

Legislative Assembly of Alberta

Title: **Monday, February 28, 2000**

8:00 p.m.

Date: 00/02/28

head: Committee of Supply

[Mr. Tannas in the chair]

THE CHAIRMAN: For the benefit of all those in the gallery, I would like to explain that this is the informal part of the Legislature. It's called committee, and we're called Committee of Supply, where we go item by item. Hon. members do not necessarily sit in the places they've been assigned. They must speak in the places they are assigned, but they are free to take off their jackets and have a coffee and that kind of thing. So it's the informal session where you can get give and take going back and forth.

head: Supplementary Estimates 1999-2000 General Revenue Fund, No. 2

THE CHAIRMAN: We had some discussion as to which would be the first item. Is it agreed, House leaders, that we're going to start with Justice? You're agreed. Okay.

Justice and Attorney General

THE CHAIRMAN: The hon. Minister of Justice to lead off tonight's discussions.

MR. HANCOCK: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Yes, I'm pleased to speak to the supplementary estimates with respect to the Department of Justice. The amount we're requesting from the Legislature tonight is, I believe, the sum of \$5,700,000 as supplementary to Justice spending. That money is being used, quite succinctly, with respect to the court services area of our department and will be applied to the revitalization of some of the technology that we have, most specifically to revitalizing the courtroom recording technology to put in digital technology.

As a result of doing the upgrades to the technology, which needed to be upgraded in any event, Mr. Chairman, we will be in a position to record court proceedings through the new digital technology recording devices, which will eliminate in good part the need for manual court reporting. Now, I should say in making reference to this that the court reporters we have in this province and the court reporting that we have . . .

Chairman's Ruling Decorum

THE CHAIRMAN: Hon. members of the committee, it is the informal part of the Legislature, but that doesn't cover lively discussions. I wonder if we can perhaps . . . [interjections] Are we disturbing you, hon. minister? If you have conversations that are going to be audible to other people that are at some distance from you, would you please do that outside, in the back, in one of the chambers at the side, so we can hear the hon. Minister of Justice and Attorney General explain why he needs this extra money?

Hon. minister.

Debate Continued

MR. HANCOCK: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. As I was saying, the sum of \$5.7 million is being requested from the Legislature in order to carry out a onetime revitalization project in Justice by allowing us, through the use of approximately \$3 million of that, to replace the recording technology in our courtrooms across the province. As

a result of replacing that recording technology with digital recording apparatus, it will be possible for us to provide transcripts through that process without the aid of manual court reporters.

We will be retaining some 16 court reporters nonetheless, because there's some concern about the transition to digital recording. So in the interim we'll be retaining 16 positions in Edmonton, Calgary, and perhaps in other locations throughout the province. It is our belief that while we're upgrading the technology, this will afford us an opportunity to redirect some of the resources of Justice to some of the frontline projects that were requested by the people of Alberta during the justice summit.

The total of \$5.7 million that's being requested includes approximately \$3 million for the new digital recording devices, and the remainder of it may be needed for the purposes of assisting those court reporters who will need to be relocated in the Department of Justice or, if they should so determine, to find other opportunities in the private sector or elsewhere in government. I want to be perfectly clear that this is not a downsizing initiative. We are not engaging in this initiative for the purpose of eliminating government employees. We are engaging in this initiative because, number one, it's absolutely necessary for us to improve courtroom technology. The recording technology we have in place right now is fast becoming out of date, and in doing so, it affords this opportunity to redirect some of the resources in the department so that we have more money available for community justice initiatives and other initiatives in the department.

We do want to make sure that we are very fair to all the employees in the department who are affected. They've provided good service to the people of Alberta and the province of Alberta, the government of Alberta. They are professionals. Some of them have been in position and providing court reporting services for a considerable number of years, some as many as 20 years with the government. So I want to assure this House, as I know you'd all want to know, that we have made sure all the people displaced by this refurbishing of the technology have been offered the opportunity to stay on with Justice in other positions. However, if they want to stay within their court reporting profession, we will assist them with packages to relocate into the private sector.

So that's the \$5.7 million we're asking for. In the event that a large number of employees stay with the government, we may not need to utilize all the resources being requested, but we want to make sure we are in a position to be fair and equitable to all employees affected by this move and therefore are requesting the sum as set out in the supplementary estimates.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

MR. DICKSON: Mr. Chairman, I'd say that the hon. Minister of Justice quite misapprehends the concerns that exist around this. I've had the opportunity to practise in the courts of this province for some 22 years, long enough, I think, to understand the importance of quality court reporting. You know, I hear the minister say that the funding is to "improve courtroom technology." One might have thought the government would say that this will improve the quality of legal services, this would improve the quality of decisions, this will improve access, but no, it doesn't do that. What it's going to do is improve the technology.

The reality, Mr. Chairman, is this. We are going in a direction that perhaps is consistent with what this government has done in other areas. It's a government that always seems to be driven by providing services at the lowest possible cost, and quality be damned.

What we do know about the kind of digital recording technology, the road down which Alberta is now going to proceed, is that it has been tried in numerous other jurisdictions, and if you talk to the

Canadian Bar Association – interesting that the Justice department did not talk to the Canadian Bar Association, the organization that represents lawyers in this province, to get feedback.

Shaun Dunnigan, the current president of the Canadian Bar Association, has written a letter to the Minister of Justice. I don't have it in hand, but it's three or four pages long. Mr. Dunnigan makes the point that there are very serious concerns about scrapping the former process of having actual court reporters in the room. He talks about the potential compromise of the quality of recording, and he talks about some of the delays and additional costs that will be part of particularly our civil justice system.

The minister talks about "some concern about the transition." The concern, hon. minister, through the chair, isn't with the transition; it's with the direction. The concern is that to shave a few dollars in this area – what's now going to happen is that instead of having a live court reporter in the room and when there's a problem, the judge or counsel can ask to have a particular exchange read back and you get that read-back opportunity almost immediately, we're not going to have that. We're going to have to rely on a recording.

8:10

The Minister of Justice surprises me. You know, we now have a Minister of Justice who has actually practised in the courts of this province. He knows how it works. He knows how it works in that room. When you have two or three people speaking over each other, if you have somebody whose first language is not English, it is often exceedingly unreliable to rely on a tape. We've seen this in provincial courts where they have gone with an electronic court reporting system. It's simply not as good.

So here's what will happen. My prediction is that what we're going to find is that those lawyers in civil trials involving two resource companies and perhaps tens of millions of dollars at stake are going to make sure – you bet, Mr. Chairman, that they're going to have court reporters in that room, because they want a record that's immediately accessible and they want to ensure that you have the higher quality of editing that goes along with having a live court reporter to take down that viva voce evidence, that testimony. People who don't have a lot of dough, Mr. Chairman, aren't going to have that opportunity, and so what you've done is created a two-tier justice system.

It's bad enough that we get on this road . . . Well, the Minister of Justice I can see is shaking his head and obviously disagreeing with what I'm saying, but I challenge the minister right now, this evening, to tell us what studies, what specific studies the Department of Justice in this province is relying on to show that this is going to mean an enhanced quality of judicial service in this province. What studies? If you look at what happened in Ontario, if you look at what happened in British Columbia – the lawyers in British Columbia want reporters back in the courtroom because they have experienced a sufficient number of problems with this fully automated system. They want to go back, but Alberta is going to proceed down this road.

We maybe have a parallel. We go down a road to private health care without a single scintilla of evidence, a single documented case that it's going to enhance the quality of health care. Now we're doing exactly the same thing when it comes to court reporting. We're going down a road where the evidence suggests that you may save a few dollars but you compromise the quality of the reporting that exists in those courtrooms.

So can the Minister of Justice tell us, if he wants the support of the Liberal opposition, what studies he's relying on that will show that the service will be at least of the same quality that we have right now and will not deteriorate? On what basis does he think the technology

in the year 2000 is sufficiently sophisticated to be able to deal with the raft of problems that happened, as I said before, the two lawyers talking at the same time? A little bit like the Assembly sometimes, Mr. Chairman: you get more than one person speaking at a time even though they're not supposed to.

Those kinds of things happen, so it's not good enough that you shave a few dollars off the cost. If my constituents are going to have more difficulty getting justice in the civil court system of this province, this is a step backwards.

I want to know why there was no consultation with the Canadian Bar Association. I want to know why there was no consultation with the Law Society of Alberta before the decision was made. I'm not talking about some frantic chat after the decision was announced. I want to know what discussions there have been. I'm not talking about just the Chief Justice of the Court of Queen's Bench of Alberta. I want to know what discussions have taken place to involve the – what have we got, hon. Minister of Justice? – about 70 or 80 Queen's Bench judges in this province. I want to know what opportunity those justices of the Court of Queen's Bench who hear the trials in this province have had to sort of register their concerns.

Anyway, those are some of the concerns I've got. You know, I take the minister at his word. He wants to be fair to the employees, and I'm mindful of their concerns, but my primary concern is the quality of justice, access to justice, quality of court reporting in this province. I just hate to see us take a step backwards, and I hate to see a situation where litigants who don't have a lot of dough end up getting compromised court reporting services, because sure as guns when a couple of big oil companies are suing each other, they're going to have a live court reporter there. I think that what's good enough for those corporations is good enough for somebody in that wrongful dismissal trial or that breach-of-contract action or that tort claim.

