

## Legislative Assembly of Alberta

Title: **Tuesday, May 4, 1999** 1:30 p.m.

Date: 99/05/04

[The Speaker in the chair]

head: Prayers

THE SPEAKER: Good afternoon. Let us pray.

O Lord, guide us so that we may use the privilege given us as elected Members of the Legislative Assembly.

Give us the strength to labour diligently and the courage to think and to speak with clarity and conviction and without prejudice or pride.

Amen.

Please be seated.

head: Presenting Petitions

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

DR. MASSEY: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. With permission I'd present an SOS petition signed by 105 residents of Edmonton, Fort Saskatchewan, Gibbons, Smoky Lake, and Sherwood Park urging the Government to increase funding of children in public and separate schools to a level that covers increased costs due to contract settlements, curriculum changes, technology, and aging schools. Thank you.

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

MRS. SLOAN: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased today to table a petition signed by residents of Edmonton compelling the Legislative Assembly to urge the Government of Alberta to hold widespread public hearings involving as many . . . clients as want to be heard before making any changes to the Assured Income for the Severely Handicapped program.

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

MR. DICKSON: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased to present this afternoon a petition signed by 57 Calgarians primarily in the three downtown constituencies petitioning the 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.

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 211, 212, 213, 214, 215, and 216.

I'm also giving notice that tomorrow I will move that motions for returns appearing on the Order Paper stand and retain their places.

head: Tabling Returns and Reports

MR. JONSON: Mr. Speaker, it's my pleasure today to table seven copies of responses to written questions 206 and 210.

As well, Mr. Speaker, I would like to table the required copies of the response to Motion for a Return 111.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

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

DR. MASSEY: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. With permission I would table five copies of a presentation to the standing policy committee on education and training from parents and teachers with regard to the continuance of the CALM course in high school, listing among their reasons that this is a course where high school youngsters can resolve conflicts and anger management.

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

DR. PANNU: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I have two tablings for today. The first one is a copy of a letter written by the principal of Jasper junior/senior high school dated April 14 to all parents who have children at school. The letter indicates the kinds of cuts that the school will have to make including losing three teachers, losing certain teacher aides, and a variety of other services.

The second tabling, Mr. Speaker, is a letter from a resident of Sherwood Park, Lorna McKerness, and she urges the Assembly to incorporate the recommendations for changes to Bill 15 suggested by the Environmental Law Centre. Until that is done, she wants to register her opposition to the bill as it presently stands.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

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

MS CARLSON: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I have three tablings today. The first is 13 letters to the Premier asking him to withdraw Bill 15, the Natural Heritage Act.

The second is a letter from Lorna McKerness also to the Premier requesting that Bill 15, the Natural Heritage Act, not be passed, because "it is a deplorable leap backward in the critical need for the protection of the incredible natural heritage with which Alberta has been blessed."

The third is a letter from David Parker, a NAIT instructor, to the Premier asking him to withdraw Bill 15, the Natural Heritage Act, because we need legislation which makes clear that it is in the interests of Albertans "to preserve and protect in perpetuity" that which makes Alberta unique.

THE SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Fort McMurray.

MR. BOUTILIER: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. With your permission I'd like to table the appropriate five copies of a petition given to me by constituents of Fort McMurray pertaining to their opposition to the removal of VLTs from the Wood Buffalo area.

MR. DAY: Mr. Speaker, I'm happy to table results of the Dominion Bond Rating Service today reflecting on both British Columbia's and Alberta's credit rating. A credit rating is very important, as you know, because millions of dollars can be saved and applied to priority programs like health and education if your credit rating is strong. B.C.'s credit rating has been downgraded today. We hope that things turn around for them, and I'll be tabling copies of Alberta's credit rating. There are comments on our proven commitment to sound fiscal management and debt reduction, and there are also positive comments saying that recent evidence of our progressiveness is the announcement to restructure the tax system by moving to a single rate tax on income. They have reaffirmed our rating as the highest in Canada.

MR. GIBBONS: Mr. Speaker, I rise to table five copies of the Edmonton Asian Heritage Month May 1999 program from the official opening at Edmonton city hall on Saturday, May 1, and their postcard illustrating the events which will go on throughout the month of May.

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

MR. SAPERS: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure to table before the Assembly six copies of the first 10 amendments the Official Opposition will be proposing to Bill 35. We're providing these amendments to the Chamber now in the spirit of being a co-operative and helpful opposition. They would make all of the user fees imposed by delegated administration organizations subject to Bill 35.

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

MR. DICKSON: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I have three tablings this afternoon. The first one is copies of notices of meetings that have been held in the last week in the city of Calgary in support of public education.

Second is correspondence from the Inglewood Community Association to the Minister of Municipal Affairs seeking disclosure of information relative to property tax assessments in the city of Calgary.

Finally, Mr. Speaker, I have copies of expense statements for each one of the 17 members of the Alberta Liberal opposition caucus dealing with travel, accommodation, and mileage expenses that have been paid for by taxpayers and to which taxpayers are entitled to accountability.

head: Introduction of Guests

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

MS CALAHASEN: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm very, very proud today to introduce to you and through you to the Members of the Legislative Assembly a beautiful, bright young star from the constituency of Lesser Slave Lake. She attends Kinuso school and is in grade 6. Jacqueline Kennedy is the proud first prize winner of the 1999 Commonwealth Parliamentary Association, Alberta branch, grade 6 essay contest. Her essay entitled Canadian Geography: A Hiker's Story depicts the wonderful variety of landscapes across this great country. Her research was magnificent, as can be attested to by the colleagues who did the marking. Congratulations from all Lesser Slave constituents as well as from all Albertans to Jacqueline on a job well done. Jacqueline today is joined by members of her family: her father, Carleton; her mother, Tina; her brother Travis; her sister Natty; and her aunt and uncle Maureen and Bruce Dreany. They are seated in your gallery, Mr. Speaker, and I'd ask that they stand and receive the warm welcome of the Assembly.

1:40

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

MR. STELMACH: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It is my pleasure to rise today and introduce to you and through you to Members of the Legislative Assembly constituents seated in your gallery. Ms Kristy Bruce, from the beautiful town of Tofield, Alberta, is here today as one of the 1998 Alberta Girls' Parliament bursary recipients. She's accompanied by her mother, Mrs. Lynn Bruce, and her sister Emily.

I would ask them to all rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of the Assembly.

THE SPEAKER: The hon. Minister of Labour.

MR. SMITH: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The Alberta Girls' Parliament is a program sponsored by the Alberta Council of Girl Guides. Girls from Rangers, Pathfinders, Canadian Girls In Training, and the 4-H club are eligible to attend. Emphasis is placed on gaining knowledge of parliamentary procedure, enhancement of public speaking abilities, and increased awareness of current events. Bursaries of course are presented annually by the Alberta branch of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association. On behalf of the hon. Member for Calgary-North West I am pleased to introduce to members Jessica Schaink, who received a bursary today and is sitting in your gallery. She is accompanied by her parents, Hendrik and Frances Schaink, and by Mrs. Sue Schroder, adviser to the Alberta Girls' Parliament. I would ask them to rise and receive the warm welcome of this House.

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

DR. PANNU: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise today to introduce to you and through you to the members of this Assembly a young man by the name of Tyler Speer, who was present in your suite this morning to accept the Tuxis award on behalf of Jill Delarue. Jill is a university student. She wasn't able to be there. I extend my congratulations on behalf of all my colleagues here in the Assembly to Jill for winning this very important award and also to introduce to all members of the House Tyler Speer. He's sitting in the Speaker's gallery. Tyler is also a second-year student at the university, and he is majoring in sociology although his future calling is to become a United Church minister. I ask Tyler to stand and accept the warm welcome of the Assembly.

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

MR. LANGEVIN: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It is my pleasure today on behalf of the hon. Member for Whitecourt-St. Anne to present to you a group of grade 6 students from Percy Baxter school in Whitecourt. They're grade 6 students. There are 102 students, and today they are accompanied by six teachers and nine adults. I would like to ask our visitors to please rise and receive the welcome from the Assembly.

head: Oral Question Period

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

### Human Impact Assessments

MRS. MacBETH: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Yesterday I sat in a Taber school along with many Members of this Legislative Assembly and listened to Reverend Lang give a very passionate call to action. It is incumbent upon this Legislature to answer that call to the very best of our ability. In order to take the appropriate action, we need first to assess where Alberta stands and then target our resources where they can make the biggest difference. My questions are to the Premier. Does the government measure its policies against a human health impact assessment similar to what is done with environmental impact assessments?

MR. KLEIN: That's a very interesting question, Mr. Speaker. I, like

the hon. leader of the Liberal opposition, sat in the audience and listened to Reverend Lang's words. His words were so heartfelt, so emotional that I don't think any politician could have expressed in such clear terms his thoughts, his expression as to how children should be treated in schools, that schools should be open and caring and loving places.

Mr. Speaker, whether there's a formal policy to do an assessment relative to the humanity of schools or a school district or the school system per se, I don't think that that is in place, but there is a number of other mechanisms that are in place. There are school councils. We have site-based management. We have school resource officers. We have a number of mechanisms in place hopefully to try to prevent these kinds of things from taking place.

As a result of the tragic incident in Taber, Mr. Speaker, our Minister of Education along with the Minister of Justice, the Minister of Family and Social Services, and those who attended will be looking to find ways in conjunction with communities throughout this province to hopefully prevent any of these kinds of incidents from ever occurring again. Whether it can be done, I don't know, but we will do all that is humanly possible to try and prevent this kind of tragedy from occurring again in this province.

MRS. MacBETH: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. What changes, if any, is government contemplating in the delivery of services and programs in our communities?

MR. KLEIN: Well, Mr. Speaker, in talking to the Minister of Education, he said with tremendous sincerity – this was yesterday on the plane. His words were: my greatest fear as a minister is that something tragic is going to happen, whether it's a bus accident, whether it's the kind of incident that occurred in Taber. We talked very briefly about the kinds of things that perhaps could be done, and I will have the hon. minister supplement.

MR. MAR: Mr. Speaker, I think that the hon. Premier and the hon. Leader of the Opposition have stated in a very clear way that this is a call to action, that we should do something.

The Leader of the Opposition further made the suggestion that we really have to evaluate where we are right now in terms of doing the things that we're doing now. The Safe and Caring Schools initiative as an example, Mr. Speaker, is a collaboration of the departments of Education, Health, Family and Social Services, Community Development, police services, the Alberta Teachers' Association, the Alberta School Boards Association. That program, which was instituted beginning in 1996 commencing with some research that was done by U of A, U of C, and U of L to determine root causes of violence, I think has been very well received.

It remains to be seen, Mr. Speaker, whether we need to improve that program or create new ones in order to deal with this situation, but I think the first step is the suggestion of the Leader of the Opposition, and that is to evaluate what we've already got, evaluate what happened perhaps in this particular circumstance, the tragic circumstances in Taber, evaluate what we have, and then determine a course of action, if any, that needs to be taken.

### Social Problem Index

MRS. MacBETH: I'll go to my second question if I may, Mr. Speaker. The Minister of Health tabled in this Assembly on March 23 sessional paper 329/99, which is a copy of the 1997-98 annual report of the Northern Lights regional health authority. I'd like to quote, if I may, from that annual report.

The Social problem Index . . . is a composite score combining rates per 100,000 population for the following social problems: suicide,

alcoholism, child neglect and abuse, homicide, attempted murder, assault, rape and abduction. A high score on this scale has a strong correlation with a lower life expectancy and reduced quality of life.

Alberta has the highest [Social problem index] among the provinces.

My question is to the Minister of Health. Can the Minister of Health confirm that Alberta does in fact have the highest social problem index score in Canada?

1:50

MR. JONSON: Mr. Speaker, the report that the Leader of the Opposition refers to I'm quite aware of. We do and have I think recognized a concern in that particular area. That is why in the overall business plan of Alberta Health actually two years ago but particularly this year, for instance, we have an initiative in the whole area of children's mental health and money specifically targeted to that particular area.

As well, Mr. Speaker, we have a number of initiatives in Alberta Health dealing with the whole area of promotion and prevention of both physical and psychological conditions and overall social conditions. So certainly as a government we are focusing on those particular needs.

MRS. MacBETH: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and thank you to the minister. Will the minister commit to making public the index score for the province as well as for each of the regions that are served by our regional health authorities?

MR. JONSON: Mr. Speaker, overall we commit as a government and certainly as a very large part of government, the whole area of health services, to both reporting on our information with respect to the performance of the system and on the views that the public of this province have on the system. We are going to continue to do that. Our annual health survey and assessment will be launched fairly shortly, and I think as a province we compare quite well in terms of our willingness to gather information on how we're doing in our health care system and reporting that and acting upon the deficiencies in the interests of Albertans.

### Career and Life Management Program

MRS. MacBETH: Thanks, Mr. Speaker. I'd like to then go on to my third question if I may. Introduced in 1985, the career and life management, or CALM, high school course was mandated for all Alberta high school students to ensure that every young Albertan received instruction in life management skills and strategies. The tensions, pressures, and realities faced everyday by our young people continue to mount, yet the government appears to be contemplating making the career and life management course a nonrequired course in the high school curriculum. My questions are to the Premier. Can the Premier commit today that the CALM program will be retained as a mandatory program for high schools right across Alberta?

MR. KLEIN: Mr. Speaker, I don't believe it's a matter of department policy to disband or discontinue or to have school boards disallow CALM. I'll have the hon. minister supplement.

MR. MAR: Mr. Speaker, by way of background the hon. Leader of the Opposition would be well aware of what promoted the initiation of the CALM program back in 1986, commencing with a Legislative Assembly resolution that was passed which urged the government to develop a suicide prevention program for inclusion in the curriculum for junior and senior high school students. The CALM program does deal with that particular issue of both depression and

suicide at the high school level. It is also contained within the health curriculum beginning at the junior high level.

The review of CALM I think has proved to be a very positive step, Mr. Speaker. We're always interested in updating our curriculum, making sure it is the best curriculum that we can provide to our young students. The public consultation process on the elements that make up CALM, whether things should be removed from it or should be added to it, has been ongoing and has been useful, but at this time there is no intention for the removal of CALM as a mandatory requirement for grade 12 graduation.

MRS. MacBETH: Thank you for that commitment, Mr. Speaker.

Given that many CALM teachers have not been given special training for this particular course, will government commit to comprehensive in-service training for CALM teachers?

MR. MAR: Well, Mr. Speaker, I think that one of the most constructive criticisms of any curriculum is that if there are teachers that are not well versed in the particular subject matter, they have difficulty conveying both the content of the curriculum as well as the importance of the curriculum. Perhaps one of the most constructive criticisms that I have heard about CALM is that there are some teachers that are not as conversant with it and therefore not as interested in teaching it as others. I can advise this Assembly that we've had many positive responses about the CALM curriculum, because there are teachers who are, as they say, into the curriculum and do a very good job of teaching it.

We think that the need for in-servicing is one which is best dealt with by the Alberta Teachers' Association, which is doing a very good job of providing professional development opportunities for their teachers, and we hope that this might be one area that they will consider in-servicing with respect to the contents and curriculum of CALM.

MRS. MacBETH: Thanks, Mr. Speaker. Given that prevention is the best medicine, will the government commit to adapting and expanding the CALM curriculum so that counseling for life management, anger management, and coping skills can be taught to our children before they reach high school?

MR. MAR: Mr. Speaker, this is one of the types of suggestions that we've heard through our public consultation process, that CALM does have a very serious side to it that is very important for young people and particularly, as the hon. Leader of the Opposition points out, to those students that are prior to the age of high school. It would be a recommendation that in tandem with the public response that we've had to the CALM curriculum, particularly in light of issues that have arisen in our schools in recent days, we would have to give serious consideration to.

THE SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona, followed by the hon. Member for Calgary-Montrose.

### Midwifery

DR. PANNU: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Tomorrow is the International Day of the Midwife. Unfortunately, because of the failed policies of this government, Alberta's midwives have very little to celebrate. Midwives are now registered health professionals, yet the Minister of Health refuses to implement an effective way to publicly fund the medically necessary services provided by the midwives. Very little seems to have changed, Mr. Minister, since I asked you this question exactly two years ago on May 5, 1997: how can the

minister justify the situation whereby Alberta families who would like medically necessary childbirth services performed by a registered midwife are forced to pay for those services out of their own pockets rather than having them paid for by the public health care system?

MR. JONSON: Mr. Speaker, as the questioner correctly identifies, Alberta – I believe it was about two years ago – came to an overall agreement to provide for the accreditation and licensing of midwives in this province, something that had been long sought after. I do not, as I understand it, think that that has been accomplished in all of the provinces of this country, although certainly in some of them.

