lecture Mr. Hume reiterated his message, "Difference is an accident of birth, and therefore it does not need to breed conflict." "Differences are not something to fight about," he said. Mr. Hume is also a member of the European Parliament, and he further commented, "Europe has created an institution which recognizes differences but concentrates on areas of common interest."

It was indeed an honour and a privilege to have this remarkable peace-advocating parliamentarian in our community during the past few days.

2:50

head: Orders of the Day

head: Committee of Supply

[Mr. Tannas in the chair]

THE CHAIRMAN: Hon. members, the Committee of Supply has under consideration several items. I'll call on the hon. Government House Leader to introduce the first item for consideration this afternoon.

### Designated Supply Subcommittees

Moved by Mr. Hancock:

Be it resolved that pursuant to Standing Order 56(2) the following members be appointed to the following designated supply subcommittees:

Education: Mr. Severtson, chairman; Mrs. Burgener; Mr. Dickson; Mr. Friedel; Ms Graham; Mr. Hlady; Dr. Massey; Ms Olsen; Mrs. O'Neill; Dr. Pannu; Mr. Stevens; and Mr. Trynchy.  
Environmental Protection: Mr. Boutilier, chairman; Mr. Amery; Ms Carlson; Mr. Coutts; Mr. Ducharme; Mr. Gibbons; Mr. Langevin; Mr. Magnus; Dr. Pannu; Mr. Strang; Mr. Thurber; and Mr. White.

Family and Social Services: Mrs. Laing, chairman; Ms Barrett; Mr. Cardinal; Mr. Cao; Ms Carlson; Mr. Johnson; Ms Kryczka; Mr. Lougheed; Mr. Melchin; Ms Olsen; Mr. Shariff; and Mrs. Sloan.

Health: Mrs. Forsyth, chairman; Ms Barrett; Mr. Broda; Mr. Dickson; Mr. Doerksen; Mrs. Fritz; Mr. Herard; Mr. Jacques; Ms Leibovici; Mr. Pham; Mrs. Sloan; and Mrs. Tarchuk.

Municipal Affairs: Mr. Fischer, chairman; Ms Barrett; Mr. Clegg; Mr. Gibbons; Mr. Klapstein; Mr. MacDonald; Mr. Marz; Mr. McFarland; Ms Paul; Mr. Thurber; Mr. Yankowsky; and Mr. Zwozdesky.

MR. DICKSON: Mr. Chairman, I'd just add that the opposition concurs with the five committees and the membership on the five committees. I'd just make one observation. The notion of having designated subcommittees of supply was one of the most promising elements in the House leader agreement that was achieved in 1994 and subsequently translated into Standing Orders.

One thing I'd just encourage the government to do. Recognizing that we have the designated supply subcommittees, what would be terrific is to allow those designated supply subcommittees to meet before the Committee of Supply rolls into operation. That's the next step.

We've got the committees now. What happens in some enlightened jurisdictions -- I look to Ontario, where they allow these committees in fact to meet and interact with a minister before the actual budget is brought down. So we're partway there, but I just wanted to outline another reform which I think would make these committees far more effective than anything we've seen to date.

We see some of the promise, but we're not all the way there. I'm going to challenge the Government House Leader and his colleagues to join with my colleagues in terms of making those further changes.

Thank you very much.

[Motion carried]

THE CHAIRMAN: The hon. Government House Leader.

### Subcommittees of Supply

Mr. Hancock moved:

Be it resolved that:

1. Pursuant to Standing Order 57(1) four subcommittees of the

Committee of Supply be established by the Committee of Supply with the following names: subcommittee A, subcommittee B, subcommittee C, and subcommittee D.

2. The membership of the respective subcommittees be as follows:

Subcommittee A: Mrs. Gordon, chairman; Mr. Severtson, deputy chairman; Mr. Bonner; Mr. Boutilier; Mrs. Burgener; Mr. Cardinal; Mr. Ducharme; Mr. Dunford; Mr. Friedel; Mr. Hierath; Mr. Jacques; Mr. Johnson; Mr. Lougheed; Mr. Mar; Mr. Marz; Dr. Massey; Dr. Oberg; Mrs. O'Neill; Dr. Pannu; and Mr. Sapers.

Subcommittee B: Mr. Tannas, chairman; Mrs. Laing, deputy chairman; Ms Barrett; Ms Blakeman; Ms Calahasen; Mr. Dickson; Mr. Doerksen; Mrs. Forsyth; Mrs. Fritz; Ms Graham; Mr. Hancock; Mr. Havelock; Mr. Jonson; Ms Kryczka; Ms Leibovici; Mrs. McClellan; Mr. Melchin; Ms Olsen; Mr. Paszkowski; Mrs. Sloan; Mrs. Soetaert; and Mrs. Tarchuk.

Subcommittee C: Mr. Tannas, chairman; Mr. Fischer, deputy chairman; Ms Barrett; Mr. Cao; Mr. Clegg; Ms Evans; Mr. Gibbons; Mr. Hlady; Mr. Klapstein; Mr. MacDonald; Mr. McFarland; Dr. Nicol; Mr. Smith; Mrs. Soetaert; Mr. Stelmach; Mr. Stevens; Mr. Strang; Mr. Thurber; Mr. Trynchy; and Mr. Woloshyn.

Subcommittee D: Mrs. Gordon, chairman; Ms Haley, deputy chairman; Mr. Amery; Mr. Broda; Ms Carlson; Mr. Coutts; Mr. Herard; Mr. Langevin; Mr. Lund; Mr. Magnus; Mrs. Nelson; Dr. Pannu; Ms Paul; Mr. Pham; Mr. Shariff; Dr. Taylor; Dr. West; Mr. White; Mr. Wickman, and Mr. Zwozdesky.

3. The following portions of the main estimates of expenditure for the fiscal year ending March 31, 2000, unless previously designated by the Leader of the Opposition to be considered by the designated supply subcommittees, be referred to the subcommittees for their reports to the Committee of Supply as follows:

Subcommittee A: Executive Council; Advanced Education and Career Development; and Treasury.

Subcommittee B: Community Development; Intergovernmental and Aboriginal Affairs; Transportation and Utilities; and Justice and Attorney General.

Subcommittee C: Agriculture, Food and Rural Development; Labour; and Public Works, Supply and Services.

Subcommittee D: Energy; Economic Development; and science, research, and information technology.

4. When the Committee of Supply is called to consider the main estimates, it shall on the six calendar days after the agreement of the motion establishing the subcommittees, excluding Thursdays designated by the Official Opposition, when main estimates are under consideration, resolve itself into two of the four subcommittees, both of which shall meet and report to the Committee of Supply.

MR. HANCOCK: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. In moving this motion, I believe we can resolve ourselves into the subcommittees of supply to allow the Legislature the opportunity to thoroughly examine our estimates and provide all members of the House more opportunity to ask questions of ministers rather than in the time-honoured tradition of the House having one member speaking at a time. By resolving into subcommittees and having two subcommittees examine estimates at the same time, we can allow more people to ask questions.

Thank you.

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

3:00

MR. DICKSON: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. I'm pleased to join debate on the motion. Before I go further, to regularize what we've done, what I'd like to do -- I have copies of the letter from the Leader of the Official Opposition to the Clerk of the Legislative Assembly designating the five designated subcommittees of supply. I'd just table that now so that's part of the record of the proceedings, if I may.

Now, proceeding to deal with the substance of the motion in front of us, I can't help but notice that we have only now just started dealing with estimates, and what did we see last Thursday on the Order Paper but a notice of closure. A notice of closure. Mr. Chairman, I have to tell you that when I looked last year and saw how little time was spent dealing with this particular motion to create the A, B, C, D committees, I was surprised to see that reference.

It seems to me that the very process of having these overlapping committees, two different committees hearing estimates discussion at the same time, is in itself one of the most powerful forms of closure. If closure is defined roughly as limiting debate -- and that's what I understand it to be -- the very essence of the motion in front of us is perhaps one of the single biggest affronts to full and open debate.

It seems to me there's some real irony here, Mr. Chairman. When you look at the beginnings of parliament, I mean where we came from, initially it was knights and barons coming together because of concern about the power of taxation and how funding was going to be spent. In fact, I notice at page 7 of *Erskine May* that knights and burgesses weren't invariably summoned to the earliest English parliaments. They started to attend regularly, and the Commons came to claim that they were sent as a necessary prerequisite to royal taxation. So we have here in the middle of the 14th century this notion starting to develop that what parliament is largely all about is managing and supervising and scrutinizing the budget, and I daresay that there are probably very few things that we ever do in this Assembly that would be more important. I mean, to deal with approximately \$17 billion, one would think that every member in this Assembly would want to see the optimal kind of consideration and the maximum opportunity for debate and questions.

Now, I don't want to pick on the Government House Leader. This is not the first time we've seen this. This started, I think, in about 1995. You know, I understand that from a government perspective it's all about efficiency, it's all about trying to streamline the process, and it's all about how you abridge the time for debate. So I can understand the Government House Leader and the government taking that position, but, Mr. Chairman, my problem is that in so doing, we seem to have lost sight of something that's even more important.

What's more important? Well, the opportunity for 3 million Albertans to ask through their elected representatives the questions that are important to them, to query different elements of the estimates that are of concern to them. My concern has always been that with the kind of process that will be triggered if this motion passes, we're going to lose some of that opportunity.

Now, somebody may say: well, how can that happen? The short answer is this. What we have are subcommittees of supply, and you will have two committees meeting at the same time. One of them will meet in this Chamber, another one up in room 512 or in another room in the Assembly. What that means is that if you're on committee A but you have constituents who are very concerned with what's happening in committee C as well, you can be in this Chamber dealing with the estimates for committee A. Assuming

you get on early and you get a chance to raise your concerns, you then gather up your papers. You tear upstairs to room 512 and roll in, but then you discover there's a speaking list there, and they're working their way through. The experience of many of us over the last number of years has been that when you get to the other chamber with your questions in your hot little hand, you rush in and what you there find, Mr. Chairman, is that you can't get on the speaking list there. So you say: okay; I've missed my chance. When the subcommittee was meeting upstairs in 512, there's a report back. Right? There's a report back to the Committee of Supply.

The difficulty is that we have seen -- and I remember keeping count in past years. In some cases we've had six, seven -- I think one year I remember eight Liberal MLAs that had questions to put to a minister. They hadn't been able to get it in in the subcommittee of supply upstairs. They came down hoping in the report period -- but you'll recall, Mr. Chairman, that when we do the report back, it's not typically a single department. There are usually two or three departments reporting back. The effect of it is this. You have largely reduced, in many cases by almost half, the effective time that legislators in this Chamber can ask questions that are important to their constituents.

You know, if I were a member of the government caucus, maybe this would be of little consequence, because what happens is that I'd have opportunity to attend caucus meetings when the budget is previewed and I'd be on one of those standing policy committees that meet from time to time, and I may have had plenty of opportunity to offer commentary and offer advice in terms of what's going on. The reality, Mr. Chairman, is that that opportunity is prevented if we pass this motion. We lose a real opportunity.

This initiative in terms of creating these committees has certainly been something we've dealt with before. It's something that has been of concern in the past. When I look back, it was a fascinating debate in 1996 when this came forward. I see that there were some excellent speeches on February 27, 1996, in *Hansard*, pages 257 to 264, and again on February 27, pages 326 to 329.