Those are the concerns I've got. Our Justice critic, the Member for Edmonton-Norwood, chatted with me the other day. She's actually been able to do some research and has got quite a bit of interesting material around this that shows some of the problems with this direction we're going. So I think I've registered the concerns I have.

Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman.

THE CHAIRMAN: The hon. Minister of Justice.

MR. HANCOCK: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. What we've heard from the Member for Calgary-Buffalo I think exemplifies a lot of the discussion that's happened around this, and that is that it's discussion relating to systems in other provinces, which have no bearing on the system we're going to bring in.

The specific references made to B.C. trying it out and wanting to go back – in fact B.C. does not have any of the digital recording equipment that I'm advised we're talking about. They don't have the state-of-the-art equipment that we're talking about. In fact, in terms of studies done or how this decision was arrived at, members of the Department of Justice did a site visit in Halifax, where digital court reporting is being utilized and I'm advised is being met with very favourable results, and also attended a number of court reporting conferences in the U.S. relating to digital court reporting.

This is not a new item. This is an item where the technology has improved and changed over the years. There's yet a new iteration of the technology, which is being utilized very effectively, I'm given to understand, in Halifax and other sites in the U.S. The technology is available. The utilization in B.C., as I say, is a different type of technology. They've had some good successes, but they've had some problems.

We do not expect, with the new technology that's being brought forward, to have those problems. I'm satisfied that it's been appropriately studied, that it can be implemented effectively. I'm just mindful of the fact that anytime you bring technology in, there are always the naysayers who say that it won't work, that we shouldn't try it, that we've got something tried and true.

I'd be the first to say that we have very good, high-quality court reporting services in this province. We want to have high-quality court reporting services in this province. We believe that using this technology, we'll be able to continue to have high-quality court reporting services in this province. Unfortunately, it will mean relocation of some of the people that have provided such good service to us over the years.

I've investigated the concerns that have been registered by the Member for Calgary-Buffalo and other concerns that have been brought to my attention, and I'm satisfied that the concerns that have been raised with respect to problems they've had in Ontario and B.C. relate to a different type of equipment and a different experiment.

So I would just assure the House that we have every intention of maintaining a high-quality legal service accessible to the public of Alberta. The hon. member will see, when we bring forward the justice statutes amendment act shortly in this session, that our commitment is to provide access to justice to people who can't afford it, to people who don't want or can't pay high fees to access justice. Those opportunities will be available through greater access to mediation, through greater access to the Provincial Court, in many other manners. This is just one other way in which we can best utilize the resources of the people of Alberta to provide as much service as we possibly can at as high a quality as we possibly can.

MR. DICKSON: Mr. Chairman, of course my heart soared like an eagle when I heard the minister talk about the new justice statute coming in, but something he said concerned me considerably. If the technology coming into Alberta is not the same technology that, if not discredited, at least demonstrated its weaknesses in Ontario and British Columbia, will the minister particularize in what jurisdictions the technology that will be employed in this province has been used and used successfully? Will the minister make available a bibliography of the studies or experiments that have been done with the precise same technology, the one we're going to bring in here? I hope the minister isn't suggesting we use a brand-new technology that's not been sufficiently field-tested in some jurisdiction around the country.

So I ask for clarification by the minister. Thanks, Mr. Chairman.

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

8:20

MR. SAPERS: Thanks, Mr. Chairman. I guess I want to start where my colleague from Calgary-Buffalo left off because I saw that the minister was preparing a response, and this might make it easier. You get two for the price of one tonight, Mr. Minister.

This whole issue of a new but not tested technology does give me pause to think. You know, Mr. Chairman, there was a political party in this province that tried a brand-new electronic technology for a leadership vote, and I'm told there were some glitches in that system. It worked out okay in the end, but it was not a learning experience that I would want to wish on anyone.

So when I hear that we're going down this path not particularly because we want to downsize and not even necessarily in terms of cost saving but because we want to modernize, it makes me think: I want to meet the salesman or saleswoman that pitched this system to this government, because this was a salesperson of some

considerable talent. What we've heard here tonight is that we're going to spend a few million bucks on a system that's unlike any other system, a system that is absolutely guaranteed to go right, like that old joke about the computerized recording message: nothing can go wrong, can go wrong, can go wrong. I guess I want to hear the minister's response to my colleague's query about where this technology is in place and what the track record is.

I'm interested to know some other things, too, like maintenance schedules and for how long the hardware and software is guaranteed and whether or not you are forced to sole source, or in other words a vendor-supplied maintenance regime, or whether public works, or whatever we're calling it these days, is going to be responsible for the maintenance of this system and upgrading. If we build new courthouses, what happens? How portable is this technology? Just a whole host of those kinds of issues which would suggest that some forethought and planning has gone into this, as I'm sure there has been.

Now, I also want to ask some questions about the court reporters that currently provide service to Alberta Justice. I heard the minister give some assurances that he was sensitive to the fact that these were valued employees. I can tell you from the few I've spoken to that they're not feeling particularly valued right now, Mr. Minister. So do your assurances of minimum disruption in the lives of these court reporters mean, in fact, that every person who is currently employed by the province of Alberta as a court reporter will be given the option of similar work at the same rate of pay without any disruption in career or benefits or standing, without any penalty to their future career growth, in the same geographic location, in the same city? Do your assurances go that far? I think if they do, that's terrific. If they don't, then that is a matter of some concern, particularly to those individuals and their families.

So please address the issues about what's going to happen with the court reporters but also put my mind at ease about this technology and where we can look at experience with this exact same technology. What are those down-the-road implications that I enumerated earlier in my comments?

THE CHAIRMAN: The hon. Minister of Justice.

MR. HANCOCK: Well, Mr. Chairman, I don't know whether I should rise to answer questions or not because they obviously don't listen to the answers. I distinctly heard myself say that before making the decision to proceed with this, certain site visits were held, one of which was in Halifax, Nova Scotia, where digital court reporting is currently in place and being well received by the bar, the judiciary, and justice there. [interjection] The same type of equipment that we talked about now, yes.

With respect to acquisition of the equipment, there will be a request for proposal going out with respect to provision of the equipment, so we'll have to see when it comes back how many different suppliers might be interested in supplying. I can't tell you at this point in time whether it's one sole source of equipment.

Clearly the equipment is being utilized in a court in Canada. It has been viewed on site by Justice department officials before this decision was made as well as having attended conferences and, I believe, courts as well in the U.S. I can get further detail for the hon. members, should they desire it.

With respect to court reporters, I've made it perfectly clear that we will continue to employ anyone who wants to continue to be employed with the Department of Justice. Can we employ them in a similar job? Unfortunately, court reporting is a unique type of skill. It's a unique type of profession, so it's hard to relocate somebody into another job in Justice that's the same as or similar to

court reporting. So there is a need for some retraining. There's a need for reclassification, but they will be kept at their same salaries. There should be no interruption in benefits. There should be no need to interrupt any of their prospects for the future with respect to their employment with the government. Can we employ them in a similar capacity? Unfortunately, no, because court reporting is a fairly unique area. However, we've given the choice to the court reporters.

MR. SAPERS: Same locale?

MR. HANCOCK: In the same locale, yes.

I can't guarantee that, but I've indicated to the department and to the court reporters that we will make every effort to ensure that there is a spot for them in Justice. If there's not a spot for them in Justice, there's a spot for them in government, and it's the choice of the reporter to determine whether they wish to leave government to continue to pursue their profession as a court reporter or for whatever other reason or to stay with the department and with government. I will be firm on that commitment.

This is not an intention of downsizing. This is really an opportunity to continue with quality court reporting while reallocating other resources into some of the areas where we can so desperately use them: in community conferencing, in restorative justice processes, providing access to the courts, providing better mediation services, quicker access to family and youth courts. All of those require resources. So when we have the opportunity for onetime funding to both upgrade the technology but also continue the quality of service and the level of service that we need to have and divert resources into other areas which will provide better access for Albertans to justice in this province, we have an obligation to do that.

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

MR. SAPERS: Thanks, Mr. Chairman. Through you to the minister. I appreciate the clarification and the certainty with which you've made some guarantees to the personnel involved.

But I am now more confused than I was before about the equipment, the technology. I want to make sure that I heard you correctly, because I don't want to be the target of another scathing, sarcastic rejoinder. What I thought I heard the minister say just now was that an RFP, a request for proposal, will go out, seeing what vendors are out there who may be interested in providing this type of equipment. I just want to know: has a specific technology been decided upon or not? Digital recording doesn't really answer the question. There are all kinds of ways to digitally record audio. So what I want to know is: has the technology been decided upon or not?

I heard the minister talk about Halifax, but I didn't hear the minister directly answer the question: will it be the same equipment so that we know we've got some track record? If there is a software component involved, as I'm certain there is, who supplies the software? Is it, again, the same software as is being used in Halifax?