Secondly, Mr. Speaker, in view of that overall accreditation and licensing, that service is available to women, to families in this province currently. Further, we are open as Alberta Health through the regional health authority system to proposals arriving at arrangements whereby midwives could practice as part of the overall regional health care system.

2:00

However, it is quite correct, Mr. Speaker, that as minister I have not felt it advisable to approve another fee-for-service pool for a particular professional group in the health care sector in this province. I do not think that that has yet been proven to be in the interests of the overall health care system.

DR. PANNU: Mr. Speaker, the minister's answer has confirmed my fear. This government continues to devalue child birth by refusing to adjust the very low fees received by physicians and then compounds this devaluation by refusing to bring midwifery services under the medicare umbrella. Why?

MR. JONSON: Well, Mr. Speaker, I just paused a moment to endeavour to understand the question, but if the question is if midwives should be paid for out of the fee-for-service pool of the Alberta Medical Association, I would just suggest that that is a very difficult goal to accomplish. I'm sure that the physicians of this province might have contrary views with respect to that particular approach. It is not something that government traditionally has just been able to mandate and impose with respect to an overall agreement and overall fee pool, which is regarded as being the area for physicians.

DR. PANNU: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My last question to the minister. It's a question, Mr. Minister, of parents having a choice, not whether it's a difficult issue for you or not.

Given that it has taken midwives 20 years to have their profession recognized, what actions will the minister take to ensure that midwives don't have to wait another 20 years before their services are publicly funded?

MR. JONSON: Well, this is certainly a very sensitive and important area when we're talking about the birth of children, but in the overall sense and in the health care system it is very difficult to deal with one specific sector without being aware of its implications for other parts of the health care system. If there were time this afternoon, I could probably list about a dozen other . . . [interjection] I realize that. I won't try, Mr. Speaker.

I could list perhaps a dozen other groups of aspiring practitioners in this province who would like to have a fee-for-service pool. They would like to be, quote, covered completely by the public health care dollar in this province. That is quite frankly just not possible. One of the challenges that we have in a public health care system is always to set the appropriate priorities.

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

### Vacant Government Office Space

MR. PHAM: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My questions today are not to the Minister of Labour but rather to the Minister of Public Works, Supply and Services. We have many government buildings across the province, and if the Legislature Annex is any example, many of the offices in these buildings are not being used. Since it costs a lot to heat, light, and maintain this unused office space and since cutting wasteful expenditure is a high priority of this government, can the minister please advise the House if his department is paying attention to this problem.

MR. WOLOSHTYN: As the hon. member suggests, Mr. Speaker, the Leg. Annex is just what it is: it's an annex to this building. About two years ago we moved out the Alberta Education Marking Centre, which freed up three and a half floors. Due to the pressures for legislative use we now have two floors that are vacant, I believe, the fourth and 11th floors.

The users of this building are MLAs. The opposition caucus has their space in there, which is totally under their control. The third party has their half floor in there as well as government research and some government members. We are also in a process of trying to accommodate some pressures that are on the library in this building by moving it over there, and occasionally we have other uses such as committees.

So with the odd occasional office that's empty, I would say that we have a minimum reserve of space for future uses. Quite frankly we're looking at the Annex in context with the whole Government Centre, and it's certainly not an indication of any kind of government waste whatsoever.

MR. PHAM: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Does the minister know the costs associated with heating, lighting, and maintaining these unused office spaces? Do you have a plan to put them to good use in the future?

MR. WOLOSHTYN: Mr. Speaker, the government has about a quarter million square metres of owned space spread out through 2,500 some odd buildings. In addition we lease about 445,000 square metres of additional space. The overall cost of maintaining this space – and that includes the day to day, the maintenance, the taxes, the whole business – is about \$4.40 per square foot, which is extremely economical. This is not all through the government coffers. A lot of our work, the vast majority as a matter of fact, has been sublet to private contractors.

I would like to assure the hon. member that just because an office space is empty, it is not a waste, and it is not an imposition on the government coffers, if you will, to keep it that way. It's good reserve space, and quite frankly if you don't have to clean it, I suppose at \$4.40 a square foot, it would be a little less.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

### Michener Centre

MRS. SLOAN: Mr. Speaker, my questions are to the Minister of Family and Social Services in regards to the future of Michener Centre. Will the minister confirm that he has received a private site development concept and financial plan for the Michener Centre property?

DR. OBERG: Mr. Speaker, as I alluded to roughly a week ago, there

has been no decision made about what the future of Michener Centre is. What I have asked the Michener board to do in conjunction with the PDD Provincial Board is take a look at an overall future. What is going to happen to Michener Centre 10, 15 years down the road? What is going to happen to the Eric Cormack Centre 10, 15 years down the road? I believe it's an imperative for any minister to plan the future for his department so that he is not caught.

Mr. Speaker, I continue to pledge exactly what I said before, that no one – no one – will be moved out of Michener Centre unless they want to be moved out.

MRS. SLOAN: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Why have the minister and the PDD board repeatedly refused to allow the Michener Centre board to consult with stakeholders – residents, parents, guardians, staff, and the community – the people most impacted by any future plans?

DR. OBERG: Mr. Speaker, first of all, as the hon. member may or may not know, any time you have a consultation, you have to have it a little bit firmer in place as to exactly what the alternatives are, what the potential options are. When it comes to Michener Centre, we are dealing with an extremely vulnerable population. I think we saw over the summer last year, when there were some rumours out there about potential redevelopment plans, exactly what happened with that, where there were lots and lots of letters received from very concerned parents who had their children in Michener Centre.

Mr. Speaker, the face of PDD boards and of PDD treatment is changing, but again I just can't say it enough: there will be no one moved from Michener Centre without their own permission.

MRS. SLOAN: Mr. Speaker, the more vulnerable the population, the more reason to be forthright in your answers. Is it not true, Mr. Minister, that your representations to the House last fall and on April 27 fell short of telling Albertans the whole truth about this matter?

DR. OBERG: No.

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

### 2:10 Growth Pressures in Calgary

MR. CAO: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Between 1991 and 1998 Calgary grew by 112,000 citizens. Construction permits for the city of Calgary increased 52 percent in 1997, another 38 percent in 1998. In 1998 Calgary also accounted for 59 percent of the total housing starts in Alberta. There are 49 additional vehicles per day joining the already existing 671,000 vehicles on the road. So my question is to the Minister of Transportation and Utilities. With the increase in population and in construction can the minister tell Calgary constituents how he's going to assist the city of Calgary with the pressure of growth?

MR. PASZKOWSKI: The hon. member has certainly identified a very significant result of our labours, of Alberta's labours as well, because indeed this is totally a very good-news story. It's a success story. It's the story of Alberta's growth, and certainly Calgary is at the lead in this particular area.

Together with that, Mr. Speaker, there are issues that have to be dealt with. These are positive issues, and certainly the growth that Calgary is experiencing and that is happening in other parts of the province as well is unprecedented in Canada at the present time.

Certainly these are things that we have to deal with, and ultimately we are dealing with them.

Our Premier's task force clearly identified that there was need and there was pressure there, and as a result of that over \$31 million was allocated to Calgary over and above what is being funded as far as infrastructure is concerned. Further to that there was another \$6,700,000 given on a very special project through lottery funding that will assist the overall pressures that are there. There's in excess of \$10 million being placed into the north/south corridor as we develop the north/south corridor, which is a critical trade corridor for moving our product into the United States. There's additional money being placed into primary highway maintenance. These are all funds that are additional to what was originally scheduled to meet and address the needs that the hon. member has so properly identified.

MR. CAO: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My second question is also to the same minister. With the increase in passengers at the Calgary International Airport from '93 to '98, rising by 64 percent, can the minister advise what plans are being considered to assist Calgary?

MR. PASZKOWSKI: This is a very fair question, because indeed, though passenger service is something that's been very significant as far as increase at the Calgary airport, there are other areas that are growing as well, and that's the whole issue of intermodal, of cargo, and of other modes of transportation that are happening in Calgary. Calgary now is the distribution centre for all of northwestern North America, and that's something important and critical to recognize.

With that we were able to establish a three-way partnership that we announced two or three weeks ago together with lottery funding: the Airport Authority funding 51 percent, the city funding 18 percent, and the province funding 31 percent. We were able to deal with some of the infrastructure pressures that are so critical at this time in this rapidly growing part of Alberta.

MR. CAO: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My last question is also to the same minister. Can the minister advise what consideration is being given to the city of Calgary's pressures as they relate to 68 million revenue passengers in 1998 who use the C-Train and buses?

MR. PASZKOWSKI: The C-Train is an important carrier of people and passengers in the city. Our officials are working with the city of Calgary, together with Municipal Affairs, together with Treasury to see if there is a better way, a new way, a creative way of dealing with this particular pressure, and certainly I'm confident that we will come up with that new way that will fit into the climate change discussions, for example, that took place this past weekend. There are other issues that are on the table that have to be addressed at the same time. Certainly I'm confident that we will be able to come up with a solution that will be practical and useful for everyone in the city of Calgary as well as the province.

THE SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar, followed by the hon. Member for Red Deer-South.

### **Pine Shake Roofing**

MR. MacDONALD: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Alberta Municipal Affairs under its mandate has the responsibility to ensure a fair marketplace. Over 1,500 homeowners in Sherwood Park with untreated pine shake roofs are now faced with large repair bills, yet this government, which authorized and promoted this untested roofing material, refuses to conduct a public inquiry. My first

question is to the Minister of Municipal Affairs. Will the minister do the right thing and use schedule 11 of the Government Organization Act to investigate this entire matter that has affected so many consumers across this province?

Thank you.

MS EVANS: Mr. Speaker, yesterday in a fairly significant amount of detail I identified the role of consumer affairs relative to the representation of the transaction between the buyer and the seller.

Relative to the circumstance to which the hon. member has alluded, which is in fact a durability issue, that is a question that is dealt with by the Minister of Labour. So I would defer to the Minister of Labour.

MR. MacDONALD: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My second question is also to the Minister of Municipal Affairs. In reference to documents the minister tabled yesterday dealing with complaints about the durability of pine shakes in 1991, can the minister explain why the results of inspections done for the department by Alberta Labour and the Alberta Research Council were not shared with consumers? Why?

MS EVANS: Mr. Speaker, the concern that was expressed to the department in 1991 had nothing to do with the concern which the hon. member is relating to today. The concern in fact expressed by a particular roofing contractor was that some of the products that were distributed may have been cracked or broken, and in fact any investigation of that, again because it's a durability issue, would be conducted by the Department of Labour.

MR. MacDONALD: Mr. Speaker, the record of this government is cracked and broken on this issue.

My third question is to the Minister of Labour. Given that Municipal Affairs has confirmed that Department of Labour inspections were done for durability in 1991, why does the minister maintain that Alberta Labour is only concerned about health and safety issues in the Alberta building code?

MR. SMITH: Mr. Speaker, quite clearly the policy is a matter of record. What we've seen throughout the inquiry with respect to untreated pine shakes holds firm as it did when we first found about it in July of '97, the work that's been done to date, and it continues in that same vein.

### **Electronic Tax Files**

MR. DOERKSEN: Mr. Speaker, earlier today the Treasurer tabled some bond rating agency reports and credit ratings showing and demonstrating the good fiscal record of this government. My questions today are indeed to the Treasurer but have to do actually with the tax and revenue department. Would the Treasurer explain to this Assembly what technological innovations they are using with respect to collection of tax revenues?

MR. DAY: Mr. Speaker, it has been reported recently what the government has been doing in this particular area of tax and revenue administration. Previously this type of material and information was filed and is stored on paper and in boxes or on microfilm, and what's been recently reported is the advancement of technology. In fact the tax and revenue administration now is largely – everything has been moved from paper filing and microfilm filing onto digital imaging. It's the equivalent of about 6 million pieces of paper being transferred onto digital imaging. The equivalent of some 3,000 boxes of

information that employees had to go through to access the various files they were looking for is largely now eliminated. It's been quite a streamlining process.

MR. DOERKSEN: Mr. Speaker, while it's important to streamline efficiencies in collection from a government point of view, are the taxpayers accepting this new system of filing?

2:20

MR. DAY: The immediate impact for taxpayers will be that the personnel who work on these items actually are more quickly able to access material, access information that relates to the various tax filers, and because it's more efficient, they have more time committed to those direct types of questions. It's a time saving.

On the operational side it saves something over \$200,000 a year, and the actual capital required to do this is provided by the private-sector company, an Edmonton firm, I might add, that has been contracted to move this along. So taxpayers are experiencing increased efficiency, and I don't think there's any level of complaint that's been recorded by moving to this particular administrative process.

MR. DOERKSEN: Mr. Speaker, my last question and most important one on this whole subject is the question of privacy and confidentiality of information that taxpayers are filing. What is the minister doing to ensure that that privacy and confidentiality is maintained?

MR. DAY: Mr. Speaker, that is one area of concern that was looked at very carefully before moving in this direction. Personal tax information related either corporately or personally is a matter of great concern to taxpayers. The sense that we have with the security systems that are in place is in fact that that information now is even more secure than before when you could have literally any number of some 6 million pieces of paper moving around a department, sometimes from desk to desk. Though it was not recorded that there was any leak of information, this in fact is a more secure system, and it is Y2K compliant.

THE SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Manning, followed by the hon. Member for Calgary-Cross.

### **Municipal User Fees**

MR. GIBBONS: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. According to Statistics Canada local government user fees in Alberta have increased by 20 percent over the past five years, the third highest rate of increase among Canadian provinces, as a result of the provincial government's downloading and off-loading policies. Yesterday the Minister of Municipal Affairs indicated that the government was considering including those user fees levied by the local government resulting from the provincial government's off-loading to overall review of user fees in the province. My first question is to the Provincial Treasurer. Will the Treasurer indicate whether local government user fees levied under the MGA resulting from provincial government off-loading will be part of the overall review of user fees and charges in this province?

MR. DAY: Mr. Speaker, the area of municipal fees is not something that municipalities would want us intruding on. We'll be happy to share the information that we garner from doing our own study, but we're not marching in on municipalities and telling them at this point or at any point, as a matter of fact, what fees they should or should not be charging.

MR. GIBBONS: My first supplemental question is to the Minister of Municipal Affairs. What changes to the MGA are being contemplated to ensure that municipalities may be in compliance with the Eurig estate decision?

MS EVANS: Mr. Speaker, presently there are no changes being contemplated to the Municipal Government Act. Through this past year we had extensive consultation. The hon. member is very familiar with our red book, our amber book, and our green book, when we finally had a go-ahead light for the legislative amendments that would be charged.

Mr. Speaker, relative to the user fees I would refer the hon. member to the publication last January, January 1998, by CMHC relative to the fees and charges that are levied on the new growth and development throughout Alberta cities. In terms of comparisons and comparables with other jurisdictions across Canada they are very favourable.

MR. GIBBONS: My second supplemental question is to the Minister of Municipal Affairs also. Why doesn't the minister adopt the position of the AUMA and amend section 8 of the MGA to ensure that the municipalities can comply with the Eurig estate decision?

MS EVANS: Mr. Speaker, certainly in the past two years I have undertaken very careful consultation prior to any changes to legislation. We do not undertake those changes lightly. There should be full consultation. Currently we are reviewing the amounts of moneys that are required to conduct fairly municipal governance and reviewing very carefully the community funding framework not only as a department but in conjunction with other departments such as the department of transportation, looking at disentanglement and the roads and infrastructure requirements. To have a knee-jerk reaction as a result of any other particular legislative or judicial decision without undertaking full scrutiny of both operating and capital expenses of the communities of Alberta would be in fact, I think, irresponsible.

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

### **Fetal Alcohol Syndrome**

MRS. FRITZ: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Recently in the Calgary region \$10,000 was received to assist with fetal alcohol syndrome, and the coalition of agencies that was formed have indicated that from their point of view of intervention strategies, this funding is merely a drop in the bucket, especially for respite and relief for families coping and caring for these children. But I believe that the minister has taken a positive step with respect to bringing together agencies to deal with this very serious issue, so my question today is to the Minister of Family and Social Services. What is the minister's intent around broader prevention strategies to reduce the number of children with fetal alcohol syndrome?

DR. OBERG: Thank you very much for asking that extremely important and very timely question. Mr. Speaker, what is happening in Calgary starting tonight and running over the next three days is a conference that's entitled Prairie Province Conference on Fetal Alcohol Syndrome. There are topics such as Alcohol & Pregnancy: From Awareness to Action; The Impact of FAS on Aboriginal Women; Adapting the Classroom & Daycare Environment for FAS Children. As I alluded to last week when I tabled the itinerary for this conference, we presently have over 700 people registered, all the way from Bermuda to Quebec to Newfoundland.

