

Legislative Assembly of Alberta

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

Date: 99/03/30

[The Speaker in the chair]

head: Prayers

THE SPEAKER: Good afternoon. Let us pray.

As we commence proceedings today in this Assembly, we ask for divine guidance so that our words and deeds may bring to all people of this great province hope, prosperity, and a vision for the future.

Amen.

Please be seated.

head: Presenting Petitions

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

DR. NICOL: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I have a petition here today with 101 names from the Lethbridge area. This is a petition that is requesting the

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

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

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

MRS. SLOAN: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I am pleased today to rise and table petitions from 101 residents of Edmonton who petition the Legislative Assembly.

We, the undersigned residents of Alberta, petition the Legislative Assembly to urge the Government of Alberta to hold widespread public hearings involving as many existing clients as want to be heard before making any changes to the Assured Income for the Severely Handicapped program.

Thank you.

head: Notices of Motions

THE SPEAKER: The hon. Deputy Government House Leader.

MR. RENNER: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Pursuant to Standing Order 34(2)(a) I'm giving notice that tomorrow I will move that written questions appearing on the Order Paper stand and retain their places with the exception of written questions 71, 72, 89, 90, 119, 122, 123, 124, 125, 126, 127, 128, 129, 130, 131, 132, 133, 154, 155, and 156.

Mr. Speaker, in the unlikely event that we complete all written questions, I will also be giving notice that we will probably waste the rest of the afternoon dealing with written motions. I'll move that motions for returns appearing on the Order Paper stand and retain their places with the exception of motions for returns 16, 35, 36, 37, 39, 40, 41, 51, 52, 53, 54, 55, 60, 64, 65, 66, 68, 69, 70, 73, 74, 75, 76, 78, 79, 80, 81, 82, 83, 84, 85, 86, 87, 88, 91, 92, 93, 94, 95, 96, 97, 98, 99, 100, 101, 102, 103, 104, 105, 106, 107, 108, 109, 110, 111, 112, 113, 114, 115, 116, 117, 118, 120, 121, 134, 135, 136, 137, 138, 139, 140, 141, 142, 143, 144, 145, 146, 147, 148, 149, 150, 151, 152, 153, 157, 158, 159, 160, 161, 162, 163, 164, 165, 166, 167, 168, 169, and finally 170.

head: Introduction of Bills

THE SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Red Deer-South.

Bill 26

Family Law Statutes Amendment Act, 1999

MR. DOERKSEN: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It is my pleasure today to introduce Bill 26, which is the Family Law Statutes Amendment Act, 1999.

This bill flows from the recommendations of the MLA review committee on maintenance enforcement and child access. This bill speaks particularly to the aspect of access, providing the court with remedies in the event that there is a pattern of denial of access and reinforces the notion that kids need love and attention from both their mother and their father.

[Leave granted; Bill 26 read a first time]

THE SPEAKER: The hon. Government House Leader.

MR. HANCOCK: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I move that Bill 26 be placed on the Order Paper under Government Bills and Orders.

[Motion carried]

THE SPEAKER: The hon. Member for West Yellowhead.

Bill 27

Regulated Forestry Profession Act

MR. STRANG: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I request leave to introduce Bill 27, the Regulated Forestry Profession Act.

This act is intended to replace the Forest Profession Act and brings the regulations of two professions under one statute. The purpose of the new act is to promote the continued quality and competency of our forest professionals. Professionals contribute to protecting Alberta's sustainable forest resource through more transparent and consistent regulations and professional conduct requirements. This act establishes clear public accountability for this profession. Organizations representing the forest industry, professional foresters, and forest technologists worked closely with us to develop this act. This high level of collaboration and support has set an excellent precedent for other sectors.

Thank you very much.

[Leave granted; Bill 27 read a first time]

THE SPEAKER: The hon. Government House Leader.

MR. HANCOCK: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I move that Bill 27 be placed on the Order Paper under Government Bills and Orders.

[Motion carried]

head: Tabling Returns and Reports

DR. WEST: Yes, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased today to table questions and answers from the estimates of Energy from the March 17 subcommittee D meeting in keeping with open government.

I would also like today to file five copies of a news release from the Alberta Energy and Utilities Board announcing the approval of the Suncor millennium oil sands application. This is a \$2 billion project that will produce 75 million barrels a year of synthetic crude by the year 2002 and ensure the continuation of Suncor till the year 2033 plus. What a statement for the province of Alberta.

MR. DAY: I have three tablings today, Mr. Speaker. The first one

is related to Moody's Investors Service, which has served notice that Alberta's credit rating is up for review for a possible upgrade. It shows in the tabling that there was specific reference made to Budget '99 related to the tax system changes. The improvements in fiscal and financial performance and the restructuring of the heritage savings trust fund were all specifically cited.

The next tabling, Mr. Speaker, is from the Canadian Bond Rating Service, that has just released their ratings. We have been reaffirmed at double A plus and A-1 high ratings. That makes us the highest provincial ratings in the country.

The third item is a chart showing the credit ratings of all provinces showing that we have the highest ratings – I went to Toronto on Friday, Mr. Speaker, meeting with our investor groups, and they were very, very interested in these results and indicated ongoing investment towards Alberta.

MRS. McCLELLAN: Mr. Speaker, I have three tablings. First I'd like to table with the Assembly responses to questions raised during main estimates on March 23, 1999.

In addition, I'm pleased to file copies of two letters I sent to the University of Alberta Golden Bears and Pandas hockey teams, which competed in the national men's and women's hockey championships this past weekend winning gold and silver respectively.

1:40

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

DR. PANNU: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I have one tabling to make. It's copies of a letter that was sent to me by a well-known Edmonton educator. In this letter he expresses concerns about the provisions of Bill 20 that will impose restrictions on teaching about civil disobedience as a means of social change and also expresses concerns about the abolition of the Board of Reference.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

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

MS LEIBOVICI: Thanks, Mr. Speaker. I have a couple of tablings as well this afternoon. The first is copies of the College of Physicians and Surgeons standards for long-stay, nonhospital surgical facilities wherein the college asks for comments about whether these long-stay, nonhospital surgical facilities should be able to "perform surgical procedures currently performed only in hospitals" and have the same resources as a hospital.

My next tabling is a letter from Christine Burdett, spokesperson from the Friends of Medicare, to myself as health care critic requesting that we remind the Premier that there are two perfectly good examples of legislation to protect public health care. The first is Bill 201, that was presented by the Official Opposition, and the current Bill 204.

Thank you.

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

MS BARRETT: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'd like to provide two tablings today, the first being a copy of an e-mail that I received on February 23 from Bill Williams in which he provided full transcripts of two other e-mail letters to the Premier, and the second is also from Bill Williams in response to my reply dated March 5, 1999.

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

MR. DICKSON: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I have three tablings this

afternoon. The first one is correspondence dated March 29, 1999, from Mike O'Brien, president of the Calgary Catholic teachers ATA local 55, expressing concerns with Bill 20.

The second tabling is a copy of a letter to all Calgary MLAs from Kurt Moench, president of the Calgary public teachers, asking that Bill 20 be withdrawn.

Finally, the long-awaited copy of the organizational review undertaken by the Calgary regional health authority with input from the Minister of Health.

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

MRS. SLOAN: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My tablings – I have a copy of four – are intended to clarify the record with respect to the references made to AISH millionaires by the Minister of Family and Social Services. I include three *Hansard* references from February 17, March 2, and March 22, in addition to seven news articles from across Alberta where the minister is directly cited as referencing the millionaires as rationale for asset testing becoming a part of the AISH program.

Thank you.

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

MR. MacDONALD: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I would like to table the appropriate number of copies of a study by the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives. It's titled *The Cost of Privatization: A Case Study in Home Care in Manitoba*.

Thank you.

head: Introduction of Guests

THE SPEAKER: The hon. Minister of Agriculture, Food and Rural Development.

MR. STELMACH: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm certainly proud to introduce to you and through you to members of this Assembly 25 visitors from Ryley school. Of course, Ryley school is located in the village of Ryley, where you may live the life of Riley. They're accompanied by a parent, Mr. Tim Ewert, and by Mr. Fred Yachimec, who is a teacher, former councillor, and an individual who really pioneered substantial economic development in the community. So I'd ask them to rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of the Assembly.

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

MRS. SLOAN: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I am pleased to rise today to introduce three members of the United Nurses of Alberta executive, all of whom are registered nurses. Karen Craik, Pauline Worsfold, and Bev Dick are here this afternoon to monitor the government's progress with respect to Bill 37 and the Health Professions Act. They are also wearing white ribbons this afternoon in solidarity with the nurses in Newfoundland and Labrador. I would ask them to rise and receive the warm welcome of this Assembly.

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

MS LEIBOVICI: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure this afternoon to introduce Christine Burdett, who is the spokesperson for Friends of Medicare and chair of the Friends of Medicare Health Care Commission, which we all know produced that excellent report,

Healing Health Care. She's here today on behalf of the Friends of Medicare to say to the Premier that the only legislation that would be acceptable would be one that bans private, for-profit hospitals.

Thank you.

head: Oral Question Period

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

Private Health Services

MRS. MacBETH: Thanks, Mr. Speaker. The Premier has suggested that if there is widespread opposition to the clone of Bill 37, the government would not table new legislation. Meanwhile, the College of Physicians and Surgeons is quietly developing standards for private, for-profit hospitals because of this government's refusal to ban these hospitals. My questions are to the Premier. Is the Premier hoping that the college will do through the back door what the government thinks it can't get away with through the front door?

MR. KLEIN: Mr. Speaker, I have no idea what the hon. leader of the Liberal opposition alludes to. What we want to do is put in place, if necessary, legislation that for all time would protect the fundamental principles of the Canada Health Act. I don't know why the Liberals would be opposed to that. I don't know why the Friends of Medicare would be opposed to that. I don't know why anyone would be opposed to that.

Having said that, Mr. Speaker, the report of the blue-ribbon panel on what was then Bill 37 – and by the way I would like to correct the hon. member for I forget which constituency who made the comment that certain people are here to watch the progress of Bill 37. I would remind this Legislative Assembly and all who observe the proceedings of this Assembly: there is no Bill 37. There is nothing, absolutely nothing on the table.

Tomorrow the hon. Minister of Health will be releasing the report of the blue-ribbon panel. That report will be available for discussion, for all Albertans to look at. We would hope that the Liberal Party would offer constructive, well-thought-out, reasonable input. We would hope that the Friends of Medicare would offer well-thought-out, reasonable input.

Mr. Speaker, after we hear from all Albertans, we will make a decision at that particular time as to whether we introduce legislation and, if we're going to introduce legislation, what kind of legislation needs to be introduced to protect for all time health care in accordance with the fundamental principles of the Canada Health Act.

MRS. MacBETH: Getting back to the question, Mr. Speaker, why is the government abdicating its responsibility to set health policy in Alberta and forcing the college to do government's job?

MR. KLEIN: Mr. Speaker, we are forcing the college to do absolutely nothing. Absolutely nothing.

We have a report that was received by the government's agendas and priorities committee yesterday. It was reviewed by cabinet and caucus today. The decision has been made to release the report and do absolutely nothing with the report until we receive the input of Albertans. Now, the college might want to provide input, the Liberals might want to provide input, the NDs might want to provide input, and the Friends of Medicare might want to provide input. Indeed all Albertans might want to provide input. That is entirely their prerogative. Mr. Speaker, we want to hear from Albertans their thoughts relative to this particular report.

MRS. MacBETH: Mr. Speaker, will the Premier bring forward legislation that would ban private, for-profit hospitals once and for all in Alberta?

1:50

MR. KLEIN: Mr. Speaker, we will ban anything that contravenes the Canada Health Act, and I would hope that they would support that.

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

Education Funding

MRS. MacBETH: Thanks, Mr. Speaker. The government talks a good talk about safe and caring schools. It talks a good talk about ensuring access to basic supplies and computers. But when it comes to walking its talk by providing school boards with the resources to make schools safe and make sure that basic supplies and technology are in place, all this government talks about is reciting test scores. My questions today are to the Premier. Given that the Guthrie school in Lancaster Park is, and I quote, filled with maintenance and health problems, outdated electrical and heating systems, leaks, silverfish, and the occasional mouse, end quote, what will the provincial budget do to ensure a safe school for these students?

MR. KLEIN: Well, Mr. Speaker, I don't know the specifics relative to that particular school. I have some specifics on 15 more schools that are doing perfectly okay. Relative to the specifics as they relate to the school that was just mentioned, I'll have the hon. minister reply, but I can continue with my list relative to the schools that have good records, good teachers, no complaints.

Again I say, Mr. Speaker, that it seems to be the newfound duty of the Liberal Party, according to the new leader: don't offer constructive criticism, don't be true critics, but use taxpayers' money to travel the province to find out what is wrong, and then, of course, bring it up in the House, not even talk to the minister about it.

You know, if these things are fundamentally wrong, there used to be honour in that caucus where the MLA would go to the minister and say: "Lookit; there's a problem here. Can we work together to fix it?" No. That's not the way these individuals operate. They've gone from bad to worse, Mr. Speaker.

MRS. MacBETH: When will parents from Hinton's Roche Miette school be able to stay at home with their families on weekends, instead of at school funding-raising to pay for photocopying expenses?

MR. KLEIN: Well, Mr. Speaker, when will the hon. leader of the Liberal opposition acknowledge the good work that is being done at the Olds junior/senior high school, where they've exceeded in all cases the provincial standards? When will the hon. leader acknowledge the good work by dedicated teachers and hardworking students being done at the Coronation school? When will the hon. member honour the good work being done by the teachers, the administrators, and the students at Ponoka composite high school or the Holden school? When will the hon. member stand up and acknowledge the good work being done at the Jack Stuart school? When will the hon. member stand up and acknowledge that good work?

I can go on and on and on, and the list goes on, and I have the names of literally hundreds of schools where good honest work is being done, where there are no problems, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Speaker, yes, relative to the school the hon. member alluded to in her first question, I will instruct right now the hon. Minister of Education to look into that particular situation, give a report. I want

that report tabled in the Legislature, not only relative to what the real circumstances are but what is being done to correct the situation. That's the way we operate. It's certainly not the way they operate.

MRS. MacBETH: Mr. Speaker, the good work being done in schools right across this province is a credit to teachers and parents in spite of the government.

Mr. Speaker, can the Premier confirm that the Jasper junior/senior high school will be receiving \$25,000 next year as a result of the provincial budget but will be paying back over \$38,000 because of the school's deficit?

MR. KLEIN: Mr. Speaker, again, that is a question that is specific to the hon. Minister of Education, and relative to that question and all the specific questions I'll have him respond. The questions most appropriately should have been addressed to the hon. minister, as the hon. leader of the Liberal opposition would have expected the questions be directed to her when she was the Minister of Education.

MR. MAR: Well, Mr. Speaker, with respect to Guthrie school I want to make it clear to members of the Assembly that all matters as they relate to the health and safety of students are of paramount concern to this government. Accordingly, when we look at the evaluation criteria for capital projects in the province of Alberta, the number one priority is matters as they relate to health and safety.

I can assure the hon. member in this Assembly that matters of health and safety will be looked after. I have visited Guthrie school personally, Mr. Speaker. The process, as the hon. member, the Leader of the Opposition knows, is that school boards do put together their requests for capital and that those are then reviewed by the school buildings branch.

With respect to the specific schools in Jasper that the hon. Leader of the Opposition referred to, Mr. Speaker, the Leader of the Opposition knows that school boards are responsible and have acted responsibly with respect to the dollars that we grant to them, and the responsibility rests with school boards to make sure that their overall budgets are balanced. In those cases where there are school boards that might have an accumulated deficit – and as I've indicated in this House before, four out of the 60 school boards have an accumulated deficit – the Department of Education will work with them to ensure that their books are balanced, that they do have a plan put in place to deal with their accumulated deficits.