8:30

So it's not just a general question, Mr. Minister, about us going to go to digital recording and that Halifax has had some success with it. Are we using the exact same hardware and software, or are we going to be looking at a request for proposal inviting all who may be interested to provide tenders and then somebody in Justice is going to decide which one of these technologies, which I think the minister would have to admit may in fact be a new and untried technology, would be put into Alberta courtrooms?

MR. HANCOCK: Mr. Chairman, now I'm confused. First there are concerns raised about sole sourcing and then wanting a specific direction. All I can do in response to the hon. member's question is to say this. First of all, we have to get the authority to spend money before we can spend it. Then we have to go out and source the equipment. I'm purposely not going to get into specific details with respect to the equipment here, nor would I want to. First of all, I don't micromanage the department to that extent, and secondly, this is a competitive process, and there are a number of suppliers, I'm given to understand, who can supply the appropriate technology, the appropriate equipment. I'm not going to get into details as to a specific piece of equipment or a specific piece of software, because it would interfere with our ability to go out and get the competitive process under way, which we're bound by law to do. So it's sort of betwixt and between.

I'd be happy to share as much information with the hon. member as soon as it's appropriate to do so, even after this process of supplementary supply is done, in order to assure both hon. members and anyone else that's interested that we're getting good-quality equipment that's got a track record. We're not being leading edge in this, but we are doing better than other provinces who have tried other forms of recording technology.

I'm satisfied that the technology is there. It's been used in application in courthouses. It's effective technology and can do the job to the satisfaction of the bar and the bench and to the satisfaction of litigants. But I'm not going to give chapter and verse tonight nor could I give chapter and verse tonight as to the type of equipment, the exact specifications of the equipment, the suppliers of the equipment, or those sorts of things, because that would really interfere with the competitive process. I'd be more than happy to share that information with anybody who requests it at the appropriate time.

THE CHAIRMAN: Edmonton-Glenora.

MR. SAPERS: Thanks. Well, you know, at the risk of further convincing the minister that I'm just a slow learner – in any case, let me put myself at that risk, Mr. Chairman. The words that the minister just shared with us convince me now that I have more concerns than I started with. Really this wasn't going to be the major thrust of my comments. I was more concerned about the men and women who have been providing public service to this province in the employment of Justice up to this point as court reporters.

You know, we have a minister who I think just told the committee that he really doesn't know what technology we're going to end up with, at what price, yet we're being asked to vote \$3 million. We were told in the introductory comments that we know we're going to spend this \$3 million well, because of this example in Halifax, but that we may not be using the same technology, the same equipment that's in place in Halifax. Because we're going to go to this competitive bidding process, we don't really know if the \$3 million is too little, too much, or about right.

So we've got a minister who's come to us in supplementary supply with his best guess about a price tag for some equipment that we may buy from somebody to put into our courtrooms. I'm not satisfied that that represents the best way to do business. I would have expected the minister to come to the committee and be able to answer the simple question. "We've carefully looked at three or four different kinds of equipment. We've narrowed it down to a type. We've talked to some vendors. We have some cost estimates. We've looked at maintenance costs, at upgrading, at portability, and yes, here are the studies and the information and the material to back it up." Frankly, I think it's a little bit cavalier to say: well, I don't

micromanage my department, so I can't give you that information.

You know, I have to account for this \$3 million to my constituents. I know that it's a very small bit of the \$4 billion surplus or the \$17 billion budget, but it's still \$3 million, Mr. Chairman. I guess I've come to expect more detail from this particular minister, who I think has done a pretty good job of coming to the committee when he's requested supply. So if there's more that he can tell us, I'd sure appreciate hearing it now before we're asked to vote on this expenditure.

THE CHAIRMAN: Are you ready for the vote?

Agreed to:
Operating Expense \$5,700,000

THE CHAIRMAN: Shall the vote be reported?

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Agreed.

THE CHAIRMAN: Opposed?

SOME HON. MEMBERS: No.

THE CHAIRMAN: Carried.

Health and Wellness

THE CHAIRMAN: We will call upon the hon. minister of health.

MR. JONSON: Good evening and thank you, Mr. Chairman. I'd like to draw members' attention to pages 21 to 25 in their supplementary estimates book. As you can see, we do not have a large number of items to deal with at this particular time, so my remarks this evening will be fairly brief. In fact, Mr. Chairman, we have a single item to look at, and that's the supplementary estimate of \$10,412,000 to provide for an unanticipated increase in the number of physicians and the services they deliver.

As hon. members may have heard last week, I announced that an additional \$15 million would be provided to the medical services budget for 1999-2000 and the upcoming budget year. The increase, Mr. Chairman, will help pay for the approximately 80 additional full-time equivalent physicians who came to Alberta this fiscal year, bringing the total number of new full-time equivalent physicians to 170 this year. That, I think, is a very positive factor. It indicates that a significant number of physicians are finding Alberta an attractive area in which to work.

This funding that we are requesting approval for under the supplementary estimate is in addition to the already approved \$910 million for the 1999-2000 medical services budget. This additional funding is in keeping with the findings of the Physician Resource Planning Committee's report setting out a direction for Alberta's physician workforce. The report sets the stage for physician resource planning by identifying the current number of physicians in Alberta and developing an understanding of the numbers of additional physicians that might be needed both now and in the future.

Mr. Chairman, although we're increasing the medical services budget by \$15 million to pay for these new physicians, the supplementary estimate only shows an increase of \$10.4 million because the balance will be absorbed within the ministry's overall allocation. As a result of changes in priorities, we've been able to realign the budget to meet the increased cost of part of this overall amount.

The final point that I would like to make, Mr. Chairman, is that we have worked with the physicians in administering jointly the overall

physicians' agreement that we have right now with the AMA. While the whole management exercise is one of managing and keeping the expenditure on physician services within the budget allotment, it was recognized in the last round of bargaining that there should be some flexibility that can be applied when you have clearly a significant number of additional physicians that are needed here with respect to the increases in the population.

When there are a significant number of additional physicians, it has to be recognized that the agreement that we arrived at about a year and a half ago was in fact an agreement for the cohort, or the physicians that were in the province at that time. With the very positive development of more physicians practising in Alberta, to the tune of 170 individuals, it was only reasonable, in our view, that we work with the AMA to provide an additional amount of money to recognize that growth in the overall physician supply.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

8:40

THE CHAIRMAN: The Hon. Member for Edmonton-Rutherford.

MR. WICKMAN: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. My understanding of the comments made by the minister is that this roughly \$10.4 million will accommodate 80 new doctors within the system. [interjection] So 80 new ones on top of what was there previously.

THE CHAIRMAN: The committee and *Hansard* have had the benefit of the question, but since it was offered in an off-microphone way, I wonder if we could have the minister either give his reply or save it until the hon. member is finished with his series of questions.

Edmonton-Rutherford.

MR. WICKMAN: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. The number of new doctors or new physicians we're talking about may seem substantial, but if we break it down and look at the various municipalities throughout Alberta and look at the difficulties in rural Alberta in terms of attracting doctors, even if we break it down on a per constituency basis, with 83 constituencies how many new physicians per constituency? When I look at the medical system – and unfortunately I've had the opportunity to see it firsthand – it was a real eye-opener in a lot of instances.

Family doctors, for instance. We tend to think that we go to them because we have a medical problem and that we're going to go to their office and that's the end of it. We know, for example, that if we have to get a blood test, going to a lab might take five minutes. You get your blood test; you're gone. But you can't go to the lab and get a blood test. You've got to go to the family doctor first.

When we talk in terms of the WCB and we talk in terms of injured workers, before WCB will approve an expenditure for a prescription, there has to be a letter from the family physician or a doctor stating that that is related to the original injury. We look at AISH applications. Doctors have to fill out those AISH applications and the CPP applications. I even found in the hospital that under Alberta health care if you stay in a private room for more than 30 days, before Alberta health care will cover the additional cost – and one is paying the premiums for that additional cost – a doctor has to send in a letter saying that, yes, the person was in there for whatever reason.

What I'm trying to say is that the demands on family doctors are very, very intense. My family doctor, for example, when I go to see him – and he's a fine gentleman – has a sign on the door that says: not accepting new patients. One of my questions I would ask the minister: is there any indication as to how many family doctors throughout Alberta are in that situation that they simply can't accommodate new patients? I commend the minister for recognizing

that there is a shortage, that there is a need for these additional physicians, but I guess the question I'm asking: is that even going to be sufficient?

We know we are in the early days in the restructuring of the health care system, and we've got to remember that no matter how much you try and rebuild a health care system that really underwent a great deal of damage – let's face it – to rebuild that or attempt to rebuild it, pouring in more and more money, unless you have sufficient doctors in the province, to access that health care system becomes virtually impossible. You have to have a sufficient number of family doctors.

I hear from constituents waiting months and months and months, six months in some cases, to see a specialist. Of course, to see that specialist, you first have to go to your family doctor to get a referral. We know that in the early days when the restructuring first took place, many doctors left the province to look for greener grass south of the border. They felt that the working conditions were better. They felt that they were appreciated there, and of course their earning potential was somewhat greater as well.

One other question I would have for the minister. In the 11 years that I've been here, I've never understood why there is such a reluctance to attempt to sit down with the so-called foreign doctors who come here from other countries. They would just love to practise, and we have parts of rural Alberta that we know are dying for family doctors. Why is it impossible? Why haven't we been able to co-ordinate, assist these foreign doctors who are eager to learn, that are prepared to go to rural Alberta, where there's an extreme shortage of doctors, to provide their services there?

