

Legislative Assembly of Alberta

Title: **Wednesday, May 5, 1999** 1:30 p.m.

Date: 99/05/05

[The Speaker in the chair]

head: Prayers

THE SPEAKER: Good afternoon. Let us pray.

Lord, renew us with Your strength.

Focus us in our deliberations.

Challenge us in our service of the people of this great province.

Amen.

Please be seated.

head: Introduction of Visitors

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

MR. HANCOCK: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Approximately a month ago we had the sad time of saying good-bye to a good friend to Alberta, Mr. Shigeru Ise, the former consul general for Japan. Today we have a great pleasure and a great privilege of introducing to you and through you to members of the Assembly a gentleman that many of us met this morning on his initial visit to Alberta, the new consul general of Japan posted to Alberta, Mr. Kiyoshi Shidara. He's accompanied by Mr. Kaoru Tsurita, consul. Consul Shidara was posted to the consulate general in Edmonton in April 1999. Prior to coming to Edmonton he was the deputy consul general in San Francisco.

As you know, Mr. Speaker, Japan is Alberta's main overseas economic partner, accounting for approximately 25 percent of our non-U.S. trade. Alberta has had a trade office in Tokyo since 1970, and we've had a Japanese consulate general here since 1972. We enjoy a very good relationship with Japan, and we're looking forward to a very good relationship with our new consul general.

I would ask the consul general and the consul to rise and receive the warm welcome of our Assembly.

head: Presenting Petitions

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

MRS. SOETAERT: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure today to table a petition signed by 41 people from St. Albert. This is part of the SOS petitions. They are 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.

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

MS OLSEN: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I, too, would like to table a petition to the Assembly from the SOS, Save Our Schools, group that states:

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

head: Tabling Returns and Reports

THE SPEAKER: The hon. Minister of Education.

MR. MAR: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm tabling the requisite number of copies of a research paper prepared for my department on reduced class sizes and PTR and their effects on student achievement.

MR. DICKSON: Three tablings, Mr. Speaker. The first one is relative to Bill 30. I'd undertaken in debate the other day to table copies of a Watson Wyatt special memorandum dated April 1999. It's an actuarial firm with some good advice to us on same-sex pension benefits.

The second item is, first, an excerpt from the 1999-2000 preliminary budget for the Calgary board of education highlighting where the cuts are going to have to be there, and, finally, a summary of special education cuts in the CBE, which are being considered by the trustees of that district as we speak.

Thank you.

THE SPEAKER: The hon. Minister of Economic Development.

MRS. NELSON: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased to table with the Assembly the requisite number of copies of the answers to questions raised during the lottery fund estimates.

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

MR. SAPERS: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Initially I have two tablings for the Assembly today. They are both letters from students at Grovenor elementary school. The first is from a grade 5 student by the name of Laura West, who is writing concerning the pending leaving of a teacher from her school, Mr. Trent, who teaches a split grade 5/6 class. Laura writes in part that she wants Mr. Trent to stay because he's a good buddy, and he's done well for the school, and she's sad that it's just because of money that he has to leave. A classmate of hers also writes. Her name is Courtney Neitsch, and she writes and says in part:

My teacher, Mr. Trent, is leaving at the end of this year. My mom tells me it is because our school doesn't have enough money. We do not want him to leave. He is good and makes us feel good about ourself.

I should say that there is a grade 4 class from Grovenor school touring the Legislature right now, so maybe the Treasurer would like to meet with them.

Mr. Speaker, I have 11 notices of amendment to Bill 35. This brings to 21 the total number of amendments now tabled to Bill 35. This package of amendments includes making sure that Bill 35 covers all fees charged by postsecondary institutions in Alberta as part of the review.

THE SPEAKER: Hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands, do you have a tabling?

MS BARRETT: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Yes, I have four tablings today. The first two are copies of news releases issued by the Alberta Union of Provincial Employees dated May 3 and 4 respectively with regard to the strike at the Headwaters health authority by the low-income wage earners there.

Additionally, five copies of a news release that the New Democrat opposition released yesterday asking the government to commit to provincial funding for midwifery in the province.

Finally, a letter that we received today from the Alberta Wilderness Association noting their objections to the contents of the Natural Heritage Act, Bill 15.

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

MR. STELMACH: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Today I am pleased to table seven copies of a letter dated March 8, 1999, written to the hon. Member for Lethbridge-East as my response to Motion for a Return 15.

MR. DAY: Mr. Speaker, I'm pleased to table today five copies of the standard calculation of comparison of tax load and tax effort between Ontario and Alberta. This is based on their most recent budget. I want to congratulate the province of Ontario, but tabling this, we will see that the total tax load or tax load on individuals or measured on personal income tax load looking at basic rate and surtaxes – any way you measure it Alberta continues to be the lowest, the least taxed citizenry in the country. I do congratulate Ontario for being in hot pursuit of that title, but they haven't achieved it yet.

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

MRS. SOETAERT: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'd like to table five copies of a letter I received from Mr. Coates in my riding. He is concerned about physical therapy patients. He lives in WestView and is very concerned about being able to access it in Capital.

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

MS BLAKEMAN: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I have two tablings today. The first is a letter from the southern Alberta citizens in support of the Maintenance Enforcement Action Committee, and it's a letter in which they're making a number of suggestions on how to improve Bill 16.

The second tabling is five copies of the spring issue of *Birth Issues: Current Options in Pregnancy, Birth and Child Care* put out by the Association for Safe Alternatives in Childbirth. It includes an open letter to the Premier of the province.

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

MR. MacDONALD: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I would like to table five copies of a letter I wrote yesterday, May 4, to the Minister of Labour requesting information about the faulty welding and faulty inspection that occurred in 1996 at the Swan Hills waste treatment plant.

Thank you.

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

1:40

MRS. O'NEILL: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased to table five copies of a map outlining the boundaries of the new 2,766-acre Big Lake conservation natural area. This new special place is located 30 minutes from the Legislature and provides protected wetlands adjacent to the city of St. Albert.

THE SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Peace River.

MR. FRIEDEL: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Today the Minister of Environmental Protection announced a new wildland park for the northwest corner of Alberta, and I'm pleased to table five copies of the map outlining the boundaries of the Hay-Zama Lakes wildland park, located northwest of High Level. This park establishes 120,000 acres of habitat used by migrating waterfowl from the Pacific to the central and the Mississippi flyways, which are three of the four North American flyways. Almost 400,000 birds have been recorded at this site during the fall migration.

head: Introduction of Guests

THE SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Highwood.

MR. TANNAS: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm delighted today to introduce to you and through you to members of the Assembly 29 Headwaters community health support workers from the constituencies of Banff-Cochrane, Little Bow, Livingstone-Macleod, and Highwood. They are accompanied today by Pat White, chair of local 57/007; Jean McCrory, vice-chair of the bargaining committee; AUPE representative, Jackie Hill; and AUPE president, Dan MacLennan. I'd ask them all to rise and receive the warm traditional welcome of the Assembly.

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

MRS. O'NEILL: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It gives me great pleasure today to introduce two groups of people in the members' gallery. The first are students and teachers and parents from Cyberschool in St. Albert. This is a school that has the students hailing from Red Deer, from Barrhead, and from other places around the province, and their strength is in technology and delivery of education through that means. They are seated in the members' gallery. They are accompanied by their teachers, Miss Kara Zutz, Miss Linnea Zutz, and Mr. Leo Beaudry, and by Mrs. Noreen Williamson, Mrs. Priscilla Haskin, Mrs. Judy Spencer-Ayliffe, Mrs. Deb Breikreitz, Mrs. Joyce Dennis, Mr. Mark Howarth, and Mrs. Vicki Bowes. I'd ask them all to please stand and receive the warm welcome of the Assembly.

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

MR. SEVERTSON: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I have the pleasure today to introduce to you and through you to the Assembly 50 grade 6 students from the Innisfail John Wilson elementary school. They are accompanied by their teachers, Mrs. Carmen Abraham and Mr. Grant Klymyk, and parents Mrs. Diane MacKay, Mrs. Laurie Lohman, Mr. Randy McDonald, Mr. Dennis Ejack, Mr. Gary Clutton, Mrs. Rhonda McDermott, and Colleen Willigar. They're in the members' gallery and the public gallery. I would ask them to rise to receive the warm welcome of the Assembly.

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

MS BARRETT: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Amongst the visitors that we have today in the members' gallery are a number of workers in the health care community who are on strike in an attempt to get back their 5 percent wage rollback. I'd like to list some of the members that are there: Bea Kuzminski, Ellie Crooks, Lois Colter, Lil Willoughby, Tillie Herrell, Pat Baker, Kathy Hagy, Karen Danforth, Donna Lyons, Diane Halbert, Dixie Lee White, Joan Miller, Betty Penny, Dawna Hiltz, Ruth Shoop, Cheryl Rodriguez, Kate Dickson, Brian Clute, Tara Hitchner, Ardith Neish, Sharon MacMichael, Jan Anderson, Anna Semenuk, Margo Friesen, and Patsy Petersen. I'd ask them to rise and receive the warm welcome of the Assembly.

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

MRS. FRITZ: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased today to introduce to you and through you to the Members of the Legislative Assembly two dear friends. Mr. Torgrim Castberg is visiting from Norway. He first visited the province of Alberta 28 years ago as an exchange student with Olds College, and currently

he is on a two-week tour of Canada and the United States. I'm also pleased to say that Mr. Castberg served as an elected official for two terms as a Conservative in Norway. Accompanying him today is Mr. Ghi Cipperly from the town of Olds. They are seated in the members' gallery, and I would ask that they rise and receive the warm welcome of the Assembly.

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

MS BLAKEMAN: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I have two sets of introductions I would like to do today. I would like to firstly introduce to you and through you to members of the Assembly a number of members of the Association for Safe Alternatives in Childbirth. It is the International Day of the Midwife today. In particular I would like to note President Janet Schwegel, Michelle Serrano, Lisa Mackenzie with Susannah, Deborah Robb, and hello to my old friend Sharon Reiner here with Morgan. I would ask them all to please rise and accept the warm and traditional welcome of the Assembly.

The second introduction I'd like to do this afternoon is a young woman who has joined the staff at the Edmonton-Centre constituency office for the summer. Naomi Agard I think originally hails from the Barrhead-Westlock area, and I would ask Naomi to please rise and accept the warm and traditional welcome of the House.

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

MRS. O'NEILL: It's a pleasure to introduce to you and through you to members of this Assembly a student of Faculte Saint-Jean at the University of Alberta. She is seated in the members' gallery, her name is Meaghan Pickard, and I would ask her to please rise and receive the warm welcome of the Assembly.

head: Oral Question Period

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

Calgary Board of Education

MRS. MacBETH: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Last week the Calgary board of education published its preliminary budget starting this September. That budget calls for the elimination of specialists for deaf and hard of hearing students, physically challenged students, and developmentally challenged students, speech/language pathologists and calls for the elimination of a family support worker and the elimination of four literacy support teaching positions. Most significantly, it recommends the closure of 500 Calgary classrooms. My questions are to the Premier. What responsibility will the Premier take for the closure of 500 classrooms in the Calgary public system?

MR. KLEIN: Last night we had the opportunity, the hon. Minister of Education and myself, to sit down with the chair of the Calgary board of education and the superintendent, Dr. Donna Michaels, to discuss precisely these kinds of problems and how we can perhaps work with the school board to lessen the impact.

Relative to the specifics, how much money . . .

MRS. SOETAERT: Enough to pay for those teachers.

MR. KLEIN: Right.

MRS. SOETAERT: More than you gave West Edmonton Mall.

MR. DAY: It was so quiet yesterday, Colleen, when you weren't here.

MR. KLEIN: It was. Mr. Speaker, you know, the hon. Leader of the Liberal Opposition asked the question. There seems to be another voice over there – right? – chitchattering away.

Mr. Speaker, we met with the school board chair and the superintendent last night to find ways in which we might work with the board to ease the burden of their financial situation.

Relative to the specifics I'll have the hon. minister respond.

1:50

MR. MAR: Mr. Speaker, the issue of this utilization of school facilities in the city of Calgary by the public board of education is a serious issue that was identified under the Calgary board of education review. One of the facts that came out of that review is that the utilization rate of CBE facilities is somewhere in the range of about 80 percent. We know that it is a difficult situation whenever there is a closure of a school facility. We know that that's the case, regardless of whether it's in Calgary or in communities in other parts of the province.

The fact is, Mr. Speaker, that the board is taking this issue very seriously, because they recognize that to have two underutilized facilities, it makes sense instead to consolidate those facilities in certain circumstances, not in every circumstance. The issue is in this particular case: if there are 500 classrooms, there's no point in keeping them open if there are no students in them.

MRS. MacBETH: Well, Mr. Speaker, given that since 1988 there are 16,000 more students in the Calgary public area and 300 fewer teachers being proposed to teach them, what is he talking about when he's talking about shutting down schools and classrooms in this city?

MR. KLEIN: Mr. Speaker, the minister is not talking about that at all. Perhaps the school board is talking about that. I would remind the hon. member that the reinvestment or the investment in education in new dollars is close to a billion dollars – a billion dollars – a 6 percent average per year over six years since 1995. That is a significant amount of money.

When we sit down and we talk about what has been done relative to education, let's not forget what this government and in particular this minister have done relative to addressing the crucial and fundamental questions of classroom needs. Early literacy intervention: are they opposed to that, Mr. Speaker? Are you opposed to that? The 500 new front-line workers to address early literacy? English as a Second Language, special needs, sparsity and distance? The list goes on and on and on.

I can only reiterate that certainly the priority of this government is education. We will make sure that what we do is in the best interests of those children in the classrooms.

MRS. MacBETH: Well, Mr. Speaker, I'm glad the Premier raised that issue. Why is this government refusing to provide 1,900 English as a Second Language students and 500 students with severe behavioral disabilities in Calgary the resources they need beyond the cap that's been imposed by his government?

MR. KLEIN: Mr. Speaker, it's so interesting to listen to the hon. leader of the Liberal opposition and perhaps repeat back the words that she used when she was Minister of Education relative to school boards being responsible for the health and the climate of education in their own districts and how throwing money at a problem is not

the solution. [interjections] Those were her words way back then.

Mr. Speaker, \$600 million over the next three years in addition to almost \$400 million since 1995. We like to talk and focus on what is right and how we improve things in the classroom as opposed to spending taxpayers' money to find out those problems. I'm glad that the hon. member has brought these problems to our attention, and I'm sure that the hon. minister will check them out, or perhaps he has an answer to that question right now. I'll have him supplement.

THE SPEAKER: Seven minutes.

Second Official Opposition main question. The Leader of the Official Opposition.

Health Regions' Fund-raising

MRS. MacBETH: Well, let's go on to another area, and that's health care, Mr. Speaker. Back in 1993 the Premier mused that the public health care system could be perhaps funded by bingos and raffles were his words. Well, it seems that the Premier is getting his wish. My questions are to the Premier. Why does the David Thompson regional health authority need to hold a lottery to raise \$400,000 for badly needed medical equipment, not extra but badly needed?

MR. KLEIN: Mr. Speaker, hospital lotteries have been around for ages. As a matter of fact, I just read in the *Calgary Herald* the other day – I think they had about four pages of lottery winners to support the foundations of the Calgary regional health authority. I know that I have a ticket myself on the Capital regional health authority. As a matter of fact, I won \$100,000 on one of those lotteries, and that didn't hurt at all.

This has been going on for years and years and years, and it's part of the tradition, the history of this particular province and the way that health districts operate.

MRS. MacBETH: Well, Mr. Speaker, why does the Capital health authority have to send out letters from cardiologists asking for donations to buy echocardiograph machines to reduce unacceptable waiting lists in the hospital?

MR. KLEIN: Well, Mr. Speaker, again, as I addressed the last question as it related to education – I talked about \$600 million over the next three years, additional new dollars – 400 new additional dollars have been put into the health care system. We consider that to be quite sufficient to sustain the system and also to make the system whole and pure and to give us a chance to work with various health authorities to make sure that we have a sustainable funding formula in the years to come.

MRS. MacBETH: Well, Mr. Speaker, lotteries aren't sustainable funding for health care facilities. Why do the Calgary and the Capital health authorities have to hold lotteries to purchase equipment for their emergency rooms?

MR. KLEIN: Mr. Speaker, health authorities can use those dollars in any way they see fit. Is this hon. member saying that we should introduce legislation – or perhaps they would like to introduce legislation – to prohibit lotteries? Will they stand up and say that they want to prohibit lotteries for hospitals? Will they stand up and say it? Well, perhaps the media up there can ask the hon. member after we get out of question period. Will she stand up and say that this government should prohibit lotteries for hospitals? Will she say that?