One other very important thing that's occurring as well starting

tomorrow is that we are entering into a partnership with the Western Brewers Association and the Brewers' Association of Canada to utilize their Mother Risk line. What the Mother Risk line is is a 1-800 number that's based in Toronto that has physicians, toxicologists, pharmacologists at the other end of the line so that if any woman has any questions about FAS, if they have any questions about how much alcohol it takes, alcohol dependency, anything like that, all they have to do is call up that line, and there will be professionals at the end of that line to answer any of their questions.

Mr. Speaker, FAS is something that personally I take extremely seriously. The prevention of FAS, as the hon. member alluded to – it's 100 percent preventable. It is the most common mental disease in the world that is preventable and I think that's something we all should remember.

MRS. FRITZ: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Given that the minister has said that FAS is 100 percent preventable, will the minister commit to introducing labeling on alcohol products that will increase public awareness of fetal alcohol syndrome?

DR. OBERG: Mr. Speaker, that is one thing that we have not committed to, and I will not commit to that. Instead what we have done is we have worked with the liquor stores to put up posters in each and every liquor store. There are things such as car stickers. If anyone has noticed my car in the parking lot, it has a sticker that says that fetal alcohol syndrome is 100 percent preventable, with a circle and a line through a pregnant woman.

Mr. Speaker, raising the awareness of fetal alcohol syndrome is extremely important. We are trying to be compassionate as we do it, yet we're trying to be forceful as well. This is the future prevention when it comes to fetal alcohol syndrome, raising awareness about this dreaded disease.

MRS. FRITZ: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My final supplemental is to the same minister. Are there plans in place to increase funding over and above the \$10,000 for the Calgary region to aid in the prevention of fetal alcohol syndrome?

DR. OBERG: Mr. Speaker, first of all in the first year of this program, when we combined with the other two provinces, I committed a million dollars for fetal alcohol syndrome. In this upcoming year I've doubled that and committed another \$2 million to this very important program. How we use those dollars has not been fully decided yet. There have been some very positive responses from the first million dollars, such as conferences around the province raising awareness of fetal alcohol syndrome. In our province it is our role to look at the public awareness issue as opposed to Saskatchewan's, whose role is to look at intervention and treatment.

There is \$2 million available in 1999-2000 and to say that Calgary will get X number of dollars of that, I cannot commit to that, but again, as I've said, we've doubled the commitment to this very, very important program.

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

2:30

### Fosamax

MS BLAKEMAN: Mr. Speaker, seniors in this province fought for two years to receive coverage of Fosamax, a drug used in the treatment of osteoporosis. This drug has been proven to help seniors maintain bone mass and reduce the number of fractures suffered by

those who suffer from this disease. Last fall the government finally announced coverage of the drug, but now we find that it is only available to seniors who have already suffered hip, vertebrae, or other fractures. My questions are to the Minister of Health. Since this drug has been proven to be effective in preventing fractures, why is it only available to those who've already suffered broken bones?

MR. JONSON: Mr. Speaker, as I think members of the Assembly are aware, we do have in our process of approving for coverage with public dollars an expert committee made up of doctors, experts in the field of the use of pharmaceuticals, and we rely upon their recommendations with respect to the viability, the therapeutic value of new pharmaceutical products that come on the market. We are following in our approval of Fosamax the recommendations of that particular committee.

The overall process that we have, Mr. Speaker, I think has stood the people needing pharmaceutical intervention very well, as well as providing a reasonable approach to the overall coverage and cost of providing drug coverage in this province.

MS BLAKEMAN: Mr. Speaker, my second question is also to the Minister of Health. Since this drug has proven to be more effective in the treatment of osteoporosis than any other drugs covered by Alberta health care, is money the only reason why it is not being provided to all Albertans that need it? It doesn't make sense.

MR. JONSON: Well, Mr. Speaker, I would be very interested if perhaps the member across the way has the scientific evidence backed by scientists working in the medical field, physicians applying or utilizing these drugs. I'd be very interested in such evidence. The information that I have through the overall structure that we have in place in Alberta Health for these approvals, at least if my memory serves me correctly, does not bear that particular contention out.

MS BLAKEMAN: Okay. To the same minister: will this minister revise the criteria for coverage so that all Albertans who need this drug can get it before they suffer the fractures? Please, Mr. Minister. Please consider it.

MR. JONSON: Well, Mr. Speaker, I guess that question could be asked about a whole host of pharmaceutical products and other medical interventions, various things that are still in the experimental stage as far as health care is concerned. We could always say, "Let's open up the till, dig deeper, tax a little more," and provide unlimited coverage for every pharmaceutical product that comes on the market that may or may not have conclusive scientific evidence to support its effectiveness.

I acknowledge the concern that seniors have with respect to osteoporosis, but the process that we have in place, Mr. Speaker, I think is one that is based as much as possible on good medical and scientific evidence vis-a-vis our committing public dollars to their coverage, and that's the approach that we'll continue to take.

THE SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Redwater.

### Petroleum Recovery Institute

MR. BRODA: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Since taking over the portfolio, the minister responsible for science, research, and information technology has been in the process of streamlining operations with the Alberta Science and Research Authority and the Alberta Research Council and ensuring that the two agencies are



working together strategically. I note with interest that on April 21 the Alberta Research Council acquired management and control of the Petroleum Recovery Institute. Could the minister please inform this Assembly about the details involving this acquisition and why it was done?

DR. TAYLOR: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Just a bit of background on the Petroleum Recovery Institute. I can see that my colleagues are all anxious to hear it. It is a private company under the Companies Act of Alberta, registered as a not-for-profit corporation. It was originally formed in 1966, I believe, as a joint venture between the government and the private sector. Over the last number of years the support from the government and private sector has somewhat dwindled, which has made their durability somewhat questionable, so recently it was absorbed by the ARC, the Alberta Research Council.

This will provide a number of synergies to this whole area of oil recovery research. For instance, it will eliminate duplicate services, and of course as a government we're very concerned about that. It will eliminate overhead and just generally enhance the process of petroleum recovery.

MR. BRODA: My supplementary question to the same minister, Mr. Speaker, is: will this acquisition affect the bottom line of the Alberta Research Council or the government as a whole?

DR. TAYLOR: No, the acquisition will not. The expenditures of the Alberta Research Council will go up by about \$2 million as will its income. I want to assure members that the total obligations of PRI will be met, and it will not affect the bottom line of either the government of Alberta or the Alberta Research Council.

MR. BRODA: My final question, Mr. Speaker, to the same minister: will the Petroleum Recovery Institute report to the Assembly on an annual basis and in the same way as other government-owned entities?

DR. TAYLOR: Yes. This is a very important segment of our economy, as everyone knows, and it will report indirectly to the Assembly through my ministry and through the Alberta Science and Research Authority. As you all know, the Alberta Science and Research Authority is a private-sector board that advises me. It's made up of some of the best leading minds in Alberta in regard to the private sector and different areas of science and research.

As a matter of fact, Mr. Speaker, this weekend the Alberta Science and Research Authority has a retreat in Red Deer, where we're going to take a look at the future, the direction we want to go. I know that the chairman of the Alberta Research Council is excited that this meeting is going to occur in his constituency of Red Deer-South. He certainly lobbied us long and hard to get it there and has done a good job to have this meeting occur in Red Deer-South.

THE SPEAKER: Hon. members, 30 seconds from now I'll call upon the first of three hon. members to participate in Members' Statements, but prior to that let me congratulate all hon. members in the Assembly today for reaching a new high in terms of decorum in the Assembly. It can work. Well done.

Having said that, might I ask for the indulgence to revert to Introduction of Guests?

HON. MEMBERS: Agreed.

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

head: Introduction of Guests

(reversion)

MRS. O'NEILL: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It gives me pleasure to introduce to you and through you to members of this Assembly Mr. Don Williams, who is a trustee with the Edmonton public school board and also a wonderful worker within the community. He's seated in the members' gallery, and I'd ask him to please rise and receive the warm welcome of the Assembly.

head: Members' Statements

### St. Mary's College

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

MRS. BURGNER: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. A few weeks ago many Calgarians were left in shock following the tragic fire which destroyed the Father Lacombe Centre in southeast Calgary. This historic landmark served as a residential centre and school for orphans. Under the spiritual and moral leadership of Father Lacombe the place was a refuge of hope, and it was providing for special needs in the community. His dedication on behalf of the children was recognized throughout the province.

I know that all my colleagues, especially the Member for Calgary-Shaw, were touched by the destruction of the fire. Although our emergency service teams worked very diligently to contain the fire, watching the collapse of the cross, which had provided a spiritual beacon on the site, nestled against the beautiful Fish Creek park, was devastating. The impact of this fire, the loss of the historic centre, was felt through the entire community.

2:40

But where there is faith, there is hope. The recent acquisition of this site for the establishment of St. Mary's College is providing a renewed interest in the historic faith dimension of this site. Mr. Speaker, I'd remind colleagues in the House that the tragedy of the fire has not slowed down the advancement of the college. It will still open on schedule, a new Lacombe campus, this September. They are constructing the library currently, and it will be ready in July. They're completing renovations of two of the buildings remaining on the site. In addition to hiring staff, they will be able to accommodate up to 200 students for the 1999-2000 academic year.

Mr. Speaker, the establishment of this liberal arts Catholic college in our community is long overdue. I congratulate the outgoing president, Dr. David Lawless, for his diligent work on behalf of the college, and I welcome Terry Downey, who is the new president, in his term of office. This site has now taken on a special interest for our community as a result of the fire and its loss. I know the presence of St. Mary's College will warmly be received within the community.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

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

### Oliver School's Microsociety

MS BLAKEMAN: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'd like to recognize an innovative program being officially launched on the 14th of May at Oliver school in the constituency of Edmonton-Centre. The staff, students, and volunteers from Oliver are starting a microsociety. They are working together to build a functioning miniature society where students will learn by doing. Students will create a constitution, a Legislature, have banks and currency, create and enforce laws, have a court system, businesses, and government agencies.

Students will also create art, produce crafts to sell in the marketplace, write and publish the newspapers, earn income, pay taxes, and learn how to save and invest. The micro-society and the school's curriculum are fully integrated.

Six strands are followed by the students: technology, economy, academy, citizenship and government, humanities and arts, and the heart strand. For example, the economy strand is where students develop, implement, and run the bank, warehouse, auction, marketplace, manufacturing centre, small business ventures, and the publishing industry. Remember; this is all done by students, with backup from teachers and volunteers but done by students. The heart strand is about heart and soul, belonging to and being responsible for the community. Students can explore volunteering, perhaps assisting seniors or reading to younger children, getting involved with environmental issues, fund-raising for identified groups, or organizing a cleanup day for the school grounds.

Oliver school is working with business partners for sponsorship and with advisers from all areas for professional advice and of course is closely linked to the community. I congratulate Principal Karen Linden and her dedicated staff on this project. I look forward to the official launch on May 14.

Thank you very much.

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

#### **A Century of Muslim Achievement in Canada**

MR. ZWOZDESKY: Thank you. Last weekend our Muslim community celebrated the 100th year anniversary of Muslim settlement in Canada with numerous events at the Shaw centre, at Fort Edmonton Park, in holy mosques, and elsewhere. I was honoured to attend these festivities along with the hon. minister responsible for children's services, the hon. Speaker of this Assembly, MLA colleagues from Calgary-Fort, Calgary-McCall, Calgary-East, Edmonton-Glenora, and Edmonton-Glengarry. Numerous dignitaries from around the world also attended. Together we all saluted the proud and enviable legacy of contributions, achievements, and accomplishments of Canadian Muslims who have impacted and benefited this province in serving our educational, social, medical, technical, spiritual, cultural, political, and economic needs.

Under the chairmanship of Larry Shaben, the first Muslim MLA in Alberta and the first-ever Muslim cabinet minister in Canadian history, thousands of community members from all faiths gathered to pay tribute to the first Muslim settlers and to honour the historic Al Rashid mosque, which was the first mosque ever built in North America. As you know, Mr. Speaker, that mosque was built right here in Edmonton, and through the tireless efforts of Richard Awid and others and the incredible fund-raising efforts of the Canadian Council of Muslim Women, Edmonton chapter, and others, Canada's first mosque was preserved and transferred to Fort Edmonton Park, where it now stands as a permanent historic landmark for everyone to enjoy.

Mr. Speaker, sincerest thanks and congratulations go to Mr. Shaben and his committee members and particularly to my friends Khalid Tarrabain, Hasan Nazarali, Richard Awid, Soraya Hafez, and all the volunteers who worked tirelessly on this great celebration.

Thank you also to community-minded individuals like Ruhi and Mohammed Asim, Nadir and Salim Rajan, Mahmoud Shabani-Ghazvini, Moe Hamdon, Sophia and Omar Yaqub, Shiraz and Khairunisa Kanji, Mohammed Jawaid, Alex and Najoua Tarrabain, Dr. and Mrs. Zahir Lakhani, all of whom are personal friends, and to all Alberta Muslims who are celebrating this centennial milestone.

On behalf of the Premier, myself, and my Muslim colleagues from Calgary-East and Calgary-McCall, Assalamu Alaikum.

head: Orders of the Day

head: Public Bills and Orders Other than

head: Government Bills and Orders

head: Second Reading

#### **Bill 207**

#### **Seniors Benefit Statutes Amendment Act, 1999**

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

MRS. MacBETH: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise to move second reading of Bill 207, the Seniors Benefit Statutes Amendment Act, 1999.

Mr. Speaker, the highlights of this bill are to recognize the fact that many groups in Alberta gave up or were forced to give up sizable portions of salaries, benefits, grants, and program services in the name of deficit elimination and debt reduction in this province over the last six years. Many groups have received and have seen those portions of their salaries and benefit packages returned. Senior citizens in this province have not. This bill is a suggestion, an offer, and an attempt to rectify that call on the part of the province.

Secondly, Bill 207 exempts all single seniors and senior couples from the payment of health care insurance premiums in an amendment to the existing legislation, and finally, for those seniors who are eligible for a cash benefit under the Alberta seniors' benefit program, Bill 207 increases their cash benefit four times a year, in other words once a quarter, by an amount equal to the increase in the consumer price index over the previous three-month period. This ensures that cash benefits will not be decreased as well should deflation set in.

Mr. Speaker, let me just outline a bit of the theme that this bill picks up on. As the Official Opposition we have been working very hard to outline how the government has chosen to deal with the issue of deficit elimination in this province over the last six years. Certainly there were strong views and strong agreement and, in fact, some plans in place to eliminate the deficit that had accrued to Alberta by the early to mid 1990s. The choice which the government exercised in carrying out that public policy initiative was to take the deficit that had been accumulated by the province, and through the reductions in its transfer payments to local governments that deficit was passed down to local governments.

We've certainly been able to quantify that decision by this government in our questions and in our debates in the Assembly this spring session. Basically government off-loaded onto our regional health authorities, onto our school boards, and onto our municipalities the deficit which had been carried by the province. As a result, we now see school boards carrying deficits and having to lay off teachers and do all those kinds of things that they do when they're strapped for cash. We see regional health authorities carrying deficits. We also see municipalities carrying deficits, and given that it's not a legally available option to a municipality, that deficit is being carried in the form of roads that are not being repaired or maintained or built to the level that growth in this province would dictate.

2:50

So that's a whole group of local governments who have had the provincial deficit passed down to them. The result is that the province takes the credit for the surplus which has been created in the provincial coffers, and the local governments take all the blame for the reduction in services. In recent days we've seen the two major metro centres of Edmonton and Calgary announce increases

in their property taxes. Those increases are the direct result of downloading by this province in terms of their decision to cut transfer grants to the municipalities by 50 percent and, as well, to squeeze out the property tax base through the imposition of the provincial education tax.

Mr. Speaker, there is another level of downloading that has occurred, not just onto local governments – the institutions of schools boards, regional health authorities, and municipalities – but onto individuals, and certainly in this spring session we have been highlighting some of those individuals who have been impacted by the downloading by the province. Certainly children are one group who have been very directly impacted by this downloading, but so have our citizens on the other end of the age scale, our seniors. Our seniors have had their benefits package cut by a major amount, and they have not been able to deal with, in addition to the cuts in their provincial transfers, the fact that there are now rising rents, that there is inflation in Alberta which is leading the country, that there are fixed costs to seniors on fixed income which become very onerous.