I don't know if the reluctance is at the college level. It could be argued, I guess, that in some cases the training may not be the same in their particular country as it is here, but I'm sure they're willing to train, take that additional training if they know that they can enter the system and that they can utilize their particular skills they brought with them. We read articles in newspapers all the time about specialists and family doctors that come over here and they're doing very, very manual-type jobs, jobs where they're earning a very, very low income, and they're not putting to use that special skill and talent they have that is much needed.

So I'd like to have the minister respond and tell us: does he feel totally comfortable that these additional positions are going to fill the bill, that we're not going to have a further shortage of doctors, that it's going to reduce the waiting list, particularly to see specialists, that it's going to mean that more family doctors can take down their signs saying "no more new patients"? The question of the foreign doctors being able to access the system and lend their skills and look at places like rural Alberta, possibly signing contracts to practise for two or three years, whatever: cannot that somehow be accommodated?

If those questions can be answered, Mr. Chairman, I'll be quite satisfied, up to a point, for tonight.

MR. JONSON: Mr. Chairman, I do not have a specific number, but there's not a large number of general practitioners who are not accepting new patients. I do acknowledge that there are certainly some that just have such a client base that they do not want to sacrifice quality by taking on more than they feel they can handle.

I think, though, that we should also recognize – and this is a fact that we have to face, Mr. Chairman – that there are a certain number of physicians who, for whatever reason, may wish to work part-time. They may want to take more than the usual breaks for family reasons or whatever. It's totally reasonable, you know, considering family circumstances, and that is a factor as well in some people limiting the number of patients they accept. So we do have to plan for that.

I'm not indicating here, as the recent physician supply report indicates, that the number of physicians here indicates that we've brought the number of physicians in Alberta up to an ideal level, but we have made progress in that direction in a quite significant way, both in terms of recruiting doctors for rural as well as for urban practice and some of the specialties.

The question was raised with respect to a topic which is not really dealt with in the estimates, but I would just comment briefly on it. There was a recent announcement, Mr. Chairman, from Alberta Health and Wellness to the effect that we were increasing the number of internships available at our two medical schools to 20 in this year and 40 in the following year. There is a portion of that number of internships that will be reserved for the first time – I don't know if it has ever been done in Alberta, but for the first time in my memory – for the foreign-trained physician. There's always been a bit of an unfair difference there, I think, in that training under the auspices of the Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons was recognized to a much greater degree here in Canada and in Alberta than that from other nations because there was always that connection to the British model of medical training, and the requirements to qualify, quote, here in Alberta were somewhat easier for someone coming from one of the Commonwealth countries. So that's why I think you see a very strong influx of South African doctors, for instance, into Alberta.

8:50

Finally, I think the overall direction, though, that Alberta Health and Wellness is taking that's really important here is that we are, through our innovation fund and other initiatives – in fact, there's a special fund as part of the AMA agreement for alternative methods of payment. We do need to look at more use of the primary care model of health care where a significant amount of the doctor's workload can be shared, often under the doctor's supervision but nevertheless shared in a primary care clinic where you involve other health practitioners: the physiotherapist, the dietician, the public health nurse. It's that which I think is one of our solutions here. Not the total solution – we are going to need more doctors – but it will certainly take the load off doctors in many of these very specific cases of treatment or care or advice that other practitioners can be involved in in a team type of approach.

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

MR. SAPERS: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I want to ask a couple of questions to the minister about this notion of 170 FTE doctors, because I heard the minister in his comments talk about the equivalent of 170 full-time docs or 170 doctors. He used both terms, and I'm just wondering whether we are in fact talking about 170 individuals practising medicine in this province now, over and above what we had at some previous time – and I think he said: new this year – or if it is in fact some calculation that we are now being told is a full-time equivalent. I'd be interested to know what Alberta Health is considering an FTE doctor, and does it vary by type of medical practice? It would seem to me that if we're talking about family practice medicine, that means one thing. If we're talking about a subspecialty like pediatric neurosurgery, that would mean something else entirely different.

The other comment I have. This is sort of a general comment, but it particularly struck me when I was reading the estimates for supplementary supply for Health. Because Health has been under so much scrutiny and because we've been on this topic of physician supply for many years and because the relationship between the government and the AMA is one that needs ongoing attention and

care and feeding, I'm wondering why this \$10 million – and now the minister said it's really \$15 million, but they only need \$10 million of new money – is being sought at this time. I mean, we're close to the end of the fiscal year; there are mechanisms within the AMA agreement in terms of making up for shortfalls, and the government is talking about its reinvestment into health care. Of course, that's going to be a debate for another day, but we're supposed to be working on rolling three-year business plans, and we're at the point where we are . . .

DR. WEST: By the time you get through talking, we'll already have spent it.

MR. SAPERS: Mr. Chairman, could you ask the minister of energy to hold his comments till he has the floor? Because it's really distracting to hear him sort of bubble up like that.

As I was saying, if we're dealing with three-year rolling business plans and then we see this kind of a figure come in, which is really not an overly large figure, it makes me wonder about the planning process. Cynically I could say: well, are we on three-month business plans, or are we on three-year business plans? So I would like some more clarity as to how the department got to this point where we're looking at an additional need for \$10 million for professional services at this particular point in time. You know, it's a pretty interesting point in time in terms of not just the larger political issues around health care but also, of course, in terms of the budget cycle.

Finally, my question – and the minister may find this particularly provocative. I don't mean it to be. Of this additional \$15 million, which is outside of the budgeted amount that was supposed to be based on the agreement between the AMA and the province of Alberta for the provision of professional services, I'm very interested to know how much of this additional money will be paid to physicians providing surgical services in private clinics.

THE CHAIRMAN: The hon. Minister of Health and Wellness.

MR. JONSON: Well, Mr. Chairman, perhaps there's not a wish to understand here, but the fact of the matter is that we negotiate an agreement with the Alberta Medical Association on the basis of the overall workforce, if I could use that term, of physicians in the province at the time of our negotiations. We were also at that time making a major effort – for instance in our rural physician action plan, which is part of that agreement, and in our overall effort at our universities – to retain the physicians that are trained here, et cetera. We were making an overall effort in Alberta Health and Wellness to attract and keep more physicians in the workforce here in Alberta.

So rather than it being taken as a negative, I regard the fact that we have had that significant additional number of physicians locate here in the province of Alberta as a positive. Because we do not fund the physician pool in anticipation of having, say, 50, 150, or 170 more doctors when we negotiate the agreement, it was understood that if there was a significant increase in the doctors of this province, then we would have to look at a reasonable increase in their base budget, and that is what this is about, Mr. Chairman. That simply is what we're responding to, in good faith.

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

MR. SAPERS: Thanks. Mr. Minister, that wasn't particularly helpful. It's not that simple. You said 170 doctors. You said 170 FTEs. Which is it? I asked some specific questions about the planning process, and you didn't address that in your comments at all. I asked if you know how much of this additional \$15 million

was paid in terms of professional services for surgical services performed in private clinics, and you didn't address that either. Do you have answers to those questions?

MR. JONSON: Mr. Chairman, by far the bulk of these physicians are engaged in the public system in family practices or in specialist services in our major centres. I do not have a breakdown on the chance that four or five of the doctors might be working as pathologists in connection with one of our laboratory companies or something of that particular that have contracts in this system.

But as I've indicated over and over again – and the opposition seems to fail to want to recognize the truth or the reality of our system – you have a private component, people working across the health care system right now in various capacities providing service. Laboratory companies are one of the best examples, Mr. Chairman. One of the alternative payment plans in here is to provide a model for crediting doctors with the service they provide to long-term care centres, and I suppose one of those long-term care centres might be a privately-owned one. We have quite a number in the province, and they haven't done any harm so far.

If you want to bring in that particular element, Mr. Chairman, I do not have a specific number. I am quite confident, though, in saying that practically all of these new physicians in the province are working in rural areas. They're working in areas of high need within the public system.

9:00

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

MR. SAPERS: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Through you to the minister. You know, one of the wonderful differences between the committee process looking at supplementary supply and question period is that in this committee we do expect answers and we don't expect the same kind of offhanded treatment that happens when the cameras are on during question period.

Now, I didn't say anything about long-term care centres. I asked about surgical services, and unless the minister is telling me that surgeries now take place in long-term care, that would be information he should share with the House. So I will take from the minister's comments that he doesn't have any comments to enlighten the committee in terms of the planning process, to tell us why we got to this point in the budget cycle where we're asking for this money, that he doesn't know whether it's 170 positions or 170 full-time equivalents, that he won't share with us the calculation for FTEs, and that he doesn't know how much of the \$15 million is going to be paid for surgical services in private clinics.

Now, those are some pretty specific questions. The minister should be able to say: I have the answers, I don't have the answers, or I'm willing to get you the answers. I'd like to hear one of those responses.

MR. JONSON: Mr. Chairman, in terms of the number of these new doctors that might just possibly be working in a, quote, private clinic, I do not know the number. I'm not aware of any, quite frankly, but I will get the number if there is one for the hon. member across the way.