THE SPEAKER: Third Official Opposition main question. The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Headwaters Regional Health Authority

MR. MacDONALD: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Striking health care workers in the Headwaters health authority have traveled over five hours to visit this Assembly today. They are seeking fair treatment, and they want the government to help them resolve their labour dispute. When we have no concern for the front line, just the bottom line, we have, unfortunately, a picket line. My first question is to the Premier today. When will the Premier instruct the Minister of Labour to find out why in this region and with these workers there are so many problems in negotiations?

Thank you.

MR. KLEIN: Mr. Speaker, this is purely a matter for the Minister of Labour to deal with, and I'll have him respond.

MR. SMITH: Thanks very much, Mr. Speaker. You know, the member has tried often to speak about the picket line and the bottom line, but he has yet to get a headline.

Mr. Speaker, let's be very clear about the Headwaters strike. Again, the member speaks without the value of knowing the process where the government has provided mediation. Mediation has been long. It's been difficult. An original part of six authorities worked on this agreement with the PHAA. All of the authorities have concluded agreements with the AUPE with the exception of Crossroads and Headwaters.

There was a mediator appointed April 30, 1997, a "no" report issued March 30, 1999, and the employer is seeking comparability with other authorities and facilities which employ workers performing duties of a similar nature. Mr. Speaker, there are issues outstanding. There is an ability to continue to mediate, to continue to provide that assistance in the hope as the Premier and as the Minister of Labour have seen before, so many agreements with the AUPE that have come to a successful conclusion.

MR. MacDONALD: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My second question is also to the Premier. Mr. Premier, do the replacement workers have the same level of training and experience that these striking health care workers have?

2:00

MR. KLEIN: Well, Mr. Speaker, I just don't have the answer to that question. Relative to the labour component the minister is here. Relative to the health component the minister is not here today, and I'll take that component of the question under notice.

Relative to the labour component I'll ask the minister to respond.

MR. SMITH: Mr. Speaker, whatever is being done in the area is entirely up to the management of the authority, knowing full well that they are specifically charged with the care and well-being of the patients inside, and they're making those decisions with that charge clearly in mind.

MR. MacDONALD: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My third question is also to the Premier. When will these workers have the 5 percent rollback that they took in 1994-95 returned to them? They've had to go on strike, and that's not fair. When will they get their money back?

MR. KLEIN: Well, Mr. Speaker, I don't know that statement to be true or false, but that is something that is between the workers and the RHA.

Relative to, again, the labour component I'll have the hon. minister supplement.

MR. SMITH: Mr. Speaker, it's very clear that these are down to the specific labour negotiation issues. When there are two people involved, there can be two solutions. When there are three people involved, there can be six. So I think the member would probably serve the two parties that are trying to strike this agreement better by not being involved in this dispute and letting the full course of labour mediation and labour collective bargaining, which has worked very well in this province, which has the least record of days lost to strike in Canada, one tenth of one percent of the G-7 countries. It works. It's successful, and I know we'll continue to do it.

Mr. Speaker, I do happen to notice, though, that in a news release, from words quoted by the president of the AUPE, he said: "The strike isn't just about money; it's about justice. We have a relatively wealthy employer who refuses to budge on a totally unacceptable position."

Well, Mr. Speaker, no one has ever referred to the fact that RHAs are wealthy. In fact, that money is spent very judiciously and very wisely. I know that there's an ability in there for an agreement to come to a successful conclusion.

Tax Cuts

MS BARRETT: Mr. Speaker, it would seem that the Premier of Alberta places a higher priority, shall we say, on playing a game of let's race to the bottom with the Premier of Ontario than he places on the well-being of Alberta's health and education sectors. Well, he laughs, but the fact remains: the Premier is once again talking about accelerating the phaseout of the high-income surtax while school boards cope with unsafe schools, crippling deficits, and health authorities refuse to pay their workers fairly. I'd like to ask the Premier then: why do he and his government give a higher priority to tax relief for high-income Albertans than he places on a just contract settlement for the lowest paid employees of the Headwaters health authority, who still haven't gotten their 5 percent rollback given back to them?

MR. KLEIN: Well, Mr. Speaker, I'm very proud of the tax reform measures that were introduced in the budget. I'm particularly proud that once all the reforms come into place, 78,000 low-income Albertans will pay absolutely no provincial tax whatsoever.

MS BARRETT: Well, then why does the Premier give higher priority to accelerating the phaseout of the high-income surtax than he gives to making sure that Alberta families don't suffer financial hardship if they choose to access midwifery for the purposes of childbirth?

MR. KLEIN: Well, Mr. Speaker, the hon. member alluded to high income. Let's put the facts on the table. The people we are talking about are some of the people here in the gallery. They are nurses. They are schoolteachers. They're earning \$45,000. That's when it kicks in, and that will be eliminated. Forty-five thousand dollars, \$50,000, \$55,000 is not considered to be in the high-income bracket, but these are the people who will benefit.

MS BARRETT: But he sure shies away from talking about the big benefits that go to those earning a hundred thousand bucks or more, where the real cash benefit is for people.

Why does the Premier, then, place a higher priority on tax relief for high-income Albertans than he does on alleviating the financial burden that health premiums impose on seniors and middle-income earners?

MR. KLEIN: Well, Mr. Speaker, relative to health care premiums for seniors, as the hon. member well knows, that is on a graduated scale. There are many seniors, I would suggest most seniors, who have those rates subsidized or pay no health care premiums at all.

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

Agricultural Trade Dispute with the U.S.

MR. SEVERTSON: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The beef industry is extremely important to the economy of Alberta. Alberta ranchers are adamant free enterprisers. We export the majority of our beef and live cattle to the United States, and we believe that we are free traders with our American friends. However, a group of U.S. cattle producers called R-CALF has launched a countervail and antidumping investigation against Canada. Could the Minister of Agriculture, Food and Rural Development indicate what he has done to defend the Alberta industry in this investigation?

MR. STELMACH: Mr. Speaker, the department of agriculture has worked closely with our producer groups to compile reams and volumes of information and answer very detailed questions posed by the United States Department of Commerce. We retained the services of legal counsel in Washington, D.C., who has provided us with exceptional advice and intelligence in working through this process. We anticipate total costs so far in this investigation of about \$3 million. That's both to the department of agriculture and to the producer groups.

I am pleased to announce that yesterday the United States Department of Commerce made its preliminary determination on the R-CALF sponsored countervail and found that no countervail duty will be imposed on exports of live cattle from Alberta going to the United States.

MR. SEVERTSON: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. To the same minister: can the minister assure our industry that this clear-cut decision will put a rest to the questioning of our cattle industry with respect to subsidies?

MR. STELMACH: Mr. Speaker, I have to emphasize that this is only a preliminary ruling and that the process of the full investigation will continue probably into early fall. There is also the antidumping investigation that we are defending. We will continue to work closely with our industry, our legal counsel, and the federal government to defend free trade in cattle.

It is important to note that under the northwest pilot project we are now importing large volumes of cattle from Montana and Idaho. That's going a long way to easing a lot of these border trade issues.

MR. SEVERTSON: My final question is to the same minister. Can the minister say if there are any Alberta programs that were found to be countervailable?

MR. STELMACH: Mr. Speaker, that's an excellent question. There were 14 out of a total of 30 government programs investigated that were found to be countervailable by the Department of Commerce. Of the Alberta programs investigated, only two were found to be countervailable, and that is the Alberta Cattle Feeders' Association program and also our Alberta Crown lands grazing lease program. However, because the countervailable duty is so insignificant – it's 0.038 percent of the import price – it was felt that the Department of Commerce was not going to proceed with this countervail.

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

Infrastructure Maintenance

MR. GIBBONS: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Stable, predictable, and long-term funding for our schools, roads, hospitals, social housing, canals, and bridges is a key element for maintaining Alberta's competitiveness in the global economy in the 21st century. Unfortunately, according to its own capital investment planning committee report, this government has spent the past seven years living on borrowed time and has failed to develop a multiyear planning framework to replenish provincial infrastructure. According to the report, a \$1 billion shortfall exists for funding of critical infrastructure needs. My questions today are to the Premier. What assurance can be given to municipalities that the government will not ignore the committee's concerns that our canal bridges are being used beyond their design life?

2:10

MR. KLEIN: Well, Mr. Speaker, it's time to get out from under the dome. I would encourage the hon. member to travel this province and look at the fantastic infrastructure. Let's start in southern Alberta, where there's been an investment over the years of something like \$2.5 billion in irrigation, probably the most extensive and most significant irrigation system in the world, not just in Canada, not in North America, but in the world. [interjection] That works.

Let's look at what the hon. minister of transportation is doing now with respect to Canamex and the \$800 million that has been committed to create a superhighway all the way from the northwestern part of this province, down through the U.S. to the Coutts border crossing, where it meets I-15, and all the way down to the Mexico border and beyond, Mr. Speaker.

Let's look at highway 40. Has the hon. member traveled highway 40? I remember highway 40 very well; you know, the new highway that's been upgraded all the way from Hinton to Grande Prairie through Grande Cache.

I would suggest that the hon. member should get on the highways and the byways and really start to travel over the mountains and across the plains, as Ernest C. Manning used to say at one time, and find out what wonderful infrastructure we do have in this province.

MR. GIBBONS: Mr. Speaker, I think the Premier should do his homework and find out where I do travel.

The next question is to the Premier again. What assurance can be given to Alberta's seniors when the committee points out that there is a \$180 million shortfall in capital requirements including insufficient and rundown long-term care facilities?

MR. KLEIN: Mr. Speaker, I don't believe that to be true at all. Again, when you get out from under the dome and you visit some of the long-term facilities in this province, they're absolutely wonderful facilities and are run by caring, loving people.

MR. GIBBONS: Mr. Speaker, it is his committee.

To the Premier again: what assurance can be given to the businesses, employees, and their families considering coming to Alberta when the committee points out that there is a lack of affordable housing in the high-growth areas of this province?

MR. KLEIN: Mr. Speaker, undoubtedly that is a legitimate question, and it is one of the problems and challenges associated with growth and prosperity. In a way it's a good problem to have. We're trying to deal with that. The hon. Minister of Municipal Affairs, I know,

has a task force set up to look at this very question, not only as it relates to affordable housing for the so-called employables but for those who can't afford housing and for those who have special needs relative to housing. So we're reviewing all of these situations.

Again I'd point out that relative to people moving into this province, as the hon. Treasurer pointed out, we have something like 55,000 new people coming into this province each year, and they don't bring their schools and their hospitals and their roads with them. We have to deal with that very positive challenge of dealing with growth and prosperity.

THE SPEAKER: The next two questions, hon. members, will come from hon. members that represent constituencies named after former Premiers in the province of Alberta. First of all, the hon. Member for Calgary-Lougheed, then the hon. Member for Edmonton-Rutherford. It's never happened before in two years.

School Classroom Sizes

MS GRAHAM: Mr. Speaker, the key issue in the current labour dispute between the Calgary board of education and the Alberta teachers' union centres around what best protects classroom size. Is it the pupil/teacher ratio, PTR, or is it fixed classroom caps? The Minister of Education has just today tabled in this Legislature a research paper on this very issue of PTR and classroom size. I'm wondering if the Minister of Education can shed some light on this very contentious issue of classroom size limits?

MR. MAR: Mr. Speaker, on a previous occasion I also tabled a research document prepared by the Canadian Education Association that had reviewed a number of different previous studies on the subject of classroom size. I invite hon. members to obtain copies of that, as well as the one that I tabled earlier today.

What we found, Mr. Speaker, is that for every report there is that suggests that there's a benefit to reducing classroom size and its effect on student achievement, there will always be another report that says that smaller classes have little or in fact sometimes no effect on student learning and that any gains that there are in student achievement come at a tremendous cost. From my review of the research – and there is a great deal of research out there – it would appear that the most significant factor in student achievement is quality of teaching and not classroom size.

Mr. Speaker, just to be abundantly clear, even if there is uncertainty with respect to the effectiveness of smaller classroom sizes on learning, even if there is doubt about that connection, nobody in this province wants to see very large class sizes. What some school boards do is put upper limits on classroom size while leaving it to individual schools and school boards to determine what class size meets students' needs best. The cap on classroom size by school boards would give those school boards greater flexibility in allocating their resources.

MS GRAHAM: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. That's very interesting information conveyed to us by the minister.

I'm wondering: other than for Calgary public and Calgary separate school boards, are there any other jurisdictions in Alberta that have the PTR in a collective agreement, or are they all policy-based classroom caps?

MR. MAR: Mr. Speaker, the only two school boards in the province that do have a PTR, a pupil/teacher ratio, negotiated in their contracts are the two Calgary boards, the Catholic and the public. There are, upon my review, a number of boards that do have policies

with respect to caps on classroom size. As an example Edmonton public has a cap on classroom size at 30. What the Calgary board is offering in its contract negotiations with its teachers is a cap of 26 at the elementary level, 28 at the junior high level, and 30 at the high school level. Edmonton Catholic has a similar type of cap, although in actual practice there are very few class sizes over 25 in that particular school jurisdiction.

MS GRAHAM: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My final question is this: what is the minister planning to do to ensure that parents and other members of the public have access to the information in this research paper that you filed today?

MR. MAR: Well, Mr. Speaker, the report does identify that the most significant issue, the most significant determinant in classroom achievement is teaching quality. It would appear from the research that in smaller classroom sizes there does not appear to be a change in the teaching method, and accordingly very little improvement accrues in student achievement.

Mr. Speaker, the hon. member asked a question about parents having access to this type of information. My commitment is that this report will be available on the Department of Education's web site starting this afternoon.

I want to make one last point very clear, Mr. Speaker. I want to repeat a statement that I made in this House earlier, and that is to say that capping classroom sizes benefits students and teachers, but a pupil/teacher ratio only benefits the teachers' union.

THE SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Rutherford, followed by the hon. Member for Calgary-North West.

2:20 Council on the Status of Persons with Disabilities

MR. WICKMAN: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The Premier's Council on the Status of Persons with Disabilities was established as an advocate for the disabled and in recognition of the great achievements of Rick Hansen. The council, in my opinion, was very effective under the chairmanship of Gary McPherson, a disabled activist. However, since the appointment of a government MLA to replace Gary, the council has been mysteriously silent on major issues such as AISH reform. My first question to the Premier: did the government feel that there were no disabled citizens that were qualified to fill this position?

MR. KLEIN: Mr. Speaker, certainly Gary McPherson did a commendable job on the council and is fulfilling an equally significant job now with the university and the chair relative to the disabled.

I take strong exception to the fact that this council has been silent. As a matter of fact I met with the chair of the council not so long ago, and it's a very strong council. As a matter of fact, Mr. Speaker, much of the legislation that is now being considered today relative to amendments to AISH comes about as the result of the input of the council.

Mr. Speaker, I don't know if it's appropriate or not, but the chair of the council is here, and I would invite him, as I have in other instances invited chairs of various boards, authorities, committees, and agencies, to respond to specific questions relative to the council's operations.

Speaker's Ruling Answers by a Private Member

THE SPEAKER: This is called question period. The purpose of question period is to bring the government to account. Private

members are not members of government. Only members who have taken the oath of Executive Council are members of government. There have been occasions in the past when private members in serving as chairmen of certain committees have been invited to respond to questions, but those have only been dealing with agenda items, what might be on an agenda, when something might be scheduled, but question period is reserved for the accountability of government.

Council on the Status of Persons with Disabilities (continued)

MR. WICKMAN: Mr. Speaker, secondly to the Premier: was a government MLA appointed simply to muzzle the council?

MR. KLEIN: No, Mr. Speaker. This MLA, the hon. Member for Clover Bar-Fort Saskatchewan, is doing a commendable job. As a matter of fact I had the opportunity of sitting down with the hon. member about a week and a half ago to discuss the work of the council, and the hon. member assures me first of all that he enjoys the work. He's totally committed and dedicated to the council, and the people on the council for the first time in a long time feel that now it has some meaning, that they're doing some fulfilling kinds of things and are actually helping government develop policy, the most evident of which is the policy related to amendments to AISH.

MR. WICKMAN: Finally, Mr. Speaker, again to the Premier: then why, Mr. Premier, has the council been so silent on major issues such as the AISH reform?

MR. KLEIN: Mr. Speaker, unlike the Liberal opposition it's not a matter of how noisy you can be; it's how effective you can be and how you quietly go about in a responsible way doing your work. That's precisely what the council is doing.

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

Provincial Tax Regime

MR. MELCHIN: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Many of the reports as well as a number of the comments made today regarding Ontario's budget that they tabled yesterday claimed that the new tax proposals will make Ontario the least taxed province in Canada. That's a title that the province of Alberta has held proudly for several years and forms part of the Alberta advantage. To the Provincial Treasurer: after Alberta's new tax plan is introduced over the next few years, will Albertans be the least taxed people in Canada with regards to personal income taxes?

MR. DAY: Well, Mr. Speaker, first, I think Ontario and their government need to be congratulated. They're going in the right direction in terms of reducing the load on taxpayers. That has proven to have a stimulating effect on the economy, and in fact over time they bring in more revenues through that particular process.