I notice further, Mr. Chairman, that the Member for Edmonton-Glenora in fact stood on a point of order. It was April 22, 1997. He raised a question of privilege. The attempt there was to persuade the Speaker that having these concurrent committees in fact offended rights of members. Now, the Speaker ruled on those facts at that time that this was not a breach of parliamentary privilege. But what we then saw was a debate that raged for the better part of three days over whether this was something that was going to advantage Albertans.

3:10

Mr. Chairman, one can go on and look at what they do in places like the province of Ontario, and we can look at other jurisdictions that in fact have done some very novel things in terms of how they deal with budgets. It would seem that in most other parliaments, as best as I can determine, what they're going towards is empowering committees to do more budget analysis and budget preparation and to be able to do that sort of work for more rigorous, more thorough, better prepared reviews of estimates. That seems to me like something we should really be trying to achieve here.

Mr. Chairman, the whole notion of representation takes a battering when you say to a member of this Assembly that you can't ask questions in the other assembly. Now, we don't come out and do that. I mean, we don't say that if you're in committee A, you can't go and ask questions in committee C. In fact, if you read the procedural rules that we use, it suggests that there's almost an invitation to be able to do that, but the reality is something very different. As I started out saying at the top of my remarks, the reality is that effectively the circumstances, the number of people in

the other committee militates against that sort of flexibility. I remember having this argument with the current Provincial Treasurer when he was the Government House Leader. The government always used to like talking about the opportunity to participate in debates in those other rooms, but the reality was always something very different.

Now, some of the concerns have been addressed in a positive way. I'm pleased to see, Mr. Chairman, that the *Hansard* now is available. Initially there was some concern about how *Hansard* was going to attack two things going on at the same time, how long it would take to get *Hansard*, and how it was going to be indexed after, how it was going to be referenced. Thanks to the creative energy of the people with the *Hansard* office we seemed to have been able to remedy that problem.

You know, the other thing I think is important is this: the value of asking questions. If the Minister of Health or the Minister of Community Development was not taking his department into one of those designated subcommittees of supply but rather was taking it in front of one of the A, B, C, or D committees, that minister might stand up and offer some response to some of the questions that are posed, that are asked. If I'm sitting in this Chamber, I have the benefit of hearing the wise thoughts of the Minister of Community Development. I might be able to hear the clarification from the Minister of Health. But I obviously can't do this if I'm upstairs in 512 dealing with a different department there. I want to hear what the Minister of Community Development has to say, and I want to hear what the Minister of Health has to say. I don't want to have to read it as stale news, Mr. Chairman, sometime after the fact.

The concern really comes down to this. If we go back, I know that in 1996, when the Provincial Treasurer, then Government House Leader, was defending this, he loved to suggest that members could move freely back and forth. He loved to focus on the report-back mechanism that exists after one of these A, B, C, D committees finishes. I'd say to the Provincial Treasurer now or I'd say to the Government House Leader: let's keep track. If I'm unsuccessful in persuading you, Mr. Chairman, and members that this is a dangerous practice we're about to embark on, which hasn't gotten any better over the last number of years, then let's keep track of the number of times that speakers show up in a report-back stage with questions that they weren't able to raise in the A, B, C, D committees, that they weren't able to raise in the report-back phase, questions that go unanswered.

We have another problem related to it, and it's this. Members, certainly in my caucus, work hard to prepare to ask tough, important questions. They do research, they review the Auditor General's advice, and they review the annual report for a given department. They look at the questions that were asked last year and the responses that were not received, and they ask those questions.

How many of us, Mr. Chairman, have had the experience of sitting in our office on a nice warm August afternoon or a July morning and finding we get an envelope delivered from the government courier? I always get pretty excited when I see the big, official ministerial seal on that envelope, and with trembling hand you take the letter opener, you open the envelope, and what do you find in there? It's a response. It's a very nice letter from the minister saying: here are the responses to the questions that you asked in estimates debate three months before, four months before. Well, that doesn't do very much good. We voted the budget three or four months before.

One would think that if we were going to make a major issue out of this representation on committees, it would have been addressed much, much earlier. Mr. Chairman, the suggestion that's been made is that after we go down the road, if we go down the road, of creating these A, B, C, D committees, somehow this is going to enhance a

kind of budget scrutiny. What I've tried to suggest is it would only do so if it were valuable and important to reduce the amount of time spent by members going through that analysis, and I'd suggest that's not the case.

I could use this as an example, Mr. Chairman. If I can go back to the Department of Health -- and I don't mean to pick on that minister or that department, but how many funding announcements have we seen in the last two years? How many funding announcements did we see in the last two years where we had opportunity to debate the budget? Yet what we see coming back in, time after time, is yet another announcement from the Minister of Health, another notice from the Minister of Health of another funding dollop, another envelope, whether it's more money for Y2K or more money for provincewide services. I'm not critical that additional funding was available for those important kinds of services, but when you get up to sort of 12 different supplementary funding announcements, you start wondering: why aren't we dealing with that in the budget? What sorts of things are we missing in our budget debate so that we can't deal with many of those things there? That seems to me to be the most appropriate place to deal with it.

Now, I'm almost out of time, Mr. Chairman. I know that there are other members who are going to be anxious to develop some of these arguments, but I'd just say that this process doesn't get any better. As we've now had the benefit of seeing it over some three years, at least three years and maybe longer, we know that this isn't serving Albertans any better. It allows MLAs to leave this place earlier, but it sure as heck doesn't provide a more effective kind of scrutiny. In fact, it provides for a reduced opportunity for scrutiny, and I think that's a really major concern. I know that Albertans, whether they live in Okotoks or in downtown Calgary, would like to see a process that works much better.

Thanks, Mr. Chairman.

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

3:20

MRS. SOETAERT: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. You know, I've spoken on this topic before, and I had high hopes for this new Government House Leader. I really did. I was truly hoping he would see that this double estimate time isn't really good. I'm still going to hold out hope for him. Maybe because he's just new at it, he didn't bring it to the caucus to change it, or maybe he just wants to be tortured a bit in here today so that he really feels the need to make this change or to at least bring it to his caucus. Because, interestingly enough, as I talk to members on the other side about this process, they don't like it either.

MR. DUNFORD: Name names.

MRS. SOETAERT: If I name names, that person would be in trouble. I'll send a note to the hon. minister of advanced education.

And you know what they don't like? They don't like room 512, and I don't like room 512 either. For me it's rather claustrophobic, and I'm hoping that at the least the committees I'm on will be scheduled for this larger Assembly because I can't stand that room. So with those hints to the ministers planning it, maybe they'll make sure I'm in here just out of concern for me, or else it could be the other way around. Maybe I shouldn't have let them in on that little weakness.

The atmosphere in that room is far too close for people who disagree with each other, because that's often what happens. I do disagree on some -- well, on lots -- of the spending that's

happened. I have good suggestions for where it should be spent, and people on that side disagree. Sometimes in the heat of debate or in a moment of disagreement, that room is far too close. You know, if we were to look back in history, I think we have to be two sword lengths apart. Tradition would say that we have to be two sword lengths apart, and I bet that table from one side to the other widthways is not two sword lengths apart. I don't think it is. It is not two sword lengths apart. So right away we've ruined tradition. You could just reach across and grab somebody's tie, and that's not healthy at all. Imagine if we carried swords. So I am hoping, Mr. Chairman, that we look at tradition. Number one, we're not sitting far enough apart, and it's very uncomfortable in that room.

Now, people can say that that's really not a legitimate concern. It is for me, but people can still say that that's not legitimate. But you know what? My constituents deserve to have input into the budget process. And if Transportation is on in this room at the same time Health is on in room 512, there's no way in that amount of time that I can possibly speak about, oh, highway 794 and only getting a third of it done this year. Well, there's only a third of it getting done this year. I'm hoping it might move to primary status because it certainly qualifies, but that again is for Transportation debate.

There won't be any lights on that road yet. Maybe at some intersections there may be, but let's say I want to talk to the minister about highway 794 and about other highways and safety around this province. At the same time, I want to be upstairs at Health so the Minister of Health can know that Mr. Bergevin is still in an acute care bed in Westlock, in fact in the pediatric ward in Westlock. Isn't that a sad statement? I think he has to know that there sits Mr. Bergevin away from his family in Westlock in a pediatric ward, and that's how we are treating our senior citizens. That's a crime. So if those two things are going on at the same time, I can't possibly get to both and get on the speaking list for both, and one would say that that's a simple democratic procedure.

Now, you know, I'm not saying that there isn't room for negotiation. If we agree, let's say for next year, between this Government House Leader and ours, which is always my hope, maybe we can work out one budget estimate at a time. Maybe we could next year, in exchange for something else. In exchange for saying that the end of the day is 10 o'clock at night? I don't know. That's just a suggestion on my humble part here. [interjection] My humble self, yes. Even colleagues on my side raise their eyebrows at that one. But it's a suggestion to make this place work better, because truly on nights past midnight I don't think any of us are making too much sense. Maybe that's a negotiation that could happen: if all nights ended at 10 o'clock, if we called that midnight, the end of the day, in exchange for one night, one budget, and not two places at once. I just think that flies in the face of democracy.

I know this government can sit back and say: "We don't really have to worry about this process, because you know what? The average person out there doesn't know." And they're right. They don't understand what we do in here with the budget process. They hear the budget speech. They hear some critics making comments on it, and after a couple of days they forget about it, until their grandfather can't get a bed, until their child has 34 kids in a classroom, or until our beautiful environment is eaten away with all kinds of projects. I know a lot of people out there don't really know about the budget process in here. I think to explain it takes a little bit of time, and maybe a few people would say that it really doesn't matter. But you know what? It does matter for democracy. It does matter that we ask every minister a question so that they are held accountable and so that I can represent my constituents. I think every person in here has a right to ask questions for their constituents.

I bet you the Member for West Yellowhead is asking the minister questions now. Well, move over. There are a few of us that are going to sit there. In fact, Member from Edmonton-Ellerslie, you can go sit by the minister right now and ask him all kinds of questions in committee, scary thought as it is, and he'll answer. Is that public debate? Does West Yellowhead have documentation that he can take to his constituents to say, "I asked this on your behalf"? I doubt it very much. It should be on the record. They should know you're doing your job. Maybe they wonder about that with different members that never speak in here. I can say: well, I don't know what your MLA asked, but I asked this on your behalf. That's what this place is for. Though this government may like closed doors and little secret meetings and a little tête-à-tête at this spot and this spot, I'm sorry; the reality is that it's public debate. That's why you were elected. Speak up for your constituents out loud in this Assembly, not in room 512. Come right here and speak in this Assembly.

MR. LUND: We're in the Assembly.