It's our view that in order to recognize the impact on our seniors, in order to attempt to assist them with the kinds of fixed taxes that have been imposed by this province, we would suggest that the health care premiums be removed from seniors and an indexing be put in place for the Alberta seniors' cash benefit. Mr. Speaker, the object of this bill is to acknowledge the contributions, the sacrifices, the care and the attention that has been given by our seniors to the strengthening of our province, and the direct assistance which they gave to the province by going along with cuts to their benefits program. Now that the province is flush and back into a major surplus position, it only seems fair that some acknowledgment of thank you could be given to these seniors, who have certainly borne the brunt and carry that load.

If we look, then, at the themes that are important to be developed, certainly one is the downloading that has occurred. A very interesting court case has of course come through, and on the whole issue of user fees, which health care premiums have now been defined as by that court case, we see that health care premiums are something that need to be taken a look at in the context of tax reform in this province. It's certainly something that we will be pushing as an Official Opposition and which Albertans, frankly, are looking at as well.

To return, then, to the objects of the bill at hand and away from the context in which this proposed amendment change is made. Certainly the first object is, as I've said, to acknowledge the contributions and the sacrifices which have been made by seniors towards deficit elimination in this province and, correspondingly, their contributions towards our province.

Secondly, Mr. Speaker, the object is to provide Alberta's 316,000 seniors with a better sense of security and well-being for their future and into the next century. Now, perhaps some in this House, certainly not on this side of the House but perhaps on the opposite side, would take the view that, you know, health care premiums aren't particularly onerous for seniors. However, we take a very different view. For seniors who have been very much affected by the cost cutting that has occurred in their local governments, who are facing very tight rental markets for accommodations, who are dealing with cost increases in terms of their property tax, their user fees, their bus passes, their rising rents, their rising utility costs, and their higher municipal charges, it is in that context that increasing health care premiums and the fact they have to pay premiums at all take on a little different context. To help seniors on fixed incomes in dealing with these costs that they must carry, we are proposing this legislation.

I think there is another object which needs to be acknowledged

and which is certainly part of the thinking in this legislation that we are bringing forward, and that is the whole context of strengthening Alberta families. There are economic and social and health pressures that are working on Alberta families. Stresses are high, and in many households seniors play a very integral part in assisting with child care, with home maintenance, with household routines, and with support for their families economically. We believe that anything that can be done to support one component of the family unit strengthens the entire family, Mr. Speaker.

Similarly, with the critical shortage of continuing care beds for seniors right across this province, many families are correspondingly providing the care and the support for seniors at home that they really do need some help from the province to provide in terms of long-term care, respite care, and support for seniors. This bill, then, helps those families make ends meet by acknowledging the contribution made by our seniors to our family infrastructure in this province and by acknowledging that in many households the need for seniors' care is being ignored by the province.

Finally, Mr. Speaker, the object is to protect seniors in the future. Inflation rates may be relatively low now, albeit highest in Alberta of all of the country, but when those inflation rates do increase, one of the provisions in Bill 207 ensures that a mechanism will be in place to protect seniors on fixed incomes.

Mr. Speaker, let me give a little bit of further background in terms of the context which I have presented in terms of the impact on seniors of the government's decision to off-load the deficit. Prior to 1994 and the budget that was presented that year, Alberta seniors enjoyed the benefits flowing from at least 19 programs administered by Alberta Health, Municipal Affairs, and Family and Social Services. In February of that year the Provincial Treasurer announced a sweeping reform of the seniors' programs that rolled 12 programs into one, that being the Alberta seniors' benefit. The goal of the reform at the time was stated as being efficiency and a single point of access for seniors.

The reality of that reform was that by 1996-97 \$302 million of old benefits had been taken away from Alberta seniors and replaced by \$172 million worth of new benefits. It's interesting math, Mr. Speaker, but it's basically \$130 million fewer new benefits in the so-called new program. Given as well that in 1992-93 the total benefits flowing specifically to seniors in this province totaled \$1.1 billion and that by '96-97 this had been slashed to \$967 million, this net cut of \$130 million represents a 12 percent cut in seniors' benefits. The cuts were achieved by replacing universal eligibility of benefits with income-tested benefits under the new seniors' benefit program, and seniors were supportive of some of these changes.

3:00

The benefits under this new program took two forms: a cash benefit paid monthly, with the amount paid calculated on a sliding scale dependent on income, and the health care insurance premium subsidy, with the amount of subsidy calculated on a sliding scale dependent on income. Seniors' advocacy groups and the Official Opposition told the government of the day, the same government as today as a matter of fact, that income thresholds for the benefit eligibility were set far too low, that the cash benefits were too low, and that seniors would fall through the cracks. Because so many seniors did in fact fall through the cracks in that seniors' benefit program, the government was forced to introduce the special-needs assistance program in '95-96 as an emergency grant program for seniors who could no longer make ends meet. The fact that this special-needs program had to be brought in was really tacit admission that the Alberta seniors' benefit cash benefits were too low and that income thresholds correspondingly were too low.

Mr. Speaker, all of that is put in the context of background and leads us to today. As an MLA, as somebody who has had restored the amount that was taken away from the MLAs, as part, as well, of a debt reduction exercise, it's puzzling as to why the provincial government would not consider restoring at least some of the benefits that were available to seniors that were taken away as a result of the debt and deficit elimination program.

Bill 207 is an important bill in terms of thanking our seniors for the work they have done in our province. It's an important part of the well-being, of the peace of mind and the security of Alberta's 316,000 seniors. Bill 207 demonstrates the value that the Official Opposition places on seniors and emphasizes the current government's apparent lack of compassion and respect, certainly by their actions, for the contribution that has been given to our province by seniors. Today we are suggesting an opportunity for the government to confirm, in fact, their support for seniors, but also Bill 207 is a tangible and a real and a substantive measure to celebrate, recognize, and most of all thank the 316,000 senior citizens in this province in this the United Nations International Year of Older Persons.

Mr. Speaker, health premiums are, according to the Eurig decision, regressive. They are user fees, and they become a tax if the cost of administering the health care premium is equal to or less than the amount of money brought in by the premium. So let's look at the issue of health care premiums as taxes. Alberta, as we know, is one of only two jurisdictions in the country, the other being British Columbia, that attempts to finance health care in this manner. By the government's own admission – and I refer to sessional papers 113/98 and 114/98 – it costs at least \$10.9 million annually to administer the Alberta health care insurance premiums. Of this amount, \$4.5 million is given to collection agencies for collections of truant commissions alone. So close to \$11 million to administer the fees.

Prior to the 1994 budget all seniors, as we've seen, were exempt from paying the health care premiums. After the budget half of the province's seniors found themselves paying this tax. In Alberta, since there only is one taxpayer, why are so many tax collection systems in place: the provincial income tax system, the Alberta health care insurance premium collection system, school property taxes, and 1,300 other user fees? Talk about duplication and inefficiency, something that we would think the province would be concerned about. According to the government's own documents, between 1992-93 and 1996-97 the removal of the universal exemption from paying Alberta health care premiums took \$70 million per year out of seniors' pockets in our province.

So how many seniors would benefit from the Alberta health care insurance premium portion of Bill 207? Well, the health care insurance premium exemption for all seniors under Bill 207 would benefit 133,807 seniors directly by putting money back into their pockets as per the following numbers. I can break down those numbers of 133,807, Mr. Speaker, but suffice it to say that combining the total number of people who have no subsidy who are seniors and single in our population along with those receiving partial subsidy and, as well, senior couples receiving either no subsidy or partial subsidy, we find that the total population is the 133,000. Therefore, 42 percent of Alberta seniors now paying full or partial health care premiums would benefit directly from this initiative of health care premium exemption.

Who are the seniors who will benefit? Well, in the . . . [Mrs. MacBeth's speaking time expired]

Okay, Mr. Speaker. I'm happy to move second reading of Bill 207 and look forward to the debate as it ensues.

MS KRYCZKA: Mr. Speaker, I am very pleased to rise today to

speak about why I do not support Bill 207. I will give the opposition the benefit of the doubt and assume that this bill was brought forward with the best of intentions. The bill does not, however, speak to the real issues facing Alberta seniors today.

Our government is committed to helping those seniors that need help the most. Bill 207 proposes diluting the resources we have at our disposal to assist our seniors population. This is not our way. This government has always treated seniors with the dignity and respect that they deserve. Part of our ongoing commitment to seniors is to listen to them and consult with them about their needs and concerns. Our government's approach is to take a thorough look at the issues instead of blindly proposing solutions to problems that may not even exist.

One of the ways we are doing this is through a study, led by the Member for Leduc and myself, on the impact of the aging population on government programs and services for seniors. Even though Alberta has a younger population than most of Canada, demographic projections indicate that the seniors population in this province will nearly double in the next 15 to 20 years. By beginning the study now, Alberta is at the forefront of the planning process in Canada to ensure the needs of today's seniors and tomorrow's seniors are anticipated and met.

The study's steering committee includes provincewide representatives of the health, housing, active living and community support sectors, and seniors' organizations. The committee is charged with assessing the status of today's circumstances and issues faced by today's seniors and the programs that support them. Then the focus will shift to identifying policy options related to demographic changes over the next 15 to 20 years and beyond. To assist the committee in looking toward the future, public consultations will be held across Alberta to examine these issues and will culminate in a provincial seniors' symposium later this fall. This symposium is especially timely in that 1999 is being celebrated around the world as the International Year of Older Persons.

Mr. Speaker, this study is focusing on all the issues facing seniors today, and some of them are actually very complex. For example, a 66-year-old senior with a \$20,000 annual income who is in excellent health and owns his or her own home might be in a better financial position than an 86-year-old senior with a \$60,000 annual income who has a mortgage or rental payments and severe health problems. We are learning through our work that income is not the only measure of a standard of living. Age, health, accommodation, and other factors are all part of the equation. The reason I raise this example is to illustrate the complexity of the issues our government is considering as we plan for seniors' present and future needs. Bill 207 does not even begin to delve into these deeper issues.

3:10

Our government has reinvested in seniors, and we have provided the kind of reinvestment seniors told us they want, reinvestment that really makes the difference for lower and middle-income seniors. That's why the special-needs assistance for seniors program was developed. This program is unique in all of Canada. We have added \$1 million to this budget for 1999-2000. As the Minister of Community Development has frequently noted, the \$5,000 maximum yearly special-needs grant makes much more of a difference to seniors than a relatively small cost-of-living increase to monthly benefits would. This program is targeted at seniors most in need and offers the greatest amount of assistance to them.

Mr. Speaker, the government continues to target reinvestment dollars to areas that matter most to Alberta seniors. As chair of the Seniors Advisory Council of Alberta, members of the council, who are mostly seniors themselves, and I have the ongoing opportunity

to meet with numerous seniors and seniors' organizations across this province and hear their concerns. While the council does hear, for example, some submissions regarding Alberta health care premiums, most of the concerns we hear about health care are from lower income seniors about the higher health care needs of seniors who have poor health.

The reinvestment in health in Budget '99 offers much that speaks to seniors' concerns in this area. The budget for the extended health benefits program is being increased by almost \$2 million. This is a program that provides financial support for all Alberta seniors who need dental care or new eyeglasses. This is a program that is universally accessible for all seniors and which is, again, unique in Canada.

Mr. Speaker, there was a health care premium subsidy volume increase of \$3.6 million in 1999-2000. We support over 60 percent of Alberta seniors with partial or full health care subsidies. Lower and middle-income seniors are being looked after. Seniors will also benefit from an increase of almost \$5 million in spending on the Aids to Daily Living program. Though not exclusively for seniors, this program has thousands and thousands of senior clients who will benefit from this reinvestment.

As the Minister of Health has noted, a significant portion of reinvestment dollars will go a long way to support long-term care and continuing care, which of course are of special interest to seniors. Seniors will also benefit from an announcement made by the Minister of Health regarding a new home drug plan to ease the transition costs associated with postdischarge health care for seniors and other Albertans.

Mr. Speaker, as well, many of the 1,000 frontline jobs to be created by Budget '99 will be in the areas of long-term care and home care, which will help to improve the accessibility and timeliness to seniors who are clients in those areas.

Indications are that the annual net migration of approximately 15,000 seniors to Alberta is for our blue skies and benefits. Balancing the perspective of all seniors in Alberta, this government is very well aware that actually the majority of seniors live very active, independent, and financially stable lives. Mr. Speaker, it is important that this government listens to seniors and acts on what they tell us. We are continuing to study and plan for future needs to ensure that our programs provide the support seniors need when and where they need it.

Bill 207 proposes reinvestment in seniors' programs without first looking at what reinvestment Alberta seniors need and where. I respectfully submit that this approach is not an effective use of taxpayers' dollars nor does it address the complex needs and concerns of Alberta's seniors.

Thank you.

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

MS BLAKEMAN: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I am very pleased to be able to join in the debate today in support of Bill 207, the Seniors Benefit Statutes Amendment Act, 1999. Indeed, 1999 is the International Year of Older Persons, and I can think of no better way to honour and recognize and support our seniors than by supporting Bill 207. As I've spoken many times in this Assembly, Edmonton-Centre constituency has a very large number of seniors living in it, and indeed I do my very best to get around to meet with all of the seniors two or three times a year.

I am now very honoured to also be meeting with seniors as the Official Opposition critic on seniors' issues. That's allowing me to gather additional stories from other parts of the province, so perhaps we have a differing of opinion between myself and the hon. member

who just spoke. The seniors that are speaking to me and I know have spoken to other members of this Assembly feel that they got a raw deal. Certainly a number of them have raised the very strong point that everyone else that agreed to tighten their belts and take rollbacks and cuts in their programs now have their money back.

If I could, I'd like to quote from a letter that I had tabled previously from the Marlowe household.

As a senior of many years, I would like to remind all members of the legislative assembly that only a few years ago many seniors had most of their seniors' benefits slashed, and even though the members of the legislative assembly and employees in the public sector were also forced to take a reduction in pay, their reductions have since been re-instituted, but those seniors who suffered the fiscal penalty have not had their benefits returned in part or in full.

He goes on to encourage our elected representatives from both sides to

support Bill 207 and reward the seniors affected, which would at least return to those seniors part of the benefits they lost which all seniors had enjoyed at that time.

What about those programs that were lost? The Leader of the Official Opposition talked about the amount of money that was reduced from programs either directly or indirectly to the benefit of seniors and then how much money was reinvested in the new programs, and there's a substantial difference between those two. But certainly the programs that I hear about the most would include the Aids to Daily Living program, which was reduced; the extended health benefits, which were reduced; long-term care; the senior citizens renters' assistance program, which is gone; the seniors' independent living program, which is also gone; the seniors' emergency medical alert program, which is also gone; and the property tax reduction program, which is also now gone.

We have user fees, taxes, loss of programs and assistance, and it's leaving seniors with less than they had budgeted for. I've spoken about that in this Assembly before. Seniors are very careful money managers because they're on a fixed income. They don't get any more money because things cost more. If grocery prices go up at the grocery store, nobody hands them any more money to have to deal with that. They're going to have to budget within what they already have and rebudget for their money.

Certainly a number of us in this Assembly are hearing quite clearly from senior citizens that they are now living with less than they had budgeted for and are finding it a strain. I think the strain is most obvious certainly in those seniors that have a lower income but also those that I suppose would be determined as being in the middle class or lower middle class. Our Leader of the Opposition had pointed out that Bill 207 would directly benefit 42 percent of the seniors in Alberta – that's a significant number – and most pointedly the single seniors with incomes of between \$18,000 and \$20,000 and senior couples with incomes between \$27,000 and \$32,500. That's not a lot of money to be trying to live on, because we can no longer assume that all seniors are living in a house that they have paid off, that all seniors are not using motor vehicle transportation. We can't make those assumptions anymore. We have a really diverse and varied and in many cases a more active senior population. So those assumptions about how much money they've got socked away or what expenses they don't have to pay out for I'm finding don't hold as true as the stereotype would have. I think this is a great way of putting money back in senior citizens' pockets.

3:20

I note that the Treasurer is often talking about the sweat-soaked loonie, and certainly for seniors that sweat may have happened some time ago. Nonetheless, it's still a precious loonie for them. He talks about how important it is to get the money back in the pockets of the

people so that they can spend it and this makes the economy go around. I can't think of a better sector of people who are more willing and more understanding of that economic give-and-take in their own communities than senior citizens. Certainly they're more than willing to spend it in their home communities. I see an inconsistency there. We seem to be willing to put money in the hands of the very wealthy and perhaps some large businesses but not in the hands of Alberta seniors. I would think that we would want to be putting it in the hands and in the pockets of our senior citizens.