The member who just raised the question, which is an interesting one, talked about: when our tax plan is fully implemented, will we be lower? I can say that today, one day after the Ontario budget is filed, when you compare directly, we are still the lowest and by a very significant margin. When you take in the overall tax load of what people in Ontario pay, they will be paying this year on their new budget tax plan about 85 percent of the Canadian average. You put the Canadian average here, and they're coming in lower than the

Canadian average, and I say: good for them. That's commendable. But the overall tax load for Albertans today is about 56 percent of that Canadian average. We are still significantly lower. We are today, and we will be in the year 2002 also.

MR. MELCHIN: Thank you again, Mr. Speaker. To the Provincial Treasurer: with Alberta cutting taxes and then Ontario following suit with cutting their taxes and now newspaper reports stating that we may be speeding up the pace of implementation of our new tax plan, is Alberta just engaging with Ontario in a blind race to see who can have the lowest tax rates?

MR. DAY: No. It's not a blind race, Mr. Speaker. Our eyes are wide open on this one. When we look around the country, we see that Canadians are moving to Alberta at a greater rate than to any other province, and that's because we know that people respond to the incentive of being able to keep the rewards of their own efforts and their own labours.

Our tax plan is something we've done after a lot of analysis, after a lot of research and talking with Albertans. We're doing this very carefully. We're making sure that our spending on the priority areas like health and education are firm and intact and in place. Our eyes are wide open, and we happen to be leading the race. We'll continue to do that, eyes wide open, Mr. Speaker.

MR. MELCHIN: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My final supplemental is also to the Provincial Treasurer. When the Treasurer unveiled Alberta's new tax plan in March, he said that debt reduction was still the number one priority of Albertans and that tax reform had to wait until such time as we'd paid off the net debt. How can you, then, stand up in this House and applaud Ontario's budget of tax reduction when the same province has a massive debt and still has a deficit position?

MR. DAY: Well, I won't back off on my congratulations to the Ontario government. Yes, they are reducing their taxes while they still have a significant deficit. I believe their budget records a deficit of \$2.1 billion, and their debt is something like \$121 billion. We believe in provincial autonomy. We don't try and tell another province what to do. I will say that we've observed and they have made the case as we have that if you lower taxes, you stimulate the economy. With their projection and their lowering of taxes since 1995, their tax revenues have increased, so they've been able to put more money towards their deficit and their debt than they were able to before 1995.

We definitely made debt a priority, and deficit reduction and elimination was a priority for us. They're doing it a little differently, but it is important to note, Mr. Speaker, that because their taxes are lower revenues are coming in faster for them than they were before they lowered their taxes. They are addressing their debt and their deficit, and again that's good news for Ontario, so I will still congratulate them.

THE SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Glengarry, followed by the hon. Member for Livingstone-Macleod.

Workers' Compensation Board

MR. BONNER: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. On Monday the Minister of Labour said that an independent review of WCB would be in the cards. Well, the board has yet to decide, but injured workers, the Official Opposition, and even some government MLAs have all identified the need for an immediate inquiry. The evidence is

staggering. My questions are to the Minister of Labour. When can injured workers expect this independent public review to be called?

MR. SMITH: Well, Mr. Speaker, it's certainly interesting that after three days of news coverage and work and discussion by the Member for Calgary-Egmont, the opposition decides to enter into the discussion, perhaps what is known as continuing in search of a headline, as we discussed earlier.

2:30

Mr. Speaker, now is the time that evidently this member needs to know more about the WCB, and I am pleased to provide that answer to his question by saying, one, that the WCB is a nonprofit mutual insurance corporation. Secondly, it provides insurance to about 70,000 Alberta employees. It is not an arm of government. It is not funded by tax dollars; it is funded entirely by the insurance premiums paid by employers.

It is governed by a 10-person board of directors. The 10 members of the board include three representatives of workers, three representatives of employers, three representatives of the public, and the chair. I'm sure the member has noticed that those positions that became vacant at the board were filled by a public competition process throughout Alberta. These Albertans who are appointed to the board of directors are there to represent the interests of the three stakeholder groups.

In the last calendar year, Mr. Speaker, the WCB received more than 125,000 claims. Almost 40,000 related to time lost from work due to an injury. One of the critical roles for government has been to ensure that workers and employers who disagree with a decision made by the board have a route of appeal that is independent from the WCB and from government.

I'm begging the indulgence of the House because of the importance of the issue. It would be a catastrophe . . .

THE SPEAKER: Hon. member, you have the floor.

MR. BONNER: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. What does this minister say to thousands of injured workers who flood into constituency offices every year who feel that they've been mistreated and want their elected officials to act, not shrug off their responsibility?

MR. SMITH: Mr. Speaker, there are comments from this side of the House that say that the preamble to the question is misleading. There are not thousands of injured workers who peel into MLA offices. There are some chronic injuries that must be dealt with.

As I was saying earlier, it would be a catastrophe if elected officials were in a position to influence decisions made by this nonprofit insurance organization. To politicize the adjudication of things would be unethical. These are employer dollars.

To ensure that the system is not politicized, Mr. Speaker, the appeals process put in place by the act provides access to an independent, quasi-judicial appeals commission. The appeals commission, like the Human Rights Commission and other similar bodies, holds hearings. The appeals commission has recourse . . .

THE SPEAKER: I'd invite the hon. minister to participate tomorrow in Ministerial Statements.

MR. BONNER: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The minister has been given the power to call a public inquiry by the Public Inquiries Act. Why does he not use this to call this public independent review of the WCB?

MR. SMITH: Mr. Speaker, knowing that time is precious, nobody, including the WCB, believes that the WCB is right all the time. The system deals with people. These issues are complex, and they're very emotional. That is why there is a system, a multipartite appeal system. There is public representation, employer representation, stakeholder representation on the board. And you know what? They're doing a good job. Our members are doing a good job too, because they realize the issues that are there, they're bringing them forward, and they're bringing them forward to members of the board of the WCB. We expect that to continue.

THE SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Livingstone-Macleod, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Calder.

Literacy Programs

MR. COUTTS: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. On May 14, 1999, the Livingstone Range school division, the Pincher Creek district schools, the Holy Spirit Roman Catholic separate school division, and other education and business partners will be sponsoring the partnership approach to literacy project, known as PAL, and the read/write adult literacy appreciation night in Pincher Creek. The celebration is for students, families, and tutors who are involved in and have benefited from these programs. The goal of PAL is to provide a trained reading pal for kindergarten to grade 3 students who need to improve their reading skills. My question is to the Minister of Education. Can he please tell this House if his department has funding that boards can access for the PAL project?

MR. MAR: First of all, Mr. Speaker, I'd like to say that I'm very impressed with the PAL project and other reading initiatives that are being taken by school boards and community members throughout the province of Alberta. The PAL project and other family literacy projects such as Homespun and literacy and parenting skills are developed at the community level by co-ordinators of volunteer tutor adult literacy programs.

In many cases, Mr. Speaker, these programs are developed with the help of educational, health, or social service boards or agencies. We don't fund PAL or programs like PAL directly. However, we do support early literacy through the \$20 million that we have set aside for the early literacy initiative. This initiative does support early literacy programs for kindergarten through grade 2 students who are having difficulty learning how to read. The early literacy initiative funding can be accessed by local school boards that support programs like the PALs program.

MR. COUTTS: My first supplemental, then, is to the same minister. How much funding is available through the early literacy initiative, and how is the funding distributed to those boards?

MR. MAR: Mr. Speaker, with respect to all of the areas that we've reinvested and made new investment in, I would have to say that the early literacy initiative has perhaps received the best reception of any program that we've put in. From 1998 through the year 2001 a total of \$74 million has been allocated to this early literacy initiative to promote the development of literacy skills in students from kindergarten through grade 2. Funding for early literacy is allocated to school authorities based on the total number of students enrolled in kindergarten and grade 1 and grade 2 as of September of 1997, and that funding has been committed for a period of three years.

The rates of funding, Mr. Speaker: for kindergarten, \$37 per child per year, for grades 1 and 2, \$206 per student per year, a significant amount of money. As an example, for the Livingstone Range school

division, which I know the hon. member would be interested in, that has resulted in funding of \$150,000. The Holy Spirit Roman Catholic separate school division has received \$153,000 through the early literacy initiative.

MR. COUTTS: My final supplemental, then, is to the same minister. What other avenues are available for boards to pursue to implement this PAL project?

MR. MAR: Mr. Speaker, Advanced Education and Career Development, which up until this fiscal year has only funded adult literacy programs in communities across the province, has established a family literacy project fund. Community adult learning councils and volunteer tutor adult literacy programs funded by Advanced Education may apply annually to that fund so that they might operate family literacy projects with the appropriate agencies or boards. The focus of the funding program is parents and their preschool children.

However, Mr. Speaker, an eligible organization could apply for funds to operate a PAL project for a year if the necessary partnership with the local school division was established. The \$180,000 fund is expected to support about 30 projects a year with grants ranging from \$2,000 to \$10,000 each.

2:40

Recognitions

THE SPEAKER: In 30 seconds hon. members will begin the first of seven. The hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands.

Sandra Botting

MS BARRETT: Mr. Speaker, today is the International Day of the Midwife. I would like to take this opportunity to recognize a remarkable woman, Sandra Botting. Sandra is a nonpractising midwife who has been an integral part in defining and establishing midwifery in Alberta. She has worked tirelessly for the past 25 years to ensure that the model of midwifery in Alberta would be one that could meet the needs of families and professionals. Sandra has risen to each of the many challenges along the way with the utmost dignity and professionalism. A decade ago she joked that she would become a grandmother before she ever saw midwives fully recognized and funded by the health care system. Sandra did become a grandmother last summer, and midwives are still not funded.

Sandra is now dealing with the greatest challenge of her life. Sadly, she was recently diagnosed with cancer. She likens the challenge of living with cancer to the challenges she faced over the years working to assist her beloved profession in becoming recognized. Her greatest desire is that families have true choices in childbirth. Sandra has given a great deal to Alberta's birthing families, her colleagues, government-appointed committees, MLAs, regional health authorities, and so many others.

I ask that we all honour and recognize the gifts that Sandra Botting and all other midwives have already given to the province and its people.

Thank you.

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

Boys and Girls Clubs of Calgary

MRS. FRITZ: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. This Saturday, May 8, the Boys and Girls Clubs of Calgary will hold its 60th anniversary celebrations. I believe that the mission statement of this dedicated organization best describes the spirit in which it thrives.

Our mission is to enhance the quality of life of Calgary's children and youth. Through community-based programs and family

support, we provide services that offer young people the opportunity to recognize and fulfill their potential.

Since 1939 the services provided have increased and have changed with growing demand, but the goals have remained the same. Boys and Girls Clubs of Calgary have been strong and active in meeting community needs. I would ask that Members of the Legislative Assembly join me in congratulating the Boys and Girls Clubs of Calgary for 60 years of invaluable service to the city of Calgary and to recognize the dedicated employees and volunteers.

Thank you.

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

International Day of the Midwife

MS BLAKEMAN: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Today is the International Day of the Midwife, and I would like to recognize the work of the Association for Safe Alternatives in Childbirth, which serves Edmonton and area, and the Calgary association of parents for safe alternatives in childbirth, which serves Calgary and area. Both of these groups and all of their satellite units along with the midwives themselves have lobbied long and hard to have midwifery services as an integral part of the health system.

I remember the government's own Advisory Council on Women's Issues recommending in the early '90s that the government legalize and register the profession, regulate it, and cover midwifery services under health care. We have achieved the first two, but midwifery services are still not covered by health care. For uncomplicated pregnancies and births midwives are a choice Alberta families want to have. This service should be covered under health care and accessible throughout the province. This is not difficult, folks. At this point all it requires is the political will. Let's get moving and achieve it by the millennium.

Thank you.

THE SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Redwater.

Gibbons Legion Ladies Auxiliary

MR. BRODA: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. On Saturday, May 1, 1999, I had the distinct honour of attending the Gibbons Royal Canadian Legion ladies auxiliary 50th anniversary celebrations held at Gibbons. These dedicated ladies are an integral part of the Gibbons legion. They give freely of their time to fund-raising, donating funds, supporting various community groups, especially veterans and dependents. I would like to recognize all past and present charter members as well as all past presidents, in particular Della Gibbons, the first president of the Gibbons legion auxiliary in 1949. Today she is still active in the organization.

Thanks to you, ladies, for your dedication and commitment to your community and surrounding areas. On behalf of all members of this Assembly, congratulations.

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

Mental Health Week

MR. COUTTS: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. This week, May 3 to 9, is Mental Health Week. This year's slogan is Making Mental Health Happen. The Alberta Mental Health Board and the Canadian Mental Health Association are focusing on workplace stress. The goal of this year's Mental Health Week is to increase awareness of workplace stress while providing Albertans with resources to get more

information or to seek assistance in reducing workplace stress. All members of the community, including government, individuals, and businesses, can play an important role in promoting and reducing workplace stress.

This year's program and the constant job of delivering accessible services will be a priority of the Alberta Mental Health Board. A perfect example of this is when just last month the Claresholm-Raymond care centre became a designated mental health facility. Prior to this date most mental health clients from the area had to be transferred to Alberta Hospital Ponoka or Alberta Hospital Edmonton. Claresholm-Raymond is now providing mental health programs and services much closer to home.

I ask all members of this Assembly to join in open houses, mall displays, or any mental health activity in their communities so that they may recognize the important role we all must play not only this week but each and every week in promoting mental health in our communities.

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

St. Albert Youth Council

MRS. SOETAERT: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It is my honour today to recognize the St. Albert Youth Council. Last Saturday, May 1, the Youth Council sponsored the march for Youth against Violence. Over 150 people gathered at Grandin Park Plaza Saturday morning to listen to speeches, music, and walk two kilometres together around St. Albert. As they walked, people in the community drove by and honked their horns in their support. They made a powerful statement about zero tolerance for violence. It was heartening and hopeful to see so many young people organizing, carrying posters, and talking about zero tolerance for violence.

The Youth Council joined with the Zero Tolerance for Violence Committee to promote this march. The slogan for the Zero Tolerance for Violence Committee is Talk It Out. The Youth Council picked up on their idea, and the slogan for the march was Walk It Out.

I am proud of these young leaders. They take action, and they make a difference. Thank you, Youth Council, for leading by example.

Creative Public Library Service Award

MR. ZWOZDESKY: Mr. Speaker, it's a pleasure to salute Alberta Library Week as well as the Edmonton Public Library, this year's recipient of the creative public library service award. This award was presented to the Edmonton Public Library for Smart Search, an innovative research service for the business community, by Community Development Minister Shirley McClellan during the Alberta Library Conference on Friday.

The Edmonton Public Library developed Smart Search after finding that 30 percent of the calls to the reference desk were in fact business inquiries. This fee-for-service program provides specialized intensive research on subjects such as funding sources, patents and trademarks, mailing lists, market research, demographics, and statistics. The program's earnings will be used to expand the library's collection of business materials. Last week I met with the representatives of the Edmonton Public Library, and I'm delighted to congratulate them on this honour.

Mr. Speaker, libraries across the province are celebrating their achievements this week. I encourage Albertans everywhere to visit their local libraries, find out about the latest developments in technology, discover the new services being offered in their

communities, and show these libraries the support they rightfully deserve.

Thank you.

head: Orders of the Day

head: Written Questions

THE SPEAKER: The hon. Deputy Government House Leader.

MR. RENNER: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I would like to move that written questions appearing on today's Order Paper stand and retain their places with the exception of written questions 211, 212, 213, 214, 215, and 216.

[Motion carried]

Industrial Environmental Inspections

Q211. Ms Carlson moved that the following question be accepted. How many inspections did Alberta Environmental Protection staff conduct of licensed industrial facilities each year between January 1, 1990, and December 31, 1998, how many infringements were found each year, and in how many cases each year was enforcement action taken?

MR. HANCOCK: Mr. Speaker, on behalf of the government I would like to accept the question, but I can only do so with an amendment. Therefore I would move that the question be amended by striking out "inspections did" and substituting "enforcement actions were taken by"; by striking out "conduct of" and substituting "on"; by striking out "January 1, 1990" and substituting "September 1, 1993"; and by striking out "how many infringements were found each year, and in how many cases each year was enforcement action taken?" and substituting "as a result of inspections or investigations?"

So the question will read:

How many enforcement actions were taken by Alberta Environmental Protection staff on licensed industrial facilities each year between September 1, 1993, and December 31, 1998, as a result of inspections or investigations?

Mr. Speaker, the reason for the amendment is that the Environmental Protection and Enhancement Act came into force on September 1, 1993. Statistics regarding enforcement actions taken pursuant to that act are available as of September 1, 1993, and a consolidated database for tracking inspections is currently being implemented. Information in this regard prior to 1998 is not available.

2:50

THE SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie on the amendment.