With respect to individual schools, Mr. Speaker, again, members of this Assembly know that the basic instructional grant rate is a function of the number of students in a particular school. The grant rate is going up by 3 percent this year, 2 percent the year after, 2 percent the year after that.

So, Mr. Speaker, I'll be happy to look into the specific school that was referred to, but overall we understand that school budgets are the responsibility of schools and the school jurisdictions that we grant money to.

THE SPEAKER: Third Official Opposition main question. The hon. Member for Calgary-Buffalo.

Calgary Regional Health Authority

MR. DICKSON: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Just a few hours ago the Calgary regional health authority released its external organizational review. Now, this report is very short on specifics, but it confirms that the original 1994 goal of, and I quote, working together effectively for the benefit of Calgarians has not yet been reached, close quote. My question is to the Minister of Health. What specific

action will this minister take to remedy the leadership problems identified in this independent report? After all, this has happened on his watch.

MR. JONSON: Mr. Speaker, the organizational and the administrative review undertaken by the Calgary regional health authority has, yes, just recently been made public. I think we should keep in mind here that in that health authority over the last number of years since their creation, the staff, the nurses, the doctors, the people in that overall very large and growing system have worked very, very hard to provide good health care to Calgarians and people from other parts of the province; in fact, people from southeastern B.C. and other parts of Canada.

Now, Mr. Speaker, let's be very clear, and that is that there is in the Calgary regional health authority a lot of good health care being delivered. In terms of the recommendations in the report and in specific response to the member's question, yes, I am very interested, very concerned, with respect to those recommendations, and the resources of my office and my department will be available, and we will be working with them to address these concerns.

2:00

MR. DICKSON: My supplementary question to the same minister: given what he's just told us and given the report's finding that the board's "constant concern about funding from Government . . . translates into a paralytic concern about expenditures," what specific action will this minister take to allow the board to focus on things like hospital beds, wait lists, and patient care instead of just meeting the next payroll?

MR. JONSON: Mr. Speaker, I think it's important to point out that the hon. member has just in this question veered from the report, which he feels is important, and I hope he does. The report is quite clear in that the overall issue or set of issues that need to be addressed in Calgary are not related specifically to funding.

There is this year, Mr. Speaker, in terms of a specific response to his question, over \$80 million going into the Calgary regional health authority in additional funding, and that is a substantial amount of money, an increase of 10 percent. That's a substantial amount of money any way you cut it, and therefore I think the thrust of the report, if he's read it carefully and understood it, is to do things more effectively, to have an effort there to build for better relationships among the different levels and individuals involved in the health care system and make the health care system in Calgary work better.

MR. DICKSON: Well, the report speaks for itself.

Given the concern that the Foothills site has become overloaded – and this is clearly in the report, Mr. Minister – will the minister impose a moratorium on further expansion at the Foothills site and look to expand services at the other two adult acute care sites?

MR. JONSON: Mr. Speaker, as minister, I have certainly recognized that there is that concern with respect to the Foothills site. Once again, as I've said, within that overall major health centre in Calgary, a great deal of very good work is going on, a great deal in the way of research related to the university and the medical school. There is a great deal of health care being provided out of that site, but, yes, that concern has been raised by myself, and it is verified in the report.

Institutional Confinement and Sexual Sterilization

MS BARRETT: Mr. Speaker, after years of legal fencing matches, the Alberta government – well, let me rephrase that. Leilani Muir

finally won her case against the Alberta government in January of 1996. Starting in May of 1996, this government has contracted with one very large legal firm out of Calgary to prevent appropriate settlements for these people who suffered wrongful confinement and sexual sterilization in what was then the provincial training centre. Public accounts show that this firm billed to the tune of just over \$2 million in 1996-97 and nearly \$3 million in 1997-98. How can the Premier possibly justify taxpayers' dollars being used to prevent a fair settlement for the last few hundred of these reasonable trial claimants?

MR. KLEIN: No, Mr. Speaker, that's not what we want to do. We want to make sure that all of these unfortunate people who were sterilized long before any of us sat in this Legislature are treated fairly and with compassion.

Relative to the intricacies of the legal work and who's getting paid to do what, I'll have the hon. Minister of Justice reply.

MR. HAVELOCK: Yes. Thank you, Mr. Premier. To clarify for the House – and I've indicated this before – to date we've settled over 575 claims. We have about 250 claims in the court process and another 40 to 50 in the settlement panel process.

We did not contract the services of the law firm referred to, Mr. Speaker, to prevent settlement. In fact, we have been urging them to settle as quickly as possible these cases on a reasonable basis. In fact, I can advise the member that as recently as I think about 10 days ago I met with department staff who are in the process of developing a strategy to settle all outstanding cases without having to take it through the court process.

MS BARRETT: Mr. Speaker, how can the government say that it didn't hire this firm to drag its feet when this firm itself not only prevented trials from occurring on two occasions but in fact had to be ordered by a court to get to trial by September, which is true?

MR. HAVELOCK: Mr. Speaker, we need to keep in mind that this is a very complex case. Again, there are 250 cases before the courts. There's a lot of information that has yet to be acquired through the discovery process. Counsel required some more information, but that information is also useful in helping us to settle these claims.

Again to emphasize, our instructions to counsel have been all along: to the extent we can, let's avoid the court process; let's be fair and reasonable in trying to come up with a settlement. To reiterate, as recently as about 10 days ago I instructed them to come up with a strategy to settle all of these without the necessity of taking it through any more court proceedings, and those are the instructions upon which they're acting at this time.

I fully expect that we'll have some settlements coming forward in the future. We need to keep in mind, Mr. Speaker, that there are about 800 to 900 claims in total. We've settled close to 600 at this time, and we're pressing as hard as we can to settle the rest.

We also need to keep in mind that it's very easy to simply write a cheque based on what the plaintiffs request, but we also need to keep in mind what is fair and reasonable for all sides involved in this, and that's what we're trying to do.

MS BARRETT: It's also fair and reasonable to admit that you're up against the clock, and you know you're going to lose.

Mr. Speaker, my last question today is to the Premier and that is this. His own minister has denied this application time and again. Will the Premier please authorize that at least a minimal payment of \$100,000 per outstanding trial claimant be given to them now while they await ultimate settlement?

MR. KLEIN: Mr. Speaker, as the hon. Minister of Justice pointed out, we're dealing with literally hundreds and hundreds of cases, and I don't think it would be fair to the Justice minister or fair to any of the other claimants to single out one claimant at this particular time. I would suggest that the hon. leader of the ND opposition let the judicial process proceed. We have set up a mechanism for those who want to settle out of court to do so. For those who want to go to court, there is a process to be followed there, and for those who simply want to settle, well, there is a process to be followed there.

Speaker's Ruling Sub Judice Rule

THE SPEAKER: Hon. members, the chair listened attentively to that series of questions. The tradition of this House is that when a matter is set down for trial, in essence the sub judice rule would kick in. Now, the onus of responsibility with respect to this rests on two individuals: he or she who asks the question, and he or she who responds to the question. In this case the respondent was the Minister of Justice and Attorney General, who would know best where things would be, if they are before the court or not.

After hearing the conclusion of three questions, perhaps the chair should have indicated that sub judice should apply here, and these questions should not have been proceeded with today.

The hon. Member for Calgary-Currie, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Manning.

Calgary Regional Health Authority (continued)

MRS. BURGNER: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. A few moments ago we had questions relating to the Calgary regional health authority's organizational review, but I would like to preface my comments by identifying that this review was initiated in response to some concerns within the Calgary community that perhaps the most effective and efficient delivery of health care services were not occurring in our region. My questions this afternoon are to the minister. I would like if possible for the minister to identify for us the conclusions and the issues that were identified in this review in order to give Calgarians and this Assembly a clear understanding of the issues covered in this document.

MR. JONSON: Mr. Speaker, the review – and it's a very important review – is now available, but it would I think be of interest to members of the Assembly, particularly to those from Calgary and certainly the questioner, that there were three or four very key areas that were addressed in the report. One of course is the whole area of developing an organizational structure where there is clear and timely communication through the various levels of the system in order to make sure that everybody working within the system understands their responsibility, also understands what help and resources are available to them.

2:10

A second area that was focused upon, Mr. Speaker, was the whole area of I guess you could call it logistics. The regional health authority needs to look at the utilization of the space available to them in the most effective manner, and this was reflected in the previous question in regard to the Foothills hospital.

A third area, Mr. Speaker, is that there needs to be further attention – I know they do have people assigned to communication in the Calgary regional health authority, but certainly there has to be an ongoing effort and plan as far as dissemination of practical day-to-day information about services in the system as opposed to

perhaps having a communications system which responds to crises rather than taking a proactive approach.

So those are three examples, Mr. Speaker.

MRS. BURGNER: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My first supplemental to the same minister: as both the health summit and our Provincial Treasurer have identified the question of when is enough money the limit that we can spend on health, did the review that we have just discussed firmly identify that the only problem in health care delivery in Calgary is an issue of funding?

MR. JONSON: No, that was not the case, Mr. Speaker. As I've indicated previously in this Legislature and I would remind members of the Assembly, some months ago a very comprehensive review of funding for regional health authorities was undertaken. It just happens that it was chaired by the Member of the Legislative Assembly for Calgary-Bow. That report and its recommendations were well received, including as I understand it by the Calgary region, and in the recently tabled budget the recommendations of the report of the Bonnie Laing committee have been largely implemented and will be implemented in their entirety over the next three years of our provincial health business plan.

MRS. BURGNER: Finally, my last question: could the minister advise what actions he will be taking to address the problems that have been identified in this organizational review?

MR. JONSON: Well, as I indicated earlier, Mr. Speaker, I'm certainly making the commitment to provide whatever assistance we can through Alberta Health to take an interest and give attention to taking the appropriate role and following up on this review because certainly improvement in the situation in Calgary as outlined in the report is a top priority with myself as minister.

THE SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Manning, followed by the hon. Member for Airdrie-Rocky View.

Education Property Taxes

MR. GIBBONS: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. According to the Premier's Task Force on Infrastructure report, communities with growth and rapid increase in market value feel that they are paying more than their fair share of educational costs. Two weeks ago the Premier announced that an MLA committee would consider alternatives to replace the \$1.3 billion raised through educational property tax. Just one month earlier the Premier and the Minister of Municipal Affairs said that the government was not contemplating phasing out the educational property tax. My questions are to the Premier. Mr. Premier, what changed the government's mind in the last month?

MR. KLEIN: Mr. Speaker, we are examining all of our options. We aren't considering at this particular time phasing out the educational portion of the property tax. That's why we're reviewing our whole taxation policy relative to school tax, particularly in light of this government's move to equalize school payments throughout the province and to pool all those dollars.

Yes, the hon. member points out that some communities are facing tax increases. I understand that about 77 percent of communities will stay about the same or will actually experience lower taxes, but what we want to do is achieve something that is fairer and equitable for all.

I will have the hon. Minister of Municipal Affairs supplement my answer.

MS EVANS: Mr. Speaker, clearly the market value assessments coming onstream this year coupled with high growth have an influence on the net amount that is requisitioned, even under an equal mill rate. The disparate levels of growth have had an influence in the Bow corridor, for example, in Calgary, in Grande Prairie, and other places.

Mr. Speaker, we are not examining whether or not education should have any contribution from the property tax. We're examining the ways and means in which calculations are currently occurring and what, in effect, can be the solution when there are any wide swings in differences between those who pay more and those who pay less.

MR. GIBBONS: My next question is to the Premier. Will the MLA committee be considering the recommendations of the Premier's own infrastructure task force to cap the residential portion of the educational property tax at \$706 million in order to give the municipalities \$100 million of additional tax room to fund transportation infrastructure?

MR. KLEIN: Mr. Speaker, if he's alluding to the task force that was set up about a year ago – I believe it was last May – that task force has not reported. As a matter of fact, there is a committee of officials from Calgary and Edmonton, the Alberta Urban Municipalities Association, the Association of Municipal Districts and Counties, various government departments, officials working on a number of scenarios. Those officials have not reported to the committee of elected people. I indicated I believe in this House or at least to the media that the elected group will get together probably in about a month's to six weeks' time to consider the report of the administration.

MR. GIBBONS: My last question is to the Premier. Well, maybe the MLA committee will be considering some of the recommendations from what was called the Premier's task force to phase down the educational property tax to 40 percent of educational operation costs to generate an additional \$180 million of tax room for municipalities.

MR. KLEIN: Well, certainly, Mr. Speaker, the recommendations of the Premier's Task Force on Infrastructure, if they relate to taxation, if any of the recommendations relate to taxation, they'll be passed on to the Minister of Municipal Affairs. As a matter of fact, the Minister of Municipal Affairs will automatically get the reports and will be asked to act on those issues that pertain to her department, because, in fact, the Minister of Municipal Affairs is also a member of the Premier's task force on municipal infrastructure.

THE SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Airdrie-Rocky View, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Canada Pension Plan Reform

MS HALEY: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. A number of my constituents continue to raise concerns with regard to Alberta's position on reforms to the Canada pension plan. It's my understanding that the Provincial Treasurer has presented a paper to his federal and provincial counterparts on the next steps for CPP reform. Could the Treasurer please advise us if there's been any progress on this issue or if in fact it's at a stalemate?

MR. DAY: Mr. Speaker, we have tabled our report on the CPP entitled Next Steps, in which we've suggested a number of things

that have to be done, and we've asked for that working group to be put together. I understand in some recent follow-up that I've done on this that that working group has been put together. I have to say that I can't say I'm excited about their progress to date. I know the issues are complex and complicated. The working group made up of federal and provincial officials is in place. They are going down the list of items that Alberta has asked to be looked at. Their progress has not been lightninglike speed at this point.

MS HALEY: Mr. Speaker, given that the 17th actuarial report on the Canadian pension plan stated that a 9.9 percent contribution rate would stabilize the plan, could the Treasurer please tell us if there's been any independent review of that report?

MR. DAY: Well, the provinces asked first of all for that actuarial report to be done, and that was done by the federal government internally. We've also asked for an independent review now of the actuarial study so that we know if the plan is in fact sound and if 9.9 percent, a significant increase for all workers, will in fact do the job. Three outside actuaries have worked on it.

The report has been completed, I understand. We were supposed to get it by mid-February, and we haven't yet received it. I'm not comfortable with that. I understand that the person who's in charge in the federal government of releasing the report in fact has been ill. I sympathize with that, and we hope he gets over that. I hope the illness has nothing to do with the contents of the independent review that we're waiting for.

2:20

MS HALEY: My last question, Mr. Speaker, is: is there any risk at all that CPP payroll taxes would go beyond the 9.9 percent raise?

MR. DAY: Well, that indeed is the concern. According to the work done by the federal government on the actuarial study, the 9.9 percent increase, which is significant, is supposed to cover that liability. We're supposed to be all right, but as time goes on and we don't get back information on this independent review, it does raise the nervousness level a little bit.

We want certain things done with that plan. We believe it should be at arm's length. There's a lot of money we're talking about. It should be subject to the same prudent investment guidelines that other large investment funds are subject to.

We've got some issues that we want to look at in terms of possibilities if the plan is not going to be sound. The least of those issues would be the effect on young workers and what they pay into the plan right now. By the time they retire, their investment return is not that healthy, something in the order of just over 2 percent.

So we want to address some of these things. I can only say that we're told that the increase to 9.9 percent is sufficient, but I'd like to see that and make sure that's very solid so we can inform the workers of Alberta about that.

THE SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Beverly-Clareview.

Pine Shake Roofing

MR. MacDONALD: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The government has withheld information on the spray used on pine shakes. Now they're withholding information on the long-term durability of treated pine shakes. In November the Minister of Labour confirmed to a government member in this Assembly that long-term testing was being conducted but denied knowledge of this when I asked him about it a few weeks ago. My first question is to the minister responsible for the Alberta Research Council. When will the

minister release the interim results of the long-term durability testing of treated pine shakes from the site in Whitecourt that is maintained and inspected by officials from the Alberta Research Council?