Indeed I note that the government's own Seniors Advisory Council for Alberta notes the concerns that I have been raising, and I'll quote from page 10 of the 1997-98 Year in Review.

The Council continued to hear concerns from middle-income seniors about payment of health care premiums. The costs of health care services are becoming an issue for many middle-income seniors. The Council heard many concerns about the costs of various health services such as optical care, hearing aids and dental care. Costs of dental care are emerging as an important issue among Alberta seniors, with no control on dentist fees and costs that far exceed those covered by existing programs.

I'm pretty sure that every MLA here heard from those seniors that were outraged that the MLAs got 5 percent back and even a raise, but seniors feel that the same has not happened to them. I've already quoted from one letter.

One of the other issues that's been raised is the long-term care. I'm wondering how many long-term care reports have been done since the early '90s. I think it's some five or six reports.

MS LEIBOVICI: Too many.

MS BLAKEMAN: I have a colleague saying that it's too many. I'm aware that there is a commitment now to having a longer long-term care study, but it is a concern to senior citizens. Essentially, I'm hearing that the deal changed somewhere, that seniors who built this province, who made it through the '30s and who made sure that no one else was ever going to have to suffer through that same kind of deprivation and fear and loss, wanted to make sure that no one else would suffer that, and they championed social programs to make sure that would not happen. In particular, they championed universality. There's a whole generation of seniors who worked on those programs, and certainly my generation has been the beneficiary of all of that. But this government, I notice, doesn't like universality. I don't quite know why, but they don't. They have given economic reasons for that, although I don't think I entirely agree with them.

But over and over again the programs that are offered are for the absolutely destitute only, and you have to make yourself destitute to get the help, so once you're in trouble and you've made yourself destitute in order to qualify, you can't ever dig yourself out again. We see this right across the spectrum. I would struggle to be proud of a province that found it acceptable having a province full of borderline, just making it, if I scrimp a little bit more on the food seniors.

Actually as I look through some of the clippings that have been collected on the increased costs for seniors – the cost of living, all of these different prices, user fees and utilities, and all the rest of that going up – I see something that really does give me a chill. It's some articles on seniors being undernourished. Why? Because they are moving their income around to cover their costs. Remember; I talked about having a limited income, a fixed income, and when you don't get any more and costs are increasing, you are having to make choices about where you're going to find the money to pay for some things that you must have. Unfortunately, according to some of the information that's out there, one of the places that seniors are

scrimping on is food. I think that has a long-term effect on the province, and it certainly does affect the health of seniors, which is again a long-term cost to the system, but I think more than that. It's not saying very positive things about how we are treating our senior citizens.

You see, part of the thing on a fixed income is that it's fixed. There's no employment training here. They don't get any more money when all of these things increase the costs. In fact, with the Alberta seniors' benefits, there isn't even indexing. Interestingly, I heard on the radio a few days ago one of those terribly helpful investment folks being broadcast. He was quite pointed in saying – and I can't remember all the figures – that essentially if you retired with an income of \$40,000, given inflation you would fairly quickly need an income of \$49,000 just to stay in the same place, just to be able to purchase the same things and pay for the same things. I'm sorry; I don't remember the exact time span that he was talking about, but it struck me at the time that it was a short time span, perhaps five years or less. So that's what happens: things cost more, but their money doesn't get any more.

Do we want our seniors to go out and take additional jobs in order to pay for this? I don't think so. I've certainly seen the stories from the U.S. of senior citizens working at McDonald's. That horrifies me frankly. It really horrifies me. We don't have employment training programs to try and find job placements for senior citizens here.

Bill 207 is really two sections. One is dealing with eradicating the health care premiums paid by senior citizens. The second part is to provide indexing of the cash benefits. Now, Alberta is a wealthy province. In almost any indicator that you look at, we are a have province and have been for some time. We do however – and I was surprised to see this – have the highest inflation rate in Canada, certainly according to the figures that were released I think in February of '99. That's exactly part of the story that the investment counselor on the radio was talking about, that if you don't have your pension or your retirement savings indexed in some way, you're going to end up in trouble with this. So there are two points to the legislation that we're proposing in Bill 207: timeliness and objectivity.

THE SPEAKER: I hesitate to interrupt the hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre, but the time limit for consideration of this item of business for today has now expired.

head: Motions Other than Government Motions

3:30

### Social Policy

510. Mr. Shariff moved:

Be it resolved that the Legislative Assembly urge the government to consider establishing a council of ministers for social issues to co-ordinate social policy development and delivery and to consult openly with Albertans about our changing social needs.

[Debate adjourned April 27: Mrs. Sloan speaking]

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

MR. AMERY: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's a pleasure to rise this afternoon and speak to Motion 510. First I'd like to thank and commend the sponsor of this motion for having the foresight to bring to this Assembly an idea that will surely add to the effectiveness of Alberta's social policy in meeting the changing social needs of the people of the province of Alberta.

Mr. Speaker, we have a system that has all of the right compo-

nents. What I mean is that we have the initiatives being discussed and the programs being implemented, and now what we need to look at is a central co-ordinating unit such as is suggested in this motion. This council would improve both the efficiency and effectiveness of our social policy in terms of programs and service delivery.

This motion suggests in its wording that the government consult openly with Albertans about "our changing social needs." I think this is an important statement to make, and at the same time I see this government is already undertaking numerous strategies to do just that, seeking feedback from the citizens of this province. However, Mr. Speaker, I do not see any harm in reiterating the commitment of this government to consult with all Albertans.

[Mrs. Gordon in the chair]

Very briefly I would mention such initiatives as the growth summit, the justice summit, and the most recent health summit. Numerous MLA committees have traveled across the province and held meetings to consult with Albertans on various issues, ranging from seniors' issues, long-term health care, and the FOIP review to agricultural concerns. Madam Speaker, all of these are important committees and consultations in that the information received helps formulate policy in the various areas, including social policy.

I have made reference to the various summits, and I would like to add that recommendations from these summits have also identified the same issues that are addressed in the wording and intent of this motion. Madam Speaker, the growth summit recommended that our ministries need to develop new ways of working jointly on issues of broad public policy, decreasing their protection of turf and resources, and assuming joint accountability for results.

The health summit report released just recently contained two recommendations regarding the very same ideas of co-ordination and communication in areas such as education, health, justice, and family and social services.

Madam Speaker, I do not see the intention of this motion as making a negative statement about our social policy. I see this motion as being about anticipating change and determining how to deal with diverse and rapidly changing social needs in the best possible and most effective way.

Now, I realize that one can say that we already have mechanisms in place to address the very issues the sponsor of this motion has discussed. In my view, Madam Speaker, I do believe establishing a council of ministers for social development would duplicate existing mechanisms. In fact, I would argue that it would actually enhance that process. I would also add that there are a number of other provinces that have recognized the very same need for such a council or something of similar composition.

The methods may vary from province to province, but the intent is the same. Saskatchewan, for example, has established a Council on Children, that works to provide a strategy for government, communities, organizations, and individuals to work together to develop common approaches to children's issues.

Manitoba has formed a Children and Youth Secretariat, that works with the provincial government departments and community organizations to facilitate change in the current service delivery system to improve life outcomes for children, youth, and families. There are nine departments that are all partners in the secretariat that approach addressing the needs of these groups together.

New Brunswick is undergoing an extensive overworking of their system and has established a special cabinet committee on social policy renewal and is currently conducting roundtable discussions throughout their province. The goal of this committee is to develop a process for a renewal of social policy framework for the province

in the context of the government commitment to self-sufficiency and to the resilience of individuals, families, and communities and of current economic, fiscal, and demographic considerations.

Madam Speaker, we are entering a new millennium where we are faced with a very dynamic and rapidly changing society. The Member for Calgary-McCall talked about our growing population that in turn equals growing needs of our citizens. I think more than ever before we are having to take a close look at the social issues that are a prevalent part of our society. A strong social policy is made up of the values and beliefs of those who make up the society. These include believing in individuals and families and communities contributing to the collective well-being and to the best of their ability.

The intent of this motion is to do what is possible through social policy programs, to ensure that all people have the same opportunities to achieve their full potential. Every person in this province and in this country is of value, and a strong social policy believes in the worth, dignity, and value of all people.

Madam Speaker, at the same time, a social policy that is working for the people must also be accountable, accountable to the people and accountable for the results of programs or initiatives. By establishing this council of ministers for social development, there is the development of a system that allows for flexibility to address differences, harmonize programs, encourage citizen participation, and encourage partnerships among individuals, families, labour, business, social organizations, communities, and governments.

The benefit of such a council, Madam Speaker, is that the results will protect and assist vulnerable groups within our society, including children, youth, and seniors, and will allow for the respect of people's dignity and for individual and collective rights in the delivery of programs, not to mention individual and collective responsibility for health, education, and social security.

More importantly, Madam Speaker, this council can address a matter we are talking more and more about in many areas of our society; that is, the ability to be proactive rather than reactive. If we do not pay enough attention to the prevention, we will pay a high cost. We will face things like young people dropping out of school, more cases of suicide, and more people depending on public income-support programs. Our social policy must stress prevention both for the general population and specific interest groups. Investing in our people today should in fact lower future costs and allow us to take greater advantage of opportunities.

One last point I would like to make, Madam Speaker, is that I see this as the perfect time to address our social policy delivery service. We are all well aware of the Ministerial Council on Social Policy Reform and Renewal, that is taking place in conjunction with the federal government and other provinces. The hon. Minister of Family and Social Services currently represents Alberta on the federal/provincial committee, that is dealing with social policy issues on a grand scale.

Madam Speaker, this initiative is the umbrella under which governments will concentrate their efforts to renew and modernize Canadian social policy. It focuses on the pan-Canadian dimension of the health and social policy system, the linkages between the social and economic unions, and the recognition that reform is best achieved in partnership among provinces, territories, and the government of Canada.

Madam Speaker, that is the way I see this council proposed in this motion, as a partnership on a provincial level between our departments. We are a part of this process taking place on a national level, and it seems the ideal time to address these same issues within our province. I encourage all members of this House to vote for this motion.

Thank you, Madam Speaker.

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

MR. SAPERS: Thanks very much, Madam Speaker. When I first saw Motion 510, I was quite pleasantly surprised to see it on the Order Paper, and I think the quest for some co-ordination and some concentration of effort towards integrated social policy is appropriate and timely. The call for a council of ministers, I'm sure, flows from the recognition that any social problem isn't just one department's responsibility, and I know that the government has taken to heart the observation of many that we can no longer develop programs maintaining a silo mentality, where every government department is really an industry unto itself with just its own smokestack and that there's no integration across all of the government departments.

Madam Speaker, the government has in fact taken a look at how it can achieve this integration and cross-pollination and co-ordinating and planning and has done so with deputy minister level initiatives and has done so through Treasury Board initiatives and has achieved, I think, some success. Then I saw the way that the motion was amended, and my heart sank, because I think the amendment – and we're dealing with the motion as amended – really weakens what I thought was a much harder edged commitment to the kind of co-ordination and integration that I've certainly been advocating for many years both inside this Chamber and outside of it and what, I believe, the sponsor of the motion is committed to as well.

I don't know what pressures were brought to bear on that private member to change his words, but whatever those pressures are, they have resulted in what I think is a motion where the real nub of the issue has been left to lag. To simply consider establishing this council I don't think is strong enough direction.

3:40

You know, I was a participant in the Conference Board of Canada partnership consultation, and before that I was a participant with the Canadian Council on Social Development on their policy papers and helped develop the agenda for Safer Cities, which was then adopted by urban municipalities across this country. All of those initiatives, Madam Speaker, were social development initiatives that called for cross-departmental, multisectoral approaches to complex problems. So I'm no stranger to this area, and I'm certainly a proponent of it.

In fact once upon a time – and this is something that certain members of the front bench would like to forget – I actually was paid real money by the government of Alberta to provide input, insight, and direction into how government could be restructured to achieve such co-ordination of social policy development and implementation. You know, Madam Speaker, I'm still waiting for them to take my good advice. Well, actually some of it they did, but I don't think you'll see it in any of the material that hasn't had the good parts whited out.

Anyway, all that being said, we have a good idea in this motion, but a good idea that has been somewhat emasculated, and that's a shame. I can't be terribly supportive of a motion that only urges "the government to consider establishing a council of ministers." I think we're at a level above that now, particularly as a result of what has happened with the deputy minister level co-ordinating committees, and if we are really now to put collectively the government's mouth where the taxpayers' money is, then what we need is the members of the front bench to stand up and say: "Yes, we're going to do this. We're going to make it the business of every minister. We're going to put into the departmental business plans performance measures that talk about partnership and co-ordination. We're going to have measurable and achievable goals enumerated. They are

going to be part of an ongoing analysis, and we're going to be accountable for the cross-government planning and for the kind of accountability that has been spoken to."

Now, Madam Speaker, I was taken with the words from the Member for Calgary-East when he was speaking in support of this motion. It's not because I disagreed with much of what he was saying, but I do take issue with at least one part of his submission on this motion, and that's when the member was alluding to the summits and what the summits have brought to the governance of Alberta. Aside from the very political nature of all the summits and aside from the fact they have been set up to, I think, deflect attention away from what the role often is of the Legislature, let me just say this. When the member speaks of the growth summit and the health summit and the justice summit as being good examples of consultations that have brought valuable direction to government, let me just remind that member and other members in this Chamber that as earnest as the participants in those three summits may have been, in total I think they brought together somewhere between 600 and 750 Albertans at those three summits, some of whom were the same people, coincidentally, at all three of them.

Now, 600 or 700 people doesn't even give you a statistically significant sample of Albertans. If you were a polling company, you'd have to poll at least a few hundred more than that to get any kind of accurate and significant statistical sample, and I believe the jargon is: accurate plus or minus 5 percent 19 times out of 20. So when the government sets about to do social policy by summit, it is very much a selective, well-orchestrated process designed to give government the answers that it wants.

Now, often the summit responses are so broad that the government can cherry-pick those suggestions, recommendations, or observations that fit with a preplanned agenda, and the government has an opportunity to variate that model of summiteering with the announced but really not fleshed out summit on children's issues. I would hope that when this summit is finally arranged for, it will be broadly based, that it will be open to anyone who wants to participate, that the report will be sent forward uncensored to the Legislature, that there will be apt funding in place to ensure that people will be able to travel to the location, and that any barrier that we would think of would be anticipated by the planners of this summit so that no Albertan is foreclosed from participation.

Then after that kind of a process, when the Member for Calgary-East stands up and talks about the good work of summits, I may be able to be more charitable in my observations. But as it stands to date, the government has not distinguished itself in how it does summits, and I would humbly submit that one of the reasons why we need a co-ordinated and accountable council of ministers to look at social policy is because often the summit process really reinforces this silo mentality, that if you're dealing with public health, well, that's got to be the Minister of Health's responsibility or if you're dealing with justice, it's just the Minister of Justice's responsibility. Of course anybody that's worked for an hour in a social agency knows that's simply not the case.

In fact I was struck by a conversation I had just last night with the Minister of Education when we were exchanging words about the events of the last few days and the observation about the tragedy that has befallen in particular a few families but really the whole community in Taber and by extension the people of Alberta. It really is a call to action regarding the broadest analysis of those social conditions that may have been a contributing factor, and it would be unfair, I think, to say that it's simply the Minister of Education's job to respond to all of those factors. What we need is a very broad view of what it is in our society that can culminate in such a senseless and really quite awful outcome.



I would like to call on my colleague from Calgary-McCall to go back and fight the good fight. Obviously he lost round 1 when the wording was changed, but go back and fight the good fight and get some real buy-in from the front bench and put some more meat around this skeletal outline that we have, demonstrating that government departments can and should work together. Ensure that it's built into the business plans. Ensure that it's built into the performance measures. Ensure that cross-department funding initiatives are there and that it's not good enough for a minister to be able to point fingers at another minister and say: it's not my job; it's somebody else's jurisdiction. Then we can come back to the Assembly and we won't need a motion that urges the government to simply consider doing something, but what we'll have is the opportunity to review and then debate the actions of government. We'll be able to say to our constituents, to the taxpayers: the government did this, didn't do this, is moving in the right direction here, is way off the mark someplace else.

We will eventually, I think, be able to demonstrate that governments do have a view of how to provide services that are not restricted to this strict and narrow sort of Holy Grail of narrow accountability. You know, we're often pushed to that because we have the bottom-line mentality. We're pushed to this very narrow view because how else can we be accountable, and of course that's the wrong answer and it's the wrong question. You set the standard, you design the policy, you design the program, and you figure out, then, how to deliver it in a way that encompasses the strengths of all of the government departments that could be involved, instead of trying to figure out who you're going to blame if it goes wrong and whose budget you're going to tax to pay for it.