In terms of the calculation for the 170 physicians, Mr. Chairman, this was worked out on an average basis with the Alberta Medical Association through their agreement. They know we have 170 new doctors. The joint committee which administers the agreement, which is made up of AMA representatives and members of Alberta Health and Wellness, sits down and looks at the average payment that is made per physician in a particular category in Alberta, and

that's what the calculation is based on. Of course, we're not quite through the year yet. We would have to wait until next year to calculate the dollars and cents that any particular new physician had charged the plan. But I'm sure we'll be very, very close, because we do have the averages of the different types of doctors in the province, and that's what it's based on.

THE CHAIRMAN: Having considered the supplementary estimates No. 2 for 1999-2000 of the Department of Health and Wellness, are you ready for the vote?

HON. MEMBERS: Agreed.

Agreed to:
Operating Expenses \$10,412,000

THE CHAIRMAN: Shall the vote be reported? Are you agreed?

HON. MEMBERS: Agreed.

THE CHAIRMAN: Opposed? So ordered.

Environment

THE CHAIRMAN: The hon. Minister of Environment.

MR. MAR: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. It's a pleasure for me to present a supplementary estimate for Environment in the amount of \$6 million to cover the day-to-day operations of Climate Change Central. Projects initiated under Climate Change Central will go ahead with a firm commitment of cash and/or resources from all partners. At the climate change roundtable last spring Albertans asked for immediate partnership action to address climate change. The Premier responded with a commitment to creating Climate Change Central, and last November we formalized that commitment.

Climate Change Central is a partnership agency that will bring together industry, researchers, municipalities, concerned Albertans, and government to identify and guide our action as a province to reduce our greenhouse gas emissions. Bringing such different perspectives together will help us develop creative and visionary solutions to pursue our economic growth while reducing greenhouse gas emissions.

These two goals, economic growth and reduced emissions, come together in our new economic strategy. In that economic strategy this government makes a commitment to leadership in climate change. This commitment recognizes the impact climate change has on other engines of economic growth like our forestry industry, agriculture, and tourism, which, in turn, directly affect the opportunities we are able to create for Alberta's children.

Including climate change in our economic strategy also recognizes that we measure the province of Alberta and the Alberta advantage and our quality of life in more than just dollars. We measure it in clean air and water and the rich diversity of our land and wildlife.

Alberta's plant, aquatic, and animal life evolve under specific climatic conditions. A change in climate directly affects those natural resources. For example, a few extra degrees of summer heat can encourage the growth of aquatic organisms that can cause disease in fish and rob our waters and fish of precious oxygen. Rain delivers oxygen back into our waters, but in 1998 there was very little rain. That year fish losses to warm temperatures and lack of rain were serious enough to warrant an official department response.

The year 1998 was also our worst forest fire year ever, followed by the second worst in 1999. At the same time, farmers in

northwestern Alberta faced drought. I already moved the start of the official fire season up by one month this year because of continuing dry conditions. It is too early to know if these situations are a temporary blip or the result of climate change, but we cannot wait to find out. We do not want to look back someday and wish that we had somehow started in 1999 or 2000.

Actually, while Climate Change Central is a new initiative, it builds on actions already taken. While the economic strategy makes a commitment to leadership, that commitment continues a leadership position that is already well established. We were the first provincial government to register an action plan with the national voluntary challenge and registry. That plan earned us a national award. In 1997 alone we reduced energy use in government-operated buildings by almost 7 percent, which is equivalent to approximately 26,000 tonnes of carbon dioxide emissions. By 1998 our government had reduced its greenhouse gas emissions from all sources by over 17 percent, below 1990 levels. That government effort plus a significant effort by Alberta industry is bringing down the growth rate of greenhouse gas emissions. In 1994 emissions grew by 4 percent. In 1995 emission growth was only 2.5 percent, and between 1996 and 1997 growth was only 1 percent. That same year our economy grew by 4 percent.

Alberta industry, led by the energy sector, is exporting its expertise and technologies in reducing greenhouse gas emissions around the world. Even the federal government acknowledged Alberta's national leadership in addressing climate change. At Alberta's climate change roundtable last spring the Hon. Ralph Goodale, federal Minister of Natural Resources Canada, said:

I want to pay a particular tribute to Alberta and Albertans. In a great many ways . . . you are leading the pack. You are making the greatest single effort. You are bringing the most intellectual capital to the table and you are making the biggest difference for the better.

Mr. Chairman, I think you will agree it is rare that the federal government achieves such insight into Alberta and rarer still that they express their support in such an ebullient way. We are achieving progress. We are learning to reduce our emissions and still pursue economic growth.

Climate Change Central recognizes that we need to do more and that we need to do it together. The reason lies in the challenge we face as Canada's energy capital. Alberta is working overtime to provide the world with cleaner burning fuels. More and more markets are choosing natural gas instead of coal or heavy oil fuel. This cuts emissions at the point of consumption, which is good news for our global climate, but it also moves some of those emissions up the pipeline to its source in Alberta. Our economy continues to grow in part by exporting the fuels that reduce emissions elsewhere, and in 10 years time, Mr. Chairman, our emissions could be 40 percent higher than they were in 1990.

Our efforts to reduce emissions so far show that we are reducing the link between our economic growth rate and emissions growth rate, but we do need to do more. We need to include new and innovative options for addressing climate change. For example, we may be able to capture emissions and store them in oil and gas reservoirs, where they may help increase our resource recovery. We're also looking at injecting carbon dioxide into deep coal beds, where it forces out methane that then can be used as a cleaner burning fuel.

9:10

One way to encourage this kind of innovation is to provide credits for new ways of doing things. Canada's joint ministers of environment and energy are working on how to address the issue of credits as part of a national action strategy for climate change. We

also are working to ensure that international agreements recognize our contributions and abilities to reduce greenhouse gases, and that includes the Kyoto protocol itself. The protocol states an intention to reduce greenhouse gas emissions to 6 percent below what they were in 1990 and for Canada to achieve that by 2010. Canada signed the protocol in 1997, but we're not yet bound by it. The next step is ratification, but that is a national decision that could be some years off.

At international meetings called the Conference of the Parties, or COP for short, the world continues to negotiate issues like emission trading and carbon dioxide sinks which would factor in the amount of carbon dioxide that is absorbed by forests and agricultural soils. The next COP meeting, COP 6, is planned for late this year to finalize the details of the Kyoto protocol before ratification. I continue to negotiate with my fellow environment and energy ministers about just what Canada's ratification would mean to each province and territory. Those discussions will be on the agenda at the joint ministers' meeting in Vancouver at the end of March. In the meantime Alberta may not be bound by Kyoto, but we are bound by our own commitment to address climate change and reduce greenhouse gas emissions in Alberta. Climate Change Central will help us act on that commitment.

We established Climate Change Central as a partnership agency to identify and guide that action. The Premier is the executive chair. David Tuer, president and CEO of PanCanadian Petroleum Limited, has joined me as a co-chair. This executive is now working on appointing a board of directors from stakeholders, including environmental organizations, who can bring different perspectives to the table and help develop creative and visionary solutions. These will be people who are committed to action and to pursuing win/win solutions to our challenge of pursuing economic growth while reducing greenhouse gas emissions.

The first job of this board will be to develop a plan with performance measures to serve the interests of all sectors and encourage the participation of all Albertans, and it is this last point that is most essential. We will achieve success only if every Alberta business and industry and every Albertan who uses energy is a participant. Through Climate Change Central we will leverage that participation in cash and in kind.

If we meet the challenge, if we're able to lower greenhouse gas emissions while we build our economy, we will maintain and strengthen our own long-term competitiveness by protecting our natural resources and assets, by becoming more energy efficient at home, and by becoming more attractive for business. We can turn our leadership on climate change into an economic advantage as we market our expertise, new technologies and processes to the world, and that fits right into Alberta's new economic strategy and our vision for the future of this province.

The bottom line is that the return on investment on this \$6 million is measured in terms of our economy but also our environment. Therefore, I ask for your vote to approve these supplementary estimates.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

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

MR. DICKSON: Mr. Chairman, thank you very much. You know, it's clear the Minister of Environment has thrown himself with his usual kind of enthusiasm into his new task. I have trouble purging from my mind a bit of your photograph. It was shortly after this minister had assumed his new portfolio. I have visions of the minister and the mayor of the city of Calgary in hip waders in a stream in northeast Calgary, and from the look of pure joy on his

face one could tell that he had found a portfolio he was really excited about, and with the kind of enthusiasm he speaks in speaking to his department, that's abundantly manifest.

As somebody who is a bit of a concrete thinker, Mr. Chairman, I have to ask for some help. We heard considerable discussion about the Kyoto accord, about emission controls, about things going on around the world, about interprovincial negotiations, and so on, but at the end what I understood the minister to say – and I know very little about Climate Change Central – is that he and David Tuer are going to co-chair Climate Change Central, and they're going to find a board of directors, but that hasn't happened yet.