DR. TAYLOR: Thank you very much. I didn't hear the preamble. I didn't hear the first part of the question. So if you could just kindly repeat the first part of the question for me.

Thank you.

MR. MacDONALD: I would be delighted, for the convenience of the minister.

THE SPEAKER: I'm sorry, but the rest of us would not be. Proceed with your second question. You got an answer to the first.

MR. MacDONALD: My second question, then, will be for the Minister of Economic Development. Since your department paid for the study, can you provide Albertans with the necessary vital information?

Thank you.

MRS. NELSON: Mr. Speaker, from what I understand, the information that we have had vis-a-vis the approval of pine shakes, treated or untreated, has been in fact accessed by hon. members through FOIP requests, and if there's additional information, then I'm sure that it has gone through a process that has moved its way over to building codes. If there is information there that has not been FOIPed, I would invite the hon. member to FOIP the information and be specific as to what it is you want in the request. Because some of these studies are quite old, I would ask you to contact me directly, and I will try to accommodate you.

MR. MacDONALD: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My third question is now to the Minister of Labour. Why is the minister reluctant to release the results of this testing or at least update homeowners on the interim testing that has been going on since 1995?

MR. SMITH: Well, you know, Mr. Speaker, the member is confused. He refers to this test going on since 1995. Yesterday he wanted us to send out the first division of the armed roof rangers.

Mr. Speaker, it's very clear that Alberta Labour and the Safety Codes Council have been involved in checking treated pine shakes manufactured in Alberta to determine if they're meeting the current Canadian association standard. There is no long-term test for durability going on anywhere remotely close to the Department of Labour or as it relates to the building code. Unfortunately the member again is trying to weave his innuendo as he was trying to before when we even caught him in clear out and out nose-stretchers. The process continues.

THE SPEAKER: The minister of science, research, and information technology to supplement.

DR. TAYLOR: I'd just like to point out that the initial study did not deal with durability. The study tested for compliance with the physical properties of the shakes. There was no study dealing with durability.

THE SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Beverly-Clareview, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Glenora.

Gainers Site Cleanup

MR. YANKOWSKY: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Last fall some announcements were made by the Minister of Public Works, Supply

and Services regarding the future of the Gainers packing plant site, which will provide many jobs for Edmontonians once Fletcher's is set up there. As I drive by the site and observe the demolition process, some questions arise regarding environmental cleanup. Indeed, maybe this is not such a good deal for Fletcher's or the city of Edmonton if they are faced with huge environmental cleanup bills. My questions are all to the Minister of Public Works, Supply and Services. Could the minister identify the types and extent of environmental pollutants that exist on the site?

MR. WOLOSHYN: Mr. Speaker, Public Works, since we resumed responsibility for the site, has had an ongoing monitoring program, and there aren't any environmental hazards that have been identified to date. As a matter of fact, the site currently meets what would be an acceptable industrial standard for usage there.

MR. YANKOWSKY: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. What are the environmental cleanup costs of the Fletcher's site, and who will pay for those costs?

MR. WOLOSHYN: With the exception of the demolition, which is occurring as we speak, Mr. Speaker, there aren't any outstanding environmental costs with respect to cleanup. Maple Leaf Foods was responsible for a portion of the cleanup, for some contaminants which they had. This work has been completed by them, and the costs were absorbed by Maple Leaf as per our agreements. The government assumed responsibility for some oil contamination which was present on the site prior to Maple Leaf being a tenant. The cost for that cleanup – and this has been done – was approximately \$9,000.

Mr. Speaker, following the completion of the demolition, we are going to run another series of tests on the whole site to ensure to the buyer that there aren't any unforeseen environmental hazards and more importantly the province that there aren't any contingent liabilities with respect to environmental cleanup on the site.

MR. YANKOWSKY: Mr. Minister, the city of Edmonton got their land for \$1, but what will it cost the city to clean up the site to meet environmental standards?

MR. WOLOSHYN: I think, Mr. Speaker, that the member must be referring to an article which appeared in the paper with respect to a pile of compost that is on that site which the city is receiving. The compost pile is not an environmental hazard in any way, shape, or form. So with respect to the environmental portion I guess there would not be any cost involved whatsoever.

However, officials from my department and from the city have entered into a bit of a difference of opinion as to whether or not this compost pile has a large degree of value. I can assure the hon. member that we'll be working out a solution which will be acceptable to both parties. In the end, Mr. Speaker, as was the intention in the beginning, the city of Edmonton will receive a clean site for a dollar.

Treasury Branches

MR. SAPERS: Albertans deserve to be involved in any decision that results in a change of status for the Alberta Treasury Branches, Mr. Speaker. Apparently this good advice is about to be acted on by the government, because they're thinking of establishing an all-party committee of the Legislative Assembly to consult with Albertans about the future of their Alberta Treasury Branch. My questions today are for the Treasurer. Given the continuing controversy

surrounding the government's involvement in ATB decisions, time is of the essence, Mr. Treasurer. Will the Treasurer explain this delay in announcing the all-party committee or what process is going to be used to consult on the future of the Alberta Treasury Branch?

2:30

MR. DAY: The imminent announcement about an all-party committee is news to me. I'd have to check with the opposition finance critic to see what discussions he may have had with the Premier that I haven't been involved in. He obviously has information that I don't. I know that the Premier has given a positive nod to consideration of that, and we're in full accord with consideration of that, but there's no imminent announcement.

I should just say something else. The member referenced an ongoing government controversial involvement with West Edmonton Mall. There is none, Mr. Speaker. There is no controversial involvement with West Edmonton Mall. The only controversy that rages is within his own mind.

MR. SAPERS: Spend more time at home, Mr. Treasurer.

Will the Treasurer agree to release all of the documents, the 581 pages of studies and reports that have been prepared for the government on the future of the ATB, including, of course, the CIBC Wood Gundy study, that have so far been withheld. Will all of that be released before the consultation begins?

MR. DAY: No, Mr. Speaker.

MR. SAPERS: Well, will the Treasurer commit at the very least that as part of whatever the review process is going to be, public hearings will be held across the province so that Albertans can fully participate in determining the future of the Alberta Treasury Branch?

MR. DAY: Well, it's a refreshing change of heart from the member opposite, because usually when we have summits or public hearings on an issue, we run into considerable disdain from the opposition. So I'm glad he agrees with us that the public should have a legitimate buy-in in this process. So that'll be looked at, Mr. Speaker, and carefully considered.

The whole question about release of certain documents we have commissioned – we've made it very public that we commissioned financial experts to do a review of Treasury Branch operations, and there were valuations that are involved in that. Those valuations are of a commercial nature. The last thing any financial institution that is looking at maintaining their own status quo position in the market or, in fact, changing their configuration in some way would do is release the commercial valuations of their operations. I think Albertans understand that. I'll try and take some time and explain it to the member opposite some day.

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

School Boards' Joint Ventures

MR. ZWOZDESKY: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The southeast quadrant of my constituency is one of the fastest growing areas in Edmonton. The Meadows and Creek's Crossing areas, for example, are experiencing the arrival of many new young families with children who want both a Catholic and a public school in their area. As I understand it, both Edmonton public and Edmonton Catholic school boards have some low utilization rates, which makes it difficult to obtain funding for new schools in these areas as well as for schools in other locations in Edmonton. My questions are to the

hon. Minister of Education. What is Alberta Education doing to help and/or to encourage public and Catholic school boards to work together in developing joint use or multi-use facilities?

MR. MAR: Well, Mr. Speaker, we are always ready to work to support co-operative partnerships among and between school boards, not only school boards but other community agencies, boards, commissions, levels of government. Last year, for example, the Department of Education created an innovation fund for capital that was intended to encourage innovative facilities used by school boards and develop ways to better use school facilities or physical infrastructure.

Mr. Speaker, the criteria under this innovation fund are that it must enhance educational program delivery and reduce capital infrastructure costs. An example of this would be the Frank Maddock high school in Drayton Valley, which received \$50,000 from the fund to complete a renovation project. The renovation project was funded through innovative partnerships with community groups, private-sector financial institutions, a loan guaranteed by private citizens, and local government.

Another example, Mr. Speaker, would be in the city of Calgary. A developer in collaboration with the Calgary board of education co-operated on a joint youth project that has resulted in the building of a K to 3 school that is built in a new community in that city. The innovation fund is providing \$450,000 of the \$1.2 million for that project.

Mr. Speaker, there are many such projects throughout the province of Alberta; for example, the YMCA that is attached to the high school in Fort McMurray, recreational facilities of the town of Sylvan Lake that are attached to the local school there, a Catholic/public elementary school in the city of Red Deer that uses the same facility, in Calgary a high school that has broken ground that has Catholic/public/city of Calgary recreational facilities and a public library all rolled into one. These are all outstanding examples of the types of innovation that we seek to encourage.

MR. ZWOZDESKY: I'd like to ask the hon. minister whether or not there are significant cost savings to this type of joint venture, common use, and co-operative approach?

MR. MAR: Well, Mr. Speaker, there's a great deal of potential for substantial savings. Obviously members of this Assembly from their own experience will know of schools that are built at opposite ends of a field, separated by 300 yards of field. Certainly if those types of facilities can be brought together and built as a joint use facility there would be significant savings with respect to overall construction and operations and maintenance of the school.

Mr. Speaker, there may also be the opportunity to save money, not only on the capital side but also on the program and the staffing sides. As an example, a shared library could have a shared librarian. Computer and technology expertise in such facilities could be shared by both schools.

MRS. NELSON: Gymnasium.

MR. MAR: One of my colleagues said that the gymnasium could be shared. No doubt, Mr. Speaker, there would be significant savings from such a joint use facility.

MR. ZWOZDESKY: My final question is to the same minister, Mr. Speaker. I'm wondering whether or not the minister has reviewed co-operative approach scenarios in some of the other Canadian provinces wherein the multi-use or joint facility model exists between Catholic and public schools.

MR. MAR: Yes, I have, Mr. Speaker. In addition to the projects in Alberta that I've identified, we've looked at other jurisdictions and what their experience has been. It would appear that in the province of Ontario they've been doing this for some time now. As an example, in the city of Georgina, Ontario, in the Sutton multi-use facility shared facilities include gymnasium, library, cafeteria, music room, science room, swimming pool, outdoor tracks, and playgrounds, and also a local church shares the parking lot with the school. The financing was also quite interesting. The municipal government provided funding for the recreational facilities, and accordingly the community has access to those facilities after hours when the school is not in use.

So, Mr. Speaker, looking at that facility and other facilities like the St. Benedict secondary school in

Cambridge, Ontario, again interesting financing: the building is owned by an insurance company, and they lease the facility to the school board. That lease period is 25 years, after which the board takes over the school or renegotiates a new lease.

So, Mr. Speaker, these types of examples clearly demonstrate that in the area of Twin Brooks, where there is a great deal of demand for both Catholic and public schools, there is a great potential for shared use facilities.

head: Members' Statements

THE SPEAKER: Hon. members, 30 seconds from now the chair will recognize three hon. members for members' statements today and will begin first of all with the hon. Member for Calgary-McCall.

2:40

Eid Al-Adha

MR. SHARIFF: Mr. Speaker, last weekend over 1.2 billion Muslims around the world, including 7 million in North America and 75,000 in Alberta, celebrated the end of the annual pilgrimage to Mecca with Eid Al-Adha festival, the second of the two major Muslim holidays. The Eid Al-Adha festival commemorates God's test of prophet Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son for God, a story common to both the Old Testament and the Koran. The hajj, or pilgrimage, symbolizes on a larger scale the unity of all humanity. Some 2 million Muslims congregate in Mecca and circle around the Kaaba, the house Abraham built.

The children of Abraham follow the three major monotheistic faiths of the world: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Common to all of them are the basic commandments and principles of generosity, charity, humility, concern for the welfare of others, and stewardship of the environment.

On behalf of my colleague the hon. Member for Calgary-East and myself I extend to all Eid Mubarak – that is, Eid greetings – and extend special thanks to the Speaker for hosting today at 5:30 p.m. the first celebration of Eid on behalf of the Alberta Legislature. This is indeed a historic occasion, and the Muslim community of Alberta sincerely appreciates and acknowledges this Legislative Assembly's commitment to all of the people of this province. I hope all members of this Assembly will be able to join Muslim Albertans at 5:30 p.m. today in the Legislative Assembly rotunda to celebrate this historic event.

Thank you, and Eid Mubarak to all.

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

Parents as Teachers Program

DR. NICOL: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. One of the aspects of Alberta that is so fundamental to our future is the commitment that all of our

youth get as much of an opportunity to get a good education as their ability will support. It's becoming more evident that as we prepare children for schooling, there's an influence on how they're prepared and their ability to learn. With this awareness it becomes important for us in our communities and as a province to include in the commitment to education that aspect of influencing and supporting the ability to learn.

This past December I had the opportunity to visit a project that has taken on this challenge. The parents as teachers program in Lethbridge is a group of volunteer parents who have each undergone a training session in being teachers and being parents. They are working with the Lethbridge public school board; Senator Buchanan elementary school; Galbraith school, which is a community school in Lethbridge, through the making connections project there; the Chinook regional health authority; and the Lethbridge public library. Sun Country children's services is also a major supporter of this project.

The mandate of parents as teachers is to assist parents in parenting. Many of their partnering families are disadvantaged, a number are teen single parents, and others are just parents wanting to learn how to improve their ability to raise their child. The parents as teachers programs vary, but many of them will start with a family in the prenatal stage and advise them on good nutrition and on preparation for the coming of their new child. After birth regular visits help the parents in rearing their child by way of talking to them about what to expect and what to observe in the way their young child is behaving. The parents as teachers also encourage the parents to build into their child rearing the aspects of learning support. The parents are encouraged to get their child involved in reading by reading to them on a regular basis and having them participate with the library.

Mr. Speaker, I'd just like to congratulate the groups that are in place in Alberta. Seven communities have started this. That's seven out of the eight programs in Canada, so it shows the progressiveness that we have here in Alberta.

THE SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Wetaskiwin-Camrose.

Camrose Rotary Club

MR. JOHNSON: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise today in recognition of the 75th anniversary of the Camrose Rotary Club. As one of the first organized clubs in Alberta, the Camrose Rotary Club has amassed a rich legacy of community development and involvement, serving the community of Camrose for three-quarters of a century. The Camrose Rotary Club of 80 members remains one of the strongest branches throughout Canada and the world. It has seen many changes since its inaugural meeting of March 24, 1924, but through the years the guiding principles of all Rotary clubs – service above self, and he profits most who serves best – have remained unchanged.

As part of an international organization of over 1 million members in 29,000 clubs in more than 150 countries, the members of the Camrose Rotary Club share the common goal of improving the quality of life in their community and beyond. Whether Camrose Rotarians are engaged in local activities such as sponsoring the air cadets, building parks, providing scholarships, hosting and organizing youth and group study exchanges, or supporting international projects such as the eradication of polio in the world, the ideal of service performed in the spirit of fellowship is at the heart of everything they do.

In recognition of their tremendous efforts it is not surprising that the Camrose Rotary Club has qualified for a presidential citation

indicating high achievement in Rotary's four avenues of service: club service, vocational service, community service, and international service. It is this signature of community excellence that paves the way for strength and prosperity amongst neighbours.

I'd like to congratulate all members of the Camrose Rotary Club on their proud achievements during 75 devoted years of community service excellence. Our gratitude goes out to these people who are so passionate in their pursuit for better community living at home and abroad.

Thank you.