MRS. SOETAERT: They're in the Assembly, but their conversation is not on the record. What does that tell us? Why are they afraid to put their conversation on the record? Why is the minister afraid to publicly answer questions to West Yellowhead? Save those questions for debate and see if you can fit in Environment down here maybe and then run up to Transportation and ask about the conditions of all the highways. We'll see. The race is on, Mr. Chairman. West Yellowhead and I are going to try at every subcommittee and see if we can get on the speaking list and represent all the concerns of all our constituents. I bet you that you won't have time. It won't be on the record, and your people won't know what you've asked on their behalf, but you can say: well, I chatted one on one with the minister, you know; we're buddy-buddy. Well, you know what? That's not good enough, and people don't believe you after a while. After a while you can say: I'm going to send you a copy of *Hansard*; this is what I asked on your behalf. They can do that.

Mr. Chairman, I'm really disappointed in this budget process because I had high hopes. I had really high hopes with these two House leaders, who are very reasonable people -- certainly our side of the House is, and I had hopes for that House leader -- that hopefully we won't go through this painful process again. First of all, we're arguing this budget process for, oh, a good part of this day. Secondly, I don't think it's fair to my constituents that I can't be at each budget I want to be at. You know, what I end up doing is sending my concerns via other MLAs and them speaking up for me, and that's just not the same as me speaking up for my constituents.

So that's all I had to say. In fact, I read some of my comments from last year in February about the budget process. Pretty well the same points, Mr. Chairman, which means that it's going to be a slow process. It's going to take them a while to catch on to this, because this is now two years in a row I've tried to make this point. So my hope for next year is that they'll get it right.

3:30

MS CARLSON: They need some of that PUF funding.

MRS. SOETAERT: They need some PUF to get it right.

Mr. Chairman, here's a final plea. I think there's room for negotiation on this. I truly do. I know our House leader can bring some ideas forward to that House leader, and I know he'll have the courage to go to his caucus and say: you guys, this budget process is painful. I'm sure no one in here likes sitting in room 512. I am sure of it. I don't think anybody likes room 512. I bet the Minister of Public Works, Supply and Services doesn't like room 512. See;

he doesn't. So there are people on that side, Minister of Education, who don't like this process. I think it would just be, you know, a nice move on all our parts to negotiate something so we're not doing two at once.

If it's within any of your power, Mr. Chairman, please keep me out of room 512 because there tends to be a lot of tension coming out of that room, and I don't like that when I'm walking down the hallways. You should feel safe in this Legislature and I don't always after a committee meeting in room 512.

So with those few and profound remarks, Mr. Chairman, I'm sure there are other people who want to speak, probably far more eloquently than I, on this topic. Thank you.

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

MS CARLSON: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I'm happy to speak on this motion, and this year I am once again speaking against this motion. There are a number of problems with designating the four subcommittees and then running two subcommittees at the same time, and I anticipate going through those in some detail.

There's no doubt that what happens when you run two committees at the same time is that our voices get diluted, Mr. Chairman, and we don't have an opportunity to represent our constituencies on all of the issues being debated at the same time. We've heard from people on the other side of the House saying: well, you can run up and down the stairs and participate if you want to. But in fact it isn't quite as simple as that. Like my colleague from Calgary-Buffalo said, when you do that, when you start the debate let's say here in the Assembly, you have your time to speak and then you run upstairs to room 512 and try to get on the list.

MRS. SOETAERT: I hate that room.

MS CARLSON: Yes, I hate that room too, and I will get to that in due time.

When you run upstairs and try to get on the list in 512, you do find that there are speakers on the list, you have to wait your turn, and you've missed a great deal of the debate that has happened, Mr. Chairman. You don't know whether or not the minister has at that stage been participating in the debate, whether they've answered any of the questions. It's hard to get up to speed in terms of where the rest of the people in the room are in the debate.

One thing for sure is that the time is so finite in terms of what we get to debate on the budget in this Legislature that you wouldn't want to duplicate a question when you go into the room. If it's already been asked, particularly if the minister has answered it, then that's a duplication of process and a wasting of valuable time that is in error. You wouldn't know that coming in. You don't have an opportunity to get briefed by your colleagues in terms of what's been talked about and what's been put on the record. Of course the Blues aren't ready that quickly, so you don't have an opportunity to review them. So you go in cold and you don't know where anybody is at, and that's a process that could be vastly improved. There's no doubt that I'm in favour of systems within this Legislature that streamline and improve performance, but I think running two subcommittees at the same time doesn't speak to that, Mr. Chairman.

We have a fundamental responsibility as Members of the Legislative Assembly to represent the people throughout this province. I would like to remind people in this Assembly of some of those issues that we have as a part of our mandate as elected representatives. In doing that, I will quote from a book, Mr. Chairman, entitled *The Concept of Representation*, which was written by Hannah Pitkin. This quote comes from page 209, and it talks about our

obligations as elected representatives in this province and the concept of representation throughout the world. It says: the representative must act independently; the actions must also involve discretion and judgment; you must be the one who acts despite the resulting potential for conflict between representative and represented about what is to be done; that conflict must not normally take place; the representative must act in such a way that there is no conflict, or if it occurs, an explanation is called for. So we must be independent, and we must use discretion and judgment and be representative in our comments.

That means representative on all issues, Mr. Chairman, not just on that subcommittee that we have been designated to. That speaks to our ability to speak on the designated subcommittees and not being available in one place to represent the views of our constituents but also to hear what the other views are that have been surrounding the issue. That doesn't mean just reading *Hansard* the next day or whenever it's available. In fact, it's not usually the next day during this process because of the time constraints they're under in terms of people power to review the transcripts and get them ready.

It's more than just being able to read what was recorded and reporting that back to our constituents. It means actually being there, hearing what's going on, not just the debate that's happening but the rest of the chatter that happens in the Assembly, because sometimes that gives us much more information than the actual recorded debate, Mr. Chairman. So we need to be able to be there at all times, regardless of whether it's a committee that we ourselves have been designated to or not.

This brings up the other issue about these subcommittees, and that is that we're only allowed to vote on them, Mr. Chairman, if we're on the subcommittee. Well, my constituents want me to be available and accessible to vote on everything that has to do with the budget. Let's face it. The budget in this province is the biggest thing that happens here. It's the reason for government being. That money, those billions and billions of dollars that are allocated every year, and our ability as elected representatives to scrutinize that budget and to report on it is a fundamental part of our responsibility and is in fact the most important action that we take over the course of the year here. Being able to bring the concerns from our constituents back here and talk about those and have the ministers who are allocating their various ministries throughout the budget process hear those and have an opportunity to respond back is fundamental to what our job is. This doesn't allow us to do it, and it doesn't allow us to vote on each subcommittee as it's reported.

As it stands, I'm only on subcommittee D. That means my vote only counts on one subcommittee, so it means that the only opportunity I have to vote on this budget in this province is on the Ministry of Energy, the Ministry of Economic Development, and science, research, and information technology. Those are not the only interests of the people of Edmonton-Ellerslie.

You know, Mr. Chairman, that in this past couple of weeks I have tabled over 600 names on petitions from people in my constituency who are concerned about education funding. Those constituents expect me to not only be discussing those issues but a variety of areas, certainly Advanced Education and Career Development, which is subcommittee A, which I'm not on, and I'm not going to be able to do that.

If I can co-ordinate my speaking in one room with speaking in the other room, then I may have an opportunity to participate in the debate, but I won't be able to hear what the minister is saying. I won't be able to know what the other questions are that have been asked until after the fact. I won't be able to know what government members have contributed to the debate, which usually isn't very much or very often; nevertheless, I would like to hear that. There's

always a possibility, and this may be the year, Mr. Chairman. I would hate to miss that opportunity.

More importantly, Mr. Chairman, even if I can arrange the schedule to be up there to get on the speaking list and speak, I won't be able to vote. My constituents expect me to be voting on Advanced Education and Career Development issues. It's a big issue in my constituency. It's an ongoing issue, and this budget to their minds has does nothing to relieve their concerns about where this is going.

Executive Council. There are always lots of questions that my constituents have about how the Premier is spending his money, and once again I won't be able to be there.

### 3:40

Community Development. I don't think people in this Assembly know, but in Edmonton-Ellerslie, in south Mill Woods, 12 percent of the population are seniors. Of that 12 percent, 6 percent of those people are over the age of 70, so issues revolving around seniors are very important in my constituency. I have an active senior population who wants to know what is happening. They've got lots of questions on what's happened in this budget for them because in the speech that the Treasurer gave, they weren't mentioned to any significant degree. They want to know what's going to be happening in this budget year for them.

They feel that they have been significantly underrepresented in terms of money and have taken a disproportionate amount of the cuts. They don't see where this promised tax break that's maybe coming in two or three years, if everything looks fine and all the ducks line up right for the Treasurer, given that he's still even with the government at that time and not gone on to his new career with a different united right party -- they want to know that there's going to be money there for them. They've taken more than their share of the cuts, and they want to see that they're fairly treated in the future. They don't feel like they have been fairly treated, and Mr. Chairman, I agree with them. I don't think they have.

[Mrs. Gordon in the chair]

Transportation and Utilities. Transportation is a major issue in my constituency. We're the southeast leg of a proposed ring road in Mill Woods that has been proposed for more than 20 years. It still isn't in the transportation master plan for completion by the city of Edmonton. The city of Edmonton tells us the reason for that is that they're not seeing enough funding from the provincial government, so it could be proposed for another 20 years before we get there, Madam Chairman. My constituents have some questions on that, so I'm wondering how I can be on subcommittee D, which is where I'm assigned and where I am allowed to vote, and also be on subcommittee B talking about issues important to seniors and issues important to transportation and where in fact I'm not allowed to vote. I think there's a real problem with that.

There are lots of concerns in my constituency as well about community-based crime. Justice and Attorney General is under subcommittee B, so when my constituents have lots of questions, not a few questions, about community-based crime in their constituency, I will not be able to fully participate in the Justice debates because once again subcommittee B is a committee I don't have a membership on and I don't have a vote on. So how am I supposed to answer my constituents, Madam Chairman?

I wonder if somebody, perhaps the Government House Leader, could answer that for me. How am I supposed to justify my position to my constituents when they say, "We want you to be there to bring up our issues, to ask the questions, to get the answers, and to vote on

the results of that"? I'm not in a position to do that because this subcommittee's structure does not allow me to do that, so I don't have the answers for those constituents. I'm hoping that the House leader will give me some of those answers, that he will tell me how I am supposed to answer them. If he doesn't, then I guess I'm just going to give his phone number to my constituents and let them call him directly. I'm sure he's very busy and he doesn't want to be tied up in those issues, but I'm going to happily do that because I don't have those answers for them.

There are some things about this budgetary process that I do support. I'd just like to take a moment to talk about them, Madam Chairman, and one is the designated supply subcommittees. I like that particular process because the designated subcommittee that I am involved in is Environmental Protection, and the Minister of Environmental Protection does a very good job in those designated subcommittees. He brings his senior staff with him and is prepared to hear the questions and prepared to answer those questions to the best of his ability that evening, and I find that those answers are complete. I like that process a lot.

We've tried a couple of systems here over the last couple of years, and one has worked, in my estimation, very well and one has failed dismally. So why can't the government acknowledge that and take the one that is failing dismally, eliminate it from the process, and change it to make it work? The designated subcommittee system where you can sit down around the table and ask the minister and his senior staff questions and get actual answers back is a very positive experience. It is the best experience that I have had in this Legislative Assembly in terms of getting answers from the government.