MS CARLSON: Mr. Speaker, we're unhappy with the number of elements of this amendment. First of all, I would like to speak to the time within which we had notice that this amendment was occurring. I have a fax in front of me that's dated 17 minutes after 1 this afternoon. By the time it traveled over here to the House, it was quarter to 2, so very little time to review the amendments. I don't think that was the intent of the agreement that the House leaders had in terms of proper notice, so we would like to bring that to your attention.

Secondly, the amendment as it's written is not at all what we have asked for in this regard, Mr. Speaker. We asked: how many inspections of licensed industrial facilities? We need to know that

information in fact, how many inspections occurred, not the information that's being provided here.

Also, we need the information back to 1990. As amended, the information isn't available, but in fact we need a benchmark in terms of what happened before the cuts and what happened after the cuts. We know that the information that's specifically requested here was available, Mr. Speaker. The amendment changes the intent of that, so we don't support that at all. [interjection]

THE SPEAKER: I'm afraid not. We're on the amendment. You've already produced the amendment. You've debated once already on the amendment.

MR. HANCOCK: Can I close debate on the amendment?

THE SPEAKER: No.

[Motion as amended carried]

Speaker's Ruling Amendments to Written Questions

THE SPEAKER: Before we get to the next one, there was actually no agreement with respect to the point that the hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie had talked about. However, there was a statement made in the House dealing with amendments to written questions and motions for returns. It was a result of a consultation with the various leaders at the time, and an outline was basically agreed to. I quote from page 125 of the *Journals* of the First Session of the 24th Legislature of the province of Alberta, 1997. The agreement at that time basically said: this exchange of information should occur before 11 a.m. on the Wednesday that the Written Question or Motion for a Return is to be moved. That deals with amendments. Again, it was not in stone. It was agreed to at the time by the various leaders, and it's worked very, very well in the past, as we've come to this date.

Industrial Environmental Permits

Q212. Ms Carlson moved that the following question be accepted. What is the total number of industrial facilities that were licensed to operate in the province by Alberta Environmental Protection each year from January 1, 1990, until December 31, 1998, and how many approvals and permits were issued to such facilities in each of those years?

THE SPEAKER: If I can see the hon. Minister of Intergovernmental and Aboriginal Affairs, I will recognize him. I can, and I will.

MR. HANCOCK: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. With respect to Question 212, I'd be pleased to accept that question on behalf of the Minister of Environmental Protection.

THE SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie to close the debate.

MS CARLSON: Yes, Mr. Speaker. We thank the government for the information. What we wanted to know here was the total number of industrial facilities that were licensed to operate in the province by Alberta Environmental Protection each year from January 1, 1990, until December 31, 1998, and how many approvals and permits were issued to such facilities in each of those years.

That the information is available for this question from 1990 would indicate that the information was also available for the prior question.

[Motion carried]

Environmental Inspectors

Q213. Ms Carlson moved that the following question be accepted. How many inspectors, full-time equivalents, were working in environmental services, Alberta Environmental Protection, on December 31, 1998, and how many were working in equivalent positions on the same date each year from 1990 to 1997?

THE SPEAKER: The hon. Government House Leader.

MR. HANCOCK: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I appreciate your comments earlier with respect to exchange of information. It has, of course, always been my policy as Government House Leader to make sure that information is available and shared at the earliest possible opportunity.

With respect to Question 213, we are proposing that there be an amendment before I accept it. In light of the fact that we haven't been able to share that information on a timely basis, my only option would be to reject the question unless the hon. member opposite would agree that the amendment should go forward. I'm in your hands, Mr. Speaker.

Speaker's Ruling Amendments to Written Questions

THE SPEAKER: Well, I'm very, very hopeful that the clarification that was given with respect to this would allow the process to continue, and I think we'll find harmony and a higher level of co-operation here than we might have had a few minutes ago. I appreciate the sincerity of all hon. members with respect to this matter.

Debate Continued

MR. HANCOCK: In which case, Mr. Speaker, I'm prepared to move an amendment to Question 213. The amendment would be that Written Question 213 be amended by striking out "inspectors" and substituting "Alberta Environmental Protection environmental services staff" and by striking out

working in environmental services, Alberta Environmental Protection, on December 31, 1998, and how many were working in equivalent positions on the same date each year from 1990 to 1997? and substituting "were inspectors at the end of each calendar year from 1993 to 1998?"

So the question will read:

How many Alberta Environmental Protection environmental services staff, full-time equivalents, were inspectors at the end of each calendar year from 1993 to 1998?

THE SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie on the amendment.

MS CARLSON: Yes, Mr. Speaker. In spite of the Government House Leader trying to be too cute by half and in spite of the fact that we have had these questions on the Order Paper for a long time and didn't receive the information until quite late today, being 1:17, we will accept this amendment.

[Motion as amended carried]

Oil and Gas Well Site Reclamation Certificates

Q214. Ms Carlson moved that the following question be accepted. How many oil and gas industry well site reclamation certificates were issued each year from January 1, 1990,

until December 31, 1998, and how many sites were inspected each year?

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

MR. HANCOCK: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. With the previous caveat I would move an amendment to Written Question 214 in order that we might accept it. The amendment would be that Written Question 214 be amended by striking out "January 1, 1990, until December 31, 1998" and substituting "April 1, 1993, to March 31, 1999" and by striking out "sites were inspected" and substituting "well site reclamation inquiries were held."

So the written question will read:

How many oil and gas industry well site reclamation certificates were issued each year from April 1, 1993, to March 31, 1999, and how many well site reclamation inquiries were held each year?

The rationale for the amendment is that the department has been collecting these statistics since April 1, 1993, following the introduction of the reclamation criteria for well sites and associated facilities policy. The data used is one of the environmental services' business performance measures and includes sites certified by environmental services inspectors, land and forest service inspectors, and Alberta Agriculture, Food and Rural Development inspectors. The data will include sites certified under the green areas audit program which do not have inquiries held but which are deemed to have had inquiries for the purpose of the statistics. There is a further rationale for it, but I think that outlines it.

Thank you.

THE SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie on the amendment.

MS CARLSON: Mr. Speaker, we have some concerns with the amendment. Once again, the changes that the Government House Leader is proposing change the original intent of the question. We specifically wanted to know how many well sites were inspected during that time period. That is not a question that we just want to know for information purposes, but it's a question that has been put to us by many people throughout this province who really want to know: with the new practices of Environmental Protection, how many actual sites get inspected? It is a big issue in this province, not a small issue, and we know that that information is available from January 1, 1990, which is the beginning request date that we have put there.

As amended, perhaps the information is not available, as the minister has indicated, but in spite of these reservations that we have, Mr. Speaker, we will accept this amendment in the spirit of co-operation.

[Motion as amended carried]

3:00

Water Well Reclamations

Q215. Ms Carlson moved that the following question be accepted. How many water wells were reclaimed each year from January 1, 1990, until December 31, 1998, and how many well inspections were carried out each year?

THE SPEAKER: The hon. Government House Leader.

MR. HANCOCK: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Despite being too cute by half, I would accept this on behalf of the Minister of Environmental Protection.

THE SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie to close the debate.

MS CARLSON: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. We are happy with the government's decision.

[Motion carried]

Environmental Regulatory Approval Staff

Q216. Ms Carlson moved that the following question be accepted. How many staff, full-time equivalents, worked on regulatory approvals in the environmental service, Alberta Environmental Protection, on December 31, 1998, and how many were working in similar positions on the same date each year from 1990 to 1997?

THE SPEAKER: The hon. Government House Leader.

MR. HANCOCK: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. On behalf of the Minister of Environmental Protection I would move that Written Question 216 be amended in order that we might be able to accept it. The amendment would be that Written Question 216 be amended by striking out "on regulatory approvals" and by striking out "similar positions on the same date each year from 1990 to 1997" and substituting "its predecessor, the environmental regulatory service, on the same date each year from 1993 to 1997?"

So the written question will read:

How many staff, full-time equivalents, worked in the environmental service, Alberta Environmental Protection, on December 31, 1998, and how many were working in its predecessor, the environmental regulatory service, on the same date each year from 1993 to 1997?

THE SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie on the amendment.

MS CARLSON: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. As this amendment is broader than what we requested in terms of information, we are happy to accept it.

[Motion as amended carried]

head: Motions for Returns

THE SPEAKER: The hon. Deputy Government House Leader.

MR. RENNER: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I move that motions for returns appearing on today's Order Paper stand and retain their places.

[Motion carried]

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

head: Second Reading

Bill 207

Seniors Benefit Statutes Amendment Act, 1999

[Debate adjourned May 4: Ms Blakeman speaking]

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

MS BLAKEMAN: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased to be able to continue and conclude my remarks in support of Bill 207, the Seniors Benefit Statutes Amendment Act, 1999. When I had spoken

on the bill yesterday, I had spoken to the seniors who had raised concerns that programs had not been returned for seniors. In particular, I quoted from a letter, by way of example, from a senior who was most unhappy that members of this Assembly had received their 5 percent rollback – it had been returned to them – yet this person did not feel that the same had been done for the seniors. Related to that was the proposal in Bill 207 in which we are proposing that the health care premiums for senior citizens be eliminated.

I would like to move on now to discuss the second major part of Bill 207, which is to provide indexing of the cash benefits. I note that Alberta has the highest inflation rate in Canada at present. I believe that the figures I looked at were from February of '99. I'm sure that those inflation numbers do rise and fall. I certainly hope that Alberta is not the highest on a consistent basis. The bill is attempting to provide both timeliness and objectivity, timeliness in the sense that the indexing would be checked every three months, which would be ensuring a reflection of recent price/inflation movements. It would be objective in that it's based on the calculations of Statistics Canada rather than on what is happening with this government.

Certainly some seniors have said quite clearly that they feel the government has a poor record of responding to seniors' needs and concerns. Actually I will reference the Seniors Advisory Council for Alberta 1997-98 Year in Review, page 12, under Income Support Programs.

Alberta seniors continue to be concerned about the increasing costs associated with maintaining their homes, including payment of property taxes and increasing utility costs.

I think a number of us here have heard that, that increasing rents are happening. Certainly in Edmonton-Centre I have spoken to that, and I know the Member for Calgary-Buffalo has as well. For what could be considered middle-income seniors who used to be able to afford to be in private apartment buildings and afford the monthly rent, the rents have increased to such a level that these people are now applying to be housed in the subsidized housing that is available. As well, for those seniors that choose to and are able to remain in their own homes, they're looking at increased property taxes.

There's no question that costs are rising for seniors. I'd spoken a few days ago around user fees, using a senior citizen as an example of the additional cost that they had not anticipated when they retired. I think there is a need for us to be able to understand that a fixed income needs to be reviewed on a regular basis so that people are not constantly getting poorer, having the same amount of money when all costs around them are rising.

What I always do with legislation is look at it and say: well, is there really a problem out there? Both from the comments that were made by the Leader of the Official Opposition and the examples I have raised and I'm sure the examples that my colleagues will be raising, I think, yes, there is a problem out there. Seniors are feeling most strongly that they are increasingly disadvantaged. As I was able to quote, that's also reflected in the government's Seniors Advisory Council for Alberta.

So the next question is: well, if there's a problem, will this particular . . . [Ms Blakeman's speaking time expired] I am so sorry.

Thank you very much for the time, Mr. Speaker.

THE SPEAKER: The hon. Minister of Community Development.

3:10

MRS. McCLELLAN: Mr. Speaker, thank you. I've looked forward to entering this debate since I listened to some of the earlier debate on this. I want to deal particularly with some what I think are not

quite complete amounts of information that have been in some of the debate.

Mr. Speaker, I want to first of all say that I oppose this bill, and I oppose it for two reasons. Firstly, I believe that seniors who are able to pay health care premiums are willing to do so. Frankly, if I ask the question to a senior, "Do you want to pay health care premiums?" I would expect the answer to be no. However, if I ask the question to seniors, "Are you willing to pay health care premiums, if you are financially able, to give a benefit to seniors of a lower income?" seniors have said yes. They have said that in high numbers. That was the basis for the changes to the program.

Secondly, Mr. Speaker, I believe that any reinvestment in seniors' programs should be targeted to those high-need seniors rather than thinly distributed among all seniors. You know, when you talk to seniors about that in large groups, which we have done over the past five years, they agree with that statement as well. In 1993 we made that decision that higher income seniors would pay health care insurance premiums. This decision was made in consultation with seniors, with many seniors, not from one letter, not two letters but from many consultations through telephone, through focus groups meetings, through meetings with the Council on Aging, all of the seniors groups. In fact, we held many roundtables with those groups over the period of time.

I should say that 60 percent of seniors – that is, all lower income seniors – and tens of thousands of middle-income seniors receive a full subsidy on their health care premiums. Let's really tell the story, because this is a fact. A further 2 percent get a partial subsidy.

[Mr. Herard in the chair]

What does this mean to seniors? Well, Mr. Speaker, it means that seniors were the first to see reinvestment dollars. In 1996 a reinvestment of \$22 million over two years was announced, but it was targeted, I'll grant you, to lower income seniors. This reinvestment benefited 58,000 seniors, including 34,000 who received higher premium subsidies. Of these, 14,000 were previously not receiving any benefits at all. The income cutoff for full or partial health care premium subsidies for single seniors is \$20,000 non-deductible income and not including federal benefits. For couples it's \$32,650, again non-deductible income, not including federal benefits. I believe those thresholds are fair.

In British Columbia, the other province that has health care premiums, I would note that their benefit threshold is \$11,327 for single and \$18,856 for couples. So let's compare: \$18,117 in Alberta, \$11,687 in British Columbia; for couples, \$27,269 in Alberta, \$18,856 in B.C.

Mr. Speaker, if you were to add a cost-of-living increase to this amount, it would not maximize the impact of any available reinvestment dollars. This might make good discussion and chat, but you should really do the calculations. For example, if you increase the ASB by 5 percent, it would provide eligible seniors with about \$5 a month. Now, I recognize that \$5 a month is a significant amount to many people. It would also translate into a \$7.8 million program increase.

On the other hand, an investment of \$7 million has enabled the special-needs assistance program to help seniors extensively. This provides emergency grants of up to \$5,000 for seniors who face financial emergencies or who are unable to meet their basic needs. The average grant under this program is \$2,558. Mr. Speaker, I suggest that is far more significant to seniors in need than a \$5 a month increase. Much, much more meaningful. If you talk to a lower income senior who's facing an unexpected dental bill or a furnace that's gone out of service in the middle of winter or broken

pipes in their house or a roof that fails, ask them if they'd rather have \$5 a month or up to \$5,000 within hours, if it's needed, to meet their emergency. I'll tell you what seniors told us: give us the special-needs assistance program. It is working.

I heard that property tax benefits were out. Frankly, they're not. They're rolled into the Alberta seniors' benefit program. However, again that is targeted to lower income seniors. I heard about reductions to Aids to Daily Living. Well, I'll grant you there were some priorities on what services were covered in that area and extended health benefits, but as I read our budget and listened to it carefully as minister responsible for seniors, I saw a \$2 million increase in extended health benefit programs for seniors. I saw \$5 million more in Aids to Daily Living. I saw a million dollars more in the special-needs program. I saw \$3.6 million more to meet the growing number of seniors.

Although you would think by some of the comments here that seniors are not treated very well in Alberta, we are receiving a net increase, higher than any other province in Canada, of seniors coming into our province: 1,200 seniors net one year, 2,000 seniors net another year. I suggest to you, Mr. Speaker, that there are many reasons for seniors moving here, but one of them is the programs.

Let's talk a little bit about the comparisons. Let's talk about optical. That was raised. Well, there's only one other province in Canada besides Alberta – that's Manitoba, and it provides a deductible – that has a program that offers optical benefits to seniors. Let's talk about seniors' eye examinations. They are at no cost to seniors here. Granted, we ask them to use three benefits a year in that program. I don't think that's unreasonable.

Ambulance: seniors are covered for interfacility transfer and emergency services. Long-term care fees: the absolute lowest in Canada. No other province has a special-needs assistance program. Monthly income support: of any province in Canada we have the highest amount allowed. For singles it's \$114 to \$196. In British Columbia it's \$49. In Saskatchewan it's \$90. In Manitoba it's \$37, and in Ontario it's \$83. No other programs in any of the other provinces. Couples: \$228 to \$292. A couple in B.C., \$121. A couple in Saskatchewan, \$145. A couple in Manitoba, \$80. A couple in Ontario, \$166. No one is even close. So I don't think we need to talk about indexing. What we should be talking about is the sustainability of this program that provides services to lower income seniors.

Mr. Speaker, a lot of what occurs with discussions of seniors is in how you ask the question. Seniors are proud of their ability to contribute to this province in the past and now. Seniors are kind, sensitive, and understanding people, and they want to assist those who cannot meet their basic needs. From my understanding of my discussions with seniors they support us not having universality, which would add a huge expense to our programs, but targeting those seniors who are in need.

Mr. Speaker, the other thing that seniors talked to us about was housing. I would remind members of this Assembly that we have some of the most innovative seniors' housing in Canada and indeed in North America here in this province. In fact, if members wanted to travel and visit them – and I know some have – for the most innovative go to Kensington Village. See what is available there for seniors for housing.