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

Point of Order Clarification

MR. DICKSON: Thanks very much, Mr. Speaker. Pursuant to Standing Order 13(2) I am asking for some clarification, sir. You recall that when my colleague for Edmonton-Gold Bar had posed a question to the minister of science and technology, the minister stood and said that he didn't hear, according to my notes, the preamble. He asked the Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar to repeat the question, and then you intervened at that point when the Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar was repeating the question.

I do recall occasions in the past when the Premier, in particular, didn't hear a question and made a similar request, and it seems to me that the opportunity was afforded then for the question to be repeated without the questioner forfeiting the supplementary question.

So for our instruction and future edification, Mr. Speaker, if you could help us understand the process you've used. Thank you very much.

THE SPEAKER: Absolutely, sir, and I really appreciate the opportunity to have the question and to deal with it.

Today was one of those remarkably nice days in this Assembly. It was quiet. Decorum was at an all-time high. It was pleasant. One could actually hear all the questions and one could hear all the answers. And in the case of the exchange that did take place between the hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar in the question that was directed to the hon. minister of science, research, and information technology, there was absolute quiet in the Assembly. Absolute quiet. The chair heard the question. A response was given by the hon. minister of science, research, and information technology, and in fact there are some words in *Hansard* with respect to the answer. They are there. They are there not only for today, but they are there for the future as well.

Now, on previous occasions the chair has allowed questions to be repeated. In almost all circumstances – in fact, he cannot remember one circumstance where that was ever permitted when there was the type of quiet that was in the Assembly today. Usually there was such a furor and such a large amount of voices in the background echoing back and forth that the reason for allowing the question to be repeated was in fact because, to be honest, the chair himself didn't hear the question. As a courtesy, then, to both players in the set of questions that was done. But today such was not the case.

Now, the responsibility of the chair is to afford all members an opportunity to participate in the question period, and there certainly are some opportunities. There are opportunities in our own rules themselves, and the hon. Member for Calgary-Buffalo would have noted that during this set of questions – usually you have three questions in a set and presumably three responses – the chair did afford the hon. minister of science, research, and information technology an opportunity to respond to a particular question. We also have an opportunity at the conclusion of question period, if an

hon. member of Executive Council wishes to supplement an answer given earlier in the day, that provision is there. That also then allows the individual who started the set of questions to ask another additional question as well.

It was so quiet today that in fact there was no need to have the question repeated because there was no reason for someone – the individual to whom the question was directed could either choose to answer the question or not answer the question. An answer is in *Hansard*. It is clearly there for all of history to see and understand.

Boy, if we could have this kind of decorum every day, it would really be something.

head: Orders of the Day
2:50

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

Bill 204
Medicare Protection Act

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

[Debate adjourned March 23: Ms Leibovici speaking]

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

MS LEIBOVICI: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's very clear that Albertans are extremely concerned with regards to public health care. We've seen many examples throughout this province of the creeping of the private sector into the delivery of our public health care systems, and currently we know that the increases from 1992 to 1998 have been from 24 percent to 31 percent.

This bill, as the bill that has been previously put forward by the Official Opposition, Bill 201, would have provided protection for our public system of health care delivery. I hope that if this bill is defeated, the Premier will be true to his words of today to ensure that there is a broad consultation, as per again another Official Opposition motion, Motion 504, to discuss fully the implications of private health care within our public health care system and that this broad consultation will occur prior to the introduction of the clone of Bill 37.

Thank you.

THE SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Redwater.

MR. BRODA: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm happy to enter the debate on Bill 204, the Medicare Protection Act, and to support the reasoned amendment put forward by the very reasonable Member for Calgary-Glenmore. I agree with his argument that we listen to the many Albertans who participated in the health summit in Calgary as well as the many community health summits around Alberta.

This afternoon, Mr. Speaker, I look forward to restoring some tranquility to the debate that has been at times unnecessarily stoked by certain members of the Liberal opposition. It was difficult to sit in the House the other day and listen to the constant and incessant chirping from Edmonton-Meadowlark and bellowing from Calgary-*Buffalo*. I don't think there are two more perfect examples of perhaps . . .

MRS. SLOAN: A point of order.

THE SPEAKER: Hon. member, we have a point of order.

The hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview.

Point of Order
Imputing Motives

MRS. SLOAN: Standing Order 23(h), (i), and (j). I'm not sure what in fact the member is trying to impute this afternoon by his remarks. He certainly is not debating the reasoned amendment or the bill at hand. I would suggest that he should be focusing his comments rather than disputing or referencing comments made in good intent to the bill previously. He should be speaking to the reasoned amendment at hand, and I would be hopeful, Mr. Speaker, that you would instruct him accordingly.

Thank you.

MR. BRODA: On this point of order, Mr. Speaker. If the hon. member opposite would continue to listen, this was a preamble. I will get to my point.

THE SPEAKER: Well, hon. members, just a few minutes ago the chair indicated how, well, impressed he was with the decorum in the House today, and . . .

MRS. FORSYTH: You shouldn't have said that.

THE SPEAKER: That's right. The chair should perhaps not have said that.

I know that some of the words used by the hon. Member for Redwater just aren't in keeping with the personality of the hon. member. One has always viewed him as a man of integrity and honour. So let's continue, please.

Debate Continued

MR. BRODA: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I don't think there are two more perfect examples of perhaps the most unreasoned debating in the history of reasoned amendments as we heard earlier from the members for Edmonton-Meadowlark and Calgary-*Buffalo*. We were challenged to stand up for medicare and public health care in the province of Alberta. I can only assume that the members for Edmonton-Meadowlark and Calgary-*Buffalo* were not paying attention during the debates thus far.

Speaker's Ruling
Parliamentary Language

THE SPEAKER: Okay. Please. That's an assumption that violates a whole series of the criteria of Standing Order 23. If the hon. member wishes to continue, would the hon. member find words that would more appropriately fit the environment which we're in.

MR. BRODA: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I will do so.

Debate Continued

MR. BRODA: I support medicare in the province of Alberta. I think we should turn the tables and ask the question of the two members opposite: do they support public health care? Do they support the Canada Health Act?

Mr. Speaker, I guess I'm going to go back to ask Calgary-*Buffalo* and Edmonton-Meadowlark to challenge their federal cousins in Ottawa when they cut \$6 billion out of the health care budget. Will Calgary-*Buffalo* and Edmonton-Meadowlark support the funding boost for public health detailed in the throne speech? Why would the members for Calgary-*Buffalo* and Edmonton-Meadowlark want

to silence the voices of hundreds of Albertans who participated in the health summit process by voting down the reasoned amendment?

Look at the record, Mr. Speaker, and you can see who in this House supports health care. Albertans know who supports health care and whom they trust on health care. That is why the Member for Calgary-Glenmore is on this side of the House and the members for Calgary-Buffalo and Edmonton-Meadowlark are on the other side of the House.

Mr. Speaker, I cannot understand why the leader of the New Democratic opposition would propose a bill such as this when I know that her goals on health care are similar to ours. I know she believes that it is important that we listen to Albertans and learn their priorities before we make drastic changes that they would not support. It is for that very reason that we initially held the health summit and why its findings must take precedence over Bill 204.

Furthermore, I find it somewhat ironic that the New Democrats would suggest a bill that has as its goal the protection of our health care system. A quick examination of the state of health care in the provinces currently governed by the New Democratic parties would suggest that the New Democrats have no idea how to protect medicare.

MRS. SLOAN: A point of order, Mr. Speaker.

THE SPEAKER: Point of order, Edmonton-Riverview.

Point of Order Questioning a Member

MRS. SLOAN: Citing *Beauchesne* 333, I would like to ask the member a question if he would be so . . .

THE SPEAKER: Hon. Member for Redwater, are you prepared to respond to a question?

MR. BRODA: No, Mr. Speaker.

THE SPEAKER: That's fine. Please continue.

Debate Continued

MR. BRODA: In British Columbia, Mr. Speaker, waiting lists are growing faster than provincial debt, especially in rural B.C., where many patients come to Alberta because they can get quicker treatment here. In Saskatchewan waiting lists for diagnostic procedures and cancer treatment have become so long that private health care providers from the United States regularly run advertisements in local papers to attract frustrated patients south of the border.

Mr. Speaker, I believe that our government is working effectively to protect our health care system and that we should continue in the direction we have been going. We eliminated the tremendous waste that built up over the years, negatively affecting our ability to deliver quality services to Albertans.

Mr. Speaker, we consulted with Albertans to determine where dollars could be more effectively spent. This has been an ongoing process through regional health authorities and community health councils. Moreover, the input from Health Summit '99 will allow us to further arrive at long-term health solutions that Albertans support.

We worked with our other provincial counterparts and the federal government for the return of the health transfers from Ottawa. We increased health funding on our own, injecting an additional \$750 million to the core budget over the last three years, ensuring that funding went directly to frontline services. And, of course, Mr.

Speaker, we announced predictable, stable, and long-term health funding in Budget '99.

3:00

For some reason the New Democrat opposition sees our approach as a flawed one. For sure our strategy is far different than what the members for Edmonton-Meadowlark and Calgary-Buffalo employed when attacking the reasoned amendment and when discussing health care in general. Mr. Speaker, they attacked a sector of the health system which provides valuable services for Albertans and reduces waiting lists for important services. They attacked a government that had to deal with severe health transfer cuts meted out by Ottawa. And they attacked a consultation process that involves thousands of Albertans on a regular basis.

In short, Mr. Speaker, they attack and attack and attack. They take their health care policy direction from the NDP. Well, the members from Calgary-Buffalo and Edmonton-Meadowlark can attack all they want.

MRS. SLOAN: Point of order, Mr. Speaker.

THE SPEAKER: Hon. member, we have an hon. member wanting to rise on a point of order.

Citation, please.

Point of Order Imputing Motives

MRS. SLOAN: Standing Orders 23(h), (i), and (j). I believe the hon. member has been instructed already this afternoon about imputing false motives. He's suggesting by his comments that one particular party in this province takes policy directions from another party. I hardly think that's of relevance given the amendment before us this afternoon, the reasoned amendment to Bill 204.

I am not particularly sure how the member has come up with his remarks to the amendment this afternoon. Who has written them for him? It's unfortunate he wouldn't entertain a question from me about that earlier. But I would respectfully request that the member get on with debating the merits of the amendment and quit wasting the time of this Assembly.

MR. HANCOCK: Well, Mr. Speaker, members of the House sit patiently while all sorts of opinions are expressed from time to time, and the hon. Member for Redwater is now expressing his view as to what's been said in the House and how it's been said. The point of order, as I understand it, was on 23(h), (i), and (j), imputing motive. I didn't hear any motives being imputed. Basically, as I understand it, the offence alleged is that he was suggesting that the Liberal Party was following the lead of the NDP. That may be correct or incorrect; it's his impression. He's expressing it to the House, and it certainly is a matter of opinion and not something that should be the subject of a point of order.

THE SPEAKER: Well, hon. members, section 23 basically outlines the circumstances in which a member may be called to order. The three cited, (h), (i), and (j), were: "makes allegations against another member"; "imputes false or unavowed motives to another member"; "uses abusive or insulting language of a nature likely to create disorder." Well, there's some possibility there under (j), but when we make these allegations and allow them, they're usually against another member, not a party or something else.

Please continue, hon. member.

Debate Continued

MR. BRODA: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Although I cannot support

Bill 204 and would urge all members to support the reasoned amendment we are debating here today, I must admit that there are some principles of merit contained within the text that deserve recognition. However, those principles of merit have already been championed by this government, and in many cases this government has gone further on these principles than the New Democrats would suggest through Bill 204.

The size and direction of the private sector of our health system is perhaps the point most often brought up by members of both sides of the House. Our government shares the concerns of Albertans who think there is a need for greater accountability and government oversight over the sector. Mr. Speaker, it is for that reason that the Minister of Health introduced legislation which would have required that all private facilities receive approval from the Minister of Health before being allowed to operate. Furthermore, the Minister of Health would have also included an amendment in the bill that would have made it illegal for private health facilities to offer procedures also available from the publicly funded hospitals. This was indeed important legislation, the likes of which have been considered by many other provinces in Canada.

It is interesting to note that just before our government introduced Bill 37, the Legislative Assembly of Saskatchewan passed a bill that implemented some but not all of the restrictions on private health facilities contained in our Bill 37. With the passage of this bill it is interesting to note that the government of Saskatchewan, the NDP-led government, allowed private, for-profit facilities to provide services also available through public hospitals. Quite frankly, Mr. Speaker, I'm shocked. However, I'm sure my outrage pales in comparison to that of the hon. leader of the New Democratic opposition. I am sure she was the first person on the phone to scold her colleague the Premier of Saskatchewan for allegedly opening the door to two-tiered health care and eroding his province's commitment to the principles of the Canada Health Act.

We indicated in the throne speech, Mr. Speaker, that we'll bring in legislation that deals once and for all with the growing private, for-profit health care system in Alberta, but first we're going to deal with what has emerged from the health summit. The recommendations from the health summit are complete, comprehensive, and were developed by a much wider cross section of Albertans than support the Liberals and New Democrats combined.

In closing, Mr. Speaker, let me reiterate my support for the reasoned amendment. Our government recognizes very clearly that a great deal of work needs to be done to ensure that public health care grows to meet the changing needs of our province, the needs of a growing community of older people and the needs of our younger generations. To meet those needs, we have and will continue to consult with Albertans to identify their health care needs and solutions to meet them. The best way this Assembly can support the protection of medicare is by throwing its support behind the health summit process, not by supporting Bill 204.

Thank you.

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

MS BLAKEMAN: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased to be able to enter into the debate on Bill 204 and the amendment that stands before the House. This has obviously generated high feelings, but it's always nice to see members of the government side engaged in the debate.

I am not in favour of this amendment. I think the reasons have been put forward very well by my colleagues in the Liberal opposition, so I won't elaborate on them or take up a great deal of your time. Part of that is that I would really like to be able to debate 204

and all of the issues that are raised inside of that. But I note that one of the reasons for putting forward the amendment is that there would seem to be a need to wait for the report from the health summit, yet I'm sure that I just heard the hon. Member for Redwater claim that all of the consultations that came out of the health summit was all the consultation that was needed and that there should be a proceeding done now. I sense – no, indeed I know that there is a contradiction in that, and I invite members from the government side to respond to that contradiction.

I'm not in favour of the reasoned amendment. I think this would have been a very interesting process, for the Legislative Assembly to have been able to debate 204. One of the reasons I'm not in favour of this amendment is that I would like to talk about the fact that 204 would have recommended actually enshrining, writing inside of the bill the right that Albertans have to health care based on the five principles of the Canada Health Act. Lots of people talk about this, but it's not actually enshrined in our legislation. I think we have come to a point in our health care system and in the possibilities that are opening before us that those principles do need to be enshrined in our legislation, not merely referred to but actually in the legislation as a guiding principle that is legislated for us.

3:10

Another point that is raised in the bill is the idea of a medicare protection advisory committee. I've had some experience with advisory committees to the government. I think the trick there is that it all depends on the political will as to how interested the government is in actually listening to the advice that is given from an advisory committee.

There are two points to that. One is: whom do they appoint to the committee? It's very important when you're setting that up to keep in mind that – well, for instance, the members sitting on the RHA boards are all appointed by the government. A number of MLA committees or task forces that we've seen or blue-ribbon reports on this, that, and the next thing: those people are all chosen and appointed by the government. So without detailing exactly what representatives are included or what organizations are expected to send representatives to sit on an advisory committee, you do run the risk of having a very nice, handpicked group of people who will be obediently following the current mandate of the government.

So I think it's important to detail a bit more, and if we were able to get to the point of amendments, I would suggest this amendment to the hon. sponsor of the bill, the Member for Edmonton-Highlands.

I understand that I'm very close to the end of my time, but I did have constituents who had asked me to speak in favour of the bill, which I am happy to do, but I'm not in favour of the amendment as it stands.