Question period doesn't work very well because it's question period, not answer period. The normal budgetary process doesn't work very well either, Madam Chairman, because when we're in the subcommittees A, B, C, and D, we have an opportunity to stand and ask the questions, but we don't always get answers. Yes, the minister will stand up for a couple of minutes, and some ministers are better than others. Some will answer a few questions and undertake to provide the answers to the rest of the questions, but those answers don't come in a timely fashion. In fact I have yet, in my six years here in this Assembly, to have had the ability to get the answers to the questions prior to having to vote, not only just in the subcommittees but on the budget itself.

In fact, Madam Chairman, while some of the ministers undertake to provide answers to the questions, some of them never do. [interjection] That's right. I see that the Minister of Community Development is looking surprised at that. Well, in fact we do get her answers. I can't remember a time when I didn't get that particular minister's answers, and while not in time, usually, to vote on the budget . . .

MRS. McCLELLAN: Sometimes.

MS CARLSON: Sometimes they do come, and I actually appreciate what she does. She will answer those questions that she has readily available as soon as possible and then the other questions later. Unfortunately, those other answers don't come in time to take a timely vote on the budget, but they do come, and that's a positive experience.

What is a better experience, Madam Chairman, is when we can ask the question and get the answer right there. When we have the minister there and the senior staff people and some other support people who sit against the wall -- and that's another thing I need to talk about, the structure of that room.

The structure of the room in 512, where we have one of the subcommittees meeting, is not very good. First of all, we're a little



too close. There are too many people crowded into a small room. When debate does get heated, as it does sometimes, it would be nice to have a little more space from some of the members. And it's very uncomfortable for some of the support staff that comes to support the ministry that evening. Madam Chairman, they're made to sit lined up against a wall. They don't feel included in terms of being a part of the process. They're not at the table, so to speak. They have all of their documentation sitting around them on the floor and falling off other chairs in an untidy fashion because there isn't space for them to properly be prepared in a professional fashion for these questions. While they have access to coffee during that time period, they're perched on a chair up against the wall with literally a line, some sort of a rope, between them and us. It isn't a very inclusive kind of atmosphere at all, and I've always felt uncomfortable that those people were not at the table.

If we were in some sort of a venue that would allow everybody to fully participate, that would be much better and I think much more appropriate, and it would recognize the value of the people who come to support the minister in his responses. As it is, they don't often get called on to respond. Because of the way the introductions are made, we don't have much background information in terms of who, precisely, they're representing and what they're coming prepared to answer questions on. That's a disadvantage of this system, Madam Chairman, that I think needs to be addressed. So not only is the subcommittee structure faulty, but the actual preparation in the rooms is somewhat faulty as well.

Also faulty is the participation of the government members, Madam Chairman. Regardless of whether we're in the Assembly here or upstairs in room 512, we don't see a strong participation from government members in this process. That's too bad, because I'm sure that often the questions they would ask would also be important to us, and we would like to hear what they are hearing in their constituencies. That would in fact serve their purposes to some extent, because if we could hear here in the Assembly what it is that their constituents have questions about and what their concerns are, then it may save us a trip out to their constituency.

3:50

I know that none of the MLAs in this Assembly who are not Liberals particularly enjoy having Liberal MLAs visiting their home ridings, but if that's the only way we can find out what it is that people are saying and what their concerns are, Madam Chairman, then we are bound by duty to perform that function, and we are happy to do so. So if we would see a little more participation on that side of the House, perhaps even the ministers would answer their questions. They don't often answer ours. So it'd be nice to see if we could get that level of participation from the ministers as well, and it would be I think a far more satisfactory result.

We often hear ministers in this Legislative Assembly say to us that we don't understand their perspective or that we don't care to understand it. I don't think that's true, Madam Chairman. The problem is that we rarely have an opportunity where we can hear them answer a question in a fashion that is not politically motivated or an answer given for the cameras in question period or an answer that is given so as not to answer the question. In the designated subcommittees where we do have ministers who do answer questions, we see how valuable that process can be. I would like to urge all ministers in the subcommittees to answer the questions to the best of their ability at all times.

Thank you.

THE DEPUTY CHAIRMAN: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Glenora.

MR. SAPERS: Thanks very much, Madam Chairman. This is old territory for some of us in the Assembly. A couple of years ago the government decided that it wanted to curtail debate on estimates, so they enacted this part of the Standing Orders to resolve into subcommittees. From the very first initiative members of the opposition cried foul, and from that moment on the government has been defending this practice. The arguments haven't changed much over the years, but the problem itself has also remained constant, and it might even become more acute because of course the stakes are always just a little bit higher. A \$16 billion budget and mere hours to discuss it.

It seems to me that the government can't have it both ways. Some people would say chewing gum and walking at the same time, and others might say sucking and blowing. There are all kinds of expressions for it, but clearly government can't have it both ways. They can't pretend to be open and transparent and accountable and responsive and at the same time introduce closure, other time-allocation guillotines, and the imposition of a subcommittee process. If the government was as confident in its fiscal plans as it claims to be, then there would be no problem with them simply throwing open the doors and saying: "Come on in. Let's sit down. Let's talk about it. We'll take as much time as you need to make sure the questions are not only asked but answered." The process should be as flexible as it needs to be to ensure that every elected member has an opportunity to satisfy themselves with the contents of the budget.

I don't think our constituents would expect any less than that. It doesn't matter whether you're talking about a member of the Official Opposition or a member of the third party or a member who is a private member on the government benches. We will all be asked the questions. We will all have the same demands of accountability made of us. Unfortunately, unless we want to tell fibs, we're going to have to say: well, I couldn't do my job; the government conspired to prevent me from doing my job. That's a horrible thing to have to say, again, in a province that is represented by a self-proclaimed open and accountable government.

Now, I'll just speak personally here for a minute. I'm on subcommittee A, which will deal with Executive Council, Advanced Education and Career Development, and Treasury. One of my roles with the Official Opposition is to also be the critic and spokesperson responsible for science, research, and information technology. As I go down the list, I'm in subcommittee A, and science, research, and information technology isn't there. It's not in subcommittee B, and it's not in subcommittee C. It's in subcommittee D. I'm not on that subcommittee, so I can't vote at that subcommittee when those estimates are debated. Now I have to say: okay; what can I do about that? Well, I can show up at that subcommittee and participate in the debate as long as I'm not double-scheduled with another one. The fact is that I probably will be, so that solution won't work.

I see the minister of transportation is offering some very helpful advice: it could come back to the Assembly. Of course it does; it comes back to the Assembly for 20 minutes. So after some colleagues have had an abbreviated chance to deal with those estimates, as the critic responsible I will have perhaps half of those 20 minutes to do my job and quiz the minister about his spending plans. Now, this is a multimillion dollar budget, and I'll have about 10 minutes. Then this government is going to stand up and claim some bragging rights that they're open and accountable. Well, Madam Chairman, poppycock would be the only parliamentary response to that claim.

The government makes its own problems worse, because they refuse to commit to two sessions of the Legislature every year, even though they've had many opportunities to live up to the Premier's commitment to do that and amend the law. In fact, the government voted against a private member's bill that would have entrenched

two sessions of the Legislative Assembly. Now, you may be asking: what do two sessions of the Legislative Assembly every year have to do with the motion that's before us today? Well, precisely this: in many other Legislatures in this country including many other parliaments throughout the Commonwealth it has become tradition that in the spring the Chamber deals with the budget, and in the fall the Chamber deals with legislative initiatives. It's a pretty rough-and-ready rule for dividing time and efforts amongst elected members. So in the fall, bills; in the spring, budget.

Well, this government doesn't want to make a commitment to the two sessions, so they try to do everything at once. Because of the time pressure that that puts on the Assembly by trying to force a whole bunch of legislation into the same period of time that we'll be dealing with the budget -- the government doesn't want to prolong the session to allow adequate time to do both justice, to do both properly, because of course the government doesn't really like being held accountable. One of the things that happens during a session is question period, and the longer a session lasts, the more days there are to ask questions and the more opportunities there are every day for the government to be horribly embarrassed for their lack of accountability.

The government does not want to see that happen, so they're left with coming up with this device; that is, a device to curtail debate. Instead of allowing the fullness of the process, they force it through this subcommittee routine, which means that we don't have those extra question periods. The way that they can cut down on the time is by having these subcommittees so they can have us in two places at once. When I say us, I mean the Official Opposition, because of course if they wanted to, the ministers could send their backbenchers notes and answer their questions, and they probably do get reasonable answers to their questions unlike the experience of most of the opposition members with very rare exception.

I see I've got the Minister of Environmental Protection's rapt attention, and I'm glad, because I was going to use him as an example. This minister, Madam Chairman, has done both very, very well in this process and has done very, very poorly in this process. I can recall one exchange when the Minister of Environmental Protection went out of his way to provide what I thought was a relatively high-quality answer to a series of budget questions. I can also recall that same minister sitting in one of the subcommittees using time that should have been allocated towards meaningful questioning of another department's estimates to ask one of his colleague cabinet ministers some of the most ridiculous puffball questions I've ever heard in my life and then allowing his buddy cabinet minister to dominate the time allocated to the committee, to spend 20 minutes to the first set of questions and then 20 minutes to another set of questions, basically dominating the time. It was a mockery of the budget examination process.

**4:00**

So that minister gets both a gold star for doing a good job when it came to his own department, but he gets a lump of coal for totally messing it up when it comes to -- I don't know. All I can imagine is some secret handshake kind of deal that he cut with his buddy minister to shut down the process in any meaningful way. [interjection] Well, I'm not even going to talk about the Minister of Energy, because what he did was even more offensive, hon. minister, than what you did. So what we have is a very, very uneven practice.

**THE DEPUTY CHAIRMAN:** Hon. member, you're not provoking the hon. Minister of Energy; are you?

**MR. SAPERS:** It's always a rule of mine to let a sleeping dog lie,

Madam Chairman. No, I'm not trying to provoke debate. I'm simply expressing the frustration I have with a process that doesn't allow me to do my job in this Assembly.

In fact, I was so exercised about this last time around that I moved a point of privilege in the Assembly. I spoke to that point of privilege and the hon. Government House Leader at the time, who is now the Minister of Justice, spoke to that point of privilege, and the Speaker ruled against it. The Speaker said that it wasn't privilege. I'll tell you that if I was ever motivated to challenge a ruling of the chair, that was the time, because this is, as far as I am concerned -- and I will always be convinced -- one of the most fundamental things that we can do; that is, ask tough questions to the government about their spending plans, about how they're going to spend all those sweat-soaked loonies, then evaluate that information as we vote on the estimates, and then be able to communicate the responses and the rationale back to our constituents for why we voted the way we did and why it is that we decided to spend all of their money the way that we've decided to spend it.

So, Madam Chairman, the circumstances, as I say, haven't changed much. If anything, they've gotten worse. This time around, I should say, there's a particular challenge. That challenge is that the government has very cleverly packaged a three-year election platform into a budget, and we're now being asked really not to just debate and evaluate a give-or-take \$16 billion budget, but we're being asked to evaluate a three-year plan that talks about multimillion dollar spending increases and purports to talk about multimillion dollar tax cuts.