3:20

The Minister of Municipal Affairs is leading an interdepartmental task force on this very item, and as the Treasurer has said on many occasions, having the strongest economy in Canada, having the most aggressive economy in Canada does bring its pressures, but we are responding to those. I have asked members in this Assembly before

that if a senior comes to you and has a difficulty with rent increases, don't tell them that they have to move. Ask them to call our offices, and we can deal with some of those issues under the special-needs program. We have a storefront office here in Edmonton, which is widely used. [interjection] Wheelchair accessible, yes. It's ground floor, right on Jasper Avenue. We have them in many other communities too, because seniors do choose to live in all parts of this province. We also have a service that if a senior cannot get out, we will come to their home and assist them if they have a need.

Mr. Speaker, for all of the letters that are quoted in this House saying, "We want back what we had," I could, if I wanted to breach the confidentiality, which I would not, file many, many more letters from seniors who have said: "Thank you for meeting my needs in a timely fashion. Thank you for the kindness and sensitivity of your staff. Thank you for ensuring that your offices have a place where I can speak privately about those items rather than having to do it publicly at a counter. Thank you for the 1-800 number and mostly for the people who man those phones, who are very knowledgeable. Thank you for the program booklet that not only includes the programs that the Alberta government has for seniors but is inclusive of municipal programs and federal government programs so that seniors don't have to go on a hunt-and-search to find out what programs are there."

I've mentioned in the House before that the seniors ministers across Canada have made a decision to place their programs on a database that is accessible to anyone. For some provinces this was a difficult decision, because it points out very clearly that they are not able to provide some of the benefits that other provinces are. However, these ministers, understanding that the most important thing is that seniors have easy access to information, that they do not have to go through this hunt-and-search activity, have graciously agreed to put those programs on this database.

I want to remind you again that Alberta is one of only five provinces in this country that offers any income support programs to seniors. Of the five programs, we have the highest monthly benefits and the most generous eligibility thresholds. For that reason, Mr. Speaker, as I indicated when I began my remarks, I simply cannot support this bill. It sounds good on the surface, and it is very simple. Give people another \$5 a month? Are we doing our seniors a service in that? That would be \$7.8 million. Or give seniors a program that can respond to them when an emergency occurs, which also costs us about \$7 million a year?

When this program was increased, I asked the staff, with the seniors present, what would happen to a senior if it was I think I said December 20 at 4 o'clock in the afternoon, your furnace quits, and you don't have the money in your bank account to purchase a new furnace. "Well, you could apply for assistance." I said, "Well, how long would that take?" "Well, if you got through today, six to eight weeks after you get your application in." I said: "That is clearly not acceptable. If we are going to have a special-needs program, I want a program, when something like this happens to a senior, where they don't go through that anguish and heartache and worry. I want a program that if this happens to a senior, they will have their furnace within hours."

Mr. Speaker, ironically, this happened. The date wasn't the same, but the circumstances were. Within three hours that senior had a furnace up and running in their home. They did not have broken pipes, warped floors or walls, or dead plants, and most of all they were not looking for a warm place to be. This program is responsive. It does work.

However, Mr. Speaker, we also recognize that the growth of the senior population in our province and indeed in our country is rapid. We also recognize that Alberta will probably continue to be a choice

of seniors of where to live in this country. So rather than leave these things to chance, we've made a decision in this government to do an assessment of the impact of an aging population on the anticipated growth of seniors in this province. We're not doing it for one year or two years. We're doing it for out into 15 to 20 years. In fact, some seniors are suggesting we should go further than that.

This study is being led by my colleagues from Calgary-West and Leduc and a number of seniors as well as stakeholder groups. Part of that information gathering is also the study being done on long-term care, which is chaired by the Member for Redwater. To make sure that we have interaction between the two committees, there is an interchange of people on those two committees. I have asked the Member for Calgary-West and the Member for Leduc to concentrate in the first months of this study on the short-term issues and to come back and tell us what those things are that we need to address that are most pressing to seniors today and then, for the conclusion of the study, to ensure that we have the information that will allow us to plan, as much as possible in today's changing world, to meet those needs of seniors into the future.

I expect the first report from that group on schedule, which will be in June. I'm saying that pointedly because I know that the hon. Member for Leduc is listening. We will have a seniors' symposium in this province in November so that we can more fully review all of those issues and questions. Seniors' groups and I agree that we shouldn't really talk about issues though. We should talk about challenges. Seniors are not an issue. Seniors provide a great contribution to this province, and they are an asset, but we do have challenges in meeting those needs and meeting the changing demographics in this province.

Mr. Speaker, I don't support Bill 207. I don't think it's well thought out. I don't think the arithmetic has been done at all. I think it makes nice play. You can send it out and say: isn't this simple? But you know what? Too many seniors are involved with this study, and they understand that the issues are much greater than that.

Mr. Neil Reimer is a part of this group. He understands the issues are much greater than this. If you asked him if it was a good idea to not have seniors pay health care premiums, he might say yes. He might say no. But if you asked him or any of those other people on this committee, in the larger context, how do we answer the question of how do we continue to meet seniors' needs in this province, particularly lower income seniors, to ensure that they can live, as they say, interdependently and so that they can live with dignity, they'll say: this is not the answer.

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

MR. MacDONALD: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's a pleasure to rise and participate in the debate this afternoon on Bill 207, the Seniors Benefit Statutes Amendment Act. I have listened with interest to the last two hon. members in the debate, but I have been listening more closely to the seniors and their families in the constituency of Edmonton-Gold Bar. While they tell me that they are getting by and making do, there is a sense of unease, a sense of worry.

As apartment vacancies across Alberta fall, I have heard from seniors forced out of their homes because they couldn't afford the rent increases. For many seniors their telephones and televisions are their connections to the outside world, yet monthly telephone rates for Edmonton seniors have twice been raised in the past few years, and many have just received a notice that their cable bills will be going up on May 1.

3:30

In Calgary, Mr. Speaker, the health authority recently reported that almost one-quarter of seniors in Calgary and area don't always

have enough money to put groceries on the table. With benefit levels down while living costs and user fees go up, many seniors are forced to dip into their food budgets to pay the bills. In the news I read about a 95-year-old widow trying to stay in her own home, but she is finding it difficult with the \$10 per hour she must pay for home care.

Like all people in our province seniors have done their fair share in contributing to deficit and debt elimination. Seniors who are seeing other people's benefits and salaries returned are asking me: when is it our turn? While our senior citizens appreciate the recognitions and ceremonies from the provincial government during the International Year of Older Persons, I think one seniors' advocate put it best when she said, and I quote, speeches are nice, but seniors want tangible commitments, end of quote.

Bill 207 is a tangible commitment from Alberta's Official Opposition. It would give all Alberta seniors a helping hand as they face higher prices, user fees, utility bills, rents, and property tax increases. Bill 207 proposes helping seniors in two specific ways that will really make a difference. First it proposes exempting all seniors from paying Alberta health care insurance premiums.

Now, here's the arithmetic. For the 133,000 seniors who now pay partial or full health care premiums, this bill would exempt them from paying these premiums starting on October 1 of this year. What would this mean, Mr. Speaker? For 36,000 single seniors with annual incomes over \$18,000 it would mean putting up to \$408 per year back into their pocketbooks to help cope with rising costs. For 97,000 Alberta seniors living as couples with annual incomes over \$27,000 it would mean letting them keep up to \$816 a year to help them pay for rising household and personal expenses. For the most part these are not wealthy or high-income households. They're good, honest, middle-income Albertans who have worked hard all their lives.

The second part of this proposed legislation is designed to help the 180,000 seniors currently receiving a cash benefit through the Alberta seniors' benefit program. Currently, there is no mechanism in place to ensure that their cash benefit amounts keep up with the increasing cost of living. They need protection from inflation. They need this protection from inflation because it is eating away at their budgets.

Statistics Canada recently reported that with a rate of 2.2 percent Alberta is the only Canadian province with an inflation rate over 2 percent. Seniors in Edmonton saw prices climb by 1.7 percent. Calgary seniors faced a 2.9 percent increase in annual inflation. Compared to historical trends, these inflation rates are by no means as high as have been seen in the past and as will be seen again. Most seniors on fixed incomes have no way to increase their incomes. Seniors who have managed to put away a little nest egg are receiving relatively low returns on their savings.

The second part of this would adjust the cash benefit for seniors and senior couples every three months. The rate of increase in the cash benefits would be adjusted so that it is equal to Alberta's inflation rate. What would this proposal mean for seniors with the lowest incomes who currently receive the maximum cash benefit? Well, for example, assuming a 5 percent annual inflation rate, a single senior paying rent in an unsubsidized apartment would receive an extra \$117 per year. Similarly, assuming the same rise in the cost of living for a senior couple still in their own house and eligible for the maximum cash benefit, it would mean nearly \$150 more per year to help them stay in their own home.

These two components of Bill 207 to help seniors, the health premium exemption for all Alberta seniors and the indexing of cash benefits, are tangible, practical ways to help senior citizens experiencing difficulties making ends meet.

My colleagues and I know that today's seniors made do during the Depression. We know that today's seniors made do during the rationing and the scarcities of the Second World War. They made do as they saved and sacrificed to build families and homes in the postwar years. Seniors made do yet again when their health and income assistance benefits were so drastically cut five years ago, and by habit and lifelong discipline they are making do right now. But forcing seniors to scrimp, to go without, to suffer silently, to make do yet again during one of the most prosperous periods of the wealthiest province in the number one country in the world is simply not right. It will not do.

The Alberta Liberals believe that strengthening one component of a family strengthens the whole family. We believe that senior parents and grandparents are vital members of Alberta families and of all Alberta communities. As economic and social pressures tear at the very fabric of the Alberta family, in many households seniors play an integral part in assisting with child care, maintenance, the daily household routine, and helping families cope. Anything that we can do to support the seniors in a family strengthens the whole family, and, Mr. Speaker, with the critical shortage of continuing care beds for seniors provincewide we see many families providing care to their aging parents, grandparents, aunts, and uncles at home. This proposed legislation would help these families make ends meet as they provide care and comfort for their senior members.

Bill 207 is important not only because it enhances the well-being of seniors; it also sends out a very important message. It states that we as a province value our seniors, that we value our retired Albertans. Alberta's young people, the next generation, take their cues, their values in large part from us. I can think of nothing more important than passing on to the next generation the values of honouring and respecting one's parents, grandparents, and elders. These are values, Mr. Speaker, that they passed on to us.

This legislation embodies many of the benefits Alberta Liberals hold as a result of listening to and working with Alberta seniors. All seniors are facing the uncertainties of inflation, more and higher user fees, rising rents and property taxes, rising utilities and higher municipal charges, and they need a bit of a helping hand right now. Contributions made by older Albertans in building this province should be recognized and honoured. A portion of the benefits sacrificed by seniors in the effort to eliminate the government's deficit and debt should be returned now.

We believe that we have a moral duty to provide Alberta's 316,000 seniors with a better sense of security, confidence, and well-being for the future. Bill 207, Mr. Speaker, is tangible. It is a real, practical, lasting measure to thank and to honour, to give hope and dignity to Alberta's senior citizens not only this year, the United Nations International Year of Older Persons, but well into the next century. I urge every member of this Assembly who cares about Alberta's seniors to support Bill 207.

3:40

Mr. Speaker, in concluding my remarks, I listened intently to the hon. minister who preceded me. The Alberta seniors' benefit program and the special-needs assistance program, the staff that administer those programs on behalf of the minister do a tremendous job, and I would like to acknowledge that, because this is a benchmark for all government departments. No matter when a constituent of mine comes to the office and we have a problem, they do their very, very best to help out and try to solve that problem. On behalf of all the constituents of Edmonton-Gold Bar I would like to thank the minister and her staff for administering the special-needs assistance program and the Alberta seniors' benefit as best they can.

Thank you.

THE ACTING SPEAKER: The hon. leader of the New Democratic opposition.

MS BARRETT: Thanks, Mr. Speaker. I rise to support this legislation because it constitutes a first step in what the Alberta NDP has said for decades, and that is we shouldn't have health care premiums at all. They are a flat tax, a regressive tax, and nowhere is this more demonstrable than with respect to those on fixed and low or relatively low incomes.

The measure being offered in the first part of this bill to completely wipe out health care premiums for seniors would go a long way in proving just how unfair the tax is, because once you have that population reporting back a year or two after the fact to say what kind of a difference that made to the quality of life for the vast majority of them – and I do mean those that qualify for either premium waiving or partial subsidy right now – it would be a pretty good indicator of how society at large would benefit if we just wiped them out altogether.

I've noticed in the last couple of months that there seems to be this match of boys trading stories and racing to the bottom when it comes to who's got the lower taxes, the Klein regime or the Harris regime in Ontario. Now we see that our government is prepared to accelerate the elimination of the high-income surtax. Well, let me tell you about that high-income surtax, Mr. Speaker. When the government introduced it, I was the Opposition House Leader at the time. I was there for seven years. When the government introduced it, they said: don't worry, Albertans; it's only going to affect . . .

DR. TAYLOR: It's too bad you weren't now.

MS BARRETT: Thank you.

. . . really high-income Albertans. Today we see the Premier saying: oh, no; listen; those people up in the gallery, the striking workers out of the Headwaters regional health authority, would benefit from us getting rid of the high-income surtax because they earn around \$45,000 a year. Well, first of all they earn \$22,000 a year. Secondly, they haven't got their 5 percent rollback given back to them. Third, it's a real change of tune for the government to now be arguing that, oh, it's the middle income that will benefit from the elimination of this tax. When it was introduced – what? – eight years ago, nine years ago, it was the Don Getty government saying: oh, it will only be the high-income people being affected. Well, you can't have it both ways. So on the subject of flat taxes my contention is that the health care premiums are a flat tax. They hurt disproportionately lower income people, but because one cannot ordinarily predict from one year to another whether one will be middle income or low income, the ideal solution is to get rid of it altogether.

The second part of this bill is long overdue. There's nothing I or the voters of this province dislike more than a government suddenly in horror realizing: oh, my goodness, we've had cost-of-living increases days, weeks, maybe a few months before they call the next election. Nobody likes that kind of manipulation. That is why we need legislation that allows for proper indexation of programs so that inflation doesn't eat away the programs and then suddenly, just before an election is about to be called, the government discovers the errors of its way, you know, just suddenly, and remedies the problem for another four years when they're getting close to the next election.

This is particularly so when you consider the income levels of people who even qualify for this program. They've got to be pretty low to begin with in order to get the cash benefit under the Seniors Benefit Act. They've got to be pretty poor to have their health care premiums even subsidized for heaven's sakes, and they've got to be

pretty low income in order to qualify for the cash payments under this legislation.

Well, if that's the case, then those people are the most vulnerable people and should never be subjected to the arbitrary catch-up of a government saying: oops, we forgot. Three and a half years or four years have elapsed, and they forgot to account for, oh, the 6 or 7 percent inflation that you might have endured by then. Maybe more. This is one way to ensure that that doesn't happen to the most low-income seniors in the province.

While I continue to argue that health care premiums should be eliminated altogether, I have no hesitation endorsing this bill because at least it goes in the right direction, and the second part of it is just plain common sense. Any government worth its commitment to the people that it says it serves and represents would adopt at least the second half of this bill right now, and then I would let them off the hook while they contemplate getting rid of health care premiums altogether. Well, for a few months anyway.

THE ACTING SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Redwater.

MR. BRODA: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure to rise today to speak on Bill 207, the Seniors Benefit Statutes Amendment Act, 1999, sponsored by the hon. Leader of the Opposition. Part of the reason I am pleased to voice my thoughts on Bill 207 is that it's timely since the United Nations has declared 1999 as the International Year of Older Persons. The theme chosen to mark this momentous year is also in keeping with my thoughts on Bill 207. They have chosen the theme Towards a Society for All Ages to stress integration and harmony between generations. Integration, harmony, a balanced approach: these are the things that we as a government strive to achieve. Albertans have told us time and time again that they want us to carefully balance fiscal responsibilities with those things that are nearest to their hearts.

Seniors, I believe, have a unique perspective on what this balance requires. They have built this province. They have seen its challenges and changes over the years and have shared in both the adversities and the rewards. I believe Bill 207 should be commended in its desire to be of benefit to our seniors. The problem I see, however, is that it blindly pushes for more without considering the bigger picture, without thought to balance. Increasing coverage of health care premiums without considering the possible impact on services this increase in budget would have – as the population ages, this reality should be even more a consideration than it has been in the past.

Bills 207 ties the seniors' benefit to cost-of-living increases without stopping to consider how very little an impact that would have on the amount actually provided to seniors and all of this at an increased cost to taxpayers, increased dollars which would serve seniors better if targeted towards reinvestment in other areas. For these reasons, Mr. Speaker, I am unable to support Bill 207 at this time.