Thank you very much.

THE SPEAKER: The time has now expired for this portion of the debate, so I'd invite the hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands to close the debate on Bill 204.

MS BARRETT: Mr. Speaker, it's very clear that this government was afraid to endorse this bill and used a parliamentary technique to avoid having to vote against it but simply to consign it to the dustbin of history. They could not be more wrong in their assumptions.

This bill enjoys incredible, widespread popularity from a majority of people, including a majority of people who vote for this government, by the way, I should add. I know this because I did attend the health summit. The overwhelming sentiment of the people participating in that summit – remember, 100 randomly chosen, 100 from stakeholder organizations: my formula. Ten minutes after the

Premier said he wanted to do this report, they just phoned up and said: hey, Pam, did you hear about the health summit? I said: no; what health summit? They told me what the Premier said on 630/CHED and QR77, and I said: "Good. Do you know what they should do? Pick 100 stakeholders and pick 100 people at random by computer and get those people together to look at health care."

Guess what the overwhelming sentiment of those people was? It was: "Get private, for profit out of health care. Maintain a publicly funded and publicly administered health care system." They said categorically no to private, for-profit hospitals. They want to maintain the system that Canadians have come to cherish. That will be the overriding conclusion of the report when it is finally submitted.

I submit to you that the hoax here is that the government just didn't want to be on the record voting against a bill which categorically, absolutely bans private, for-profit hospitals. Moreover, some of their vested constituents might not like another element of the bill, which doesn't scare me off one little bit, and that is that we would grandfather private, for-profit clinics. You bet. We need to put an end to the creeping privatization of our public health care dollars.

It would of course establish an advisory council, and I think it would be hard for the government to ignore any advisory council that it appoints or has elected. For example, the blue-ribbon panel on Bill 37 had no choice – and we'll be proving this tomorrow – but to observe that Bill 37 was flawed inasmuch as it did allow for private, for-profit hospitals, called by any other name so they didn't offend the Hospitals Act, getting around the back door, in other words, or getting it through the back door. That's what they wanted.

Even Jim Saunders, one of the movers and shakers behind the HRG wanna-be hospital, upon the introduction of the government's amendment, which would have limited the kind of procedures allowable under the roofs of private, for-profit hospitals, said: "We might as well drop the bill then. If we can't tap into the taxpayer system, we might as well drop the bill." So proof again that the private, for-profit hospitals want to double-dip. They want to make money maybe from rich people. I don't know. It's in their own business report, their own business plan that they want to be able to offer procedures which are currently covered by Alberta health care; in other words, dip into the taxpayer's pocket again.

This bill was so clear, Mr. Speaker, in its opposition to any attempt to do that. I cannot understand why the government just wouldn't have the guts, the political honesty to stand up and vote against it instead of sponsoring this amendment, which allows them off the hook and which didn't even really deal with the substantive matter, which was the panel on Bill 37, not the health care summit. As I said, I was at the summit. I can report firsthand. I attended more than half of the workshops. I know what the sentiment was.

So, Mr. Speaker, a pox on their house. I say a pox on their house. If they think this bill is going to die on the Order Paper, I remind them that this little pip-squeak, this little Mighty Mouse, doesn't plan to go to sleep on this issue. Get ready for the next election, folks, because Bill 204 will be in front of the people of Alberta, and they will say: shame on you for not supporting it.

THE SPEAKER: Would all of those hon. members in favour of the reasoned amendment to Bill 204, the Medicare Protection Act, as proposed by the hon. Member for Calgary-Glenmore, please say aye.

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Aye.

THE SPEAKER: Opposed, please say no.

SOME HON. MEMBERS: No.

THE SPEAKER: The amendment is carried.

[Several members rose calling for a division. The division bell was rung at 3:16 p.m.]

[Ten minutes having elapsed, the Assembly divided]

[Mrs. Gordon in the chair]

For the motion:

Amery	Herard	Renner
Broda	Hierath	Severtson
Burgener	Johnson	Stelmach
Cardinal	Jonson	Stevens
Clegg	Klapstein	Tannas
Coutts	Kryczka	Taylor
Doerksen	Laing	Thurber
Ducharme	Lougheed	Trynchy
Evans	Magnus	West
Fischer	Marz	Woloshyn
Forsyth	McClellan	Yankowsky
Haley	O'Neill	Zwozdesky
Hancock	Paszkowski	

Against the motion:

Barrett	Gibbons	Nicol
Blakeman	Leibovici	Olsen
Bonner	MacBeth	Pannu
Carlson	MacDonald	Sapers
Dickson	Massey	Sloan

Totals: For – 38 Against – 15

[Motion on amendment carried]

head: Motions Other than Government Motions
3:30

Health Care Accountability

506. Mrs. Forsyth moved:

Be it resolved that the Legislative Assembly urge the government to examine the creation of a system of accountability for Alberta's health care system which would outline performance measures in an attempt to monitor system efficiency and identify a standard of care for patients.

[Debate adjourned March 23: Mr. Broda speaking]

THE ACTING SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Redwater.

MR. BRODA: Thank you, Madam Speaker. I rise today to enter the debate on Motion 506, which seeks to design a system of accountability in health care. I've noticed that a significant amount of legislation and issues we deal with here have to do with accountability. Both government and opposition members are concerned with the issues of accountability, and this is why Motion 506 should be supported. It conveys an intent that I daresay is shared by both sides of the House.

Madam Speaker, I have a great interest in this issue not only as a member of this government but also as a patient who sometimes uses health care services and as a taxpayer. As an MLA I've had an opportunity to listen to the concerns of my constituents about their health care system. I have also seen this government break new ground in accountability for funds, and I've been pleased with the results. However, as an individual who both uses the health care

system and helps pay for it, I've been concerned about how accountable we are for the dollars I pay to the system and whether or not I'm getting the full service I feel I deserve.

I believe the type of system Motion 506 is proposing is an opportunity for Alberta to make our health care system the most efficient and accountable this province has seen and a model for the rest of the country to follow. As a government we've worked hard to redesign all of our systems and processes to make sure that we are fully answerable to the public not just in theory but in everyday practices. For Albertans this has meant a more responsible government which upholds high standards of efficiency and effectiveness. That has been the greatest Alberta advantage. Alberta has been recognized as a leader among provinces in the development of health system accountability, performance measures, and reporting.

Though this is wonderful news, the work doesn't stop here. We now have to look at improving our way of monitoring efficiently within the system and ensuring that people have information they expect regarding how well the system is performing. Yes, we do have an overall idea of what is going on in the system, but it is not enough. We cannot design specific solutions to issues which are not specifically charted, problems that have not clearly been defined. This is important information to have, Madam Speaker, not only as taxpayers but as people who rely on the health system or who have loved ones who rely on it.

We speak a great deal about accountability and being accountable for the dollars we spend, but I think we should keep in mind that this issue goes beyond dollars. It's about quality. Quality health care is not simply a matter of putting more money into key areas any more than it's simply a matter of cutting back in certain areas. Both of these measures at one time or another are necessary, but they do not on their own translate into quality. It requires a balance, Madam Speaker, a balance between what we have and where we need to go, a balance that can only be maintained by being responsible in our directions and forthright in our responses.

This government's vision on health is healthy Albertans in a healthy Alberta. Madam Speaker, this mission speaks not only to our physical health but also to our fiscal health. Just as you need to know exactly what the illness is and exactly what is needed to ensure physical health, our fiscal health requires a full outline of what is going on in our hospitals and clinics and what precisely is needed to correct our problems.

Motion 506 speaks strongly of this government's mission to be open and accountable, and it provides an open framework to debate the best way to accomplish that mission in our health care system.

Madam Speaker, I would urge all members of this Assembly to vote in favour of Motion 506 and open the door to greater responsibility for quality health care in this province. We must remember that we need to make sure that the system is fully accountable for those dollars, that they are spent where they are needed most, not for higher salaries but for more frontline staff, to address waiting lists, priorities of the people of Alberta. As a government we have always said that throwing more money at a problem in the system does not help. We need to invest the money intelligently, ensuring the dollars are going to key areas that really need investment and are meeting the public's priorities.

We need to expand our accountability to include the very roots of the health care system. Those roots lie with our government, the regional health authorities, hospitals, health care providers, and patients. It is true that the hospitals in this province and indeed in this country are the biggest spenders in our health care system. It is also true that these biggest spenders are also the least accountable for their spending. The money they receive is largely in a lump sum, available to them to disburse as they see fit. Madam Speaker, it may

be the government who signs the cheques, but the real power to decide the level of spending and the quality of service in health care lies with our hospitals and our doctors. It is with them that the decisions are made that affect the resource distribution within the system.

I realize that this is a sensitive subject, but it is one which I believe goes to the heart of efficiency in our health care system. We set standards and performance targets within government, and no one can deny that this is a good idea. We set out a plan for where we want to go, have designed the system to get there, and have laid it out for taxpayers to see. Why should our hospitals be any different?

Madam Speaker, the public has been bombarded by mixed messages about our health care system. "The system is in crisis," they are told, while on the other hand, "I don't believe that," the other says. "There is nothing wrong." The public needs to know exactly what the issues are, and they need to know that an effort is being made to make things better.

3:40

This system of accountability, I'm proposing, would help provide that assurance. We need to be truly accountable to health care to know where the dollars are going and to discover the truth about where the problems lie. We need to recognize that patients have to know exactly what is going on, just as we need to recognize the reality that there will be a breakdown in the system. The sooner we admit that, the sooner we look towards fixing these things that need repairing. [interjections]

Madam Speaker, I urge all members of this Assembly to open the door . . .

Speaker's Ruling Decorum

THE ACTING SPEAKER: Excuse me a moment, hon. Member for Redwater.

Anyone in this Assembly has the opportunity to ask the member questions if they so desire. They can rise and go through the chair. The Member for Redwater has the floor.

Debate Continued

MR. BRODA: Thank you, Madam Speaker. I urge all members of this Assembly to open the door to a better, more accountable health care system by voting in favour of Motion 506.

Thank you, Madam Speaker.

[Mrs. Forsyth rose]

THE ACTING SPEAKER: Hon. member, with motions we do not have the mover of the motion close debate.

The hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie.

MS CARLSON: Thank you, Madam Speaker. I have a few comments on Motion 506. We've been calling on the government for a long time to implement better performance measures. It's nice to see that the government is listening and once again taking one of our good ideas. It's too bad it has taken this many years for them to do it. Certainly we would hope that they would jump right to it on this particular issue.

MR. SAPERS: Why wasn't it discussed by agenda and priorities?

MS CARLSON: Well, that's a good point. Why wasn't it? Perhaps the minister would like to address that in the amount of time remaining here.

I think there are a number of reasons why we need performance measures in health care, and all of us could, I think, stand here and list the huge numbers of areas that need to be addressed here. In fact, perhaps if there had been performance measures in this government, we wouldn't have had to see the kind of slash-and-burn cutting in health care and we would today have a system that delivered health care in a manner that met people's needs in a timely fashion. It's too bad that we don't have that. In fact what we have is a government who will squeeze and squeeze and squeeze health care costs without ever addressing the systemic needs in the system.

So what's their response? Instead of putting forward the kinds of performance measures that would be constructive in this kind of regard, they take a look at private health care as the answer to all their problems. Well, that still doesn't solve the kinds of problems that we have in health care, that result in the delivery of a system that is inefficient. There are all kinds of examples of that. Right now home care and hospital stays are examples of systems that are trying to make do with what we have and in fact result in a very inefficient delivery of the systems.

I'll give just one short example. A friend of mine, a small businessperson, had to go into the hospital because he thought he was perhaps suffering a heart attack. He needed some work done in terms of addressing a minor clogging he had in one of his arteries. The doctor was afraid to send him home. He said: if I send you home, you will have a heart attack; you'll just have to wait here until an operating bed becomes available. Well, in fact that person, who is a small businessman, spent 10 days in the hospital taking up a bed, waiting for this minor surgery that he needed. There was no recovery time from the surgery. He was out the same day as it occurred, but he held up a bed for 10 days. Now, how can that be an efficient use of the system? It isn't.

We have lots of people in the Mill Woods area and from the surrounding northern Alberta who feed into the Grey Nuns hospital who could have made great use of that bed. Instead, this healthy man had to disrupt his business and sit in the bed in his pajamas waiting for the surgery to be performed.

If there were performance measures and they addressed these kinds of issues, perhaps this is the kind of streamlining and efficiency that we could see improved in the system, and then we wouldn't have to talk about private health care, ever, in this province. There is enough money to fund the system. There is enough money to provide adequate service. The government just can't figure out how to do it. So performance measures would certainly help with that.

We've seen not just us asking for this, not just people in the health care professions field, not just Albertans. The Auditor General's report, as well, said that more emphasis should be given to the measurement of service outputs and patient outcomes. We see a government who has never measured outcomes of any health care service. Once again, how can that be? If there's some rebuttal, then we'd like to hear it on the record, please. Stand and speak to the issue.

Waiting times I think have a significant effect on the outcomes for health care procedures. It would be very interesting to see how our health care system is performing in terms of outcomes. So I am looking forward to seeing this put in place.

THE ACTING SPEAKER: I hesitate to interrupt the hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie, but under Standing Order 8(4) I must put all questions to conclude debate on the motion under consideration.

[Motion carried]

Fiscal Stabilization Fund

507. Mrs. MacBeth moved:

Be it resolved that the Legislative Assembly urge the government to establish a fiscal stabilization fund to be used strategically to smooth over the instability of Alberta's revenue base and to ensure that health care, education, and social service programs are protected from the threat of further expenditure reductions.

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

MRS. MacBETH: I'm very pleased to rise today on Motion 507 standing in my name on the Order Paper. Madam Speaker, the object of this motion is to encourage the government to establish a fiscal stabilization fund in order to sustain the fiscal position of the province on a year-to-year basis in response to the inevitable cyclical and variable nature of our province's revenue base, to protect the quality and accessibility of our social programs, and to improve the government's medium- and long-term fiscal planning framework rather than just the short-term.

The fiscal stabilization fund provides greater flexibility in the budget process by smoothing over large unforeseeable and negative revenue shocks better than the current system of economic cushions that's been built into the 1999-2002 budget plan. With a medium- to long-term fiscal stabilization component the constraints imposed by the Fiscal Responsibility Act would require unplanned and destabilizing expenditure reductions in the event of unexpected revenue shortfalls. The fiscal stabilization fund is, instead, a responsible and prudent response to the historic volatility and variability of Alberta's revenue base.

The fund's emphasis would be on sustaining the priorities established within the budget framework over the medium to long term. In contrast, the economic cushion established under the Fiscal Responsibility Act is a year-to-year emergency response to revenue weakness in that year, which does little to sustain or balance the priorities of program spending, debt retirement, and tax reductions contemplated in Budget '99.

Let me discuss how the fiscal stabilization fund would work. Prudent fiscal management and fiscal responsibility require the establishment of mechanisms within the budget process that not only protect the fiscal bottom line but sustain investments in our society that contribute to a healthy fiscal and social balance. Fiscally responsible governments cannot ignore or dismiss the cyclical nature of our economy in Alberta and the volatility of a significant portion, 50 percent in '99-2000, of our revenue base of personal income tax, corporate income tax, oil royalties, natural gas royalties, and bonuses from the sale of Crown leases. We in the Official Opposition believe that we must have a fiscally responsible plan to deal with a sustained revenue downturn that would have an adverse effect on the province's bottom line. This plan would ensure that we could sustain investments in the building blocks of our society – our public health care, our public education, our infrastructure, our social safety net, and our competitive tax regime – without resorting to destabilizing expenditure reductions.