Now, when you peel back all the layers of rhetoric around the rather dramatic budget presentation of the Treasurer the other day, what you'll see is that this year's budget is really just a very expensive version of last year's budget and that there's not a lot of really meaningful changes that are going to come into play in the next 12 months. What happens in the next 12 months becomes the springboard for all of those other things that the budget plan talks about, and because this is really the springboard for all of those other things, it really needs our full and utmost attention now. We really have to concentrate on making sure that the assumptions that underlie the budget plan are the correct assumptions. We have to make sure that we are not being led down the garden path.

Now, I have some very significant questions about the economic feedback that's being projected. I know the Minister of Advanced Education and Career Development has those same questions. The proposed 40 percent feedback by the fourth year of the plan is an extraordinarily optimistic number. It would be one that I would be delighted if it was achieved, but I can't come to my own independent conclusion about that projection because the detail isn't in the budget package. So I'm going to need to be able to question the Treasurer about that, and it's not going to be a simple exchange. It's complicated information, so we need the time to explore that.

If the assumption turns out to be based on sound logic and on scientific analysis, well, that's great, but if the assumption turns out to be one that was influenced by, heaven forbid, politics, then I think we ought to be able to expose it for what it is: just another promise made by another politician. Then we can evaluate whether or not we want to believe that promise, but I don't think that evaluating a budget should just be a trust or a faith exercise. I think evaluating a budget should be held up to far more rigour, independence, and objectivity than that, which brings us back to why I don't want to support the motion.

We've asked the government on several occasions to allow us to have the fullest budget debate possible. Now, this government has bragged about wanting to be the leaders in this and that. They want to be the leaders in spending the least money and they want to be the

leaders in collecting the least taxes and they want to be the leaders in -- I don't know -- racing to the bottom line of this or that. Why can't this government take some pride and become the leader in the most open, honest budget debate with the highest degree of public and opposition scrutiny? Why can't this government stake that out as a goal and then claim bragging rights about that achievement? Unless of course they simply don't want to answer the questions, unless of course they simply don't believe that their plans will withstand that level of scrutiny.

I can only come to the conclusion that they don't in fact believe their own rhetoric, and the self-doubt is written all over the faces of Executive Council when they avoid entering into this debate. The fact is that this government does not want to have this opposition afforded the opportunity to ask the kinds of detailed questions that would come in full budget review. They don't want to give the public an opportunity to get a second opinion, and they don't want to have the time set aside so that people can work their way through all of the public relations and get to the heart of the matter.

This budget announcement that we've just endured was one of the most brilliantly orchestrated bits of political theatre that I've ever seen. Full marks to the government for pulling it off. I mean, we had budget leak after budget leak, all the tantalizing stuff, starting last October with the Tax Review Committee -- half a billion dollar tax cuts, the headlines blared -- leading right through to: oh, you know, Dr. Boothe says that it's a bitter pill to swallow. Then we get to: well, we've got program spending, because I'm calling in from Mexico to tell you that the health care bloody mess is going to get fixed up. Then we wait with great anticipation for the Treasurer's big day -- and I noticed the Premier mostly absented himself -- and lo and behold we've got this amazing witches' brew of tax cuts and program spending and promises of all kinds of good things to come.

The media seemed to buy it. I noticed the headlines seemed to score well for the government. I listened to some of the talk shows; in fact I was even on a couple of the talk shows. People were calling in and saying: "Well, we're all going to get a huge tax cut; aren't we? Didn't they promise that everyone was going to get a tax cut?" I was having to say: "Well, no. You may have heard that, and I can understand how you came to that conclusion, but the truth is something very different from what the perception is that's out there." Then people would say: well, aren't we going to get billions of dollars more for health care? And I'd say: well, you know, I understand how you came to that perception, but that's not really the truth. "Well, yeah, but we're getting hundreds and hundreds of millions of dollars in education funding, and they're going to hire a thousand new teachers." "Well, no. I understand how you came to that conclusion, but that's not really what's going to happen."

You know, in advanced education I did notice that there was \$15 million added to the student loan fund. That's okay, except that what we have is a government that says: we're committed to continuing education, and the way that we're going to show this is by allowing students to get into more debt.

I think that there's probably a more complete and more complicated answer to the situation than that, and I know that in the proper questioning, in the give-and-take that will come in a debate that's not pressured by time and is not under the threat of closure, as today's debate is, we could get to those insightful questions and we could get those full and complete answers, but again we're going to be denied that opportunity.

#### 4:10

I would like to strongly state for the record one more time that I am opposed to this process. I think that this process does a disservice to every elected member. I think that this process does a

disservice to every taxpayer. I think that this process is one that has been manipulated by the government to ensure the least amount of scrutiny and questioning possible. I always find it remarkable that only in the Legislative Assembly could a day be considered two hours long, which is what happens in one of these subcommittees when we have a full day of debate, but in fact what it is is two hours.

I must say just one last time that this is the fact that disproves the government's claims that they want to be open. What this shows is exactly how controlling and restrictive this government wants to be, particularly when it comes to answering the big questions about how tax dollars are being spent.

So, Madam Chairman, this motion won't be getting my support, and I would encourage all members who are concerned about accountability to vote against it.

Thank you very much.

THE DEPUTY CHAIRMAN: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods.

DR. MASSEY: Thank you, Madam Chairman. I'd like to make a few comments in speaking against the motion. I think that if we go back to the purpose of estimates and the estimate debates, it may help clarify why the opposition has been so opposed to the arrangements that have been used these last several years in designated subcommittees.

I think that for Albertans the estimates are the place where legislators sit and ask the question: are Albertans receiving value for their tax dollars? It's that central question that drives the budget estimates. There's an opportunity during the estimates debates to look at the government's objectives and then to make some judgments as to whether or not those objectives are being realized through the expenditures that the government projects to make. I think a third purpose of those estimates is to ask if government policy implementation and management of programs is really effective. So there are three central questions, but the most important of them all for Albertans is: are we receiving good value for the tax dollars that the government is asking us to contribute to make this community we call Alberta a better place? It's an important question.

Ontario recently went through a review of the estimates process that they use in that Legislature. The Auditor General of that province talked of the value of the estimates and the questioning process that is used in examining those estimates. I'd like to quote from part of the Auditor General's report. The Auditor General indicates that

the real value of estimates lies in the preparation that ministers and civil servants must make for them: no one is certain what the opposition will ask, and the government must be prepared to explain and justify its policies at length in a very public forum.

I think that that's the important part for the opposition: we want to ensure that those explanations and that justification are done in a very public forum.

The Auditor General goes on further:

As is generally the case with parliamentary accountability, the estimates debates themselves are normally far less effective in fostering accountability than the fear engendered in government by their mere existence.

So it's not so much the actual questions that are often asked, because we all know that we come away having asked hundreds and hundreds of questions during those estimates, but it's the notion that that scrutiny is there and that every policy that the government undertakes, every plan that they pursue, is open to questioning.

The Auditor General in Ontario used the word "fear." I'm not sure that "fear" is the right word, but there is that caution to

ministries, to public service personnel, and to the government that whatever they do is going to be looked at and it's going to be looked at in a very public forum. I believe that that's at the root of some of the difficulties that we're having as we look at the process that we have in place.

I think that all of us have appreciated the moves that the government has taken to make scrutiny of the budget better and more detailed and to provide legislators with the information that we in the past haven't had. It's the information, of course, that's contained in the business plans. Those business plans do provide additional estimate information, that is very valuable in making the judgments that we have to make about the government's spending plans. It's interesting. I noticed that the Auditor General, in reviewing the Ontario estimates process, singled out Alberta as a province that had moved to the use of business plans for providing more budget information and applauded their use and pointed to that technique as a way of augmenting the thoroughness that the budget estimate process needs to have. So we do have additional information to what was the case a number of years ago in that we have those business plans.

The business plans were a good move, but the government also has made some other moves. The one that people are objecting to today is the simultaneous scheduling of subcommittees. It does seem to be a system that we have tried a number of times in the last few years, and it's presented problems. It's presented problems to the opposition. Every year at this time the prelude to the estimates is this debate over this simultaneous scheduling of subcommittees. We all know almost by heart now the arguments that are made. It goes to, you know: how well has it worked? If the Auditor General of Ontario is correct, then for a government that fears scrutiny, I guess scheduling committees simultaneously helps reduce the fear in some quarters, but it does have opposition members upset because of the restraint it puts on a comprehensive examination of all aspects of the budget. That public airing and the opportunity to question publicly and to vote on budget estimates are interfered with, using the simultaneous scheduling of committees.

One of the other fears -- and I don't have the quote, but I was looking at some previous *Hansards* -- was that not only is this an unsatisfactory process for budget estimates, but one of the previous Government House Leaders indicated that he thought that this might be a useful process to extend to other legislative committees. That was again something that struck fear into the opposition's hearts, that this notion of simultaneous scheduling of subcommittees, even dealing with the Legislature, might be extended to those areas. I think we are doing everything by speaking against this motion to indicate that we definitely in no way endorse this procedure, nor would we entertain it being extended to other deliberations.

4:20

One of the other concerns that we've had is that the budget scrutiny is really one of the most important jobs that we carry out in the Legislature, and we're not privy, as government and government members are, to the compiling of government policy and the putting together of budgets to support those policies. We are the outsiders in the process. We look at the finished product and have to make our judgments based on what we see in the estimates. So it's a fear from our side that we will not be able to carry out the role that has been assigned to us, and that is to very carefully scrutinize every expenditure of government, to raise questions, to put forward proposals, and to assure Albertans that their Legislature is in fact doing what the Legislature is intended to do.

Now, as I indicated in the past, we've expressed our concern with the process. It's been addressed in a variety of ways. Several House

leaders from both sides of the House have negotiated over the issue and tried to come to some resolution, but the fact remains that nothing has changed, and here we are again with a motion before us that would establish simultaneous subcommittees scheduling to examine the budget estimates. We had one of our previous House leaders raise a point of privilege as another device to try to bring to the government's attention how very inappropriate the opposition believes this kind of scheduling to be, and of course that was not successful. We've raised points of order to try to draw the government's attention to how we feel that this scheduling procedure does not serve Albertans or this Legislature well. We've tried a number of ways of coming to some reconciliation with the government about it, and it's been unsuccessful.

One of the things that we might want to consider in the future is an examination not just of the designated subcommittees. We might want to consider an examination of the entire estimates process and how effectively that process works. I would be interested, for instance, in terms of the time and the hours that are put into the process in trying to determine the changes that actually occur to government policy from this kind of a scrutiny. How often are programs changed as a result of the kinds of questions that are asked in estimates discussions?

The response from the government in estimates is always very uneven, and it seems to be often more tied to the competency of a particular ministry than to any policy of answering questions or trying to come up with explanations for government policy. I've had the experience of a minister who answers questions within a few days by letter, promises the more complete answers, which arrive within a couple of weeks, and I've also had the other experience where I waited 11 months for a minister to respond to questions that were raised in budget estimates.

So I go back to as I started, Madam Chairman. The estimates are really an extremely important function of this Legislature, the examination of those estimates. Making sure that those tax dollars are being spent wisely is the obligation not just of the opposition but of every member of the House and making sure that the dollars are translated into programs that are beneficial to Albertans and in fact contribute to making this a better community. The third one, the notion of program management: we have to be assured that program management is effective.