Our government is well aware of the wealth of knowledge and experience our seniors can offer us, and we consider seniors' programs a priority in this province. In fact, when the government first started reinvesting, seniors' programs were one of the first to benefit. Since 1996 there has been an increase of \$32 million – that's 22 percent – to seniors' income support programs in Alberta.

In 1993, after a series of roundtable discussions, participants, including seniors, told the government two main things. First, they told us that all Albertans who are able to pay premiums should contribute towards the cost of health care regardless of age. Second, we were told that there should be a consolidated and co-ordinated approach to seniors' benefit programs.

3:50

Health care is a big issue with our seniors, Mr. Speaker, as it is for all of us. According to Alberta Health figures as of January 31, 1999, there were 220,128 seniors' premium accounts registered with Alberta Health, including single seniors and senior couples. Of these accounts 60.7 percent were receiving a full premium subsidy, and 3.7 percent were receiving a partial premium subsidy. Clearly, there are a significant number of seniors who are eligible for subsidies in health care.

As a government we have done what Albertans told us to do. We have made sure that these seniors who cannot afford to pay premiums don't have to. For the record, Mr. Speaker, the income eligibility levels are generous. Single seniors with incomes below \$18,106 are eligible for a full premium subsidy, and single seniors with incomes between \$18,106 and \$20,825 are eligible for a partial subsidy. Senior couples with incomes below \$27,211 are eligible for a full subsidy, and those with incomes between \$27,211 and \$32,650 are eligible for a partial subsidy. I believe these income levels are realistic and generous. They ensure that those who are most in need don't have to pay premiums, which is really the way it should work. Those who can pay do, and those who are unable to pay are provided for.

Bill 207 would change this current arrangement and provide full subsidies to all seniors. In the day-to-day lives of those seniors who could afford to pay premiums, this addition would mean relatively little when compared to what the additional funding could do if redirected into services.

Mr. Speaker, this government has tabled a budget which will see a 21 percent increase in health funding. That's an increase of \$935 million over three years. The funding will go to hiring more frontline workers and to increasing the number of key surgeries, such as cardiac valve operations and joint replacements. Mr. Speaker, this is the kind of reinvestment that seniors feel is a priority. In an ideal world governments could subsidize everyone and everything. However, this is just not reality, not unless we were to achieve this at the expense of essential programs and services.

I'd also like to speak on the other portion of this bill, which would attempt to tie seniors' benefits to cost-of-living increases. Mr. Speaker, cash benefits under the Alberta seniors' benefits are based on a senior's level of nondeductible income. That's their total income minus their old-age security, guaranteed income supplement, workers' compensation payments, social assistance, and RRSP contributions.

Seniors' benefits were among the first program areas which saw reinvestment dollars. In 1996 an increase of \$22 million was announced for lower and middle-income seniors, which meant that 34,000 seniors received higher premium subsidies, including 14,000 who were previously not receiving benefits at all.

Now this bill would tie those payments to the cost of living. At first glance this seems like a really positive measure: more money if the cost of living goes up. But as has already been expressed, this money would amount to little for individual seniors compared to what it could do if redirected into services. Putting that money into targeted reinvestment in seniors' programs could really make a difference in the day-to-day life of our seniors. That, Mr. Speaker, is the intelligent thing to do.

Yes, there are times when a senior may experience difficulty. The minister mentioned earlier that we do have a program, the special-needs assistance for seniors program. I think it's worth while repeating that the program will provide a senior with a lump sum grant of up to \$5,000. What does a senior have to do to get this money? You just have to show you're unable to meet your basic needs. Again, Mr. Speaker, those who are most in need have the resources available to them.

Mr. Speaker, having looked at these things and listened to the debate so far on this bill, I have to admit that I find the comments made by the hon. Leader of the Opposition confusing. Bill 207 basically does an about-face from policies the hon. Leader of the Opposition was in favour of back in April 1991 when she was the Minister of Health. At the beginning of April 1991 the Minister of Health of the time announced that seniors would have to pay 20 percent of the cost of some services covered by the extended health benefits program. She also announced that nursing home fees would go up. Why the government and this same Minister of Health singled out seniors as not paying enough for their health costs – those who could afford to pay should pay.

Mr. Speaker, it's the same member that's proposing this bill that shaped the system into what it is today. The things the hon. Leader of the Opposition so opposes are the system she helped form back in 1991, though it's true that we have taken programs for seniors a lot further since then.

This government is not ignoring its senior citizens. In fact, as mentioned in this year's Speech from the Throne, this government is working on a broad initiative to assess what impact our aging population will have on seniors' programs and services. That is the challenge we should be focusing on, because the reality is that it does no one any good to put more money into the system without directing it into areas which would ensure the best services for the most people.

I think the members across the way may recognize this, Mr. Speaker. The hon. Leader of the Opposition said such a thing more than once during her time as a cabinet minister. For example, in November of 1990 she noted: to say we're simply going to add more money each time is not going to get to the root of the issue, which is how we can sustain a health care system 20 years down the road. This statement is true today, and it applies to more than just health care.

Now, that was a long time ago, and I wasn't here, so I'll use a more recent example. Just a couple of months ago in relation to federal plans to give more money to the province for health care, the hon. Member for Edmonton-Meadowlark noted that it's not a question of how much money but more a question of how we spend the money we have. I couldn't agree more.

We have to consider what our needs are now and where we'll be 20 years down the road. This is especially true in the case of seniors, considering our aging population and the influx of seniors from other places like B.C. We need to respect the fact that our seniors have helped build the Alberta we enjoy today. We're now enjoying the fruits of their hard work, so we need to make sure that they're comfortable in their retirement years. That means being responsible enough to provide for those who are unable to do for themselves and to ensure that the programs we do have are the most efficient and provide the quality of life these men and women deserve.

Again, I cannot lend my support to Bill 207, and I would encourage all members to do the same. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

4:00

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

MS LEBOVICI: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The discussion over the last couple of days has been very illuminating, though in fact it sounds more and more like a paid political announcement as to what the condition of seniors is within this province.

There are a lot of speeches that seem to say: don't worry; be happy; it'll be fine. Don't worry; be happy that in fact you may not have enough money to provide for a decent meal for yourself. Don't

worry; be happy that there may not be enough money to pay for the rent. Don't worry; be happy that there may not be enough money to ensure that you can in fact have access to services that you require, such as eyeglasses, dental care, and the list goes on. But don't worry; be happy, seniors in this province. Be happy that this government has taken more than 20 percent out of your pockets. Be happy that you have had a small amount for a certain number of seniors reinvested, in your pockets. But all those others, the 40 percent of seniors that do not get health care premiums paid for in this province: they should be happy. Is that right? The 40 percent of seniors that cannot afford to provide for their care should also be happy.

Speaker's Ruling Decorum

THE ACTING SPEAKER: Hon. members, you know, it would help if you would speak through the chair. Those who are not recognized to speak, it would help if you would not speak.

Hon. member, please carry on.

Debate Continued

MS LEIBOVICI: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. This year is the International Year of Older Persons. I have had – and I can think of just last Friday when I was in my constituency office – a number of seniors say to me: you know, isn't it time that we were recognized for the sacrifices we have provided to this province? Not just in the last five years but over the entire period of time that they have been in this province and have built and maintained and have worked to make a province that we in this Legislative Assembly now sit and enjoy. The thanks that they got was to have the benefits they could depend on taken away from them, taken away because a roundtable supposedly – and I think if the Member for Redwater actually looked at what the roundtables said, he would find that it is a little bit different than what his commercial said just about 10 minutes ago.

The reality is that there were a lot of recommendations made at the roundtable. Some were enacted, and some were not. It was very interesting, the selective listening that this government undertook in 1993 in implementing changes to seniors' benefits, to education, and to health care, to name just a few. The results are being reaped right now. It is also interesting that the Member for Redwater would bother to look up what happened in 1991 but did not bother to see what happened in 1992 and 1993 with the seniors' report, which was shredded by this very government that he is a member of. So before you start throwing stones, hon. member, maybe you should look in your own backyard.

The reality is that the logic that I heard from the members on the other side on this private member's bill is twisted, to say the least, Mr. Speaker. It is twisted because what it says is that if in fact the seniors in this province have the audacity to ask for at least the 5 percent that was taken – and there was more than 5 percent taken, Madam Minister – the 5 percent that all the other groups in this province have got back, including the MLAs in this Legislative Assembly – and shame on you for not recognizing that – that at least that 5 percent would be put back into their pockets, but in fact they will have other programs taken away from them if they have that audacity. That is what the Member for Calgary-West said; that is what the Member for Redwater said. I'd have to read *Hansard* to see if that is what the hon. minister said.

MRS. McCLELLAN: I would be really careful on that one.

MS LEIBOVICI: That's why I said that I will read *Hansard* to see whether that is what the minister said.

The reality has been the veiled threat in the comments that have been made by the other members. I quite frankly believe that the seniors in this province deserve a whole lot more than that.

It's interesting that we had the roundtable in 1992 and '93. There have been numerous consultations with regards to health care and other areas when it comes to looking at benefits and services that seniors can access. We now have another group. There's the Member for Redwater, who is looking at what the long-term care needs are of seniors in this province. The members for Calgary-West and Leduc are looking at some – I'm not quite sure what the mandate of their particular committee is, but it is to find out what the needs of seniors are. Once they've found out what those needs are, the report, which will be brought forward at some point in June, will only deal with the short-term needs, we are told, Mr. Speaker, and not the long-term needs.

In fact, maybe at some point down the road, we and the seniors in this province will have to wait for some symposium to occur, and then they may well find some recommendations which may take another year or two years to enact. You know, that is, quite frankly, too long when you are a 75- or an 80-year-old senior in this province who wants action now, who doesn't want to wait for a symposium.

Speaker's Ruling Decorum

THE ACTING SPEAKER: Hon. members, you know, there are rules in this House. When members make allegations, cast aspersions on other members, impute unavowed motives, then things degenerate. So, please, let's have some debate on this bill, and let's not speak to each other across the aisle but through the chair.

Thank you.

MS LEIBOVICI: I'm not sure what the point of order was, Mr. Speaker . . .

AN HON. MEMBER: There was no point of order.

MS LEIBOVICI: . . . because there was no point of order.

THE ACTING SPEAKER: Hon. member, if you want to read your Standing Orders, it says, "A member will be called to order by the Speaker if . . ."

Thank you.

Debate Continued

MS LEIBOVICI: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The reality is that seniors will have to wait in this province for a symposium to occur. The reality is that the action could occur right now as a result of the bill that has been proposed by the Leader of the Official Opposition. That is reality. That is not an allegation. That is not an inference. It is reality.

The reality is that the cost of housing in this province is increasing and the cost of food in this province is increasing. We see that because of municipal tax assessments and the downloading to municipalities, municipalities across this province are looking at tax increases as well. That directly affects the pocketbooks of seniors. What we have proposed in this legislation is, one, that the health care premiums be deleted for seniors, as they were approximately five years ago, and in fact the other part of it is that there be indexing.

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

THE ACTING SPEAKER: The hon. Minister of Economic Development is rising on a point of order.

**Point of Order
Questioning a Member**

MRS. NELSON: *Beauchesne* 482. Mr. Speaker, I was wondering if the hon. member would entertain a question.

MS LEIBOVICI: There are many times that we can discuss. At this point in time I would like to finish, because I believe that there's only – how many minutes left? – nine minutes left. So I would like to make my point. If at the end of my discussion there is time left over, then I will entertain that question.

Debate Continued

MS LEIBOVICI: The reality is that the costs across this province are increasing. We are seeing more and more services in health care being charged to individuals. For instance, if you want to have a particular kind of tensor bandage, that bandage will cost you \$2 before you can take it out of the hospital. There is a list of fees that have been accumulated through the last number of years that directly hit the pockets of seniors.

With this particular bill what in fact we are looking at is ensuring that, though it is not a huge amount, if there are any increases to the cost of living, those increases would be provided to seniors, and if the cost of living drops, the seniors would not be penalized as a result of that drop.

In the viewpoint of the Official Opposition this is not an unreasonable request. It is not an unreasonable bill. It is not a bill that would bankrupt this government. It is a bill that would provide for seniors to have that extra bit of cash in their pockets so that they can live a life that I'm sure most members in this Legislative Assembly would like them to be able to obtain.

4:10

The reality also is that what we are looking at is a so-called reinvestment, as the government likes to call it, in seniors' benefits. What they do not like to admit is that that reinvestment was as a result of a taking out of benefits and a taking out of subsidies to seniors across this province. Though in fact there was the Alberta seniors' benefits program put in place, what has occurred is that a large number of seniors – and perhaps these are figures that need to be read into *Hansard* so that there is a reminder of what actually occurred in 1994 as a result of the changes that amalgamated the seniors' programs. Especially for those members who were not in the Legislative Assembly at that time, this is probably a good reminder.

The reality is that there were at least 12 programs that were rolled into a seniors' program, the Alberta seniors' benefit. The reality of that reform was that by 1996-1997, \$302 million of old benefits – and that's what seniors had predicted their retirement would be based on. None of the seniors' benefits were grandfathered; they were just taken away. Old benefits were taken away from Alberta seniors and were replaced by \$172 million in new Alberta seniors' benefits. Now, whether you want to look at the new math or the old math, the reality is that there's a subtraction. The reality is that there is at least a \$130 million difference between what the seniors had and what they got. So when you look at that, that was at least a 12 percent cut in seniors' benefits. Twelve percent, Mr. Speaker.

So did that program actually work? The reality is that no, it didn't work. There were seniors that were falling through the cracks, so there had to be the special-needs assistance program that we've heard about this afternoon put in its place. It's an emergency grant

program for seniors who can no longer make ends meet. So the cash benefits were too low and are still too low, and the income threshold benefits are still too low.

I'm not sure what the vote will be; hopefully the vote will be positive. But how can the members within this Legislative Assembly who may wish to vote against the bill at this point in time justify that to the 316,000 seniors across the province? The reality is that these seniors . . . [interjection] If there are more than that or less, that is not really the point. The point is that there's a large population of seniors in this province whose needs are not being met. If it is 316,000, 315,000, 290,000, that is not the point as much as the fact that each and every one of us in this Legislative Assembly represents seniors who are at various levels of need and that we should all be, I believe, standing up for those seniors.

So the amount that was taken out of the seniors' benefits amounts to about 12 percent, and what we are proposing is that the Alberta health care premium exemption be put in place again for seniors and that in fact there also be a mechanism whereby inflation can be kept track of. Why is that so odious to some of the Members of this Legislative Assembly? Why is that thought so odious?

If in fact there has already been an admission that the threshold levels are too low, then perhaps that is another area that needs to be looked at, to ensure that those threshold levels are raised so that seniors are in fact able to have the quality of life which I think all seniors in this province need.

There are several groups and organizations who believe that seniors should get back at least some of the benefits that they've lost. We've used probably a rather conservative estimate by saying that it's 12 percent. If I look at a comment from Neil Reimer, vice-president of the Alberta Council on Aging, what he indicates is that seniors are far from getting back the 22 percent of benefits that they have lost. Gladys Michaud, president of the Society for the Retired and Semi-Retired, said that it's time to give seniors a little consideration. That is exactly what we are asking in Bill 207, that seniors be given a little consideration. She goes on to say that with costs up, more user fees – and we have a bill within this Legislative Assembly to talk about user fees – and benefits down, many seniors are forced to dip into their food budgets to pay the bills. This is not a way of acknowledging and thanking seniors, especially when it is the International Year of Older Persons.

It would be, I think, a strong statement from this government if they were in fact to provide something substantive to seniors in this International Year of Older Persons. It would be more than platitudes, more than saying: don't worry; be happy. In fact what we would have is some concrete action from this government.

Thank you very much.

THE ACTING SPEAKER: Apparently we have run out of time, hon. members. Standing Order 8(5)(a) provides for up to 5 minutes for the sponsor of a private member's public bill to close debate. So I would invite the hon. Leader of the Opposition to close debate.

MRS. MacBETH: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I've been following the debate, and I appreciate the contributions of members of the Assembly on both sides of the House to the discussion of the value and the benefit and the recognition of that value that we as a Legislature and as a province bestow upon a pretty special group in Alberta, the senior citizens.

While it's important – and we often hear in this United Nations International Year of Older Persons lots about the celebration of the year – one of the seniors I know put it best, I think, when she said to me: well, you know, speeches are nice, but seniors want some tangible actions. That is what we are proposing by this legislation.

The tangible action is to recognize that seniors in this province have been impacted by cuts to provincial services. Those cuts have not only affected our local governments. They have been handed down to individuals as well, and certainly seniors are some of them.

The whole recognition of the cost of health care premiums for seniors, which of course they didn't used to have to pay, is a way of helping out our seniors, who have been affected very much by rising rates of rent, by shrinking accommodation for both regular residential care and long-term care, by higher user fees, higher costs of utilities, higher property taxes. All of these costs have impacted, and they impact on seniors in a very special way because of course seniors live on fixed incomes. One of the ways that the province can deal with people living on a fixed income is to assess the fixed costs, the fixed taxes which apply to that income group, and in the case of seniors one of the most blatant is, of course, the provincial health care premium cost.