3:50

Unfortunately, the current government I think is very dedicated to pursuing just this bottom-line notion of program delivery and really needs to raise its eyes a little bit and understand that it's not always the most efficient or effective to simply worry about the minimization of expenses. Often what's left out in that kind of calculation is any sense of value and making sure that we're not penny-wise and pound-foolish. Cutting back in one area to look good by one measure of accountability often results in something happening, an unexpected and unwanted negative outcome in another area, and the impact is on our electorate, on our citizenry.

I often think of it like a balloon that you squeeze. You may be able to constrict it in one end, but it pops out someplace else. When we do social programming by squeezing seniors' programs or by squeezing education or by squeezing health care, we often see the results popping out someplace else. We had a brief discussion of that, actually, in question period today when the Leader of the Official Opposition mentioned the social problems index and the report out of one health authority. In any case, Alberta has the worst SPI, social problems index, of any jurisdiction in Canada. That's not because this is a bad place to live. I think it's just because we've lost sight of the need to co-ordinate and integrate and be sensitive to the potential for unintended impacts through shortsighted, bottom-line thinking.

So, Madam Speaker, I would hope that the government heeds the advice of many members of this Assembly and broadens its perspective. Unfortunately, I don't think this motion, if it's passed, will be exactly the carrot or the stick that is needed. But it's nice to know that members on all sides of the House are at least thinking about it, and we'll be here to help.

Thank you.

THE ACTING SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Highwood.

MR. TANNAS: Thank you, Madam Speaker. I'm pleased today to have the opportunity to speak in support of Motion 510. Establishing a council of ministers for social development is a concept worthy to consider. The motion as proposed by the hon. Member for Calgary-McCall will help meet the social needs of our changing society, as this motion proposes to establish a central co-ordinating unit that would serve to facilitate communication and co-ordination between these initiatives, provide a means by which to monitor and evaluate policies and activities and a system to address potential conflicts in program delivery, and to measure satisfaction of the services.

Every society, Madam Speaker, has certain values and beliefs about how people should treat one another. These values and beliefs become a society's social policy. Social programs include such areas as literacy, early childhood services, income assistance, housing, legal aid. The list is endless. Generally provincial governments are responsible for social policy, so I'd remind hon. members of Motion 510.

Be it resolved that the Legislative Assembly urge the government to consider establishing a council of ministers for social issues to co-ordinate social policy development and delivery and to consult openly with Albertans about our changing social needs.

A central co-ordinating unit as is suggested by this motion would facilitate communication and co-ordination of initiatives being undertaken in the area of social issues. A council of ministers for social development could provide a means through which to monitor and evaluate policies and activities in Alberta. Such a council could put in place a system capable of anticipating potential conflicts in program delivery as well as indicators by which to measure satisfaction with services. A council could work to ensure that potential consequences of a particular initiative in all departments are examined prior to implementation.

This motion is about encouraging the government to take additional steps towards the most effective means by which to meet the changing social needs of Albertans. Establishing the suggested council could be one avenue for linking the community-based sector with government to identify issues and create strategic partnerships for social development. Such a council would co-ordinate social policy development, would co-ordinate social policy delivery, would review practice. Such a council would consult with Albertans through changing social needs.

I urge all members to vote for Motion 510. I will. Thank you.

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

MRS. O'NEILL: Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. I would just like to take a couple of minutes to reflect very briefly on the merits of this particular motion. It is a motion that speaks about co-operation and co-ordination of services directed most specifically at children and those in need, not only children but adults, and those with social concerns.

It is with the co-operation of various departments that this government has taken tremendous steps to initiate programs that meet the social needs of our changing society. We have done it, and we demonstrate it every day when we work with interdepartmental initiatives. Every society has certain values and beliefs about how people should treat one another. These values and beliefs are what constitute what we call social policy of that particular society.

Social policy includes numerous issues. There are programs such as those that deal with literacy, early childhood services, income assistance, and most of all, particularly in our northern climate of course, that which has to do with housing that is adequate and sustainable. These areas through which assistance can be provided are the fundamental building blocks for a society to meet with

success on both an individual and on a collective level. The successful establishment of a council such as proposed in Motion 510 will further demonstrate the commitment of this government to building and maintaining a just and a caring society where all citizens are valued and have the opportunity and the means to fulfill their potential.

As New Brunswick continues with the social policy renewal which they have undertaken, they have discussed their vision as being one where "we want a society where we celebrate our differences and we all feel responsible for each other's well-being." I propose that Motion 510 is about doing just that. As legislators in this province it is not only our duty; it is our responsibility.

THE ACTING SPEAKER: I hesitate to interrupt the hon. Member for St. Albert, but under Standing Order 8(4) I must now put all questions and conclude debate on the motion under consideration as proposed by the hon. Member for Calgary-McCall.

[Motion carried]

### Highway Intersection Warning Signs

511. Mr. Fischer moved:

Be it resolved that the Legislative Assembly urge the government to investigate ways to improve traffic safety at rural intersections by improving the visibility of "important intersection ahead" signs or by adding additional signage informing drivers of upcoming intersections.

THE ACTING SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Wainwright.

MR. FISCHER: Thank you, Madam Speaker. It is my pleasure to rise and introduce Motion 511 for discussion. I am proposing Motion 511 because it is important that this government do all that it can to reduce the number of accidents, injuries, and fatalities on rural and secondary roads in this province.

I do not want to in any way make light of or criticize the department of transportation or any local municipal governments on how the signage at intersections is done now. However, I believe that as landscapes change, as traffic patterns change, as types of vehicles, speed limits, and technology change, then so must our safety warning system change. We must find better ways of warning drivers of dangerous intersections on primary and secondary roads in this province. Our fatality rate on rural highways would strongly support my position.

4:00

Madam Speaker, the vast majority of accidents at these intersections are because of driver error, where for one reason or another a motorist fails to stop at an intersection. By cutting down on this driver error, we can also cut down on injuries and fatalities. This motion would require the Department of Transportation and Utilities to examine not only high-accident intersections but all intersections in our province and determine methods of making drivers more aware of their existence.

There are several ways that we can make these intersections more visible for drivers. The installation of additional warning signs, flashing lights, area lighting, or rumble strips before the intersection have all been employed elsewhere in the province as well as in other provinces to warn motorists. We also must recognize that not all of the intersections within our province have these warning systems.

As well, Madam Speaker, an Alberta-specific "important intersection ahead" sign could be used as a warning sign for all sudden, high-traffic, or other significant intersections. We should also

consider the development of oversize or a new warning size in this process. The important intersection warning signs: I'm not sure that motorists know what those signs really mean. When you have an "important intersection ahead" sign, does it mean a stop ahead, or what does it mean to them? I know that we think we are sending a message to those drivers, but somehow or other that message is not getting through.

Any of these responsibilities should be examined to determine which method is the most effective at increasing driver awareness. Residents of rural Alberta are all too aware of the possible dangers that can occur on the roads between our communities. Tragic accidents on rural highways have become almost a part of living in rural Alberta. There are too many people on our roads – and I can use some of them in my own constituency – that have died on our highways. We must improve the warning system.

Madam Speaker, the 1997 Alberta traffic collision statistics documents point out just how serious the problem on our roads has become. While our growing province has welcomed the increase in traffic, the licensed vehicles on our roads and the new commerce that it brings, we need to put a stop to the increase in accidents that has come along with this increase in traffic. Between '93 and '97 the number of reportable collisions per year increased from 84,588 to 92,365. Right now there are more than 250 accidents on roads in our province every day. Now, that's huge, and I asked my researcher to please check those numbers again because I thought it must be unreasonable. Of course, those are all accidents within this province. Over that same period of time the number of traffic-related fatalities per year grew from 383 to 429. There were one and a half fatalities per 10,000 motorists, the second highest rate in Canada, after the province of Saskatchewan.

Madam Speaker, more than one person dies on our roads every single day of the year. Although rural Alberta enjoys a lower overall accident rate than urban areas, the consequences of accidents in rural Alberta are far more severe. While only 20 percent of the accidents occur in rural Alberta, 76 percent of the fatal collisions occur on our rural roads. Now, 76 percent of the deaths are on our rural roads; that has to tell us something, and that is exactly why Motion 511 was brought forward.

The Alberta traffic collision statistics guide also points out that the majority of accidents on our roads occur near the intersections. Accidents such as turning left across another vehicle's path, stop sign violations, or failure to yield generate a disproportionate amount of injuries and fatalities compared to many of the other types of collisions. In '97 turning left across another vehicle's path killed 14 and injured 1,400, making this type of accident the third most common cause of injury on the road today. Stop sign violation accidents killed 55 people, the second leading cause of death on Alberta roads. Nineteen percent of all traffic-related fatalities occur as a result of stop sign violations. Failing to yield at an uncontrolled intersection killed five and injured 317, making it the ninth most common injury-causing collision.

Madam Speaker, better intersection awareness will decrease these types of accidents. Programs similar to the one advocated by Motion 511 are already in place in the provinces of Manitoba and Saskatchewan. Both of these provinces constantly monitor high-collision intersections and stretches of road to determine whether or not improvements like rumble strips, flashing lights, overhead intersection illumination, and additional or oversized signage would be effective additions.

The program in Manitoba has seen measurable improvements in the overall safety on rural highways. Between '95 and '96 the number of overall reportable collisions dropped by 10.2 percent. Moreover, over that same period of time the number of fatalities dropped by an impressive 27 percent.

Despite the fact that Saskatchewan is still the only province with a higher level of traffic-related fatalities than Alberta, Madam Speaker, their highway safety improvement program has helped to reduce the alarming statistics. Saskatchewan has found that intersections with newly installed overhead area lighting experienced a 58 percent reduction in accidents. The installation of flashing red lights at key points saw accidents decrease by 28.5 percent. These figures are encouraging and clearly illustrate the probable positive effect that our province could enjoy from a similar program.

I would like to put to us: what are we really doing in rural Alberta, where 76 percent of the fatalities are occurring? Maybe we should be looking at the current policy of prioritizing just high-traffic intersections. Many low-traffic areas have disastrous accidents too. Low-traffic intersections tend to have smaller stop signs, smaller, if any, "stop ahead" warning signs, and certainly smaller "important intersection" signs. In some cases they don't have any.

I have visited the accident sites and driven the path into the intersection where fatalities have occurred, and I've tried to understand why this has happened. In most cases you have to conclude that the driver was not aware of the stop sign and of the danger of that intersection.

Last Christmas at Viking a family of four was in a horrible accident where the driver drove through a stop sign on highway 36 into a large fuel truck traveling along highway 14. Even though there was a 60-kilometre speed zone, there was a small "important intersection" sign, and there was a small "stop ahead" sign, the accident still occurred, killing three out of the four people in the car.

I believe that a large, full-size "stop ahead" sign maybe even 300 or 400 yards back of the intersection and possibly with a flashing light – and with our technology now and solar power, maybe that's feasible to have: a flashing orange light and a great big stop sign that people have to see as they go by. In this case as they got into the commercial area and the 60-kilometre zone, those signs were not very visible. There was a railway track they had to cross, and the "stop ahead" sign seemed to be down in and the background had commercial property behind it, and it just wasn't as noticeable. Neither was the "important intersection" sign.

#### 4:10

We have other areas in the province where there's not very much traffic, where the roads have little traffic compared to the traffic near the cities, but there's very little warning. In the nighttime we've had people come up to a dead end, cross that highway, meet a car coming the other way, and wipe them right out. It seems to me that some better signage or flashing lights or something could help eliminate some of those accidents.

I meet with a number of my local municipal government people, and at almost every meeting I go to, one of the topics that comes up is the danger of the intersection near their town or where two highways meet. Lots of those folks will say: you're just waiting for an accident to happen; you should do this and this and this. Of course we tell them that certain things work and certain things don't work, although I think we need to spend possibly more money on bigger signs and flashing lights and make it so that a motorist almost has to see that sign.

It is important that our government make the issue of traffic safety as complete and comprehensive as possible across the province. I want to see us do that in not only the high-traffic areas but also on the roads that have a lot less traffic but are still dangerous when you get to the intersection.

I'd just ask members to please support this motion. I think that everyone in this Assembly wants to see us improve our traffic safety to save the lives of many of our friends and relatives that we've lost

in this province. I'd just end by saying that we have a lot of the white diamond signs and a wreath of flowers along the edge of some of the roads in this province, and I would like us to put some signs up that focus on saving those lives, not marking them afterwards.

Thank you.

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

MR. BONNER: Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. It's a pleasure to rise this afternoon and speak to Motion 511 on rural road intersections. I want to commend the hon. Member for Wainwright for, first of all, the research that he did here and the consultations that took place with the Alberta Motor Association, the county of Strathcona, Alberta Traffic Supply Ltd., and Park Paving. Certainly there was a lot of foresight that went into addressing this problem that does occur.

I am quite familiar with dangerous intersections. I grew up in Jasper, and in Jasper we have the intersection of highways 16 and 93. Of course, we also have the additional problem in the town of there being a lot of wildlife near this intersection. It is not uncommon every summer even today to have fatalities at this intersection, certainly not only fatalities but there's just too much suffering of the serious types of injuries that you do get at an intersection. Over the course of the years many, many different attempts have been made at improving the safety at this particular intersection, and many of those were addressed by the hon. Member for Wainwright when he went through his discussion on Motion 511.

So the object, Madam Speaker, is to improve traffic safety and reduce accidents at rural road intersections. I think most of us would agree – and I could be wrong – that the majority of accidents do occur at intersections, and because both cars are going at quite a speed, these accidents are generally severe. They involve multiple cars, and the injuries that occur are lasting. So the highlight of this motion is to improve traffic safety at rural intersections by improving visibility of signs, and that is a very good thing.

As well, Madam Speaker, we have to look at the statistics, and in looking at those statistics, that will outline a number of things. It will first of all outline the frequency of accidents at the various intersections. It will also include the types of accidents that happen at these intersections, whether they are multiple car or between two cars or whatever. It will also tell us the type of safety signs that are included at that particular site presently and how they can be improved, whether this is improving the size, the location, the reflectivity of the signs, or the location of the signs. In some cases what we've seen is the actual installation of lighting at these particular intersections.

Now, another way that's proven to be very effective on paved highways is the introduction of rumble strips. These are very effective because it does bring the driver's attention to the fact that they are entering a situation that is dangerous. These are a very, very low-cost safety feature that can be undertaken for a very, very small price, particularly during regular resurfacing work.

Another factor as well that the hon. member didn't mention was that driver education is also a very important part of safety at intersections. I would say that the majority of accidents are due to human error and certainly not mechanical malfunctions of the cars.

So those are the highlights of this particular motion, Madam Speaker, and there are two questions that remain that the motion does not address. Who decides which intersections need improving? The province or the municipality? Of course the second question is: who pays?

Now, we have seen certainly the off-loading of the provincial

government onto the municipalities, and whereas the province has been able to balance their books, the municipalities have a much harder time because they cannot go into debt. So what we see here is a situation where municipalities have had to slash programs, and I wouldn't want to see a bill that would impose on municipalities more programs where they have to pay when we have, for example, a province that is now quite flush and could afford to make all of our intersections in this province safer. We have seen that there is a hidden deficit out there that has been shifted to the municipalities, as the Leader of the Official Opposition mentioned earlier, and we've had to see taxes raised in both Edmonton and Calgary. So this is certainly an issue that I would like to see addressed before this motion is passed.

4:20

Now, accidents at intersections on rural roads are more dangerous and more severe than at urban intersections. At urban intersections we have many, many different safety devices that help us out. For busy intersections we do have lights. We do have signs indicating, for example, that this could be a high-collision area. We also have signs in urban areas indicating whether fatalities have taken place here or not. We just passed a bill earlier this year or last fall where cameras could be installed at intersections, again high-volume intersections, which would record cars that are running red lights. So we do have this in the urban areas, but we certainly don't have it in the rural areas.

The other issue here as well, Madam Speaker, is that in the rural areas it is very common for these cars to be traveling at a much higher rate of speed than what they would be if they were in an urban area. When we look at the whole issue, there is a direct relationship between the speed of the cars and the severity of the injuries in the accident. As well, what we have in the rural settings is a familiarity by the people who use those roads all the time. That familiarity in itself can be dangerous in that these people have traveled this road numerous times, there is a very small volume of traffic on that particular road, and perhaps the one time they do take a chance is the time that this accident occurs.