So with those comments I would conclude and hope that we won't next year face a similar debate, that somehow or other the House leaders can agree that this is very unsatisfactory and that we should revert to a system that allows the estimates to be debated with legislators who choose to be at those estimate debates, free to do so, and that they won't be torn between trying to be in two places at one time, that they won't feel their freedom is being constrained to vote on particular estimates, that it will be a truly public examination of the estimates.

Thank you.

THE DEPUTY CHAIRMAN: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Meadowlark.

MS LEBOVICI: Thank you, Madam Chairman. I, too, rise this afternoon to speak to the motion that addresses the dividing of the Legislative Assembly into four subcommittees of the Committee of Supply: subcommittees A, B, C, and D. When I look at the subcommittees that have been divided and my role on those particular subcommittees and then look at the designated subcommittee that I am a member of as well, I recognize that there's a fair amount of overlap between my role as Health critic and my former roles that I have had within this Legislative Assembly as critic of Public Works,

Supply and Services, critic of Labour, critic of Intergovernmental and Aboriginal Affairs, critic of Executive Council, to name just a few. Though I am no longer critic in those particular areas, I do have an interest in and, I would like to think, some form of expertise as well in looking at the budgets that are in those particular areas.

I am on subcommittee B, which is the committee that will deal with the estimates of Community Development, Intergovernmental and Aboriginal Affairs, Transportation and Utilities, Justice and Attorney General. Subcommittee A is Executive Council. As I indicated earlier, it was one of the areas that I was critic of. Subcommittee C is Labour and Public Works, Supply and Services. Unfortunately, because of the way these subcommittees run, where they run parallel to each other, two at a time, it will likely be that I will be unable to attend either subcommittee A or subcommittee C.

When I look at my critic portfolio at this point in time with regards to Health, Labour and WCB and occupational health and safety are intertwined with the whole issue of health. Public Works, Supply and Services is also intertwined with the issue of health, because that is the area that Health receives its dollars from for capital funding. When I look at science, research, and information technology, which is a different subcommittee, that in effect has ramifications with regards to health as well. So in terms of my ability to perform my function as Health critic and to perform my function as an oversight function with regards to the dollars that are being spent in areas other than health, it would be, I believe, valuable to be able to attend those particular subcommittees as well. Unfortunately, as I'm sure has become very clear to the Members of this Legislative Assembly, that in fact will not be the case and will be very hard to action.

4:30

Now, I was in this Legislative Assembly, as some of the other members were as well, when we had the old system where the committees did not run parallel to each other and where in fact we were able to attend and to spend and concentrate energy on each department. I remember prior to my election in 1993 -- and I'm sure other MLAs can think back to that time as well -- one of the things that constituents said very loud and clear was: we want you to be able to analyze and to look at the large amount of dollars that are being spent by this government.

When we think of the fact that this particular budget is \$13.1 billion, an increase of \$600 million over last year, why wouldn't we want to be able to go back and assure our constituents that, yes, we have had the ability to look at each department, that we have had the ability to ensure the dollars are being allocated properly, that that ability is not constrained by time and is not constrained by a structure that in fact has been put in place to be of convenience to the government? It is not a structure that has been put in place to provide for that oversight function, to provide for the function of looking at and ensuring that Albertans' dollars are being spent wisely.

So, yes, we are here, and yes, we are standing and making this point, because perhaps some of the newer MLAs don't know and don't realize how fortunate in a sense we were, even though it wasn't adequate at that point in time, that we were able to have the luxury of looking at the budgets of the departments one at a time. Now, we know that the new system doesn't allow for that. We know that one of the reasons that this is occurring is because the government does not like to have too much scrutiny of their decisions and of their budget.

What we have heard today from the Premier is that this government is open and that this government is accountable to Albertans, but when it comes to the budget and the expenditure of tax dollars of Albertans, we find that this government shuts like a clam and that

in fact it tries very hard not to have too much information out to the public. We know that there are systems in other jurisdictions across this country and on the federal level that allow for a broader review of the budget of each department.

#### **Chairman's Ruling Decorum**

THE DEPUTY CHAIRMAN: Excuse me one moment, hon. member. I'd like to call the committee to order.

AN HON. MEMBER: Where are we going?

THE DEPUTY CHAIRMAN: You're going to sit down, I hope. We certainly don't mind when you sit down and visit with your neighbour or someone else, but I don't think we need groups of people standing in the Assembly.

Hon. member, continue.

#### **Debate Continued**

MS LEBOVICI: Thank you, Madam Chairman. I was hoping actually that that was something akin to a huddle, where they were trying to see whether or not they could on the spot, due to the persuasive arguments of all the members that have spoken before me, change their mind and change this motion. Unfortunately that's not the case, other than perhaps for the Minister of Public Works, Supply and Services. I think that he, having actually been in this position, may fully understand what the impact is of what we're requesting.

So, as I was saying, we have on the one hand a government that says that they're open and accountable, but on the other hand what we see is a closed process where it is very difficult to look at each of the departments and to be able to scrutinize the expenditure of public dollars. As elected members that is one of our roles.

Now, what's interesting is looking at the government's responses to requests from our members to be involved in different decisions. One that I can think of most recently is around the WestView regional health authority. When one of our members requested that she be included in the discussions around the budget, which is an item that we could be talking about in the Legislative Assembly but that unfortunately due to the structure she may not have an opportunity to, the response was: well, this is a government decision, and therefore government members are the only ones that can be involved.

I would like to put forward that when you are talking about the budget of a regional health authority, this is the decision of the Legislative Assembly. This is not a one-sided and lopsided decision with regards to making the policy of ensuring that Albertans have access to health care services in their region. This is more than the decision of the government in the most narrow sense. So, again, the avenue for exploring and for looking at what the policy is and the implementation of that policy through the budget comes through this Legislative Assembly, for we in fact vote on that budget, and we in fact therefore have to ensure that the budget represents the needs, the wishes, the aspirations of all Albertans to the best degree possible.

Now, what I have seen -- and I believe it was the hon. Member for Edmonton-Glenora who brought it up -- was that if in fact we are to take that train of thought, the extension that the only ones that really have input and that need to talk about the budget are the government members but that in the Legislative Assembly and through the process of the subcommittees, both designated and nondesignated, that is the opportunity for the opposition to ask questions, then I put it to this Legislative Assembly that in fact there

should be no government members on the designated subcommittees, that there should be no government members on the subcommittees of the Committee of Supply because in fact you've had your chance at the budget. You had the chance before the budget was presented in the Legislative Assembly. You've had your chance at it, and in fact perhaps we should be the only ones that are in . . . [interjections] It's interesting that everyone has suddenly come alive, and I think that's wonderful, Madam Chairman.

The reality is that if we take the notion that it is only government members that are to be consulted when it comes to the putting together of the budget, then it should only be the opposition members that look at the questioning that happens within the Committee of Supply. So if we really wish to make it fair, the time that is spent alternating between government and opposition could be doubled for the opposition by not having any of the government members present, because in fact you've had your chance. We've heard that over and over and over again. [interjection] If, as the Minister of Community Development seems to express, that is an astonishing thought, then let's just reverse it. Let's have the opposition members as part of the government decision that says, "This is what the budget should be," prior to the budget being put into the Legislative Assembly.

You can't have it both ways. Either we are part of the process or we are not part of the process, and if we are not part of the process, then what happens in this Legislative Assembly is it ensures us the avenue to have our say and to be involved in the making of the budget. Now, there are, as I indicated, examples where the opposition has been included in the budget process either before, during, or in preparation for the next, and these are very pertinent examples that have been used and are being used in other Legislative Assemblies throughout this country. They are Canadian examples, and if we wish to look in the States, where they have the oversight committees, then we can look in the States as well for the American examples on input into budget.

#### 4:40

So there are ways to ensure that our concerns are addressed, and our major concern within this structure that has been put into place is that there is no real avenue, that there is not an adequate amount of time, that there is not the ability to attend the different subcommittees, and that there is an unwilling -- I'm trying to think of the best way of explaining this. What it is is that we are unable to perform our fully defined functions as elected MLAs if we are left out of being able to scrutinize the budget process. This is a distortion of democracy that has been put on us by this government in the . . . [interjections] Again it appears that we've managed to wake some of the government members up, and I do hope that they will engage in the debate.

This has ensured that we are unable to look at all of the government departments, and the only reason is for time. That would be a generous assessment as to why this would happen. An ungenerous assessment would be to indicate that this government is not open, that they're not accountable, that they do not want to be scrutinized, that they do not want to have their constituents recognize that in fact their budget process can be flawed. That would be an ungenerous assessment. But a generous assessment would be that this has been put in place in order to ensure that the time and the ability of our debate is limited and to thereby also limit the amount of time that we have in a session, which, as we all know, limits the amount of time that the opposition can then question the Premier and the ministers on issues of importance because we have less question period days. So in fact that is a more generous assessment of why this is occurring.

Now, I want to say, as the Minister of Public Works, Supply and Services has pointed out, that in fact in the designated committees of supply and in some of the other committees some of the ministers have been very good in answering questions that have been put forward by the opposition. I do want to recognize that. My comment is that if we had more time, we could ask more questions that would be able to elucidate and ensure that we have in fact covered all our bases. As we know, it's very difficult in the short period of time we have to ask everything that needs to be asked, and on occasion we have sent letters to the ministers, which may or may not be answered in a timely manner. So this is of concern to us as well.

We do not endorse this process. I want to make that very clear. We believe that there is a role for the Official Opposition in looking at the budgets. We believe that it is part of our duty as representatives to ensure that we have that function of scrutiny, and though the old system was not perfect, it would at least be a good starting-off point to look at reforms to the current budget process. We set up as an example the budget process in Ontario. We set up as an example the budget process that's used by the federal government. We would be more than willing through our House leader to look at how in fact we can make the budget process more democratic. We would be very interested in modernizing this system of budget analysis, because when you're looking at the amount of dollars and the complexity of each department, it is obvious that there needs to be a process that will be able to ensure in a systematic way that taxpayers' dollars are well spent.

I don't think that this is an unreasonable request. I think this is a request that most of our constituents would nod their heads at and say: yes, that makes good sense. When they hear that we spend perhaps 20 hours, if that, on the budget process, they just shake their heads and find it very hard to believe. So, again, I believe that if we are looking at trying to do things better, trying to have a government that works more effectively and efficiently, trying to make government more open and accountable, this is one process that we can work on together to ensure that in fact that has happened.

With those comments I'll take my seat and hope that perhaps, Madam Chairman, we will have another huddle that will in fact produce the desired results that we have put forward from the Official Opposition.

Thank you very much.

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

MS OLSEN: Thank you, Madam Chairman. It's unfortunate we have to rise and debate these specific motions. One would think that to get the best questions asked by the opposition, we would be allowed a process that would allow for all of us to be present in the committees when the questions are asked.

One of the issues that I have, Madam Chairman, is that with the short time period I have had some feedback on the budget. However, I have not had a lot of feedback on the budget because I have been unable to talk to folks in my constituency over the weekend. That time frame, from the time the budget is dropped on Thursday to Monday, is not a lot of time for us to get out and talk about the budget to constituents or even have a town hall meeting, for that matter, and get some feedback.