4:20

Secondly, the other portion of the bill is to recognize that for those seniors who are of limited means, limited means already recognized by the province, there be an indexing of their cash benefit to reflect the previous three months of inflation and to be adjusted on a quarterly basis. This is very doable for a group of people who most surely deserve our support and some support in a financial way, as well, through the seniors' benefit and the indexing of same.

Mr. Speaker, I was very pleased to be able to sponsor this bill. I think when we look at how lives in Alberta are affected by seniors, how seniors participate very directly in family support, child care, home maintenance, all of those kinds of things, and when we look at how families correspondingly support seniors who may need a little extra care, given the shortage of long-term care beds in our province and the shortage of those kinds of services, this is a way to say to our families who are supporting this province and supporting our communities that here is a way that the province can give a direct message of thanks for the contribution that's been given.

For those two reasons I'm very proud to sponsor this bill. I thank all members for their contribution. I would urge all members to support the bill, and I would move second reading of Bill 207, the Seniors Benefit Statutes Amendment Act.

THE ACTING SPEAKER: All those in favour of second reading of Bill 207, Seniors Benefit Statutes Amendment Act, 1999, please say aye.

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Aye.

THE ACTING SPEAKER: Those opposed, please say no.

SOME HON. MEMBERS: No.

THE ACTING SPEAKER: Defeated.

[Several members rose calling for a division. The division bell was rung at 4:25 p.m.]

[Ten minutes having elapsed, the Assembly divided]

[Mrs. Gordon in the chair]

For the motion:

Blakeman	Leibovici	Sapers
Carlson	MacBeth	Soetaert
Dickson	Olsen	Wickman
Gibbons	Pannu	

Against the motion:

Amery	Hancock	McFarland
Broda	Hierath	Melchin
Burgener	Hlady	Pham
Cao	Jacques	Renner
Cardinal	Johnson	Severtson
Coutts	Jonson	Shariff
Day	Klapstein	Smith
Doerksen	Laing	Stevens
Dunford	Langevin	Tannas
Friedel	Lougheed	Tarchuk
Fritz	Mar	Taylor
Graham	McClellan	Zwozdesky
Haley		

Totals: For – 11 Against – 37

[Motion lost]

Bill 208

Prevention of Youth Tobacco Use Act

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

MR. JOHNSON: Thank you, Madam Speaker. I am grateful for the opportunity to bring forward Bill 208 today. This bill addresses youth tobacco consumption in the province and aims to protect Alberta youth from the negative effects of tobacco use.

We're all well aware of the risks associated with tobacco use, but not everyone is aware that most smokers and users of smokeless tobacco become addicted while still in adolescence. The most serious health hazard of tobacco for youth is addiction and its long-term effects. Tobacco use is the leading cause of preventable death and disability in Alberta. According to recent estimates compiled by the Alberta Tobacco Control Centre, premature deaths resulting from tobacco use in Alberta rose from 3,214 in 1994 to 3,458 in 1997. Madam Speaker, that means tobacco use was responsible for one in five deaths in the province in 1997.

In addition, tobacco use costs the Alberta economy an estimated \$729 million a year, or nearly \$300 for each person. This includes \$216 million for direct health care, indirect health-related costs: reduced productivity, lost income, and property damage. Madam Speaker, tobacco use is a social problem.

Preventing tobacco use by youth is critical because research shows that few adults will initiate using tobacco products. Survey results indicate that over 25 percent of smokers now aged 15 to 19 years began to smoke before age 13, and almost 85 percent began before age 16. The earlier youth become addicted, the greater their chances of developing a tobacco-related disease, and those who begin smoking by age 15 double their chances of dying prematurely.

Madam Speaker, according to the Alberta Tobacco Control Centre, the average age when young people start smoking on a regular basis is 13 years of age. Furthermore, about 90 percent of adult smokers began smoking before they were 19 years of age. Youth smoking is a serious problem in our society, and research indicates the problem is on the rise. In a public opinion poll done by the Alberta Tobacco Reduction Alliance, Albertans said that they strongly support youth initiatives and believe that government and health organizations should take action to protect young people from tobacco-related harm.

Madam Speaker, these facts are the fundamental reasons behind my bringing forward this private member's bill. If we can prevent

our youth from becoming addicted during this period of their lives, when they are most susceptible to becoming lifetime users of tobacco products, then we can spare them the difficulty of trying to quit later in life and the anguish of health problems caused by tobacco use.

According to the Addiction Research Foundation, an agency of the Ontario Ministry of Health, tobacco use is considered Canada's greatest public health problem. Tobacco use is the leading avoidable cause of death in Canada. Health Canada says that each year tobacco smoke kills over 40,000 people in this country. That is more than the combined deaths resulting from drug use, AIDS, murder, suicide, and motor vehicle traffic accidents. In addition, Canadian smokers use between 20 and 25 cigarettes a day, putting them amongst the world's heaviest smokers.

4:40

Addiction is the first indication of a health problem associated with tobacco use. It is an important concern because the addiction usually makes it difficult and sometimes impossible for the user to quit later on even if he or she wants to quit. Teens are an especially vulnerable group when it comes to the use of addictive and health-threatening drugs because they tend to take more risks than do adults. To give you an indication of the capacity for addiction to tobacco products, a U.S. study estimated that youths who smoke will stay addicted for an average of 16 to 20 years. Another U.S. study found that while only 5 percent of high school seniors who smoked believed that they would still be smoking five years after graduation – that is, 95 percent believed that it was only a temporary thing – on the average, 73 percent were still smoking eight years later.

Given this evidence, the most effective course of action would be to prevent addiction in the first place. That means that first and foremost we must seriously address the problem of youth smoking. As a society we have done much to teach our children about the risks associated with tobacco use. Students that I have talked to seem to be well aware of the effects of tobacco use. Many school districts are banning or have banned smoking on school property. In Ontario smoking has been banned on all school property.

Teens reach their potential by thriving within limits or boundaries that protect them emotionally, physically, and intellectually. Providing standards while they are young helps to channel their energies and directions, which will empower them to achieve their potential. Youth want to know what the rules are, and they expect a consistent message from those rules.

In speaking with teens on this issue, one of the questions raised is why adults give them mixed messages about using tobacco. Some teens have said to me: you teach us that smoking is harmful but do little about making sure that we don't use cigarettes. Some have said: if it was really that bad, you would treat it like alcohol, with laws preventing usage in public.

Our laws on youth tobacco use make it illegal for a retailer to sell to a youth, but it is not illegal for a youth to purchase or possess or consume tobacco products. The message is: we don't want you to have cigarettes, but if you get them, there's no law against consuming them. That, I believe, gives an inconsistent and soft message, when we need a consistent and strong message. Bill 208 gives a clear and consistent message to our youth: it's against the law to smoke in public places.

Madam Speaker, most youth are law-abiding citizens. The normative aspect of the law is that it sets a standard that most youth will observe, just as they follow any reasonable and good law or regulation. In fact, enforcement really isn't an issue with the majority. The absence of legislation on the issue of youth smoking has made it very difficult for schools to deal with teen smoking.

However, school boards in Edmonton, Calgary, Fort McMurray, Wetaskiwin, Camrose, and others have banned smoking on school property. The problem with this course of action is that they are facing complaints from neighbouring residents and businesses about kids smoking on streets and neighbouring property and littering with cigarette butts.

Madam Speaker, I would add here that several police forces in the province, retailers, school boards, many superintendents, principals, many teachers, and many students have expressed to me their support for Bill 208 in the interests of combating these types of problems and, more important, in the interests of reducing the incidence of youth smoking. The Elk Island school board made a recommendation to the Alberta School Boards Association to urge the federal government to amend the Tobacco Act to make it illegal for persons under the age of 18 to use or be in possession of a controlled tobacco. The Alberta School Boards Association forwarded the recommendation to the Canadian School Boards Association. However, the resolution did not pass. I have a letter of support here for Bill 208 from the Alberta School Boards Association as well as letters of support from school boards in my constituency.

For the Alberta government, tobacco-free youth is one of four primary objectives outlined in the Alberta tobacco reduction plan. Federal legislation to control the use of tobacco through restrictions on tobacco sales to minors, smoke-free public places, packaging and labeling requirements, and taxation have all resulted in an overall reduction in the consumption of tobacco products in the province, particularly during the '80s. Price, access, education, and packaging have all been identified as significant influences on both the consumption of tobacco products by youth and in preventing young people from starting to use tobacco.

However, Dr. Rob Cushman in an article entitled *Protecting Our Children* has revealed the crux of the matter. I quote: what we are witnessing is the progression of a public health problem from education and promotion to legislation and ultimately enforcement; history tells us that this evolution is the only way to push compliance beyond a suboptimal plateau, whether it be seat belts, tobacco, or any other intervention.

Legislation is the key component in reducing tobacco use by young people to the lowest level possible. The Alberta Tobacco Reduction Alliance recommends a comprehensive approach to tobacco control legislation, with which I agree, Madam Speaker. What we need is a balanced approach to tobacco control, one that addresses the responsibilities of both retailers and young consumers. The part that is missing is the accountability and responsibility of the youths themselves.

Madam Speaker, I have worked with youths through my whole career, and I have found them to be truly amazing. When encouraged in the right way and given guidance, direction, and positive reinforcement, they will rise to any challenge and make good choices. We need to raise the standard, once again, for our young people rather than fostering a victim mentality, they being the victims of a supplier or some outside force. Youths are responsible people and I'm sure are equal to the tobacco challenge. We need to involve them in a meaningful way.

As recently as 1993 the federal Tobacco Restraint Act held both retailer and youth accountable by applying fines for illegal sales or consumption of tobacco by people under 16 years of age. However, this act was repealed and replaced by the Tobacco Sales to Young Persons Act and again in 1997 by the Tobacco Act. Both of these acts removed all responsibility from young people for using tobacco. With this change, Madam Speaker, the message has become inconsistent. Once again, why should it be illegal for a retailer to

sell, yet legal for a minor to buy and consume tobacco?

By leaving our legislation without any accountability by youth as consumers, we are allowing an activity that is detrimental and harmful to our young people and, at the same time, are denying our kids a valuable opportunity to learn responsibility as part of their growing up experience. If we depict our young people as victims, they will ultimately display the behaviour of victims, and that certainly is not in society's best interests. Madam Speaker, guidelines can be liberating and can empower young people. They provide freedom, the freedom to be responsible for actions, the freedom to make the right decisions, the freedom from peer pressure, and, I might say, the freedom to stay free from tobacco addiction. We as legislators have a responsibility as adults and as stewards of this next generation to provide youth with the direction and protection that they deserve.

Madam Speaker, it has been said that we would be criminalizing youth by instituting this law. I agree that we should not criminalize our youth. Are we criminalizing by giving tickets for speeding or parking violations or not wearing seat belts? Of course not, nor would we be criminalizing youth by establishing a law prohibiting tobacco consumption to protect them from this danger. The objective is to provide a disincentive and to state clearly to our young people that tobacco use is a danger to them, and we as a government take our responsibility to protect them very seriously.

4:50

The best documented case of a community that has sharply reduced the incidence of youth smoking comes from Woodridge, Illinois. This municipality and town imposed a tough local ordinance in 1989 to get cigarettes out of the hands of children and to reduce youth smoking. The components of the Woodridge program were simple and threefold: number one, strong measures to ensure retail compliance to a law prohibiting sales to minors; number two, a good education program on tobacco use in the schools; and number three, antitobacco legislation for youth, a law restricting them on the usage of tobacco.

Madam Speaker, a foremost researcher on tobacco use from the University of Massachusetts, a Dr. Joseph DiFranza, stated that the Woodridge program has produced the best results of any program anywhere. In 1989, 16 percent of Woodridge's junior high students described themselves as regular smokers, and by as early as 1991 only 5 percent were regular smokers. These are convincing figures, and as a result the ordinance has been replicated internationally. Today more than 200 local governments in the U.S., in Canada, and in Europe have laws modeled after Woodridge's ordinance. Sergeant Talbot of Woodridge informed me on March 19 in a telephone call that the city of Chicago and 33 surrounding communities, involving a population of about 4 million people, have now adopted the Woodridge program by ordinance.

Madam Speaker, there is also some enlightening evidence about the necessity of each component of the Woodridge program. Jurisdictions such as Massachusetts have implemented only a piecemeal replica of the Woodridge program, essentially omitting youth tobacco possession laws because of faulty arguments that these laws might criminalize youth. Research concluded that Massachusetts towns that have reached the 80 percent target rate for compliance with the law by enforcement programs for retailers have nothing to show for their achievement in the way of reductions in youth smoking. Levels of smoking among high school students were actually similar to those in towns without tobacco controls. Tobacco retailer compliance rates are important, but if they do nothing to curb the use of tobacco products by young people, what is accomplished? The point is that this is only one important

component of the Woodridge program. A significant difference between the Massachusetts and Woodridge projects appears to be the youth possession component.

Madam Speaker, other provinces have proposed legislation similar to Bill 208 in the interest of protecting youth from tobacco consumption. For example, Bill 100 was a private member's bill in Ontario that proposed an amendment to the province's Tobacco Control Act to create an offence for persons under 19 years of age to purchase or be in possession of tobacco. That's 19 years of age. The bill died on the Order Paper. However, the sponsoring member plans to reintroduce it in this new session.

The federal Tobacco Act was passed in 1997. As I mentioned before, the act places restrictions on the sale and access of tobacco products to persons under the age of 18 years but does not prohibit the purchase, possession, or consumption of tobacco products by youth. Given that the federal statute does not address youth possession or consumption of tobacco, Bill 208 does not duplicate the federal act; rather, it complements it. Many provinces have duplicated federal legislation in drafting their provincial statutes. However, in Alberta so far we have determined to reduce or avoid duplication. For this reason Bill 208 is a stand-alone provincial act. In the words of the Calgary Police Service, who also support Bill 208, "Bill 208 would complement the [federal] Tobacco Act, Section 8, which prohibits the furnishing of tobacco to a young person in a public place." This way Bill 208 addresses the missing component of an effective tobacco reduction strategy.

Madam Speaker, the Woodridge project is a partnership effort by stakeholders in a community to solve a problem. It is a simple solution, and it is inexpensive. It involves health, education, business, police, social services, parents, and students working in cooperation and with the will to solve a problem. But government is also an important partner. It provides the necessary legislation, enabling the local community to succeed.

Madam Speaker, by legislating that youth cannot consume tobacco products in public places, we are striking the right balance between retailer compliance and youth consumption. At the same time, we are eliminating three deficits that currently exist in provincial tobacco control policy.

First, we are providing support for our young people who do not want to begin smoking but find it difficult to say no to peer influence when it appears that youth smoking is condoned by our society. In a letter of support from the Battle River regional division No. 31 they state: "We feel that this legislation could act as a deterrent to those youth who are considering using tobacco products."

Secondly, we are providing an accountability factor for our young people by requiring that they accept responsibility for their actions when they consume a product that the law says they should be protected from because of its addictive and dangerous qualities.

Finally, we are providing legislated support to this government's policy of fostering a generation of tobacco-free youth. In the words of the Lakeland regional health authority, who will also support this bill: this proposed bill is "effective and timely."

For these reasons, Madam Speaker, I would encourage the members of this Assembly to support this bill, and I look forward to the debate. Thank you.

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

MS LEIBOVICI: Thank you, Madam Speaker. I rise today to address Bill 208, the Prevention of Youth Tobacco Use Act, which has been put forward by the member. I would like to commend the member on putting forward a bill that in fact tries to address a very

important issue. That is the issue of tobacco smoking, which is, as he had indicated, an issue that can be viewed by some as a social problem but has been researched and proven to be actually a drain on our health care system. One of the foremost ways of attacking this problem is in treating it as an addiction that is probably best treated by having individuals not start to smoke, because once one starts, it is difficult to stop, as I know a few hon. members in this Legislative Assembly recognize. We all recognize that it is difficult for individuals as well.

We know that one of the major issues is the issue of smoking amongst our youth. In fact, when one looks at the statistics, there seems to be a steady percentage of young smokers within our society. Some figures that I have in front of me indicate that 31 percent of females aged 15 to 19 are smokers and 20 percent of males aged 15 to 19 are smokers as well. We have the highest rates in the country for chewing tobacco: 16 percent of 10 to 14 year olds chew tobacco, and 25 percent of 15 to 19 year olds have used chewing tobacco. I'm not sure if that indicates that that's an actual addiction to it. Thirteen is the average age when individuals become regular smokers. Overall, some of the analysis seems to indicate that tobacco use accounts for 20 percent of all deaths in Alberta either directly or indirectly.