Anyway, when we look at the problem here, then we have to look at the problem particularly in the rural areas, because even though the volume of traffic might be low at these particular intersections, the severity of the accidents is very high. So we do have to prioritize what intersections in the rural setting we want to make safer.

There are some other issues here as well, Madam Speaker. What are the causes at the rural intersections? Is it because somebody overlooked a sign, because somebody couldn't see a sign? Is it because they didn't have enough time to react to a sign? Were they driving too fast in that particular situation? Again, all of these revert back to driver error, and these are some of the problems that we do associate with rural intersections. As I mentioned earlier, many people often assume that it is safe at this intersection, so they don't heed the signs that are there. We have to look closely at the situation and see if improving the signs will make any difference in the safety at that particular intersection.

The next issue I'd like to look at is that of driver attitudes. Certainly in many cases this is where we have to get education programs initiated so that we can change driver attitudes. I think if we could do that, if we could hit on programs that would impact drivers, this certainly would make the biggest difference in making particular intersections safer.

There are other factors that we can look at here as well, Madam Speaker. When do these accidents occur? Are they during high-traffic times, for example when people are going to work or coming home from work? Do they occur at night, or do they occur during

the day? Does it matter if it's during the week or on a weekend? Again, an in-depth study would have to be done in order to get many of the answers that we require to put the suggestions of this bill into play.

There are a number of ways to increase the awareness at intersections, and as the Member for Wainwright indicated, there are a number of different ways that we can improve the visibility of signs. One of those is certainly by increasing the size of the signs. This happens particularly when we get situations, for example, of a secondary road intersecting a primary road. When we do have cars traveling at a higher speed on primary roads, then of course we would want a bigger sign to try and draw the attention of the drivers. One of his suggestions, as well, was to move the sign back so that it gives the drivers more warning and more time to react.

When we look in the manual of uniform traffic control devices for Canada, we do see that there are sign dimensions. Now, these sign dimensions are a minimum, so I do think, particularly where we have a high incidence of accidents at intersections, that increasing the size and the reflectivity of those signs is a major way that we can draw drivers' attention to the possibility of a dangerous situation. When we look at the incidence of accidents and particularly daytime accidents, we have five different sizes, Madam Speaker, that stop signs come in, and these range in size from 60 centimetres by 60 centimetres up to 120 centimetres by 120 centimetres. Of course, the larger the sign, the more it costs, but I think in this particular situation if we can save one life, cost does not become a factor.

As well, there are situations on some secondary roads and primary roads where we can give drivers advance warning that they are approaching intersections, and we could do this with flashing lights, with special signs. This becomes particularly important in the case where we may have, for example, a hill which hides an intersection, or it might be an intersection around a corner which is hidden. So by installing lights or signs that we are approaching a fairly busy intersection, then we can, again, warn the drivers and help them make the necessary adjustments.

As well, Madam Speaker, we can in other ways provide advance warning. We can do this by marking the range road or township road number well in advance. By marking these well in advance – for example, range road 220: 500 metres – giving the drivers advance warning, it allows them to take control of their car or truck or whatever vehicle it may be and be prepared for the upcoming intersection.

Now, when we look at this, we can run through what happens during nighttime accidents as well. Of course, one of the major issues for nighttime accidents, Madam Speaker, is to increase the reflectivity of the sign.

THE ACTING SPEAKER: I hesitate to interrupt you, hon. member, but the time limit for consideration of this item of business is now concluded.

head: Government Bills and Orders  
head: Second Reading

4:30

**Bill 37**  
**Freedom of Information and Protection**  
**of Privacy Amendment Act, 1999**

[Adjourned debate April 29: Mr. Friedel]

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

MR. DICKSON: Thanks very much. I'd almost forgotten that the bill had already come in once at second reading and had been

moved. I came close to forfeiting the chance to speak to it at all at second reading, Madam Speaker. I'll try and be a little faster at the next stage.

Bill 37 is a bill that's had probably far more comprehensive analysis and treatment than most bills get before they come into the Assembly. As has been noted already by the Member for Peace River, freedom of information has been the subject of a three-year review, which was provided for in the existing Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act.

In fact, it's always been understood, right back to when the Premier first created an all-party committee in the fall of 1993 chaired by our distinguished Minister of Environmental Protection, that there would have to be periodic reviews of the report. We had a lot of fun traveling around Alberta in the fall of 1993 hearing from Albertans what was required. That resulted in the report that came into the Assembly in early 1994. Then we saw I think it was Bill 18 in 1994, which was passed. It came back in 1995, when the government diluted some of the provisions that we were pretty excited about the year before. They put in what were known as the Clark amendments to be able to allow our Ethics Commissioner to also hold the dual position of Information and Privacy Commissioner. So there has been actually a lot of legislative treatment around freedom of information.

Then, of course, section 91 mandated a three-year review, and that was struck last spring. There were – I've lost count; the members for Calgary-Glenmore and Bonnyville-Cold Lake may recall. I think we must have had about 18 committee meetings in Edmonton over the course, starting last March and then going through really until February 1999. I'm happy to say that a number of the recommendations from the select special committee were unanimous and ones that myself and the Member for Edmonton-Castle Downs were pleased to support and continue to be pleased to support. There were some concerns, Madam Speaker, and I'll detail those in a moment. Certainly the members of the committee worked very hard, and we learned a lot about information and privacy issues in the province. I think for the most part the recommendations that came forward are things that make the freedom of information regime around this province work better, work more effectively.

Now, there are some issues that have to be raised in terms of some of the limitations in the process that bring us to this point. The first one is that I continue to be very disappointed that there was no public consultation this time in the work of the select special committee. Madam Speaker, public consultation does a couple of things: it educates and informs Albertans about issues, and it genuinely solicits their input and their feedback. In fact, what we had here was a select special committee that I was not able to persuade that there should be public hearings. The view of the committee, certainly of the government majority on the committee and supported by the leader of the third party, was that public hearings weren't necessary.

I regret that one of the results, I think, of not doing public hearings was that of the 120 submissions received, only 15 were from members of the public. Some may say that that suggests there wasn't widespread public interest in access to information or privacy issues. I don't believe that for a moment. I think, though, that what we ended up experiencing with that select special committee was a big institutional bias, if you will.

We heard from all of the local public bodies who will soon be subject to FOIP or are already subject to FOIP. We heard from universities. We heard from colleges. We heard from schools. We heard from teachers. We heard from regional health authorities and health professions and a host of other people. Virtually everybody making submissions and responding to this issue were people who

are in the business of processing applications, and as important as that is, it's only one-half of the process. What we weren't hearing, Madam Speaker, were those Albertans who make applications.

It's important to recognize that it's not just this member and it's not just members of the opposition that use the Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act. In fact, the biggest users of the act are businesspeople in the province of Alberta. That's not widely known. It's not the media, and it's not the opposition. It's not MLAs. The people who most use the Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act are businesspeople who are trying to get information. This act is actually a useful and powerful tool for them. It also serves its purposes with the opposition and with the media.

The institutional bias that was present in the review, though, was manifest in a couple of different ways. I reference the dissent from the preliminary report that had been prepared by myself and my colleague for Edmonton-Castle Downs and in fact tabled in the Assembly. The public consultation paper that was done didn't highlight the problems that had been encountered with the act, and this is one of the other problem things. The public discussion guide simply summarized some of the key elements of the act. It didn't share with Albertans the experience that people have encountered with the act from the time it went into force on October 1, 1995, until the time the committee undertook its work.

We learned a lot of things in the three years of experience with FOIP. We learned that our application fees are the highest in Canada, and we learned that application fees can be a major problem when it comes to access to information. We learned, Madam Speaker, that when the province of Ontario, after Mike Harris got elected, moved from having no application fees to bringing in a \$5 application fee, access requests dropped off by something like 40 percent. So let nobody believe that access fees don't have an impact on volume of requests. I think that's an unfortunate thing.

You know, if you have the chance that I've had to spend a lot of time talking to librarians, people involved in the business of sharing information with Albertans, they were quick to point out initially and reinforced in many different ways that user fees, application fees, are the single most effective way of limiting or curtailing access. That continues to be a major concern. Those are the sorts of things we'd heard. If there had been public hearings, if there had been a more aggressive discussion guide that went out to Albertans that said, "You know, these are the problems we've been hearing about with this act over the last three years," that would help informed debate.

The other concern I'd want to raise is that there was a deadline for public submissions that was very short. The chairman of the committee began advising certain people that later submissions would be accepted. We had a deadline that in fact was not a deadline at all but was sort of a moving target. I think that created some problems in terms of submissions.

The other comment I'd make is that we missed some really unique opportunities with this review, some opportunities that would have fit very well with what was going on with the act. We're at a bit of a unique history in Alberta when we're dealing with information. Bill 30, the Health Information Protection Act, was introduced two years ago. The Minister of Health was justifiably beaten up over that bill and retreated and in fact created a task force to look at it. We understand that there's a new iteration of that bill coming maybe in the next day or so or next week, before we finish for the summer.

4:40

Dr. Tom Noseworthy in this province was appointed to be co-chair of a federal health advisory task force with a view to developing a national health information strategy. There was a privacy audit initiated, to her credit, by the Minister of Municipal Affairs to look

at what was going on with private registries and the use and potential abuse of information. This is something that's been going on.

Now, the problem is that the select special committee had two presentations from consultants working with the Minister of Municipal Affairs. What was difficult was that you have these parallel processes going on at the same time, and it would not be, I think, any person's idea of the most efficient way of soliciting public input on privacy issues to have a health information process over there, to have a private registry information review over there. You've got a three-year select committee dealing only with the narrow part of the FOIP Act. Then to compound all of this, you've got the federal government and the House of Commons dealing with Bill C-54, a bill which will radically change the way data and personal information are managed in the nongovernmental sector.

So you have all these things going on. You have the European Union privacy directive, which we've discussed in this House before, that came into force in September of 1998. We're a trading province. We don't comply with the European Union privacy directive, and that's something like \$700 million in terms of goods and services we export to western Europe that potentially are at risk because we're noncompliant. Then on top of all that, we had the Uniform Law Conference of Canada working on a draft uniform data protection act. So all of these things are going on, and one would have thought that this was the vehicle to bring all these things together. You know, with privacy it's the same kind of issue whether it's health information or registry information or commercial/noncommercial information. I'm disappointed we weren't able to integrate those things.

Some of the other problems I've talked about are the institutional bias in the consultation, the fact that there was a deadline for the public making submissions and that 132 days after the deadline for public submissions we still were receiving information from different government departments. So when we look at the report from the select special committee, we shouldn't be surprised that it's very responsive to what public bodies identified as a problem. In my view – and this is a minority view – we didn't pay enough attention to the perspective of applicants.

In terms of some of the issues, while I support the bill and the bulk of the recommendations are positive and I encourage all members to vote for the bill, I wanted to spend my time detailing some of the things I think we can do better and some of the things I'm going to be addressing in terms of amendments. EPCOR and ENMAX were completely excluded from the scope of FOIP. EPCOR and ENMAX may present themselves now as private utilities, but they didn't start as private utilities. They exist because of a huge investment in terms of public dollars in terms of both those utility companies.

The preferable approach would have been to recognize that they could use the specific exemptions. To take them out holus-bolus I think is a problem. It's a problem that if you're a citizen in Red Deer, Alberta, or in Grande Prairie, Alberta, you have a lower level of privacy, of access rights than you do if you live in Calgary or Edmonton or Lethbridge or Medicine Hat. Why is that? The reason is that the RCMP are the police service in communities like Red Deer and Grande Prairie, but what's happened is that the federal legislation under which the RCMP operates is about 12 or 13 years old and doesn't provide the same heightened level of privacy protection that our FOIP Act does. So you have a different standard of protection in some places.

You know, there were some further concerns that private schools are held to a different standard, a lower standard of accountability than public schools are. There are substantial public dollars going into private schools, but the decision was made – and it's evident in the bill as well – that they can somehow be accountable maybe to

the Minister of Education, but they're not directly accountable in the sense that people can make requests. There's a different level of privacy protection. In fact, there's no legislated privacy protection in terms of students in private schools.

What I found particularly troublesome, Madam Speaker, was that we didn't receive any submissions from private school people saying: we shouldn't be subject to this. All of the submissions we received, whether it was from the Peace River school board or from the ATA or the Alberta School Boards Association, said that it should be the same standard; private schools or public schools, it doesn't matter.

What happened was that it turned out we had a couple of members on our committee who had been on the Private Schools Funding Task Force, and they reported. So what we had was a pretty unsatisfactory incorporation by reference of some other consultation that had happened the year before really around different issues. That was private school funding, we all thought, but suddenly that sort of came in through the back door, and even though the people who responded to the select special committee said to make it the same standard, we had that sort of problem. So I had some difficulty with that.

One of the other things I have some problems with – if we look in Bill 37, there's a particular issue that's of concern, and that's section 1(1)(d)(ii) and (iii). We've broadened the law enforcement exception. This becomes very significant. Before, we said that if you're involved in an investigation that may lead to the laying of a charge, that information would be exempt. That made good sense. Now what we've done is rolled this out further to include administrative penalties. I know my colleague for Edmonton-Norwood is going to develop this argument further. What this now means is that if an elevator crashes in an apartment building in Calgary-Buffalo and there's a suspicion that the elevator inspection may not have been up to snuff, what happens is . . .

MR. SAPERS: Where's my button?

MR. DICKSON: I have a great button I should be wearing while we're discussing this bill, and I'm asleep at the switch. I'm bringing it next time, in committee stage.

If that elevator crashed in that apartment building, somebody could argue that you couldn't get reports that were done by the Department of Labour on whether that was a safe or an unsafe elevator, whether there had been proper testing, because there might be some kind of an administrative review going on. So what you've done is you've spread the net for the exception. It's not the net; I should say the shield of protection. The umbrella of darkness has been spread to cover things. That was never intended. The public's right to know is hampered.

We have a problem with section 13(2), which offends section 2 on the freedom of association in the Charter of Rights and Freedoms. You know, we have a problem here where we're now going to discriminate. We may say that there will be an extension of time for responding to an access request if "multiple concurrent requests have been made by 2 or more applicants who work for the same organization or who work in association with each other." So now what's going to happen . . . [Mr. Dickson's speaking time expired]

I hope that isn't the end of my 20 minutes already. We'll pick this up later, Madam Speaker. Thank you very much.

4:50

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

MS OLSEN: Thank you, Madam Speaker. As you probably are aware and as all members of this House are aware, it's very, very

difficult to stand up after the hon. Member for Calgary-*Buffalo* because he is Dr. FOIP. He knows this act inside and out. Quite frankly, I think the recommendations and the discussions that the hon. member has had regarding the Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act are in fact most insightful and most instructive. It would certainly pay other members of this House to lend an ear to what he has to say.

As we know, Madam Speaker, the object of this particular bill is to fine-tune the Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act, which was passed in 1994 and enacted a year later. Interestingly enough, the amendments are based on submissions made to an all-party review by the general public, the media, police services, self-governing professions, school boards, postsecondary institutions, regional health authorities, municipalities, office of the Information Privacy Commissioner, the government of Alberta, and other stakeholders. Out of all of that I believe there were about 120 submissions, and 15 of those were from the general public.

We also know that the advertising and requests for submissions were made in a one-day advertisement in the major dailies, and that's it. It doesn't sound to me like this government wanted a very broad discussion on freedom of information and protection of privacy, which is unfortunate given that the Premier has stated that he supports this kind of initiative. In fact, I think we get another message here. I don't see this government moving very quickly to show that they're sincere about the freedom of information and privacy protection.

My colleague from Calgary-*Buffalo* made some good points in relation to who was included more often than not. Maybe what we should be looking at is who wasn't included and who didn't come forward, in my view likely because they didn't know. The government refused public consultation in the way that many other consultations and discussions have been done. So the discussions in our view were somewhat limited and certainly caused some red flags to be raised from my perspective. It's unfortunate that we have to keep going back over this legislation, but we want to make it good legislation.

I want to talk a little bit about some of the things that are happening. We do know, though, that the procedure was limited and the whole process was limited in the scope and quality of the review. That's very clear. We also know that on this all-party committee that was held, the government had a majority. I just might want to include publicly that the New Democratic Party was also onboard and refused to hold public consultations. I think that's a very key issue to note, that the party that boasts they're the saviours of civil rights won't even allow discussion in public consultation on freedom of information and privacy. I think that's a problem.

Calgary-*Mountain View* I'm hoping will get up at some point and will get involved in these discussions, because I know he has some wonderful words for us. Although he's sitting comfortably right now in his chair, I think the information will seep in somewhere.