So I'm sitting here and thinking this, Mr. Chairman. We're dealing with supplementary estimates. That means this is stuff that can't wait until the next budget year. Here we are virtually a month away from the end of the current budget year and we have a request for \$6 million going to Climate Change Central. The big gap for me is: what's going to happen between now and the end of March? Anything after the end of March presumably will get picked up in the budget for 2000-2001.

We heard reference to projects. Well, I guess what I'd want to know is: specifically what kinds of projects, how many projects? What's the total budget for Climate Change Central? As I understand it, this is one of the sort of private sector/public partnerships. I don't know what the budget of Climate Change Central is. I don't know what portion the \$6 million represents of the whole. I don't know whether this is sort of seed money to get this thing started. If there's no board of directors, I don't know how there would be projects already started.

I want to be clear, Mr. Chairman, that I support efforts to control emissions. We've been a leader in energy production. I'd like Alberta to be a leader on this continent in terms of emission control. We've got incredibly talented engineers and a sophisticated petrochemical industry. There's no better place in Canada for us to do the pioneering and to provide that leadership, but the case in hand is why we need \$6 million now that can't be addressed in the budget for 2000-2001. I'm assuming that Climate Change Central perhaps didn't even exist at the time the budget for 1999-2000 was done, but I have to know more information about the kinds of projects that are currently under way and I guess, in part, just why the \$6 million is being sought by way of interim supply.

That's the thing I can't quite figure out, Mr. Chairman, and nothing in the minister's remarks made that any clearer for me. In fact, it made it even more puzzling, because virtually his entire presentation was prospective, in terms of what we intend to do and what may happen and so on. I have an expectation – and maybe I'm alone in this. Maybe I'm the only one in this Chamber that thinks this way, but I have this notion that for supplementary estimates we come in and these are things that – either we've hired more doctors than we've anticipated or we have an immediate expenditure that we have to deal with in this province that can't wait until the next budget year, that this is something that's happening right now. I didn't frankly hear anything – and maybe I wasn't listening closely enough or didn't understand some of the nuances in the minister's presentation, but I didn't get an answer to that question: what has to be done now that couldn't be done in the budget that we're going to be able to deal with in some considerable depth over the next four weeks?

I'm not necessarily opposed to supporting Climate Change Central. Climate Change Central makes sense, to try and do some collaborative effort with industry, the private sector and government. That's a perfectly appropriate place to put some public money to help that thing along, but I need some stronger sense of timing of expenditure and the number of projects and the kinds of projects and those sorts of things.

9:20

I have to know, Mr. Chairman – once again, maybe everybody else in the Assembly knows this: is this unique to Alberta? Does this operate outside the boundaries of the province of Alberta? Is it something that includes all of western Canada or all of Canada? Is this unique to Alberta? I don't know that. Fairly basic questions but they're the kinds of things that would be really helpful in terms of voting the \$6 million.

Thank you very much.

MR. MAR: Mr. Chairman, I'm often impressed by the comments made by the hon. Member for Calgary-Buffalo, and his comments this evening are no exception. Perhaps the starting point is with respect to: is Climate Change Central unique to Alberta? While a national strategy dealing with the issue of climate change is being worked on with the federal government, individual provinces have also put together their plans, but I would have to say that an entity like Climate Change Central is unique to the province of Alberta. It is the reason why Minister Goodale and others from the federal government, including David Anderson, federal Minister of the Environment, have commented on Alberta's leadership role in the whole issue of climate change.

Mr. Chairman, to address the issue with respect to the timing, Climate Change Central will be incorporated as a not-for-profit corporation by the end of the month of March 2000, and a funding agreement will be put in place between the Department of Environment and Climate Change Central.

With respect to the issue raised by the hon. member on what this money is for, he is correct that the projects are prospective. This \$6 million is not for project money. This \$6 million is simply for the day-to-day operations of Climate Change Central in terms of administration for the next three years. So, Mr. Chairman, he is correct that the projects that have been discussed and that may come forward are not being funded out of the \$6 million but, in fact, are prospective and have not yet been reviewed by the agency known as Climate Change Central.

THE CHAIRMAN: After considering the proposed supplementary estimates for the Department of Environment, are you ready for the vote?

HON. MEMBERS: Yes.

Agreed to:

| | |
|-------------------|-------------|
| Operating Expense | \$6,000,000 |
|-------------------|-------------|

THE CHAIRMAN: Shall the vote be reported? Are you agreed?

HON. MEMBERS: Agreed.

THE CHAIRMAN: Opposed? Carried.

Community Development

MRS. McCLELLAN: Mr. Chairman, I am pleased to introduce these requests for supplementary funding and to speak briefly to them. The first is income support for seniors under the special-needs assistance grants. I think every member in this Assembly has had some experience with constituents and the special-needs program. I think almost without exception members would agree that it is a good program, that it is proactive, and that it does address quite adequately those special needs seniors might encounter at any given point.

I recall when we were looking at this program. It was introduced by a previous minister. I asked the department officials exactly what would happen if a senior's furnace failed on December 21 at 4 o'clock in the afternoon and it was 40 below. They said, "Well, they would apply," and I said, "And then what?" "Well, it would be reviewed, and it would be answered." And I said: "You know that that's not acceptable. We have got to be able to respond immediately."

Coincidentally, after the changes were made that allowed that to happen, almost that very circumstance did happen. Officials made a point of calling me and saying: you know, Madam Minister, we had something so close to what you outlined to us, and we want you to know that within two hours that senior's furnace was in operation and their needs were met. That told me that while it may not be perfect, it certainly was a good step in the right direction to making sure that seniors had security of knowledge that if they had an emergency, it could be met.

I must give credit to the staff in this program in the regions, because they certainly have reacted. It is difficult to anticipate exactly what the costs will be in that area. I do think it is very important to support the additional funding that's required to meet those needs. I know that they are needs and that they are special needs and that those dollars are going to a very good cause.

What were some of the increased pressures? Well, we know that increased prices in property taxes, utilities, heating – these high costs have been an issue. So I am speaking in support of that and hope that members can support those additional dollars.

The Alberta Social Housing Corporation: I think the explanation speaks to itself. There are actually shortfalls in delayed sales of land and property.

Special purpose housing: this is really a cash management issue; it doesn't affect the bottom line. I would ask that the Assembly also approve a supplementary budget in that manner.

With those comments I would do my best to answer any questions members might have or ensure that the minister does answer them for members at a later time. Thank you.

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

DR. MASSEY: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I just have a few questions about the Community Development supplementary estimates. The minister answered partly the need for the increase in income support for seniors. And it is a good program. I've had some of my seniors well served by the program, so I appreciate it being there. I guess one of the questions is: will that amount be carried over into the next budget? Will it be increased by that amount? Was it the number of people applying, or was it just that the amount required was more than what was budgeted for in the first place?

I had a little bit more difficulty in tracking down the special purpose housing, and with some help from my colleague I found it in the Municipal Affairs section of the budget. Assistance to Alberta Social Housing Corporation there is \$77,892,000. I heard the minister say that this was really a cash flow problem. This is in addition to the \$77 million, I assume. I guess I have some questions about that. What are the reasons for the delay in the sales of those properties? Exactly what are the kinds of properties and land that are affected by the delays?

Is there a plan? I couldn't find a performance measure or a goal, and it may just be that I didn't locate it in the right place in the budget, Mr. Chairman. There's no sort of performance measure that I could find dealing with this particular item, and I wondered if it was because it wasn't appropriate to generate a performance

measure for it, that it was something that doesn't lend itself to that kind of measurement. But there must be some sort of plan in terms of the disposal of properties and land, and I wondered what the measures are, if there any that exist. How will they determine whether or not they are doing as they are charged to do in the budget?

9:30

Under 5.0.6, the \$1,470,000 loss. What kinds of alternatives were considered before that loss was taken? Where there some alternatives that were looked at? In terms of the properties, is that list made public, and exactly what kinds of properties are involved?

I think with those brief questions, Mr. Chairman, that concludes the questions I have on this portion of the estimates.

MRS. McCLELLAN: I will certainly get an answer to those questions. You are right that in my comment these are a cash management issue, from the information I have. Yes, this was transferred from Municipal Affairs to Community Development, so I am not in any position to give you the detail that you'd like in your answer. I will pass those requests on to the minister, and I know that he'll respond to you very quickly.

THE CHAIRMAN: After considering the proposed 1999-2000 supplementary estimates for the Department of Community Development, are you ready for the vote?

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Agreed.

THE CHAIRMAN: Opposed? Thank you.

Agreed to:

| | |
|--|-------------|
| Operating Expense and Capital Investment | \$8,991,000 |
| Nonbudgetary Disbursements | \$1,470,000 |

THE CHAIRMAN: Shall the vote be reported?

HON. MEMBERS: Agreed.

THE CHAIRMAN: Opposed? Carried.
The hon. Government House Leader.

MR. HANCOCK: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Having dealt with all of the votes necessary under the matters brought before the House for supplementary supply, I would move that the committee do now rise and report progress and beg leave to sit again.

[Motion carried]

[The Deputy Speaker in the chair]

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

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

Community Development: operating expense and capital investment, \$8,991,000; nonbudgetary disbursements, \$1,470,000.

Environment: operating expense and capital investment, \$6,000,000.