So we know it is an issue that needs to be addressed. We know that there are numerous concerns within Alberta with regards to the issue of smoking. We have seen some attempts made at both the level of the municipalities as well as at the provincial level to deal with the issue of smoking. We now have sections within restaurants that are divided between the smokers and the nonsmokers. Within this Legislative Assembly itself we recently passed legislation to indicate that there are designated smoking areas, but the majority of the Assembly is off-limits to smokers. There are advertising campaigns, and the government has provided funding for some of those advertising campaigns, with a recent initiative by the Minister of Health to the Alberta Tobacco Reduction Alliance. Some of what the money is being used for is for projects such as the current provincewide clean air campaign so that Albertans can declare their homes smoke free.

5:00

The work that the member has done and the background that the member has provided to the Assembly was interesting to listen to. I would be interested if the member is willing to provide some of the copies of the endorsements that he has had with regards to Bill 208. He indicated that the Calgary Police Association may be in support. My understanding is that the Edmonton Police Association may not be in support, and when we have an issue as difficult as this one, I believe that there has to be a thorough consultation with all the stakeholders involved.

One of the basic concerns is that our approach to the issue of smoking/tobacco use needs to be an approach that is balanced. When one looks at the Woodridge approach, it is an interesting model. It is my understanding, though, that it is not widespread in its usage, though a number of areas are looking at implementing it. Perhaps one way of knowing whether or not it would work in the Alberta context is to see if there could be a pilot project in an area of Alberta that might be willing to enact some of what the Woodridge program attacks.

The components in that program include the local licensing of tobacco vendors, repeated undercover inspections – and this is a very, very key part of the Woodridge program in that they have sting operations where they have youth that are under 18 that are used to go into stores and attempt to buy products. There are police waiting outside to either provide a ticket and saying, “Yes, you have

contravened the legislation,” or on the other hand to say, “Good for you; you didn't contravene the legislation.”

So there's that immediate reinforcement, and I think that part of what has made the program so successful is the fact that you have that ongoing undercover work so that they are very close to zero percent – well, it's a 90 percent threshold – compliance by the tobacco vendors in not selling to individuals who are under 18. So that is a key, key component: how does our youth obtain tobacco?

The other part of it is the education programs. Some of the youth that are caught are in fact sent to education programs. That is part of their learning, so to speak, so that they understand what the whole issue is about. Then of course there is the fine for minors who smoke.

The interesting part, though, when one reads about Woodridge, is that what is most important, the researchers have said, is that Woodridge vigorously enforces its ordinance and that that is what the key is. Also, the tobacco control advocates have indicated that the best chance of success is if there are several parallel attacks under way and that these are very, very important components to ensuring that tobacco usage is minimized amongst youth.

I don't know if the member has any information as to why the new federal act has deleted mention of youth possession and consumption and if in fact one of those reasons was because it was unenforceable. So if the member has any information on that and if he's willing to share that, again, that would be useful information to have.

At this point in time I think the intent of the act is commendable, but I believe there needs to be more consultation with the stakeholders before passage of this act happens. In fact, perhaps what might have been a better way of bringing this issue to the forefront might have been through a motion urging the government to assess or to put forward a pilot project with regards to preventing youth from accessing tobacco products.

The major concern of course is the enforceability and if in fact we are passing legislation that will be impossible to enforce, unless we have assurances from the municipalities, that would in fact have to carry the burden of ensuring that their enforcement officers are providing fines – I'm not sure if it's arresting as well – that they are willing to undertake that responsibility. So information or some kind of indication from a group such as AUMA would also be, I think, a group that needs to be consulted with regards to this particular piece of legislation.

So with those words I will conclude my statements on Bill 208. I think it is a valid issue to be discussed within this Legislative Assembly. I hope that it is one we will continue to discuss and find a solution to, because I think it is important that there is a solution to the issue, as much of a solution as you can get to the issue of youth under the age of 18, if that's the age we're using, which I believe it is, accessing tobacco products.

Thank you.

THE ACTING SPEAKER: The hon. Minister of Education.

MR. MAR: Thank you, Madam Speaker. It's my pleasure to show my support for Bill 208. As minister responsible for educating young people, that are affected by this bill, I feel it's my duty. Also, I share with other Albertans and members in this Assembly who have expressed the feeling that it seems strangely inconsistent that children are legally able to use a product that is illegal for them to purchase.

As Minister of Education it's exciting to be part of preparing young people for the full and productive life that they have ahead of them. The education system works hard for one purpose only, and that's to help make our children make the most of their potential. It

does this with significant financial support from the people of this province and great effort on the part of 30,000 teachers in this province, 60 school boards and authorities, parents of more than half a million students, and hundreds of business and community partners in education.

I've visited hundreds of schools in this province, Madam Speaker. I've seen the energy and the resources that go into preparing our children to become responsible and contributing members of society, and it is sad to see that some of those same children are ones that stand around in little clusters here and there letting their potential go up in smoke.

Madam Speaker, while we are preparing our young people for life, tobacco is preparing some of them for death. Now, mostly it is a slow process. Usually smoking does not rob children of their youth, and it may not rob them of their young adulthood, although it can. But over time, tobacco can and will rob them of their prime in older years when they still have much living to do, much to accomplish, and much to contribute to their families and to the communities that they live in.

Juvenile smoking depends on two factors. Those factors, in my opinion, are motive and opportunity. Making it illegal to sell cigarettes to children helps reduce the opportunity. Bill 208 proposes a further reduction of this opportunity and hopes to remove motive.

First, reducing opportunity. School boards set their own smoking policies, and in some jurisdictions smoking is not tolerated on school property. Some students simply move their smoking across the street, much to the chagrin of the neighbours of the school. Making it illegal for children to smoke in public places would remove this option for students and at the same time address the concerns of homeowners who live close to schools and, perhaps more importantly, further reduce the opportunities children have to smoke.

The same goes for nonschool areas. Municipalities already regulate smoking for indoor or public places like restaurants and shopping malls. These are areas that attract young people. Again, making it illegal for children to smoke outside these areas as well as inside will further reduce opportunity.

5:10

Now, some would argue that motive is even more important than opportunity. Where there is a will, there is a way, and I think that the best solution is to help reduce the will. Peer pressure remains one of the prime reasons why young people take up smoking in the first place. Bill 208 sends a very clear message that juvenile smoking is not acceptable. Bill 208 would make it very inconvenient for teens to find a place where they can smoke and offers the possibility that one's cigarettes may be confiscated. In my view, this would be a great deterrent for teens.

Bill 208 provides a realistic approach to the issue of youth smoking. It does not propose that we follow laws or proposed legislation elsewhere that make possession of tobacco by minors a crime. Possession presents significant enforcement issues. A law against juvenile consumption, however, allows any law enforcement officer seeing a young person smoking on public property to immediately confiscate the tobacco and also issue a fine.

To conclude, as in every other aspect of our society, our children represent our future. Tobacco-free youth is the first step to a tobacco-free society. Bill 208 does not have all the answers – no one piece of legislation can – but it is clearly a step in the right direction, and I urge members of this Assembly to support it.

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

MS OLSEN: Thank you, Madam Speaker. I find it very interesting. First of all, I want to commend the hon. Member for Wetaskiwin-Camrose for bringing forward the bill. Although I'm not speaking in support of this bill for a number of reasons, I do believe that the initiative has merit to some degree.

I also want to say that, you know, as a police officer, driving in a police car on the street, I can guarantee you that if this was law, the last thing I would do is stop and take tobacco or a cigarette from a youth and give him a ticket. You know why? Because right now there aren't enough policemen to respond to the calls that exist, and there are people in fact waiting six hours for a policeman to respond to a legitimate call. So I get really kind of offended when we start creating laws that just create more work for an agency without the resources to do it. Now, if the Minister of Justice wanted to increase the kitty or even look at the motion we put forward to increase the numbers of police officers in communities and on the streets, then maybe they would have a kiddie tobacco unit. Maybe that could happen, but it's not going to, Madam Speaker.

I also find it very interesting that we have this tobacco bill in front of us when in fact the Canadian Association of Chiefs of Police are looking at decriminalizing marijuana because of the cost of enforcement. So now they want to downgrade it from a criminal offence and make it a bylaw so somebody can give out a tag for it.

We've got to balance everything here. Yes, we need to focus on youth smoking. There is no question. But it's not through enforcement and laws such as this. It's through education: education in the school system, education through Health Canada, education through the Department of Health, education through the Department of Education, and it goes on and on and on and on.

So although this is a laudable thought and notion, I can't support the idea that we're going to have policemen taking tobacco from kids. Quite frankly I thought about this earlier: you know, what if I was police officer, say, on the street and I have to collect an exhibit? What about chewing tobacco? What am I supposed to do as a police officer? "Here, spit into this bag," and I'll keep this as an exhibit? I don't think so.

Madam Speaker, I also think it's important to draw attention to Health Canada's tobacco enforcement group. In fact, those folks have tried to put on a serious campaign over the last few years to actually reduce the number of people who are selling tobacco to youth. I think there is legitimacy to that and to that component of tobacco enforcement, but I think it's far more difficult for me to sit back as a police officer and say, "You know, this would be a good thing for police to enforce."

I can tell you right now that the summer is coming up and the major police agencies and the RCMP in this province are going to be shorthanded because of holidays, because of sickness and people having to go from one department to another to cover off for somebody else. Policemen are going to be running from call to call, and that means that they're going to be taking the high-priority calls first, and the notion of tobacco enforcement is going to be far from reaching any reality.

As a matter of fact, Madam Speaker, I would go so far as to say that the matter of alcohol enforcement on a grand scale for juveniles is not something that police departments undertake unless it's right in front of them, unless it's very visible and they can see it, unless they go to a house party and there's a pile of kids drinking. They sure don't patrol the streets and those kinds of things, because there isn't time, and that's the reality. I would suggest that you would find that same reality in schools with teachers, with fewer teachers, fewer resources.

While I say, yes, it is our responsibility to target youth smoking and possession, I don't think this is the right way to do it. I think we

have to come from a far more preventative environment and look at putting the money into different programs.

Madam Speaker, those are my comments, and I'll leave it at that.

MR. DOERKSEN: Madam Speaker, I am happy to have the opportunity to speak to Bill 208. This bill addresses a serious problem among our young people today. While this Assembly has shown an interest in the challenges facing our youth, we need to go further in taking action to protect them from health problems that have been all too prevalent among our own generation.

Madam Speaker, last year I presented to this Legislature a private member's motion that was not debated urging the government to expand its initiatives to reduce the incidence of smoking by making it illegal for minors to be in possession of cigarettes; hence I fully support Bill 208 and the initiative taken by my hon. colleague to address the problem of youth smoking. However, I would recommend that the bill be taken further and amended to include a provision prohibiting possession of tobacco products by minors.

The incidence of tobacco use among young people is increasing. According to the National Clearinghouse on Tobacco and Health, in 1994 the rates of young people between the ages of 15 and 19 years smoking were 32 percent for females and 20 percent for males. This is an increase from 1990, when these same rates were only 30 percent for females and 16 percent for males.

Although many Canadians believe that tobacco use is a habit or personal choice, scientific research has established that the nicotine found naturally in tobacco is highly addictive. It is. The United States Surgeon General's 1988 report states that cigarettes and other forms of tobacco are just as addictive as heroin and cocaine. These are powerful drugs, Madam Speaker, drugs that destroy the lives of the users.

5:20

Nicotine is also a powerful mood-altering substance that reaches the brain quickly when consumed by smoking a cigarette. Health Canada reports that the nicotine found in tobacco is one of the most addictive substances known to scientists and that about eight out of every 10 who try smoking get hooked. Now, eight out of 10 is 80 percent, the same thing. That's a high percentage.

Tobacco use can lead to a physical and psychological dependence on nicotine. People who are physically dependent on tobacco suffer a withdrawal reaction when they stop using it. Symptoms include irritability – we notice that in this Assembly – anxiety, headaches, sleep disturbances, lack of concentration, a decreased heart rate, and cravings for nicotine. These symptoms can last from several days to several weeks. However, the desire for a cigarette and relapse to smoking can occur for months after quitting.

AN HON. MEMBER: Years.

MR. DOERKSEN: And years.

As with other drug use, Madam Speaker, not only physical but emotional dependence can play a role in nicotine addiction. Certain events or emotional states may become a conditioned signal to the brain telling a person that they need a cigarette.

This is only amplified among youth. Adolescence is a stage of life that is characterized by change and growth. It is also a stage where emotions run high, and the transition to adulthood presents some difficult challenges for our young people. Conditioned responses to these challenges that involve tobacco use only solidify a lifelong addiction to nicotine. Once they are adults, anytime something triggers those same feelings, the craving for nicotine is also triggered.

Despite this evidence nicotine is currently excluded from drug control legislation in Canada. Unbelievable, Madam Speaker. The

basis for this exclusion does not appear to be justified by its pharmacological properties. Several researchers have identified nicotine as a psychoactive substance which affects brain chemistry, as do heroin and cocaine.

Some of the most startling evidence, Madam Speaker, is that tobacco use by youth is known to predict future drug use. That means there's a correlation. The association between tobacco use and other drug use is thought to occur for three reasons. First, the nicotine produces changes in the central nervous system which are similar to those produced by cocaine and heroin. Therefore a nicotine user's central nervous system changes in a way that predisposes the person to other drug use. Second, the learned behaviour of inhaling cigarette smoke can enhance the effectiveness of delivery of other inhaled drugs. Third, tobacco may be used to regulate mood and behaviour and may predispose someone to use alcohol and other drugs for the same purpose. Progression from tobacco to other substance abuse results in increased multiple health risks from multiple drug use.

Tobacco users also develop strong psychological addictions to tobacco products. The products become linked to everyday activities and gradually are relied upon as a means of coping with positive and negative feelings. For these reasons, quitting becomes extremely difficult. The strong addictive nature of nicotine and the underestimation of its addictive qualities by youth combined with a low average age at which smokers regularly start cause well-founded concerns among health advocates interested in preventing lifelong tobacco use.

In 1994 Canadian youth between the ages of 12 and 18 years consumed about 1.7 billion cigarettes, or about 17 million packages of 25. This activity is worth about \$280 million in retail sales in Canada. About \$162 million of that is collected as tax revenue with the remaining \$118 million going to retailers, distributors, and the tobacco industry.

This is the impact on Canadian youth in general, but let's consider one person. Before a young person takes that first puff, they should examine the financial cost. This could be evidence enough to curb use. Let's say that a young person starts smoking at 13. Let's also say that this person smokes an average pack a day. By the time they turn 30, they will have spent about \$15,000 on cigarettes, and that's in today's prices; as the Premier says, dollarettes. Fifteen thousand dollars is a nice down payment on a house; it's a good portion of the price of a new car; it's \$15,000 less to owe on student loans.

We need to remember that this money is being paid because of an addiction, not necessarily because a person wants to continue smoking. Many people try to quit repeatedly throughout their lives but simply find it incredibly difficult. By retirement age this addiction will have cost that person thousands more dollars, not including expenses due to medical bills.

Madam Speaker, a proactive strategy against teen tobacco use is one that focuses on prevention before addiction ever becomes an issue. My colleague mentioned the Woodridge program, which has been proved to be the most effective course of action in preventing youth tobacco use. The evidence is compelling that antipossession legislation combined with restrictions on retailers for sales to minors is more effective in reducing rates of teen smoking than simply stepping up the enforcement of laws governing retailers.

Given that federal legislation already covers retailers, there is a need for legislation restricting minors from possessing. I say "possessing" because I am in favour of the antipossession law for minors in this province. I support the bill, but I would be even more supportive if the bill were to include possession in section 2 as the Gaming and Liquor Act does.

As recently as 1993 federal law did make possession of tobacco by youth an offence. The Tobacco Restraint Act was in effect to

restrain the use of tobacco by young persons. The act specifically stated that any person under the age of 16 years who smoked or chewed tobacco in a public place or purchased or had in his possession any tobacco products was guilty of an offence. However, this act was repealed in 1993 and replaced by the Tobacco Sales to Young Persons Act, which removes all restrictions on use and on possessing tobacco products and places greater restrictions on retailers not to sell tobacco to minors.

Madam Speaker, school boards have resorted to implementing their own policies on the issue because of the lack of government initiative. They face a conundrum because enforcing these policies sends the kids who smoke to neighbouring residential or commercial properties, while not enforcing them opens the school up for criticism from parents and the schools that condone teen smoking. Bill 208 could go a long way in helping our schools deal with this problem. [interjections]

Madam Speaker, they are begging me to carry on. Shall I keep on going?

Madam Speaker, I have so much more to say that today I am going to move adjournment of debate so that I can carry on my comments next week. So at this point I move to adjourn debate on this bill.

THE ACTING SPEAKER: Having heard the motion by the hon. Member for Red Deer-South, does the Assembly agree with the motion?

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Agreed.

THE ACTING SPEAKER: Opposed?

SOME HON. MEMBERS: No.

THE ACTING SPEAKER: Carried.

[The Assembly adjourned at 5:28 p.m.]