3:50

The Official Opposition have a plan to respond to revenue volatility. The government, on the other hand, simply reacts to revenue volatility on a year-to-year basis. The issue of sustainability and stability is a key to effective spending and tax reform policy, and that is why the Official Opposition have been calling for the establishment of a fiscal stabilization fund within the budget process

here in Alberta. A fiscal stabilization fund would allow spending and revenue reduction commitments made in Budget '99 to be sustained over the course of the fiscal plan.

The establishment of a fiscal stabilization fund would ensure that strategic investments undertaken in our public health care and education systems, policies designed to increase the competitiveness of our tax regime, and a plan to pay down the accumulated debt are sustainable over the longer term, rather than the reactive one that we've seen. The fiscal stabilization fund would introduce greater stability and certainty into the budget process in Alberta and would allow us to sustain our core social programs, which are clearly the backbone of our competitiveness as a society. A fiscal stabilization fund would make money accessible immediately to sustain public health care, education, and tax cuts should the need arise from falling oil and gas prices in a particular year.

The economic cushions established by the government under the Fiscal Responsibility Act do not allow for this as the cushion is largely dedicated, 75 percent of it, towards accumulated debt. Thus, if the price of oil or natural gas falls or if corporate or personal income tax were to decline drastically under the current system, then essential programs would have to make up the shortfall. The fiscal stabilization fund is a way to achieve and secure the fiscal and the human balance that is so important to Albertans. The fund will ensure that in tough times we can continue to pay down the secured debt, sustain tax cuts, and balance the budget while at the same time maintaining funding and access to core programs in health care and education.

Alberta has been very blessed over the past six years by strong revenue growth and by strong economic growth, but we also know that the reality in Alberta is that that can ebb and flow. In fact, of course, Alberta has in terms of average absolute deviations the largest deviation, at 7.7 percent of revenues as a percentage of our total expenditure, compared to all of the other provinces. Volatility is not a question. The question is how to deal with it.

The fiscal stabilization fund is intended to be used exclusively to mitigate any sudden, uncontrollable shortfalls in revenues by sustaining program expenses or tax cuts rather than having to finance program expenses or tax cuts through debt financing, through increased VLT or slot machine taxes, through user fees, or through simply reducing the level of expenses. The income earned from a fiscal stabilization fund on a year-to-year basis from investments in bonds and securities will be retained and form part of the fund.

The fiscal stabilization fund would be established as a special fund in order to comply with the Auditor General's recommendations on consolidation of the government's reporting entity and to reflect anticipated adoption by the government of the recommendations of the Public Sector Accounting Board on the reporting of designated assets. Funds allocated to the fiscal stabilization fund would be viewed as designated assets and would be available only for the specific purposes outlined in the legislation.

The public sector accounting statement 3100 from the Institute of Chartered Accountants of Canada recommends how to account for and report on restricted or designated assets and revenues in the financial statements of governments. While the Auditor General has indicated that his preference is for consolidated revenue statements as opposed to stabilization funds, we would argue that in fact a stabilization fund, given the volatility of Alberta's revenue picture, would be one that could meet the Auditor's generally accepted accounting principles and at the same time provide the cushion which wouldn't lead Alberta to the cuts in expenditure which have been experienced in the past several years.

Let me compare the fiscal stabilization fund versus what has been provided to date within the Fiscal Responsibility Act. Of course, it

was our amendment and our recommendation that the fiscal stabilization fund become part of the Fiscal Responsibility Act. It was an amendment that we had proposed. Of course it was rejected. Nonetheless I think it's worthy of government's consideration, particularly when the government is frequently telling the opposition that we don't come forward with constructive suggestions. This, we think, is an extremely constructive one which they may wish to consider.

In terms of the comparison, then, between the fiscal stabilization fund and the Fiscal Responsibility Act as it's currently constituted, none of the prudent or the responsible elements of fiscal stabilization are reflected in the government's financial management framework as described in the budget. Although through the Fiscal Responsibility Act the government has established a 25 percent allocation formula under which funds can be earmarked for spending or revenue reduction initiatives during the course of a fiscal year, it does not deal any more effectively with the issue of sustaining additional spending or revenue reduction commitments than the Balanced Budget and Debt Retirement Act did, its predecessor.

Given that actual expenditures during a fiscal year must not be more than actual revenue, of course, the Fiscal Responsibility Act does not prevent the withdrawal of any spending commitments made under the 25 percent allocation formula during the course of a fiscal year if a budget shortfall becomes a distinct possibility. For example, if the government were to allocate a portion of excess revenues to tax reductions during the course of a fiscal year, it would be simply irresponsible for the government to increase health care premium taxes, VLT taxes, slot machine taxes, user fees to compensate if subsequent revenue weaknesses resulted in a potential budget shortfall over the remainder of the fiscal year.

But, as we all know, all of the volatility under the Fiscal Responsibility Act is on the expenditure side of the ledger, as any tax reductions which did not provide a sufficient stimulative effect on the revenue base would have to be paid for by expenditure reductions or increases in user fees, health care premiums, and VLT taxes. Those are not responsible nor are they sustainable budgeting practices. The replacement of the current revenue cushion – in other words, 90 percent of the forecast revenues for nonrenewable resources – with the so-called economic cushion is mere tinkering and does not adequately respond to the recommendations of the government's own Revenue Forecasting Review of 1996.

Budget '99 establishes an economic cushion of \$617 million, or 3.6 percent of total revenues of \$16.8 billion. However, the province's own Revenue Forecasting Panel of July 25 made the following observations about revenue cushions. Of course, this is the government's own report. It said: the size of the revenue cushions has not been large in relation to total revenues; for the last three years it has averaged about 3 percent of total revenues, the same this year; historic results indicate there is a probability that the cushions could be inadequate in any one year; history suggests that there will be years when the cushions are not adequate to cover unanticipated negative revenue shocks.

4:00

The Revenue Forecasting Panel went on to state that there should be consideration of modifications to meet the occasional contingencies (arising when the cushions are insufficient to cover large declines in revenues) without making unintended and possibly destabilizing short-run changes in expenditures or taxes. That is, there could be consideration of other alternatives to build in more flexibility on an annual basis . . . First, they would involve the use of a predetermined (and large) unanticipated decline in revenue to trigger special provisions.

This is where our proposal for a fiscal stabilization fund fits in. It

responds prudently and responsibly to the recommendation of the Revenue Forecasting Panel while the government continues to tinker around the margins with ad hoc reactions to revenue instability.

Let me close, Madam Speaker, by talking about the whole issue of revenue volatility and expenditure volatility. Why does Alberta need a fiscal stabilization fund? The answer lies in the revenue and expenditure forecasting record of this government. Let's look for a moment at the choices the government made in the five years of postdeficit environment, when Alberta was at the height of the business cycle with strong economic growth and a growing revenue base and when there was sufficient flexibility within the budget process to sustain a structural surplus.

Over the past four years the government exceeded the debt retirement target set out in its own plan by over \$4.3 billion. The ratio of debt pay-down versus priority spending was 9 to 1. Between 1994-95 and 1998-99 \$9.6 billion in accumulated surpluses will have been generated in Alberta. Seventy-five percent of that, or \$7.2 billion, will have gone towards the payment of the net debt; 18 percent, or \$1.8 billion, will have gone to reinvestment in programs; and 5.4 percent, or \$500 million, will have gone towards tax cuts.

So what are the consequences of these choices which the government made in terms of their impact on Albertans? Well, Madam Speaker, we are 21 years ahead of the original schedule of debt repayment set out in the Balanced Budget and Debt Retirement Act and a full 10 years ahead of the revised schedule set out in the Reinvestment Act. The government put \$7.3 billion aside towards the retirement of debt over the past five years, putting it years ahead of its own schedule, yet put nothing aside to deal with the volatility of its revenue base and the cyclical nature of our economy. It in fact squandered the opportunity in the high economic cycle to protect our health care and our education systems and to sustain comprehensive tax cuts in the inevitable period of slower growth and revenue weakness.

Madam Speaker, the government's fiscal plan ignores the high volatility of the Alberta economy. The government has been very fortunate, as have all Albertans, that the revenue cycle has been high over the past several years, but the variability is mainly due to reliance on commodity-based industries that are very much a part of our economic growth in this province, such as petroleum, forestry, and agriculture. The high level of economic variability translates into an unstable revenue base, making revenue forecasting difficult and requiring prudent spending choices that can be sustained over the planning period.

Madam Speaker, we offer the fiscal stabilization fund as an opportunity to build the fund in our province, as an opportunity to build stability and long-term planning mechanisms in our province rather than ever having to put our province through what it's been through over the last six years in terms of cuts and reductions on the expenditure side. Our plan would ensure that tax cuts would be sustainable, that spending in the priority areas of education and health would be sustainable, and that planning could go on in all of the various sectors of our economy because of the existence of the stabilization fund.

I thank you very much, Madam Speaker, and I look forward to other members of our caucus participating in this important debate.

MR. DOERKSEN: Madam Speaker, I'm glad for the opportunity to rise this afternoon and share some thoughts with the Assembly on Motion 507, sponsored by the Leader of the Opposition. In beginning, I'd like to recognize the merit of the motion: to protect the provision of health care, education, social service programs from revenue fluctuations. The Leader of the Opposition has highlighted some of the very real issues that we deal with in Alberta, and that is

revenue fluctuations and the predictability of the ongoing revenue. So in that sense I think most members of the Assembly are in agreement. But while the idea has merit, the government has already set in motion another plan to address the potential for revenue fluctuations that the Alberta economy has experienced. There are several pieces of legislation in the province that I would like to mention as we enter into the discussion of the reasons why a fiscal stabilization fund is redundant at this point in time.

The first piece of legislation I want to mention is the Government Accountability Act, which was passed I think in 1995 or 1996 and states that "the Provincial Treasurer must prepare a consolidated fiscal plan for the Government for each fiscal year." A consolidated fiscal plan is one that includes all government agencies, corporations, and funds within one clear and comprehensive reporting process. In accounting terms it simply lists all assets and liabilities to give a complete picture of the province's financial situation. Essentially, Madam Speaker, it's a government with a consolidated budgeting process that has nothing to hide.

I'd also like to point out, because I was here when this legislation was first introduced, that it also called for three-year business plans, which was something that was new certainly to most jurisdictions in North America, certainly new to Canada, and one that set out a tremendous rigour for a government to follow in preparing their budget and business plans. I think the budgeting plan that the government has set out is a concise and transparent process that is understood by Albertans.

The second statute, of course, is the Balanced Budget and Debt Retirement Act, which was passed back in 1996 and ensured that the government did not run a deficit in any fiscal year. Madam Speaker, Alberta is a deficit-free province by law. That act also included provisions for applying annual surpluses in revenue to debt repayment, and that has played a significant role in putting Alberta's fiscal house in order. That legislation has been so successful in helping the government to reduce our debt that by the end of the next fiscal year we hopefully will have repaid the province's net debt. That is a tremendous legacy to leave to our children and to the next generation of Albertans. In a world where governments continually live beyond their means, Alberta stands out as one that has addressed that challenge and now lives within their means while at the same time maintaining a high standard of living, arguably one of the highest standards of living in the world.

Madam Speaker, Bill 1 that was introduced this session, the Fiscal Responsibility Act, sets out another plan to pay off the remaining accumulated debt of some 13 and a half billion dollars. It also requires a promise to set aside 3 and a half percent of its estimated revenue as an economic cushion, and I would point out that a particular clause in that bill says, "At least 3½%." It doesn't state that it has to be exactly 3 and a half percent; it has to be at least 3 and a half percent. That's the minimum economic cushion that the province is obligated to set aside. Perhaps in a case where a government thought that percent was not sufficient, it allows for an even greater economic cushion to be set aside if it was so deemed prudent.

4:10

An economic cushion serves a similar purpose to a stabilization fund in that it protects against revenue volatility. However, it offers the added benefit of being part of the overall budgeting process. Revenue cushions have been included in Alberta's budgeting and reporting process since 1993. They are a measure to ensure that the government lives within its means. The good news is that cushions have not had to be used, and the resulting surpluses have been applied to Alberta's debt.

Madam Speaker, the security against revenue volatility is contrasted to the way the fiscal stabilization fund operates. Under

the Fiscal Responsibility Act the 3 and a half percent cushion as estimated for this budget year will amount to \$617 million. The economic cushion will ensure against falling revenues due to fluctuations in commodity prices and emergencies like the unusual number of forest fires we had the past summer. If the cushion is not required during the fiscal year for these purposes, then 75 percent of it goes to pay down the debt, and the remaining 25 percent can be used to accelerate capital infrastructure projects and other priorities.

Given this plan, the notion of a fiscal stabilization fund for this province would only serve to hinder the excellent mechanisms aimed at protecting against revenue fluctuations that will aid this government in furthering the high degree of fiscal success that has become synonymous with Alberta. I believe that the approach the government has taken in following these principles is a more suitable approach than the fund proposed by the member opposite. I also feel that this approach most closely fits with the wishes of all Albertans.

Albertans have been clear with the government about the importance of maintaining a balanced budget. They have emphasized the importance of open and accountable government. We cannot and we must never go back to the days of budget deficits, but at the same time we must ensure that the resources placed in the essential services are such that the needs of Albertans continue to be met.

The plan of the government as outlined in Bill 1 is more rigorous than the establishment of a fiscal stabilization fund. Under Bill 1 fiscal discipline is required in setting revenue assumptions to keep spending in line, and conservative revenue assumptions help us to do that. A fiscal stabilization fund is lax in the requirement for fiscal discipline because there is always an opportunity to run a deficit that can be covered by the fund. From the '93-94 budget year up to last year's budget our government consistently put money aside to ensure that we would continue to live within our means should corporate tax or royalty revenues fluctuate dramatically. In last year's budget that principle stayed the same, but the base for the cushion was expanded to take into account the overall revenue and expenditure numbers.

Why do we have these cushions in place? We have them in place to achieve the goals I've just spoken about: the preservation of both Alberta's balanced books and its most important programs and services in the event revenues should drop significantly. The availability of an economic cushion has allowed this government to pay down our net debt faster than we would have in its absence. Without it we probably wouldn't be predicting the last payment on that debt to be made only one year from now. Because of the advance in paying down our debt, we now have available to us \$650 million each and every year that used to be applied to interest and that can now be applied to program spending or tax relief.

Additionally, the way in which our government has been approaching the issue of fiscal stability over the past six years and the manner in which the recently tabled Fiscal Responsibility Act proposes to continue the practice of creating an economic cushion is the most accountable approach. But, Madam Speaker, better than a stabilization fund and even better than Bill 1 is no debt at all. Borrowing for the current needs robs Alberta's future generations and forces us to rely on unpredictable future revenue streams. That is why Albertans continue to support the pay-down of our debt in a reasonable and prudent manner.

Finally, the creation of a fiscal stabilization fund would mean that money like our revenue cushion would not be included in the government's consolidated budgets. This makes for confused accounting, Madam Speaker. Both the Auditor General and the financial review committee have taken the view that such a mechanism would be incompatible with our system of fully consolidated reporting. Consolidated budgeting and reporting are essential for an open and accountable government and one of the underlying

principles facilitating Alberta's superior financial performance.

Ultimately, Madam Speaker, our current approach is about striking the right balance between programs and fiscal responsibility. It is about the Alberta advantage. It is about ensuring that Alberta continues to be one of the most prosperous, growing, and economically stable places in Canada in which to live or invest. It is the approach which best fits with Alberta's needs and philosophies of openness, fiscal responsibility, and providing essential services to Albertans who need them. For these reasons, while the fiscal stabilization fund has merit, I urge the members of the Assembly to recognize the better approach that the government has now in place by voting in the affirmative for the government by voting in the negative for this motion.

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

MR. SAPERS: Thank you, Madam Speaker. I'm very pleased to enter the debate on the motion of the Leader of the Official Opposition, my colleague from Edmonton-McClung, the motion supporting a fiscal stabilization fund, which of course has been a policy of the Liberal opposition for some time. We're hoping, of course, as with all of our good ideas, that eventually the government will listen. If they don't do it before we have an opportunity to do so, then it'll be a quick action of the government once we have the ability to do so.