Health and Wellness: operating expense and capital investment, \$10,412,000.

Justice: operating expense and capital investment, \$5,700,000.

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

HON. MEMBERS: Agreed.

THE DEPUTY SPEAKER: Opposed? So ordered.

head: Consideration of Her Honour
the Lieutenant Governor's Speech

Ms Haley moved:

That an humble address be presented to Her Honour the Honourable the Lieutenant Governor as follows.

To Her Honour the Honourable Lois E. Hole, CM, Lieutenant Governor of the province of Alberta:

We, Her Majesty's most dutiful and loyal subjects, the Legislative Assembly, now assembled, beg leave to thank you, Your Honour, for the gracious speech Your Honour has been pleased to address to us at the opening of the present session.

[Adjourned debate February 28: Mr. White]

THE DEPUTY SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Calgary-West.

MS KRYCZKA: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, for this opportunity to respond to the Speech from the Throne. I had the privilege of serving as chair of the Seniors Advisory Council for Alberta during the International Year of Older Persons last year, and I want to report to this Legislature on some achievements and highlights of the year. I would like to share some of the vision and inspiration that members of the council and I carried forward from the International Year of Older Persons. We look to the future confidently, knowing that there will be challenges, but there will also be opportunities.

First of all, I want to say that we appreciate the attention given to seniors in the throne speech. The presence of Mrs. Mathilda Hirsch as a guest of the Premier underlined the respect we all feel for the men and women who helped build our province. We also appreciate the Lieutenant Governor's words of thanks to

Mrs. Hirsch and the many Albertans like her, some still with us, many not, who worked so hard throughout the 20th century so that the new century could offer such promise.

We appreciate the fact that baby Micheal Tustin and members of the class of 2000 shared the spotlight with Mrs. Hirsch.

Alberta's seniors are justifiably proud of the legacy they pass on to Alberta's children and youth. Our seniors are also aware that they still have much to offer young Albertans as they prepare to take up the challenges and pursue the opportunities of the next century. Seniors, for example, look forward to Alberta's centennial year in 2005. They want to celebrate past achievements, of course, but they also want to help shape and define the future for the province, for their children and grandchildren, for themselves, and for the growing number of seniors who will come after them.

We will face unprecedented demographic pressures when the baby boom generation enters its senior years. The first baby boomers will turn 65 in 2011, just over a decade from now. By 2016 the number of seniors in Alberta will double, from around 300,000 today to 600,000. Our overall population will also increase, so the percentage of seniors in the total population will not rise quite so dramatically. It will go from around 10 percent to just over 11 percent and peak at around 14 percent soon after that. This impending demographic shift represents a clear and present challenge for Alberta, as it does all over North America.

We can take pride in the knowledge that the government of Alberta has anticipated this challenge for at least a decade. Alberta is a leader in research and programming for an aging population.

Our government has taken bold, decisive action to anticipate and prepare for what we might call the seniors boom. Community Development Minister Woloshyn is responding proactively, as did his predecessors as ministers responsible for seniors.

9:40

I am proud that I've been able to contribute as chair of the Seniors Advisory Council, as chair of the steering committee for the governmentwide study on the impact of the aging population, and as vice-chair of the Long-term Care Review Policy Advisory Committee. I'm grateful to have had those opportunities. My experience has helped me understand the challenges we face. It has also assured me that we have the will, the commitment, and the means to respond effectively and that we have the dedicated and knowledgeable departmental support to respond efficiently.

Mr. Speaker, at this point I would like to turn briefly from the real and significant challenges of a rapidly aging population to talk about the opportunities. Let me tell you something about today's seniors and the seniors-to-be in the baby boom generation. They are living longer as a group than their parents and grandparents. They are likely healthier, more independent, and better educated. They are energetic, motivated, accomplished, and capable people who possess a wealth of experience and an impressive diversity of capacities and abilities. At 65 most can look forward on average to 15 good, productive years. Alberta seniors embody the distinguishing Albertan values that were singled out in the throne speech. They are confident, entrepreneurial, innovative, self-reliant, spiritual, and environmentally aware. Our seniors are role models for future generations, or they can be if we work as hard at integrating them into our communities as we do at meeting the economic and social challenges they represent.

I have traveled all over Alberta, especially during the International Year of Older Persons. I have learned about Alberta seniors and a lot more from them. They command respect and attention not only for their years but also for the quality and diversity of their concerns and vision, their knowledge and experience, and their sense of humour. Our seniors are a tremendous resource, one that we may not appreciate or use to its potential. As we anticipate and prepare for an aging population, we must not focus too quickly and narrowly on the potential burdens on our resources. There are and will be costs, to be sure, but there are tremendous potential benefits if we can recognize and embrace them.

Some of our seniors will need long-term care, an issue that was addressed by the Broda committee in its meetings with Albertans and in its report to Health and Wellness Minister Jonson, but many of them will be able to spend all or most of their later years at home. They will be able, willing, and in many cases anxious to participate in community life and activities. When he released the Broda committee report last November, Minister Jonson said that we need to plan for a future where increasing numbers of seniors will have access to continuing care when they need it, and he noted that we need to create a culture that supports seniors living in their own homes and contributing to their families and communities as long as possible.

The report also stresses the need for healthy aging in supportive communities, a new generation of continuing care centres, and aggressive recruitment and training of health care professionals and providers. As I said earlier, I had the opportunity to serve on the Broda committee and help prepare the report. It indeed reflects the comments, priorities, and suggestions of health authorities, government departments, stakeholders, and Albertans.

I also had and still have the privilege of chairing the governmentwide study on the impact of the aging population. Community

Development Minister Woloshyn asked us to first review current government programs and services. We then reported to Minister Woloshyn in June last year. The report presents 11 issues and makes 19 recommendations based on information gathered from government departments and agencies that provide services to seniors or who have an interest in seniors. The report was released in July last year with a request for public response to its recommendations.

Next was a series of 17 focus group consultations with nearly 700 Albertans throughout Alberta. The governmentwide study steering committee used the report, the public responses to the report, and the information from the focus groups to prepare the discussion guide for a symposium on aging held in Edmonton November 18 to 20 last year. Nearly 170 Albertans attended the symposium. They represented stakeholder groups and Alberta's constituencies. Constituency representatives, who were randomly selected, ranged in age from their late teens to their 80s. Symposium participants looked at a broad range of questions. They brought a variety of perspectives and offered valuable insight and inputs and helped develop a vision for the future of seniors' services and programs in Alberta. That vision is the central focus for our report that we will present to Minister Woloshyn this spring. Symposium participants asked us to consider the potential economic, social, and cultural impact of an aging population with special emphasis on education for health and wellness, healthy lifestyles, and responsible financial planning.

Speaker's Ruling Referring to a Member by Name

THE DEPUTY SPEAKER: Just a general reminder. We don't call the members by their names; we call them by their cabinet position or their constituency. Once is forgivable, but repeated times, we'll have to remind you.

MS KRYCZKA: My apologies.

Debate Continued

MS KRYCZKA: They also emphasized the need for government to monitor services and programs for seniors and asked us to include all age groups in further discussions. Symposium participants also highlighted a need for supportive communities, communities that are safe and committed to the well-being of seniors, that support intergenerational interaction, and that include and integrate seniors.

Healthy aging was another important theme. Participants focused on active living, community involvement, and strong families. They recognized that we lay the foundations for healthy old age in childhood and support them with healthy lifestyles in our young and middle years. This led to suggestions for lifelong education and healthy lifestyle choices. I know many of the seniors' service organizations look forward to exploring opportunities for partnership in the new emphasis on lifelong learning offered by the Ministry of Learning and the minister.

Last year's restructuring of the government placed responsibility for seniors' housing under the Minister of Community Development. This change was part of a continuing initiative to consolidate seniors' programs under one roof. The consolidation initiative gets further support in the throne speech through the government's commitment to providing one-window access to all services and programs. The goal is improved access and efficiency for all Albertans, but I know it has special significance for seniors who may not be as mobile as they once were. The focus on crime prevention and policing will also please seniors. Personal safety, security, and protection from fraud and intimidation are major concerns, and seniors will be happy to see those concerns reflected in the throne speech.

Mr. Speaker, I'd like to affirm on behalf of my colleagues on the

Seniors Advisory Council for Alberta that the throne speech is a positive, forward-looking document. It addresses important concerns and challenges, and it offers many opportunities for Alberta's seniors to live productive, satisfying lives in health, dignity, and respect. The Seniors Advisory Council for Alberta appreciates the fact that the government of Alberta will continue its commitment to supporting the independence and well-being of seniors through a wide range of income support, health, and housing programs worth more than \$1 billion. This commitment was demonstrated when short-term support was announced by the Minister of Health and Wellness soon after he received the long-term review report in November 1999.

The overall government long-term plan for seniors will include long-term responses still to come from the minister of health and further responses to come from the Minister of Community Development to the report on the governmentwide study on the impact of the aging population that will go forward from the steering committee in the spring. Of course, the throne speech itself includes increases in the Alberta seniors' benefit program and a special-needs assistance for a seniors' program.