I represent a constituency, Madam Chairman, that is very much impacted by the budget in terms of health care, education, social services. Part of my constituency is very much a very poor inner-city area, and I need to address in the budget the concerns of the people who work in that environment. I need to bring their ques-

tions back. I need to have the opportunity to go out there, field the questions from those particular constituent groups, and have that feedback to come back into the Legislature and properly debate and ask questions of the ministers on their specific issues.

I will in fact not have the opportunity to speak to everything. I am designated to be on a subcommittee. I'm also designated to be in two designated committees, and others of my colleagues are designated to be in two places at one time. We have yet to figure out how that can happen and how, then, the members that are on those two committees can best represent their constituents. I think it's a serious flaw in a government process. It is determined by the government, in fact. It is not determined by an all-party committee or all three House leaders. That's a fallacy. This is a process that's set up for and by the government, and it is not open and accountable when the structure as it is in place.

I'm concerned that what happens is that when two groups are sitting and asking questions, if subcommittee A and subcommittee B are both sitting on the same day, in real logic that would be one day, but in the logic of the government and the subcommittee process that is two days. I don't know, but when I was in school, one day meant one day, and that's not what we see happening here. So we make it very, very difficult for people to respond to constituent concerns and to the budget.

I'm the representative for Edmonton-Norwood, and I'm representing my constituents on every single issue that comes forward in this House. I may have questions in areas where I am not going to be able to ask the questions. I am not going to be able to represent my constituents' concerns because I'm not allowed in that committee. So I think that's definitely a flaw in the process. We need to be able to put as much energy into discussions in this particular environment, in the budget process, as we have in other areas. [interjections] I find it really difficult actually, Madam Chairman, to try and concentrate when we have so much chatter.

4:50

I am concerned that given the fact that we are dealing with all of the taxpayers' dollars here, \$13.1 billion -- the taxpayers do pay their taxes. They do have a right to be represented at all of these committees, and we don't see that happening. That's a lot of dough, Madam Chairman. I'm of the opinion, as many of my colleagues are, that we cannot simply just divide these committees and say that that's appropriate. How do we give good political representation to the constituents in our environment, in our area, if that's what's expected?

I can't necessarily ask the Treasurer questions when I'm in a committee asking the Minister of Justice questions. There are a lot of questions I'm going to have to ask the Minister of Justice, and I would like lots of my colleagues to be able to ask the Minister of Justice a number of questions. They all have concerns around Justice. So we want to be able to quiz that minister on some of his figures and his outcomes. We want to know exactly what he's doing. [interjection] I'm sure that the hon. member sitting with the minister right now would like to know what he's doing, too. You know, that's open and accountable government. It would be nice for all of us to know what he's doing.

MS CARLSON: But does he know himself?

MS OLSEN: That's the big question, Madam Chairman. Does the Minister of Justice himself know what he's doing? I don't think so.

MR. HAVELOCK: Sue, I can't tell you what I don't know.

MS OLSEN: Well, we believe that. We believe that comment that the Minister of Justice made, because we don't believe he really knows. But, hey, he's a lawyer, and I know he has the answers. I know it. I know he does.

Madam Chairman, I'm really getting distracted. I can see that nod; you want me to focus here. [interjection] Yeah, we'll get some billable hours from the Justice minister on our answers. Is that it? That'll work. That's democracy.

Madam Chairman, I need to move back and just talk about the ability of this government to be a little more open and accountable. What we don't see is that openness and accountability. In fact, closure is the key word, and that's what's going to happen. In fact this government has made no bones about the fact that closure will happen on the budget, and that is absolutely wrong. That defeats the process.

You know, one thing that struck me very much in my two years here is that the government speaks out of both sides of its mouth. What happens is that they say one thing and do another, and that one thing is said only when it's convenient for the government. They don't like to have to face up to any of their responsibilities or be accountable for issues. There's always an excuse. So they can be open and accountable when they feel like it, not as a government practice. So I have some concerns about that. I have concerns about the whole fact that this government is going to bring in closure on this bill. And this won't be the only . . .

DR. WEST: Point of order.

THE DEPUTY CHAIRMAN: A point of order, hon. member.  
Yes, Minister of Energy.

#### **Point of Order Imputing Motives**

DR. WEST: Well, under Standing Orders 23(h), (i), and (j), I believe it is. If I followed the text of the hon. member's debate here just in the last few minutes, it would be insinuating that members of the government were not accountable in telling the truth. She's crossed the line almost when she says that they say one thing here and another thing there. I would question that she is imputing motives and saying things in debate to irritate this side, that 23(h), (i), and (j) cover. As well, I would say that she comes very close to saying that we lie, and I don't know whether you can stand in this Assembly and insinuate or allege that another member deliberately misleads somebody by not telling the truth.

THE DEPUTY CHAIRMAN: Hon. member, on the point of order.

MS OLSEN: Yes. If the hon. minister could, I'd like it if he could quote me, because I don't understand his specific reference. If he could quote me on what he's alluding to, for further clarification for me, that would be helpful, Madam Chairman, because I don't understand what he's talking about.

THE DEPUTY CHAIRMAN: Well, the hon. minister is talking about 23(h), "makes allegations against another member," 23(i), "imputes false . . . motives to another member," and 23(j). I think, hon. member, I would just have you try to come back and focus in on what we are actually debating, and that is of course the motion that the Committee of Supply be established with four subcommittees. If we can focus in on the actual motion, please.

MS OLSEN: Are you now stating that I'm not responding to the point of order?

THE DEPUTY CHAIRMAN: No. I'm saying that I don't really believe there is a point of order. I actually probably think the same thing could be said for many members that have debated in this committee this afternoon. So I think that we just need to focus on what we have before us and what the debate should entail.

MS OLSEN: I think that's an excellent ruling, Madam Chairman.

### Debate Continued

MS OLSEN: I'd just like to move on, and then hopefully we can get through this.

I was talking about the use of closure. I do think it's not a responsible tool to use. We know it's been used in the past, and we know it'll be used in the future, but I'm wondering what mileage the government seems to gain out of this process. It shows in fact that maybe they don't necessarily respect the democratic process, the ability of the opposition. I'm an opposition member. I should be allowed to question the ministers on their budgets and find out where their dollars are going and in fact find out the meaning of some of the issues they've brought forward in the past.

I think, Madam Chairman, that in order for us to represent our constituents in the best possible manner, it's important that we don't break down into four subcommittees. It's important that the debate take place here, on the floor of the Legislature, in the very environment and atmosphere that it was determined the Legislature would be for. In fact, that would give us all an opportunity to listen to what particular ministers have to say.

One of the things that strikes me, Madam Chairman, is that the government talks about integrated services. So we now know that justice, education, health care, social services all flow together. Why would we not want to have all of those four ministers available, then, for us to quiz and query at the same time? If there are interdepartmental exchanges, interdepartmental policy work, if in fact they're working as a superministry, then we should be able to quiz them as a superministry. That means that we shouldn't just have one particular minister in front of us, that we should be able to have all of those ministers who are involved in a specific area in front of us. We should be able to ask any one of them what their budget means in the context of the greater picture. I think that that's something to think about, because we're going to see more of this. We see some crossover between Education and Advanced Education. It's an issue we should have both ministers available to speak to and to query. That's a significant issue for us.

Madam Chairman, I would just like to close by stating that we cannot allow the democratic process to come into disrepute, if you will, through this type of situation, by this type of committee structure. It's wrong. It's just wrong. We should be able to, as I said, represent our constituents to every single minister in here. I have questions I would like to ask every single minister here, and I would like to ask them in this Assembly on the record. As I said, there's that interdepartmental function with the superministries that requires some attention, and all of those folks and all of their deputy ministers should be available for quizzing from us as well.

So with that, Madam Chairman, I shall take my seat, and I'm sure that one of my other colleagues will be able to expend 15 or 20 minutes on this subject.

5:00

THE DEPUTY CHAIRMAN: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview.

MRS. SLOAN: Thank you, Madam Chairman. It's regrettable that we are debating this afternoon the establishment of a somewhat

lopsided and inequitable process for the debate of the budget presented by the hon. Treasurer last week. In preparation for my remarks this afternoon, I thought that perhaps one of the best ways of establishing the inequity is to liken this process to the process of negotiation that occurs formally across this province in many different sectors. The tenets that I am accustomed to in participating in negotiations are that there be principles of due process and fairness and equity and a sentiment of mutual gain in the process. In many respects the negotiation of the provincial budget, if you will, the debate of the provincial budget, in my opinion, should be based on those same tenets. Regrettably, it is not.

The process as it's been proposed in establishing, I guess, a two-layered system of committees puts the opposition at a distinct disadvantage in this Assembly. We are further disadvantaged because in the months preceding the Treasurer's announcements last week, all of the government members in this Assembly had the opportunity, in my understanding, to be part of the construction of the budget. They were sent drafts. They were allowed the opportunity to give input. They were allowed to take it back to their constituents, take their constituents' input, and provide that to the Provincial Treasurer.

Most of that, Madam Chairman, I know because I heard the hon. Treasurer talking about it on Access TV last week. He talked about this very intensive process that he afforded all the members in his caucus to make recommendations to him and to the Treasury about the budget and make sure their constituents' concerns were part of that process. Well, with due respect to that, there are 19 members, perhaps speaking for the ND members also, that weren't party to that process. We weren't given copies of any drafts of the budget, and we were certainly not part of the Provincial Treasurer's speaking tour prior to the introduction of his budget last week.

The budget itself, Madam Chairman, is growing more and more complex, and that is compounded by the fact that the government has brought in this process of a business plan, which, at least in my view, is intended to make it less appealing for the average citizen to not only understand but even be interested in reading the documents. Very much repetition. The structure in which the business plans are proposed doesn't follow any straightforward process.

Given that, you would think there would be some desire to allow for a full public analysis and debate in this Legislative Assembly. I mean, this is really where the rubber hits the road with respect to the budget. And it takes time. It's just now over 72 hours since the budget was introduced in the Assembly. I have had the opportunity to have some scattered discussions with constituents about the budget, particularly a great conversation with a principal in the Edmonton public school system this weekend on a ski hill in the city. His question was: "How many times can this government announce the same money? In the end, when it comes to the grant that I'm receiving on a per student basis, there is a minuscule adjustment being made." Now, to go into the budget documents themselves and actually establish that takes more time to be able to nail down exactly how the government has padded, how they have provided those facts in the budget itself, that takes more analysis, Madam Chairman.

Referring back to the principles that I talked about in the beginning, I would add in conjunction with my comments about the complexity of the proposals that there seems to be an intent to have this whole process built on the principles of further secrecy, further deceptiveness, and regurgitation of announcements that government ministers have made in previous months. Certainly as we saw last week, it was quite a performance to behold, day by day each minister jostling to have their allotted TV time to announce mostly old announcements that they had made before, and then the grand



finale on Thursday with the Provincial Treasurer. I have to say that that kind of production was something you don't get the opportunity to witness very often.

MR. DICKSON: The national poster boy.

MRS. SLOAN: Absolutely. The national poster boy, rolling out his platform for his leadership bid. What's yet to be determined is: will it be the leadership bid of the Reform Party, the united alternative party, which doesn't exist, or the Progressive Conservative Party? I thought that given what a roll we were on with respect to announcements last week, it would have cumulated in an announcement of a provincial election on Friday. That one, I guess, will be left for a later day.