I do thank the Member for Red Deer-South for entering into the debate and offering a thoughtful analysis of the motion, of its merits and what he perceives as its weaknesses. I guess it probably goes without saying that I disagree with that analysis, and I think that there's a real point of contrast between what the government has been saying about its fiscal plans and the economy of Alberta and what the opposition has been saying about fiscal plans and the economy of Alberta. That point of contrast can probably best be summarized when the Member for Red Deer-South said: Alberta is debt free by law. There can be nothing further from the truth. Alberta is deficit free not by law but because of a robust economy that has managed to progress in spite of government policies which have created massive disruption in public services, which have created huge deficits in municipalities and school boards and RHAs and the incoming child service authorities, huge deficits in terms of delegated administrative authorities. So it is absolutely not the case.

We owe a debt of gratitude to the hundreds of thousands of Alberta workers who have taken wage rollbacks, who have lost their jobs. We owe a debt of gratitude to the men and women who continued to work in spite of government policies, to persevere to maintain a quality of service that we can only be grateful for, because it's all happened in spite of government policy, certainly not because of government policy.

One of the key features, of course, is the speed at which this government has moved to pay off the debt. Now, let me say that as a representative in this Assembly of a party that put debt and deficit elimination on the political map in this province, I am very proud to be in the Assembly at a time when we are approaching zero debt, at a time when we have year after year budget surpluses. I'm quite in favour of surplus budgets, and I am quite in favour of operating with little or no debt. The problem, of course, is in how you get there, and the difference is very important.

Now, I'll just give an example. You know, probably one of the most interesting things that the government has done as a result of Budget '99 is the proposal for a \$600 million expenditure in the form of a tax cut. Make no mistake about it: a tax cut is an expenditure. If we maintain the status quo, you'd have the revenue, and you could spend it someplace else. So when the government by policy

decides that they want to eliminate a certain amount of revenue, it's an expenditure decision.

4:20

So it is very interesting that the government has decided to make an expenditure decision at this point in time of around \$600 million. Now, if there had been a fiscal stabilization fund in place that we were able to draw on in periods when the revenue is slow – for example, when there are low commodity prices – and you still wanted to pursue an expenditure policy of tax relief, the people of Alberta would have a pool of funds available that the government of Alberta could use to accomplish the tax cuts and not just provide tax relief to the very rich in the province, to a disproportionate level to everyone else, but in fact could afford to provide tax relief to the whole spectrum of Alberta taxpayers in a much fairer way.

For example, if this government had wanted to, it could today eliminate the 8 percent flat tax. It could today eliminate the .5 percent surtax. It could today make sure that low- and middle-income earners receive the same degree of benefit from tax relief policy as those income earners who have reportable income of \$100,000 and more. The money would be there, and we'd be able to afford that. I don't think there's anybody in this Assembly that wouldn't like to go home to their constituencies and say yes to the one-third of Albertans who represent those taxpayers who will not receive under the government's plan the lion's share, the majority benefit of the government's tax relief scheme. We would be able to go back and say: "You know what? We found a better way to do it, and now you will benefit at least to the same extent as all of those high-income earners," who must somehow manage to get the ear of the government and get their attention in a far more dramatic way than the rest of us.

There are plenty of reasons why we should pursue this idea of a fiscal stabilization fund, and I think that it does help illustrate the difference in approach between the government of today and the government of tomorrow, the government that will be, Madam Speaker.

Now, one of the government's primary advisers of late has been Dr. Paul Boothe, a noted economist from the University of Alberta. Dr. Boothe made the point in an *Edmonton Sun* article dated December 12, 1998: "Budgeting in Alberta is planning for volatility. That's the nature of the business." We've already had a brief review of just how volatile the Alberta economy is. Because of this volatility it doesn't make sense to put all of your eggs in one basket, which is what happens under the current Balanced Budget and Debt Retirement Act or under the incoming Fiscal Responsibility Act. It makes much more sense to hedge your risk, to spread it out. Of course, a stability fund allows you to do that because it's not just current year. A stability fund allows you to have an asset that you can use year to year to help deal with the volatility.

Now, Madam Speaker, let me give you a practical example of the utilization of a fiscal stabilization fund. To illustrate how it could be used as a means to smooth over the volatility in Alberta's revenue base and protect health care and education, it would be useful now to examine what impact dedicating three-quarters of the year-end fiscal surplus towards the net debt would have had on Alberta's fiscal position between 1994-95 and 1998-99. If only 75 percent of the year-end surplus had been dedicated to net debt reduction as opposed to the 100 percent that the government allocated, if only 75 percent had been allocated, the question is: how much money would have been freed up between '94-95 and today and placed within a fiscal stabilization fund to offset revenue weakness?

Under this alternative scenario that I'm proposing, the answer is that \$5.9 billion in net debt would still have been paid down between '94 and '99, leaving a net debt of \$2.4 billion as of tomorrow, as of

the end of the fiscal year. Now, under the status quo scenario, under what the government did, \$7.9 billion in net debt has been paid down, leaving a net debt of \$417 million, a big difference, Madam Speaker, but one that I think I can help people justify. Under the alternative scenario the accumulated debt would have fallen from \$22 billion as of April 1, '94, to \$16 billion as of April 1, '99, a reduction of nearly \$6 billion, or almost a third. Under the status quo scenario the accumulated debt is projected to fall from the \$22 billion to \$13 billion as of April 1, a reduction of about 39 percent.

Under the alternative scenario annual debt servicing costs would have fallen from \$1.6 billion as of 1994 to \$1.2 billion as of April 1, '99, creating a permanent debt intrasavings of \$415 million per year. Under the status quo scenario that permanent debt intrasavings is about \$629 million per year. Under the alternative scenario over \$2 billion, \$2.058 billion, in cumulative residual funds would have been generated between '94-95 and '98-99 that could be placed within a fiscal stabilization fund to address revenue forecast variability and respond to emergency spending priorities as required.

Under the government's plan there are no cumulative residual funds generated. None. In other words, all of the hard work that all of the men and women in this province have contributed towards retiring the debt, getting rid of the deficit has resulted in a big goose egg in the bank, nothing put aside.

Now, while it is true that we are so far ahead on the debt repayment plan, we have done so at the same time that we have created large classrooms, long waiting lists for medical procedures at the same time that we have created infrastructure deficits across this province in every public institution. The argument has to be made, Madam Speaker, that if we had managed to follow the plan that was approved and maintained the schedule of debt retirement, we would still have had the ability, because of how robust the economy has been, to have had these residual funds. We would have been able to maintain some program integrity. We wouldn't have the crisis that we are currently facing today in health care, in public education, in municipal infrastructure, in children's services, and we would still be well down the road to eliminating the net debt deficit, as are so many other jurisdictions in North America.

Alberta is not the only place that has managed to pay off the debt. Governments of every stripe in this country and elsewhere have managed to pay off their debt. They've managed to eliminate deficits out of their budget. This is a political action that has captured the imaginations of taxpayers and of voters from coast to coast and is not a creation of the Conservative government of Alberta.

Madam Speaker, the issue here isn't whether or not a political policy should be pursued to eliminate the debt and deficit, because the answer clearly is yes. The question here is whether it was done the right way. In my submission the answer in Alberta is clearly no, and a better way could have been pursued. Our argument is that the better way would have been to maintain the schedule of debt retirement while putting money aside in a stability fund for what could truly be a rainy day. [interjections] I hear some catcalls of spend, spend, spend. Perhaps the members aren't listening. This is accumulated surplus. Accumulated surplus. If you can't understand that concept, perhaps you'd like to meet with . . .

THE ACTING SPEAKER: I hesitate to interrupt the hon. Member for Edmonton-Glenora, but the time limit for consideration of this item of business has concluded.

head: Committee of Supply

4:30

[Mrs. Gordon in the chair]

THE DEPUTY CHAIRMAN: I'd like to call Committee of Supply

to order. I would just like to sort of go over the format here. It's 20 minutes to the minister responsible for the department, 20 minutes to the Official Opposition – and usually that would be their critic – and five minutes to the third party's critic.

head: Main Estimates 1999-2000

Executive Council

THE DEPUTY CHAIRMAN: I would ask the hon. Premier to please lead off.

MR. KLEIN: Thank you, Madam Chairman. When I gave my estimates, there were a number of questions asked. I didn't have an opportunity to write them all down. Certainly our officials in the gallery had an opportunity to look over the *Hansard*, and we'll try today to answer as many of the questions that were posed. I am pleased to be able to continue our debate of Executive Council's estimates for 1999-2000. I'd like to take a few minutes to answer questions asked by members of this committee about Executive Council, the office of the Premier, and the Public Affairs Bureau.

[Mr. Tannas in the chair]

First, I would like to answer a number of questions asked about Executive Council. Members asked a number of questions about the business plan process, particularly about the role of Executive Council in co-ordinating that process across government. Well, I can tell you that Executive Council is looking at developing some practical ways to build on the long-term context of the government's business plan process. We're working to find practical ways to increase the emphasis on the third year of business planning so that we can incorporate more strategic long-range planning into the process. Mr. Chairman, it's that kind of planning that really has not resulted in a lot of political rhetoric about the financial stability and the financial worthiness of this government. It has become the kind of planning that has really set the benchmark and the model for the rest of Canada. Ministries have also included a section in their 1999-2000 business plans that looks at key risk factors and assumptions associated with meeting their business plan targets.

So in response to questions about standardized formats for business plans, I can tell you that ministries all work from the same standards for setting up their visions, their missions, their goals, their strategies, and so on. It's then up to each ministry to tailor these elements to best suit their specific business plan. Ministries are also developing business plan guidelines for any organizations that are accountable to the minister. I would like to point out that the Auditor General's office has also provided ministry business planners with direction on ways to improve the management discussions and analysis in ministry reports.

Questions were also asked about budget details. Executive Council's 1999-2000 estimate numbers, detailed by object, are as follows: for the office of the Premier, \$2.3 million in salaries, wages, and benefits, \$1.3 million in supplies and services, \$110,000 in financial transactions of other items, and a total of 40 full-time equivalents; for the office of the Lieutenant Governor, \$125,000 in salaries, wages, and benefits, \$50,000 in supplies and services, and three full-time equivalents. That comes to a total of \$3.9 million and 43 full-time equivalents for Executive Council. The 1999-2000 estimate numbers for the Public Affairs Bureau are \$7.2 million in salaries, wages, and benefits, \$1.5 million in supplies and services, and a total of 128 full-time equivalents. That comes to a total of \$8.7 million in expenditures, which of course will be partially offset by the bureau's projected revenue of \$1.5 million, ostensibly through the Queen's Printer.

Another member asked about steps being taken in response to the Information and Privacy Commissioner's comments about Executive Council's processing of FOIP requests. All of the recommendations set out in the commissioner's report were accepted. Since that time, Executive Council staff have received additional FOIP training, information systems have been improved, and additional staff have been added to the list of search contacts to ensure that all relevant staff are aware of FOIP requests. Executive Council is also planning to formally review its records management procedures in the near future.

A question was also asked about Y2K. I would ask members of this committee to note that government has accepted the Auditor General's recommendations surrounding Y2K. We are ensuring that Y2K concerns are being met through the office of the chief information officer, which is included in the estimates for Public Works, Supply and Services, and I would suggest that members direct their questions about Y2K to PWSS.

I'd like to turn now to questions asked about the Public Affairs Bureau's performance measures. There were questions relating to the surveys themselves and the methodology used to compile the results. I would ask members of the committee to note that a good deal of the statistical information about the surveys is included each year in the annual report. This information is reviewed by the office of the Auditor General, and members of the Auditor General's staff work with the bureau to make sure that all of the necessary elements are included and reported correctly.

In response to questions about the decision to discontinue the supplier satisfaction surveys, that suggestion came from the office of the Auditor General. [interjections] Is there something that is particularly amusing? I thought this speech was particularly dry.

MRS. McCLELLAN: Yeah, well, it's the usual amount of attention.

MR. KLEIN: It is the usual amount. Well, they asked the questions. They don't want to hear the answers; right? You know, I could go to page 12 and then come back to page 3, and they wouldn't know the difference, Mr. Chairman.

The office felt that more appropriate measures could be found to reflect progress made in goal 4; that is, "increase revenue by developing new products and services." Bureau staff will be working with the office of the Auditor General to find new measures for goal 4.

One member also asked a question about the factors that go into deciding what new products will be developed through the Queen's Printer bookstore. I can tell you that customer and government need combined with an awareness of overall cost effectiveness are key factors in determining new products and services. Mr. Chairman, that means listening to customers and finding out what their priorities are as well as working to make the most of the growing trend toward partnerships and other cost-sharing projects among Alberta government departments.

A good example of this can be found in the partnership between Alberta Justice and the Queen's Printer bookstore to produce the *Rules of Court* projects. The *Rules of Court* binder provides the legal community with the information they need to do their job: information like notices to the profession, practice notice, and regulations. The project saves Alberta Justice approximately \$50,000 per year, and the bookstore's production costs are more than offset by revenues received, which is another factor driving product development. This in fact is the push toward new information technologies. Bookstore staff are working to stay on top of emerging trends by posting legislative information on the Internet and by offering options like electronic commerce.

There was a request for more information on working with the personnel administration office on a strategy to build recognition of the Alberta public service as an employer of choice. When you look at the demographics within the Alberta public service, you see that the average age of all employees is now 44 years and the average age of our management group is 47. A significant number of employees are also eligible to retire in the next five years. In 1981 37 percent of new staff were under the age of 30. Today only 5 percent of our employees are under the age of 30.

So given our current demographics, we know that we need to look outside our organization to meet future demands. With Alberta's economy remaining strong, very strong, and, I would add, with strong political support, support that says that we're going to maintain the environment to create economic prosperity and new jobs, we are anticipating that we'll run into competition for staff in certain areas. In other words, what we're doing as a government to create a strong economy, to create the climate for private-sector jobs is, as a matter of fact, a detriment in some ways to the government, because we can't pay the kinds of salaries nor would the public let us pay the kinds of salaries that can compete with many of the private-sector jobs.

4:40

So, Mr. Chairman, our goal is to focus on recruitment strategies that will help us to attract new graduates and experienced employees. Working under the title Making Alberta Stronger, our strategy includes ads that are more appealing to job seekers, an ambassador program with employees promoting the public service, and a web site for people who want to know more about us as an employer. I would suggest that members direct any further questions about this project to the minister responsible for the personnel administration office. That used to be me. It is now the Minister of Advanced Education and Career Development.

Mr. Chairman, this concludes my comments on Executive Council and the Public Affairs Bureau. I would now like to ask the MLA for Athabasca-Wabasca to offer some additional information about the Northern Alberta Development Council.

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

MR. CARDINAL: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. During the subcommittee of the Executive Council the Member for Edmonton-Riverview asked questions regarding the performance measures for the northern development branch and the Northern Alberta Development Council. I would provide the following answers.

We measure our performance through annual customer surveys and by tracking statistics related to our bursary program. Receiving input has always been fundamental to the Northern Alberta Development Council's work, but this is the first year we have had a goal related to it. It has been upgraded from a strategy in our previous business plans. Lack of awareness of the NADC and of opportunities to meet with the NADC have been identified as concerns through our annual customer survey. We will meet with northern community and industry leaders to receive input into our current initiatives and to determine their development needs and priorities. This will help guide our business planning process and ensure that the council continues to work on priority northern matters. Planned events include targeted regional consultation sessions and a conference on northern development to be held in 1999.

Goal 2 will be measured based on the results of our customer survey. Project partners and clients will be asked if they believe our project work promoted development opportunity or addressed a development barrier. We have revised our survey questions based

on an extensive review of past years' surveys and in reply to the recommendations received from the Auditor General for a new, consistent survey question.