In closing, I would like to acknowledge the hard work and dedication of my colleagues on the Seniors Advisory Council and the governmentwide study on the impact of the aging population, thanking them for their contributions and support. I also want to thank the chair, the MLA for Redwater, and the Albertans who were members on the long-term care review committee for the opportunity to participate and contribute.

On behalf of my council and steering committee colleagues and the senior citizens of Alberta I would like to thank you, Mr. Speaker, for the opportunity to speak on this occasion. I would also like to thank the Premier, the cabinet, my caucus colleagues, and the members of this Legislature for their continuing support for and attention to the needs and concerns of Alberta's senior citizens.

Thank you.

9:50

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

MR. WICKMAN: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Let me start off by saying that I would hope our in-house wanna-be Prime Minister watched Paul Martin's budget today. There was a bold, balanced document. I look at what the Treasurer here has presented in terms of tax reform, and I have some difficulty figuring out the so-called advantage it's going to be, particularly to a certain category of Albertans.

Certainly with the increase in the personal exemption we will see a number eliminated from the provincial tax roll totally. Then when we go to the next category, those that are taxed at that first level of 17 percent, we look at the existing system. The existing system is 44 percent.

MRS. McCLELLAN: Is this the budget?

MR. WICKMAN: This is throne speech. The budget was referred to in the throne speech.

Mr. Speaker, when we look at 44 percent of 17 percent, that to me is roughly 8 percent. Under the flat tax they're going to pay 11 percent. That's 3 percent more. Even with the increase in the personal exemption I'm not sure those people are going to get a break. The people that will get a break: if you're making \$90,000, \$100,000 a year, of course you're going to get a break.

MR. SAPERS: Jim Dinning is getting a tax break.

MR. WICKMAN: Oh, there's going to be a whole number of those people getting a tax break. So that I don't understand.

The second point I want to direct to the minister of human resources, and I would ask that he take note of this. I recognize that in the throne speech there was reference made to concern for persons with disabilities. As a result of that, we saw in the budget increases in two categories: one being the developmentally disabled, and secondly, those on AISH.

Now, the reference is made to expanding the AISH program. Yes, I recognize it is going to allow for the entry of an additional 650 recipients, but one thing that hasn't been addressed or referred to in the throne speech is the existing situation where the new legislation that was implemented put a \$100,000 ceiling on the assets a recipient could have.

We have this situation, Mr. Speaker, to the minister, where a great number of the AISH recipients were forced to apply for CPP. Of course, if they got the CPP, let's say \$600 a month, that was deducted from the AISH. That was considered earnings. Now, if they have, say, \$40,000 locked away in RRSPs for their retirement, even though they roll that over, they don't touch it, they don't take any of that interest, just let it roll over like I do with mine, like I would venture to say most everybody in here does so it's there when we head to our retirement, it's deemed as earnings. Even though they don't touch it, it's deemed as earnings, and it puts them over that level that they become eligible for AISH. It forces them every year to cash in a certain amount of their RRSP. Mr. Speaker, to the minister, I didn't comprehend in the first piece of legislation that it was going to have that type of consequence to those individuals.

The second point I want to make. We talked in terms of education in the throne speech; education was one of the areas that was highlighted. There are a couple of points in education that really, really are a sore point with me. One is the numerous requests now that elementary students have to make of their parents and grandparents and neighbours in terms of fund-raising. We're talking in terms of asking little tots in grade 1 and grade 2 to go out there and raise funds for their schools. It's happening at the school my grandchildren go to. I'm sure it's happening to the school the Member for Edmonton-Glengarry's children go to. I'm sure it's happening through virtually every school in the province, where little tots are being asked to go out and hustle chocolate-covered almonds.

What I do, because I don't want to have to see my grandchildren go knocking door-to-door, hustling \$2 boxes of chocolates, is buy them all and give them out. But not all the grandparents and parents can buy them all, so these little tots are forced to walk the streets carrying a box of chocolates. The bigger kids know they're carrying these chocolates and they're carrying money, and we hear at Halloween what happens. Well, the same situation can occur. I don't think, if we talk in terms of a good educational system, that we should be encouraging a system where we're asking little tots to go door to door to hustle \$2 chocolate bars, and that is a direct result of a shortage of funding to education. We can talk in terms of the throne speech and the promises made in terms of expanding the educational base and such. It was fine.

Now, another area that was touched upon in the throne speech was postsecondary education. Postsecondary education is becoming more and more difficult for students to access. Student loans – and I realize there have been some reforms that were announced later in the budget. Nevertheless, the tuition fees have continued to rise, and the demand on student loans and the shortage of summer employment that pays sufficient wages to allow them to at least store a little bit makes it very, very difficult for potential postsecondary

students to access the universities, the colleges, and the technical institutions.

One thing, Mr. Speaker, that is very, very dear to our hearts is the opportunities for our young people to develop the skills so they can go out on a global basis – we're not talking provincially; we're not talking nationally; we're talking now globally – and compete, to have the skills, to have the educational background so they can effectively compete. That has to be a concern to every parent, to every grandparent, to every legislator in this Assembly, and that has to be addressed.

Now the health care system, of course, was one of the main focuses in the throne speech. The best way to sum up the health care system to me, at least from my point of view, sort of in a nutshell, is that it's sort of like you take a car, you demolish it, and then you're going to rebuild that car part by part. We all know it's probably going to cost four times, six times, 10 times as much as the original automobile. That seems to have happened to the health care system, where a number of years ago it was virtually demolished. Now the government is attempting to rebuild it piece by piece by piece, and the cost continues to escalate, get higher and higher and higher, yet the quality of the health care system continues to deteriorate. There is more and more concern. We hear more and more about waiting lines. We still have the problems on occasion with ambulances driving around without an emergency room to take the patients to.

So health care is a problem, and how the government intends to fix that health care, what kind of plan they're going to have, I don't know. In my opinion, the answer is not to go in the direction the government appears to be going, and that is to sell the system to the private sector.

Earlier this afternoon one of the members stood up in the House and tabled a letter about a gentleman from Britain that participated in a dual system and praised that system. Well, I have heard from other people from Great Britain that have lived over there, that know that system, and they disagree. Just like in the United States, in terms of the health care system there, it is clearly a two-tier system, and for those who have the dollars, who can buy the insurance to insure that they have sufficient access to the health care system, it's fine for them. But for those that can't, it's a whole different story. We all know and hear of cases where Americans are bankrupted simply because they had to go in the hospital for a few days.

I don't want to see us leap to that type of system, and it appears the government is determined to get its foot in the door. We can talk about overnight stays in private hospitals, but what happens after that's allowed? Albertans come to their MLAs and say: "Look, I need hip surgery, but I'm going to have to wait six months. I can go into this private hospital, but they won't allow me because I have to be in for more than three nights." The pressure is going to be on the MLAs, the legislators, to increase that overnight stay to three overnight stays. Pretty soon we're going to end up with private hospitals that are there competing against the public system at a much greater cost and that tend to serve only a segment of the population. I really, really urge the government to heed the direction that they're heading.

10:00

DR. WEST: There are no private hospitals. No private hospitals.

MR. WICKMAN: The minister is shouting over, "No private hospitals." I'm talking about a foot in the door. Don't allow that foot in the door. If you get that foot in the door, that crack becomes wider and wider and wider until the door is totally open and it's a full-fledged system. [interjections]

Speaker's Ruling Decorum

THE DEPUTY SPEAKER: Hon. members, you're all invited in the course of the debate on reply to the speech by Her Honour the Lieutenant Governor. You're all entitled to that, but the courtesy of the House and the practice of the House is that we have but one member speaking at a time. That member is, of course, the hon. Member for Edmonton-Rutherford at this moment.

Debate Continued

MR. WICKMAN: Two last points, Madam Minister. One to you. I appreciate and I'm sure seniors appreciate the additional funding in the special needs that was talked about earlier. There was reference made to seniors' programs and a 10 percent increase in such in the throne speech. It's welcomed. Some say that it's not sufficient. If it's not sufficient, I would hope government will address that to ensure our seniors are provided the dignified lifestyle that they've earned themselves, that they're entitled to by contributing to this province over a good number of years.

My very last point again to the minister of human resources. I would just urge him in his WCB review to allow for some opportunity other than just a questionnaire for interested Albertans, interested groups to actually make submissions as to what they feel is wrong, what can be corrected with the Workers' Compensation Board.

On that note, keeping within my 10 minutes as promised, I'll conclude.

MRS. McCLELLAN: Mr. Speaker, I want to make a few comments on the Speech from the Throne. First of all, I want to commend Her Honour on the very gracious manner in which she presented the speech which outlined the government's agenda for this session. I believe that drawing the relationship between the first Speech from the Throne, delivered many years ago, to the very young, the first baby born in the year 2000, to a lady who heard that first speech firsthand, to a young graduating class rather talks about the excitement I think we all feel of moving into a new century and a new opportunity to work together collectively to make this province, indeed, the absolute best place in this country and in the world to live and to raise our families. I think each and every Member of this Legislative Assembly shares that.

Mr. Speaker, the hour is late. I do wish to add some more comments at a later date, but at this time I would move adjournment for this evening.

[Motion to adjourn debate carried]

[At 10:05 p.m. the Assembly adjourned to Tuesday at 1:30 p.m.]