MR. DICKSON: Disappointed again.

MRS. SLOAN: Absolutely.

THE DEPUTY CHAIRMAN: Hon. member, the chair has allowed a lot of leeway with this type of discussion. Can we get back to the four subcommittees, please?

MRS. SLOAN: Absolutely.

So in essence the structure that is set up is going to have a whole series of debates on Executive Council; Advanced Education and Career Development; Treasury; Community Development; Intergovernmental and Aboriginal Affairs; Transportation and Utilities; Justice; Agriculture, Food and Rural Development; Labour; Public Works, Supply and Services; Energy; Economic Development; science, research, and information technology, all occurring in a relatively simultaneous fashion. The premise of being elected, as I understood it, Madam Chairman, was to be able to represent the interests and the concerns of the citizens within my constituency on any matter that was before this Assembly. This structure does not facilitate any member of this Assembly, particularly the members of the opposition, fulfilling that role.

In preparation I thought of some issues that would overlap all of these subcommittees, and I wondered how in fact an hon. member would be able to debate such issues given the structure that the government has proposed. One such issue would be housing, both general housing and subsidized housing. In essence you could take those issues to the subcommittees on Municipal Affairs and Family and Social Services, but also technically you might want to ask questions at Economic Development, at Public Works, and at Community Development. All of those are occurring in separate subcommittees. So I guess the intent of the process is to scatter, to make the structure so virtually impossible to navigate that on an issue as important as housing is in this province at the moment, a member would have to be literally a sprint runner to get to these various committees to bring issues forward.

5:10

Another issue that would similarly cause the same problem is the issue of disabilities. It would be feasible, Madam Chairman, that on the range of issues that arise under the heading of disabilities, you might want to ask questions of Community Development, you might want to ask them of Public Works, and you might want to ask questions with respect to transportation. Again a member would be faced with an arduous process in order to accomplish that task.

Two other areas that have come to mind, one prompted by the Premier this afternoon in response to a question raised in question period, are the issue of efficiency within the government and

specifically the whole issue of whistle-blower protection, which would apply in essence to every department. I thought that given the Premier's response this afternoon, it would be interesting to question the various departments. Given the Premier's articulated desire to have efficiency throughout the government organization, it would be interesting to question these different departments on what provisions exist. Given the lack of whistle-blower protection in the province, what mechanisms exist to allow inefficiencies to be identified with no threat or real repercussions? Madam Chairman, there's really no other process that comes to my mind in the course of the legislative session where you will have all of the departments reporting, their business plans are open for analysis, and you have an opportunity to put that question forward to multiple departments. This process does not provide for that.

The last area that has an overlapping role is the issue of freedom of information and protection of privacy. Similarly in all of the departments that are impacted by the establishment of this subcommittee structure -- there are 13 roughly, I believe, a couple that represent sort of multiple interests. All of those areas unquestionably are under freedom of information and protection of privacy. You would not be able to seek out specific information with respect to their compliance with the freedom of information act under this process.

Further, Madam Chairman, I believe this morning the opposition received notification that the government was intending giving notice of a closure motion with respect to the adoption of this process. That puts another whole light on the matter. I guess I look at this government's approach to governing, the fact that they set up an inequitable process, a process that's inherently unfair to the minority voices in this Assembly, and then they have the absolute gall to invoke closure.

Do we respect the voice of the minority in this province or not? I would like to know that. It's unfortunate that there are not more members of the Executive Council here this afternoon to speak to that, but this is a real demonstration to me that the . . .

THE DEPUTY CHAIRMAN: Hon. member, you're not supposed to make reference to the absence of members.

MRS. SLOAN: Noted. Thank you.

My question is: do we respect the rights of the minority in this Legislature? The answer to that question by the establishment of this process on the budget would be no, hon. Justice minister. There are all kinds of ways, if the government wanted to, to develop a process that would allow this budget to be debated fully, and perhaps maybe even, Madam Chairman, improved through the course of debate.

But we've seen a creeping, to use the term of the Provincial Treasurer, increase in the utilization of closure in this Legislature, particularly over the tenure of this government. I believe as of -- 1997 are the statistics I have before me: use of closure 19 times in four years. I believe that's up into the mid-20s now, Madam Chairman. Premier Getty in his term of office used that heavy-handed resource only 14 times in six years, and Premier Lougheed in 14 years used it only once. So it has been gradually increasing over the course and particularly almost rampant in the term of this government.

I thought it would be useful, in that same vein, Madam Chairman, to go back a bit in history and look at, to substantiate my comments with respect to the increased incidence of closure, a whole variety of examples where it has been used by Conservative governments dating back to 1982. As one of the first examples, the Conservative government under Lougheed was debating heritage fund expenditures, and the motion for closure was invoked to attempt to limit

debate on the provincial government's budget to 25 days and further limit the heritage fund expenditures to 12 days.

At that time the opposition was represented by the Social Credit Party, and lo and behold, that party also stood firm and said that they would be co-ordinating a concerted effort to call the government to account for the use of that tool. In 1984, similarly, the budget at that time was \$9.6 billion, but the government again deemed that it was not in their interests or in the interests of citizens in this province to have full debate, and they invoked closure as well.

It has extended, Madam Chairman, to other areas. In 1988 we saw the utilization of closure to end debate on Bill 21, the Employment Standards Code. That was in relation to an issue that was related to the Gainers' strike and affected all non-union . . .

THE DEPUTY CHAIRMAN: Excuse me, hon. member. The hon. Minister of Justice.

#### **Point of Order Relevance**

MR. HAVELOCK: Madam Chairman, I'm just wondering whether we're debating the motion that's before us regarding the committee structure, or are we debating closure?

THE DEPUTY CHAIRMAN: The motion before us, hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview, is a motion pursuant to Standing Order 57(1), where we form four subcommittees of Committee of Supply.

MRS. SLOAN: Thank you, Madam Chairman, but this committee's structure is the ultimate form of closure, and we are debating this afternoon whether or not this Assembly respects the rights of the minority.

5:20

THE DEPUTY CHAIRMAN: I do want you to focus in on the motion that is in front of you by the Government House Leader where

pursuant to Standing Order 57(1) four subcommittees of the Committee of Supply be established by the Committee of Supply with the following names: subcommittee A, subcommittee B, subcommittee C, and subcommittee D.

Thank you.

#### **Debate Continued**

MRS. SLOAN: I'm speaking against that motion, Madam Chairman, because I believe that this Assembly and citizens in this province deserve the right to full debate, and that structure does not provide for full, open democratic debate on the budget. In that respect, even the tenet of the debate this afternoon should be allowed to be broad and be able to represent all of the aspects that this government . . .

#### **Chairman's Ruling Relevance**

THE DEPUTY CHAIRMAN: This member has been very broad with many, many speakers. I realize it's 20 minutes after 5 and people are somewhat anxious, but let's just focus in. You did so well for a good part of your speech. Now let's just stay with the thought.

MRS. SLOAN: I will respect the chairman's guidance with respect to this matter, Madam Chairman.

#### **Debate Continued**

MRS. SLOAN: One of the main problems in this Assembly is the

attitude that government members take to debate on substantive issues like the budget. They want to ram it through as they do so many other contentious things. They wouldn't want to allow too many opportunities for the opposition, be it members of the ND caucus or the Liberal caucus, to scrutinize the expenditures that they're making, because in fact what we might expose, lo and behold, is the deceptiveness in which many of their budget proposals are constructed and the lack of transparency, going back to one of my comments at the beginning of the budget, the transparency that does not exist in the budget documents.

Thank you, Madam Chairman.

THE DEPUTY CHAIRMAN: The hon. Member for Medicine Hat.

MR. RENNER: Thank you very much, Madam Chairman. I don't have a lot of time left before the hour comes when we're required to recess until later on this evening, but I would like to take this opportunity to use the little bit of time that is left before you're required to recess this gathering this afternoon and discuss some of the arguments that I've been listening quite intently to throughout the afternoon from the opposition. I would like to just put a few points on the record.

The main concern that opposition members have repeatedly talked about throughout the afternoon is the fact that this process that the government is proposing restricts their ability to serve their constituents and to ask questions. I contend, Madam Chairman, that nothing could be further from the truth and in fact I think that members of this House -- and we have talked about this before -- have the ability to deal with their specific issues in a more effective way rather than a less effective way under the subcommittee structure. One of the problems that . . .

THE DEPUTY CHAIRMAN: I want to call the committee to order, please. One person has the floor, and that's the hon. Member for Medicine Hat.

MR. RENNER: Well, I'm glad you pointed that out, Madam Chairman. I was just going to actually use what was going on around us to point something out: that this House, despite the fact there are 83 members, the rules -- and the rules probably need to be there, and frankly it's the job of the chair like you to enforce the rules -- only allow one person to speak at a time. When we are in Committee of Supply, then 82 other members sit, usually quietly, not very often, and listen while one member speaks.

The process that we have before us allows for twice as many people to speak at one time. We can kind of get back to the statistical analysis that was taking place in question period today. That's a 100 percent increase in participation. To be serious, Madam Chairman, the fact of the matter is that rather than only one person at a time having an opportunity to speak and ask questions on behalf of their constituents, two people, one person in this room and one person upstairs, get to speak at a time. So frankly, from my perspective, we are having more opportunity for input, not less opportunity.

The other thing that this does is allow for a little bit more flexibility because -- well, opposition members, because the majority of them live in Edmonton, maybe don't quite comprehend the difficulties that some members have that have to travel a long distance, but there are logistical problems from time to time. The Member for Lethbridge-East has almost as much understanding of the situation as I do coming from Medicine Hat.

There may be occasions where members are required, as all members are from time to time, to take care of constituency business back in their own ridings. When that happens, then they can have an

opportunity if they perhaps missed one of the Committee of Supply discussions on a particular department, when it comes up again in the subcommittee -- they can get two departments in one evening, and they have an opportunity to provide input and discuss the concerns that their constituents have on two different departments in one evening. From that point of view, again I see that there are some distinct advantages to this. [interjections] No. Hon. members, you're not sitting under the clock. I can see that I still have at least another minute, if not two minutes.

THE DEPUTY CHAIRMAN: I'm sure the chairman will interrupt you, so just carry on.

MR. RENNER: I am not going to be resuming my seat until the appointed hour has arrived, so all of the heckling will do no good.

THE DEPUTY CHAIRMAN: And I'm not going to recess the committee until the appointed hour, so carry on.

MR. RENNER: So let me talk a little bit more about what this process is all about. The process that we're going through in estimates is a very important process, and opposition members constantly talk about how they want to have the opportunity to ask questions and seek information. Well, the need to ask questions and seek information, I can assure you, Madam Chairman, is not exclusive to opposition members. Government members also have those same needs and those same kinds of requests. So when we have this process in place, oftentimes it seems that . . .

THE DEPUTY CHAIRMAN: I hesitate to interrupt you. Pursuant to Standing Order 4(3) I am going to leave the chair and recess this committee until 8 p.m. tonight. We'll reconvene in Committee of Supply.

[The committee adjourned at 5:30 p.m.]