We have to also look at the role of the Information and Privacy Commissioner and the office, the role they played in this particular consultation. There were no outside experts independent of the government department that is responsible for the administration of the act and advocates for those public bodies that are responding to and resisting access requests. I think that's very important to note too.

The hon. Member for Calgary-*Buffalo* also brought up a number of issues in relation to the huge institutional bias in the consultation. Public bodies were almost constantly consulted by the committee chairman and the government employees tasked to this committee. Well, what kind of consultation is that when, you know, it's the chairman going around getting contributions through this back-

channel kind of communication process that existed? I think that's wrong. If you're going to have an all-party committee, the chairman doesn't engage in back-channel communication and provide that as part of the substantive basis for his report. That's an issue that I think we need to look at.

There's a tremendous amount of disagreement between what the Official Opposition here perceives to be good freedom of information legislation and obviously what the government perceives to be good freedom of information. We talked about substantial public input. Well, that's a fallacy. In my view that's such an erroneous perception, when it's documented that of 120 written submissions only 15 came from the public. I think that if the government calls that substantial, then we know how they're making their policy, and all Albertans are in trouble, Madam Speaker.

I want to talk a little bit about the act. We had a release, and the government highlighted some of the issues. One of the issues that was brought up which the government felt they should amend is that the police will be allowed to withhold criminal intelligence information from disclosure and will have the right to refuse to release information that would interfere with an ongoing, unsolved investigation. I think that's fine, Madam Speaker, for the time being, but I have a huge problem in that there are some things that are happening.

Let's just take the issue that's under investigation to date. When the RCMP conclude their investigation, there is no opportunity to FOIP that particular investigation and find out what's going on, and there's no obligation or duty imposed on the RCMP to release that report. That requires some attention. Let's take, for instance, what we'll call the Montgomery report, which is being investigated by the RCMP right now. If that report isn't made public or at least in part made public – and I recognize the need to protect some of the proprietary information, the process, the tactical moves that the police might engage in in order to obtain information. I recognize that a lot of that has to be protected. What I'm not satisfied with is that when we have an investigation such as we have on the table right now, we don't have a commitment from the Minister of Justice about what in fact he is or isn't going to release, and we as members of the public couldn't go and demand from the RCMP anything involved in that particular investigation. [interjection] Bless you, hon. Member for Lesser Slave Lake.

MR. SAPERS: Bless us all.

5:00

MS OLSEN: Bless us all.

I have some concerns with where to draw the line. I think the hon. Member for Calgary-*Buffalo* addressed this. This particular recommendation on the police, in our view, unreasonably broadens the law enforcement exception, an exception that is already quite expansive. I've read the particular act in relation to this, as I've needed to look at what I may or may not be able to get in different issues from the police, and it is very expansive. It is very exclusive.

We need to ensure that legislation will not compromise and prohibit public access to the administrative investigations, such as I just talked about, and that in fact is where laying a charge is secondary to the remedy that somebody may be seeking. So I think that's important.

We look again to different issues, where the rural policing is different than municipal policing and the areas where the RCMP are a municipal force. The federal freedom of information act does have some interesting characteristics or elements of it in that it's very weak. It's very weak, and we have almost a two-tiered access to information depending on where you live in the province. So in

municipalities it may be different than those areas policed outside of these jurisdictions.

I think that that's a caution, and I think that that's something that all hon. members should think about. We're not interested in accessing the tactical or strategic information from police on police operations. We're more concerned about: does the public have a right to know on an administrative issue? I think that that's where we have to walk the line. I think it would be reasonable to say: yes, the public does have access to that information, and there shouldn't be extreme prohibitions in place in that respect.

The other area I was concerned about was obtaining access to records. One of the recommendations is that in trying to obtain access, we believe it's very dangerous to treat differently two or more applicants who work in association. We want to ensure that in those types of relationships where two or more applicants are trying to get information – we're wanting to know what limits there will be on any intrusive investigations. So we have to take into consideration those kinds of things.

I would say that as we move forward in the electronic world, we can access information at any time we want. In fact today I thought: well, gee, what's happening in the House of Commons in relation to Bill C-54? I'm able to find out exactly what that bill is. Bill C-54, that is on the table in the House of Commons right now, is

An Act to support and promote electronic commerce by protecting personal information that is collected, used or disclosed in certain circumstances, by providing for the use of electronic means to communicate or record information or transactions and by amending the Canada Evidence Act, the Statutory Instruments Act and the Statute Revision Act.

Well, Madam Speaker, this is another step in the right direction. You know, I look right here in front of me, and four hon. members have laptops in front of them. We all have access to the Internet through here. We can all have access to e-mail through here. We can pay our bills right here if we choose. We could all be paying our bills right here, right now, over the Internet. How is that information all protected? Who has the right, then, to collect that information, and what are they going to do with it? That's a concern, and I think that we have to be more forward thinking.

Our legislation should mirror those things that are happening at the federal level, should be supportive or complementary to what is happening with our federal laws, and we don't see that. We see a move away from the protection of information. We see the movement away from allowing people access to information, and quite frankly there's a lot of information that people should have access to. Then we talk about fees. Well, our fees are atrocious. If a person really feels that they have a real bone to pick with the province and they want their records and they're going to go through FOIP to get information, you know, they have to pay a horrendous fee for that. At some point, hopefully, that will be covered. I know the hon. Treasurer is going to be looking at that whole issue of fees and the collection of fees, and this is just one of those other issues that we need to look at.

You could say, Madam Speaker, that as a position, a freedom of information and privacy position, we're going to appoint somebody as a director, and that's going to be a \$70,000 a year job or a \$60,000 a year job. But to obtain that information, we have to be able to recover that salary and all those benefits and everything else, so it's going to cost an exorbitant amount in order for any member of the public to collect the information that they require and in fact that in many instances they have the absolute right to have.

So, Madam Speaker, I think it's important that we have the hon. Treasurer involved and that he's looking at his legislation, ensuring that that complements federal legislation, that he's moving forward

instead of backward, and the same with the Minister of Labour. I think it would serve those members well to take some direction from the Minister of Municipal Affairs, because she's taken the right step by identifying some issues and concerns. We in fact now know that she's well on her way to correcting some of those problems. And do you know what else? The Minister of Municipal Affairs is very open to concrete, constructive suggestions from members of the opposition, so in proceeding down the path that she is going, I know that she would be accepting of those constructive remarks and opinions from the opposition. I'm just hoping that the Minister of Labour and the hon. Treasurer are as open to that kind of thing.

Madam Speaker, the other concern that I have in relation to fees is that many of those people who might require information, maybe some of those people in disadvantaged positions, may feel that the government hasn't dealt with a situation or an issue in the appropriate manner, and they want access to their files. What concerns me is that with the fees that are set right now, many of those people don't have the resources to obtain all of that information, so it becomes a little bit difficult for them to determine and discern what exactly it is that they want and need. I'm hoping that we will in fact address that issue and that more people who don't have the resources to obtain the information are allowed to collect the information anyway, because, you know, this government shouldn't be based on a customer model, I suppose. It should be based more on the citizenship model, where we have a right to access information because we're citizens of the Crown.

Thank you, Madam Speaker.

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

5:10

MRS. SLOAN: Thank you, Madam Speaker. I, too, am pleased today to rise and make comments on Bill 37 at second reading. This bill perhaps is in partial completion of a widespread consultation the government conducted on freedom of information, but it was a contentious consultation. I know that my hon. colleagues that participated as members of the opposition in that process made recommendations that were completely rejected by the committee and subsequently by this government.

Perhaps what is most important to establish this afternoon, Madam Speaker, is that not only the opposition had concerns about the restrictiveness of the bill proposed by government. Because a large number of organizations took considerable time and invested both their staff and resources in making submissions to this committee, I think it is appropriate to voice concerns of other organizations and entities in this province to the bill as drafted by the government.

The first submission that I would like to speak to this afternoon is the submission made by the Consumers' Association of Canada, the Alberta chapter. They outlined in some detail, Madam Speaker, a number of concerns with respect to barriers encountered in accessing information and the context in which they view these issues. One of the areas they cited as a barrier was the interpretation of the Alberta Health Care Insurance Act.

The exclusion of this Act from the FOIP Act and Alberta Health policy, researchers, key stakeholders and the public [being] unable to access information which is critical to identify and evaluate the impact of specific healthcare initiatives and external influences on the safety, quality, accessibility and value for money of healthcare services in Alberta.

They provided as an example the "work-to-rule actions by physicians and 'media' negotiations," a tactic that this government employs not only against physicians but now against registered nurses and teachers. The association cites that

not even individual physicians are aware of the variations in billings



among practitioners and facilities. Even the AMA claim they cannot access this data and so have been unable to monitor individual physician billings in order to meet their contract obligations with Alberta Health. In BC, [in contrast] this information is published every year.

Another area of concern is that the delegation of authority and responsibility for health care services and/or governance to the regional health authorities in hand with an increasing number of contracted private parties being involved in the delivery of health care and the quasi-public organizations such as the College of Physicians and Surgeons has further limited access to critical information.

The Association cites that when requests are made to Alberta health for information on which policy is based, these requests are frequently referred to RHAs, specialist societies, contracted commercial organizations, the College of Physicians and Surgeons, etc. The RHAs [commonly] quote the previously identified Alberta Health restrictions to deny access to information.

These are things, Madam Speaker, which this bill this afternoon does not address.

I'd like to conclude my statements on the Consumers' Association submission by reading their context remarks.

It seems absolutely unbelievable to our association that individual Albertans are currently being asked (forced) to put themselves at significant risk and give up their sensitive personal, medical and financial information for sharing by government, insurers (third party liability, WCB, LTD, etc) and both public and commercial providers. Yet we are denied even minimal access to information on these parties – despite the fact that it is our money, autonomy and health at stake.

Poignant, poignant submission, Madam Speaker. Could not have been better said, and regrettably the government has chosen not to address those concerns in the context of this bill.

Another submission that is worthy of examination is the submission made by the Canadian Association of Journalists. In their submission the association said that

the committee's preliminary report "shows contempt for the public will" by recommending that MLA expenses continue to be excluded from the Act and that municipal officials and appointees get the same treatment.

They went on in their submission to highlight some of the preliminary report's shortcomings, and I will summarize those very briefly.

1. The committee has rejected the calls of the public for greater financial accountability by elected officials . . .
2. The committee has completely ignored the CAJ's recommendation that people making requests be given the right to access records in the form in which they exist . . .
3. The committee appears not to have dealt directly with the [association's] recommendation that time limits for fee estimates and extension requests be reduced to fifteen days from thirty . . .
4. [The association's] recommendation that self-governing bodies be included under the Act has been rejected. The guidelines proposed by the committee are doomed to failure. Self-regulating bodies can't be expected to voluntarily release information that may reflect poorly on their performance regulating their profession.

Also a wise statement.

5. The committee appears not to have dealt directly with the [association's] recommendation regarding the fee system. The current system is unfair to people who make larger requests. If the estimate is less than \$150, the applicant only pays \$25. If it's more, then he pays the entire amount, not just the incremental cost above \$150.

Another submission of interest that the government I'm sure would be alert to but doesn't appear to have considered in the construction of the bill is the submission made by the Canadian

Taxpayers' Federation. This submission was made in January of 1999. The letter which was written at that time to the chairman and members of the committee specifically cited that

one committee recommendation is of concern, as is the lack of another. Both concern the freedom of information side of the Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act.

The federation urges the committee

to once again review the Federation's proposal that cabinet documents be available for public scrutiny after five years as opposed to the current 15 years. The committee has not addressed that particular . . . proposal though it has, ironically, recommended that local public bodies be subject to the Act after five years instead of the current fifteen. Why should municipal bodies be subject to five-year disclosure laws but not the provincial cabinet?

A very good question, Madam Speaker. Another case perhaps of off-loading responsibility and accountability onto other bodies while the government is not willing to meet the same test or meet the same bar of accountability.

The federation also cited the '94 cabinet discussion surrounding West Edmonton Mall, and I know that my colleague from Edmonton-Glenora will be speaking at some point later in this bill, and I'm sure he will address these concerns as well. The federation indicated that the controversy surrounding West Edmonton Mall and Alberta Treasury Branch

would be available this year if the province amended freedom of information laws for a five-year exemption only. As it is, Albertans will have to wait until 2009 to understand the cabinet's thoughts on such matters.

Unbelievable. And this is a government that proposes to be open and accountable. I guess that motto only applies long after the vault has been opened and the money allocated in this case.

5:20

The federation was reasonable as well in saying that while some cabinet confidentiality is useful, lest important discussions take place in side hallways, the public has a right to know the nature of cabinet discussions sooner than a decade and a half after they took place.

I would strongly agree.

They further stated that by keeping the public in the dark regarding how cabinet makes decisions and their discussions for 15 years, this

cuts the public out of their right to know until long after, so to speak, the political horse has left the stable. An informed public is not something political representatives should be opposed to,

unless perhaps the political representatives of government are insecure about the decisions they're making and the appropriateness of those decisions when placed under the public microscope, Madam Speaker.

The federation also spoke on a similar point to the journalist in citing that

to exempt MLA office expenses from the Act is mistaken. No Albertan has the right to know the names or phone numbers of those contacting their MLA, but Albertans do have a right to know how their tax dollars are spent in the MLAs' offices.

Again on that count, Madam Speaker, as someone who in all years I've been a member of this Assembly has tabled annually an accounting of how my constituency budget was spent and on what issues, the bar is there for anyone who wants to achieve that type of openness and accountability to their constituents.

I have only addressed a small number of the submissions, Madam Speaker. Actually I do want to raise just one more before I move on to the other aspect of my debate. The Alberta Federation of Labour also made some timely and appropriate comments about this review. They pointed out the restrictiveness of the consultation process, the tight time line for submissions and input for the public. In their

particular experience the Alberta Federation of Labour office “only received the discussion paper, which was the first information that a review was underway, a couple of weeks ago,” and that was in early June of 1998.

MR. DICKSON: And a June 30 deadline.

MRS. SLOAN: Exactly. The deadline for submissions, Madam Speaker, was June 30, 1998, so certainly not anywhere good enough for the seriousness of the act that was being considered.

The Federation of Labour made three recommendations to improve the act. First, they “believe the scope of the Act is too limited.” They indicated that they understand that “MASH sector bodies are being phased in over the next year or so. This is a positive step.” However, “another wave of inclusions should occur,” and they agreed with the Consumers’ Association in saying that “self-regulating bodies, such as the College of Physicians and Surgeons, should be covered due to their important role as public watch dogs.”

Secondly, they indicated that they

would like to see less use of exclusion clauses to prevent Albertans from receiving information. Most exclusions, such as if a third party were to be affected or documents related to court proceedings, are reasonable . . . However, we believe the Committee should examine two exemptions more closely.

These are the exemptions for MLAs and offices of the Legislative Assembly and, further, the exemption of advice, recommendations, policy considerations to Executive Council members.

Their third recommendation cited “the cost of FOIP requests.” They recommended “that a more inclusive and accessible process for fee waiver be implemented.”

Those are all relevant and, I would submit, worthy of due consideration by the government. It would appear that in the context of what we see before us this afternoon, those concerns by organiza-

tions that represent a wide diversity of citizens in the province of Alberta did not warrant the government’s attention or review.

So with those comments, Madam Speaker, in terms of the general debate on this bill this afternoon, as someone who has now had the opportunity to use the act on a variety of occasions, at one point all the way to an appeal to the commissioner and, I might add, a successful appeal, I think the act is fundamentally sound, but the stage that we are at and the amendments that the government is proposing do not go far enough, in my opinion. Certainly if we aspire to being a true democracy, I would submit that the citizens of this province who pay the bill, so to speak, for the provision and the operation of ministries of this government, the Legislative Assembly, the provision for the coverage of expenses that we incur as elected officials most certainly deserve to be able to access information under a freedom of information act in a relatively easy, low-cost fashion. That is not something that this act provides.

Particularly in the few minutes I have remaining, I’d like to speak about some of the vulnerable populations that find themselves caught in a maze of bureaucracies – Family and Social Services, Alberta Justice – many of whom are living an existence in poverty. They have valid reasons to want information, but they are not able to provide the fee provisions the act requires, and it would appear to me that in this case, Madam Speaker, it’s just another case of this government’s suppression of the vulnerable by making an act that is not sensitive to the financial challenges they face. As we see social issues becoming higher up on the political agenda, I think that has to be given due consideration.

At this time, Madam Speaker, I would call the question. Thank you.

[Motion carried; Bill 37 read a second time]

[The Assembly adjourned at 5:29 p.m.]