In past years northern leaders as well as partners and clients were asked generic questions about NADC's contribution to developing the northern economy. This approach seemed to measure NADC's profile with northerners rather than the effectiveness of our project work. We believe this new approach will be more consistent and give us more accurate information about our contribution to development in the north.

Our performance on our bursary program is tracked through two measures. For the NADC bursary we tracked the number of students who received bursary assistance and their rates of return service into the north. Students contract to work in the north in their area of training in exchange for bursary assistance. The rate of return service shows that percentage of students who fulfill this obligation. Our '97-98 annual report clearly outlines our performance for the last three years and our target for this fiscal year. Over the past three years the return service rate has increased from 72 percent to 76 percent, and our target is a 75 percent return service rate.

We also measure our performance in obtaining matching funds from community, industry, and other organizations for our bursary, and that is the bursary partnership program. Our performance over the past three years is also outlined in our annual report. Over the past three years matching funds have increased from \$93,000 to \$120,000. Our target has now increased to \$130,000 over the three-year business plan.

These performance measures are meant to track the macrolevel of performance of the organization. Results of our work in specific projects are outlined in our annual report.

Thank you.

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

MR. SAPERS: Thanks, Mr. Chairman. Thanks to the Member for Athabasca-Wabasca and to the Premier for providing some responses to some of our earlier questions. I have a few questions myself, and the decision of the Official Opposition in terms of utilizing our 20 minutes in report is to share the time not just with the critic responding but also with some of my colleagues. So we'll be sharing that.

I'll move directly to some questions that remained, Mr. Premier. I was listening to your remarks, and I reviewed *Hansard* to check on the comments that you offered after our initial sets of questions, and there are a couple of areas where I haven't received some satisfactory response.

Before I mention them specifically, there is also a comment that you made regarding a staff person of the Liberal caucus. [interjection] I won't rise to the bait, Mr. Chairman, but I just say that it's the usual amount of attention paid as well. In any case the comment was made to one of our staffers, Mr. Kaplan, who works in our office, and I have to say that I thought it was very unbecoming that the Premier would make reference to somebody who wasn't in the House, wasn't able to defend himself, to name them, and to make very serious suggestions about their behaviour that were unsubstantiated and weren't true. I thought that perhaps the Premier might have reflected upon his comments and might have taken the opportunity today to set the record straight, and of course he didn't. This of course had to do with the Premier suggesting that several opportunities had been offered for the staff member to go to the Premier's office and review materials.

I can tell you this. I was very happy to hear that now all of the government surveys will be open to the researchers and members of the Official Opposition through the Premier's office. That was good

news, and of course we'll be taking full opportunity to take advantage of that generous offer from the Premier, and I just hope that in the future the Premier won't misrepresent the good work and the hard work of the men and women that work for the Official Opposition.

Now, the first area, a specific area that I questioned the Premier on that wasn't answered was a series of questions which I raised about the government's commitment to dealing with racism and intolerance in Alberta. I had asked the Premier how much money was being spent in Public Affairs Bureau to deal specifically with racism and to educate Albertans and employees and elected members about the danger of intolerance in our society. I asked as well if the Premier could provide details of the specific activities, so the dollars being allocated and the specific activities. That information request has still been left unanswered, Mr. Chairman.

The other specific question that I'm going to raise today that I want to get back on the record – because I do expect the Premier will review all of the questions and provide written answers to all of the questions that were left unanswered – is the question I asked the Premier in regard to the cost of providing audio clips on the government's web site when the government presents its news releases in an electronic form. The Premier had talked about documents produced by the Liberal opposition and referred to them quite unfairly, I thought, as propaganda but managed somehow to justify in his own mind this new expense that the government is undertaking to highlight specific and selected policies of the government, many of which are purely political.

4:50

I just find it very ironic and can't stop myself from taking the opportunity to comment on that irony, that the Premier would label one form of information sharing as propaganda but be totally blind to what's happening through his own office. The questions I asked specifically were: what is the cost of adding these audio clips to the government's web site, and is an evaluation being done to determine whether or not Albertans are getting a benefit for the extra dollars spent on enhancing the government's telling of its tales through this electronic means?

So I would hope that the Premier will provide answers to at least those two questions, and also once again I'll call upon him to reflect on the statements he made about somebody who's not able to defend themselves in this Chamber.

Wanting to leave the maximum amount of time for my colleagues, Mr. Chairman, I'll depend upon the Premier's written responses for the remainder of my questions which were left unanswered.

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

MR. DICKSON: Thanks very much, Mr. Chairman. I've got a number of questions, but before I get to the specific questions, I wanted to query some of the items that appear in the business plan summary. I'm going to focus on some of those things, because what we find is that the outline of expenditures is so skeletal. I look at program 3, Public Affairs, which is of particular interest to me, and votes 3.0.1, 3.0.2, 3.0.3. Those are areas that I'm particularly interested in and hope to explore in the next few minutes.

One of the things that jumps out at me is this. I look at the government's goal of "make government information more accessible to Albertans," and then I see there's a key performance measure which says we've identified in '99-2000 that our target is 75 percent overall satisfaction level. Well, what I'm interested in is the period October 1, 1995, to June 30, 1998. There were 3,833 FOIP requests. These were requests by citizens who were not able to access

information by going to someone in the department and asking for it and had to make a formal application. I'd like to know of that 3,833 FOIP requests – and 1,344 pertained to general requests for information – why we wouldn't survey those people in terms of determining whether the government is achieving its goal of being more accessible to Albertans.

I'm going to suggest, Mr. Chairman, that in so many respects the government puts out substantially more information than they ever have before, but what's interesting is that it tends not to be the information that corresponds with the primary interest and needs of Albertans. I think that when we look at the volume of the freedom of information access requests, that suggests to me that we've fallen far short of the goal that's been set, and when the government is measuring public satisfaction with government information, I don't know why they don't integrate what problems we've had with freedom of information.

Now, I just want to move from that for a moment. It strikes me that when the Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act was coming into force on October 1, 1995, there was a delay in circulating the training video. Why was that, you might ask, Mr. Chairman? Because the Department of Public Works, Supply and Services had put together all of their training material for freedom of information, but what they discovered, lo and behold, was they decided that at the opening of the video they wanted a comment from the Premier. So it meant about a three-week delay in getting the training video out there, but it started off with this wonderful pronouncement by the Premier of this province saying that we were about to usher in a brand-new era of openness. This was a new era of transparency. Government for the first time in this province acknowledged that it's we the citizens that own information and that we simply lend it to government for specific purposes for specific time periods.

Well, what we've seen in the experience since is that with some of the highest access fees anywhere in Canada, with very generous exceptions aggressively and vigorously applied by heads of public bodies, too often we have a lot of information that Albertans want to get that they cannot access. That continues to be a concern.

It also brings me to wonder: where is this public relations office, which is really quite a wondrous thing? When I look at the talent and the resources that are co-ordinated through the public affairs office – it's certainly very effective in getting out the government's message. I'm not sure, Mr. Chairman, when I look at the key performance measures, that it acknowledges the importance of sharing information that is less about advancing the government's partisan agenda than it is about addressing the needs important to Albertans.

I'm wondering why it is that the Premier's office was found to have fallen short in terms of the standard under section 9, the provision in the Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act that says that there is a duty to assist. When there was an investigation done this last year, in 1998, with respect to an access request for some West Edmonton Mall documents, some Treasury Branch documents, the Premier's office, Executive Council office said: no, we don't have the documents. Then after the Premier banished them at a news conference, these very documents that had been sought, we discover that the Premier's office had them indeed.

There was a subsequent investigation by the Information and Privacy Commissioner's office, who determined that there had not been a proper search and that, lo and behold, the people in the Premier's office had inadequate training. They didn't have enough training with the freedom of information act. So here we have the Premier, who ushers in the FOIP regime on October 1, 1995, talking

about a culture of openness and this enormous change that's going to be wrought. It's the Premier that ought to be setting the standard, yet we find it's the Premier's office that in fact is found to have not complied with the obligations under the act. So very troubling, Mr. Chairman.

Then the other concern I have has to do with Bill C-54 and the fact that this huge public affairs branch that's accessible at the discretion of the Premier is not focused on telling Albertans what Bill C-54 is about, what the impact is going to be in terms of the Alberta businesses that trade and do business outside the province. It's a major concern, Mr. Chairman, and frankly I'm astonished that the public affairs office hasn't started to address that. I know there are other questions and other points to raise, but here was an opportunity for leadership on the part of the Premier's office, and frankly it doesn't seem to be evident that that kind of leadership is being discharged.

Those are the comments I wanted to make at this point, Mr. Chairman. Thank you.

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

5:00

MS OLSEN: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I just have a few comments to make, and they're in relation to the Public Affairs Bureau. I'm just concerned that the Public Affairs Bureau has become a somewhat more political arm, if you will, as opposed to an arm that is supposed to facilitate the government. I have some concerns about that. I'm wondering at what point the Premier can address that issue.

It's very interesting to note that in the core business plan the Public Affairs Bureau is to supply professionals to government departments and "to develop and implement communications programs." What we find often is that many of these positions become extremely political, and it becomes more of a protectionist arm of the government, if you will, than a function that serves Albertans. There's a certain message that has to go out – and that message is at the taxpayers' expense – but that message is not necessarily based on facilitating a program. It's in many instances based on protecting the government.

I'm just wondering, you know, if the Premier can reconcile that for Albertans and try and recognize – I say that and I say that we have the development of a position in internal affairs for one of the members that left the Premier's office, Mr. Dau. That position cost 125,000 taxpayers' dollars or thereabouts. That position did not exist prior to his going over there. I think that was a very political move that cost the taxpayers a lot of money, and I'm not sure that that's the wisest use of resources. In fact, I would venture to say exactly otherwise.

I guess that hearkens back, Mr. Chairman, to the Premier's theme that he's developed about how the opposition is going around talking about different issues around the province. He's saying: well, that's at the taxpayers' expense. Well, I would like to know exactly what, then, he perceives the roles to be here. He in fact goes around the province, and every member in this House has a responsibility to go around the province and fill the critic portfolio. So I'm wondering, you know, where he's trying to go with that, and maybe he can explain that. Is he disappointed with the fact that we as an opposition are doing our job? I'm not quite sure what the whole issue is with him there.

The other thing I have for the Premier is: what leadership role has he taken in combating sexual and workplace harassment, and what is he showing Albertans that he's doing in his own office? Is there a policy that he follows? The policy that I see out of Community Development is there. It's available for Albertans to read; there's

even a plan. Whoever developed that has done an excellent job, and I would like to see that apply to every department.

How much money is the Premier spending on that type of initiative? Considering that the public affairs office is very political, I think there are some concerns that I have there and concerns I've actually heard out of that office. So I think those flags need to be raised for the Premier, and he needs to pay attention to some of that stuff.

I recognize that we don't have a lot of time here. I'm wondering how the Premier has met the goals and strategies out of the NADC. I look at some of the goals: they "receive input into priority northern development opportunities and issues." Well, exactly how has that happened over the last few years? Because when I look at some of the key performance measures, some of these are not developed yet, so we don't actually even have a target and a baseline. At what point is that going to become a reality so that Albertans can know that that's happening? I think we need to look at that as well.

The performance measures, goals, and strategies for the rest of the department have been talked about. I'm glad the government is measuring the satisfaction of people using the RITE line and the bookstore and those kinds of things. There are some needs to respond to, some of the Auditor General's requests that I'd like to see happen. One of those was to discontinue the private-sector supplier satisfaction key performance measurements. I'd like to see that occur.

Mr. Chairman, thanks for the opportunity. My time is up and we'll move on. Thank you.

THE CHAIRMAN: The next part is the leader of the NDP opposition, who has five minutes.

MS BARRETT: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I promise members of the Assembly that I will not speak as rapidly in as quick-fire fashion as I did when summing up on Bill 204. That was a feat. I felt like I was back in Manitoba.

A couple of observations about the Public Affairs Bureau component of the Executive Council estimates. While I was not a member of this Assembly between 1993 and 1997, as you know, I was still reading *Hansard* and reading budgets, and I noticed that during the years of the hack-and-slash budgets the government continued to swell its resources in the Public Affairs Bureau. If I'd been here, I would have been swatting at them over that. Of course, they probably needed the spin doctors to tell all the people who couldn't get into hospitals that they should feel good about this for some reason or other. I'm not sure what reason.

Again, I see a continued trend here, more money in the Public Affairs Bureau while members of this Assembly and the public of Alberta are waiting for a document that's been held by the provincial Health minister and the government since last Monday on one of the most controversial bits of legislation ever heralded in by any government in this province. They have put this document into the hands of their spin doctors so that by the time it's made public – is it tomorrow? I'm not sure. Tomorrow or the next day. They'll have had it for a week and a half and been able to launder the message, so to speak. I object to tax dollars being used in that fashion. I think the Public Affairs Bureau should be way less politically charged than what it is right now.

I would also in the context of Bill 37 like to make note that during the time that the Premier's office was getting tons of calls – and that's hardly an exaggeration – the frontline phone answerers, Lynn and Cindy, were absolutely wonderful. I think they wanted to choke me sometimes over the furor, but they handled the public extremely well. Hats off to them.

However, I do know that there was one person in the Public Affairs Bureau in the Premier's communications office who actually would fight with people who phoned up objecting. I don't know her name. I never did find out. I know that she was telling telephone callers that they were wrong, that they were being led around by the nose, that there was absolutely no way that this bill could allow for private, for-profit hospitals. But, you know, weeks later, after the spring session concluded, the Premier went on record with the *Edmonton Journal* saying: yeah, I guess Barrett's right; yeah, it could. So just a caution.

Finally, if I were the Premier, the one thing I'd always want to do is keep the optics of my budget as positive as possible. While I'm concerned about a decrease in the amount of money going into the RITE telephone system, I'm not sure what's causing that. I hope it's not a reduction in personnel, because as the Premier says: the cuts are over; the cuts are over. I'll believe it when I see it. However, back to the optics, Mr. Chairman. I would want the RITE system phone line budget under the Department of Public Works, Supply and Services so I could brag about having a lower than average Executive Council cost.

Those are my observations.

THE CHAIRMAN: Okay. We're ready for the vote. After considering the business plan and proposed estimates for Executive Council, are you ready for the vote?

HON. MEMBERS: Agreed.

Agreed to:	
Operating Expense	\$14,022,000

THE CHAIRMAN: Shall the vote be reported?

5:10

HON. MEMBERS: Agreed.

THE CHAIRMAN: Opposed? Carried.

The hon. Government House Leader.

MR. HANCOCK: Yes, Mr. Chairman. I would move that we rise and report the vote and progress on estimates for Executive Council.

[Motion carried]

[The Deputy Speaker in the chair]

THE DEPUTY SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Dunvegan.

MR. CLEGG: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The Committee of Supply has had under consideration certain resolutions for the fiscal year ending March 31, 2000, reports approval of the following estimates, and requests leave to sit again.

Executive Council: \$14,022,000, operating expense.

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

HON. MEMBERS: Agreed.

THE DEPUTY SPEAKER: Opposed? So ordered.

MR. HANCOCK: Mr. Speaker, in light of the hour and in light of the invitation we have from the Speaker to attend in the rotunda of the Legislative Assembly at 5:30, I would move that we do now adjourn until 8 p.m., at which time we reconvene in Committee of Supply.

THE DEPUTY SPEAKER: The hon. Government House Leader has moved that the Assembly do now adjourn and that when we reconvene this evening, we do so in Committee of Supply. All those in support of this motion, please say aye.

HON. MEMBERS: Aye.

THE DEPUTY SPEAKER: Those opposed, please say no. Carried.

[The Assembly adjourned at 5:14 p.m.]

