

Legislative Assembly of Alberta

Title: **Wednesday, March 20, 2002**

1:30 p.m.

Date: 02/03/20

[The Speaker in the chair]

head: **Prayers**

THE SPEAKER: Good afternoon.

Let us pray. Though we as legislators of this great province and its people are taken from the common people and selected by You to be architects of our history, give us wisdom and understanding to do Your will in all we do. Amen.

Please be seated.

head: **Introduction of Guests**

THE SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Clover Bar-Fort Saskatchewan.

MR. LOUGHEED: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased to introduce today Mr. Arnie Duncan, a teacher in Ministik school, and his class of grade 6 students. I see he's also accompanied by bus driver Martin Rozema, I'd mention, a former student from Ardrossan days. Would you please rise and accept the traditional warm greeting of the Assembly.

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

DR. PANNU: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure today to introduce to you and through you to the Assembly three Albertans. They are Mary Bell, Isabelle Foord, and Robert Keulers. They are seated in the public gallery. These three guests are members of the AISH Network of Alberta, a nonprofit society committed to improving the lives of people on AISH. They're also active in the Poverty in Action Society, Edmonton Working Women, Edmonton Epilepsy Association, and Catholic Social Services. They have given hundreds of hours of their volunteer time in improving the lives of their fellow citizens who have continued to fall through the cracks because of the provincial government's social and economic policies. I will ask now these three guests to please rise and receive the warm welcome of the Assembly.

THE SPEAKER: The hon. Minister of Municipal Affairs.

MR. BOUTILIER: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It is indeed my pleasure today to introduce two senior citizens from the oil sands capital of the world, Fort McMurray: one lady who has given the Premier some valuable information on the china in his office as well as another lady who is a huge supporter. One of the ladies who is here today happens to be over 91 years old, and she truly is a queen of the north. I'd like to ask Olive Woodward and Betty Williams to stand and receive the very warm welcome of all members.

THE SPEAKER: The hon. Minister of Economic Development.

MR. NORRIS: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Not to give the impression that there's a run on friends coming to visit this week, but I'd like to introduce to you and through you to the House the shining light of my family, my sister Colleen. We're a family of nine, and I would like her to report back to mom that some of us are doing okay. Would you please welcome my sister Colleen to the House.

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

MS BLAKEMAN: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I'm just delighted today to be able to introduce to you and through you to members of the Assembly Catherine Ryan. Catherine is a representative of the Alberta Council on Aging, and she's here today to observe the budget debate for the Seniors ministry. I would ask her to please rise and accept the warm welcome of the Assembly.

head: **Oral Question Period**

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

Provincial Fiscal Policies

DR. NICOL: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The Premier promised Albertans that the only way taxes are going in this province is down. Yesterday he broke that promise. My question to the Premier: why has the Premier broken his promise to Albertans?

MR. KLEIN: Mr. Speaker, relative to taxes generally – now, we're talking about income tax and corporate tax, business tax, and so on – they are indeed going down. Indeed, there was a reduction, albeit a small reduction, in corporate taxes yesterday. Admittedly we did raise taxes on cigarettes and alcohol and some of the things that are deemed to be damaging to people's health, hopefully to help offset the costs of providing health services for the use or abuse of those products, and I see nothing wrong with that.

Relative to health care premiums, premiums are precisely that: premiums. You might note in the budget – and I'm sure the hon. Minister of Finance will supplement – that great strides were taken to protect those in low-income brackets and seniors, especially low-income seniors, from increases in health care premiums. As a matter of fact, one MLA reported today . . . [interjections] Mr. Speaker, will you please ask the hon. member who's, you know, lip-flapping over there . . . [interjection] I'm not testy. They don't like to hear the fact that about 440,000 Albertans will be relieved of higher premiums, and in fact some of those people pay no premiums at all.

DR. NICOL: My next question again to the Premier: Mr. Premier, how many times have you said that there is only one taxpayer in Alberta, only one pocket that that money can come out of? Health care premiums and taxes all come out of the same pocket. You've broken your promise to them that you wouldn't go into their pocket for money.

MR. KLEIN: Mr. Speaker, I'm not a masochist, you know, and I can tell you that. I'm not in the business for the big bucks. But we had to do what was necessary to face the financial realities of today. If the hon. leader of the Liberal Party will stand up today and say that he wants to reduce to the level they were before taxes on alcohol and cigarettes, let him stand up and say that.

DR. NICOL: Mr. Speaker, if I were Premier, I wouldn't be in this position right now and we wouldn't have had to raise those taxes.

Mr. Speaker, my next question again is to the Premier. When he put in place the single-rate tax, he promised Albertans that they would be treated fairly under our tax system. The taxes imposed yesterday discriminate against individuals with lower income. Why did he break his promise to Albertans?

MR. KLEIN: Mr. Speaker, first of all, thank heavens the hon. leader of the Liberal opposition is not in my position today.

Relative to this province's position, understanding that there was no increase to personal income tax – there was a decrease to

corporate income tax – in comparison to other provinces, Mr. Speaker, we are still the lowest taxed people of any jurisdiction in this country, and we plan to keep it that way.

MRS. NELSON: Let's be very clear. This last year, the fiscal year we're still in, we introduced a reduction in personal income tax of \$1.1 billion that we put back into the pockets of Albertans. When this hon. member stands up and starts to criticize it, he forgets that we also have no payroll tax, no capital tax, and no sales tax in this province. In fact, we're the only one in Canada without it.

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

DR. NICOL: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. But we also are one of two provinces in Canada that have health care premiums.

To the Premier: what faith can Albertans have in this government when a promise that was central to their mandate is discarded one year into the term of office?

MR. KLEIN: Mr. Speaker, it wasn't discarded. Well, in one respect, and that is the sin taxes, the taxes on cigarettes and the taxes on alcohol. Premiums are premiums. If we didn't have premiums, then we would have to go to a payroll tax, which I would suggest is less flexible in terms of our ability to grant some 440,000 Albertans exemption to those particular premiums. Premiums also indicate to Albertans quite clearly that there is a cost to health care.

1:40

Mr. Speaker, I recall attending the Premiers' Conference where indeed the Premier of British Columbia indicated that because the Liberals in Ottawa have reduced health care transfers through the Canada health and social transfer to 13 percent, B.C. had to raise health care premiums. The Premier of Ontario said that in addition to a payroll tax they might have to introduce premiums – in addition to a payroll tax – for health care, and other provinces have indicated they might have to do the same thing. Health care costs are escalating at an unprecedented pace. The Mazankowski report recommended quite clearly an increase in health care premiums. It's no secret. This has been out there for some time. There have been figures that have ranged from 20 percent to 40 percent. Thirty percent is actually a saw-off, and it's an amount deemed reasonable. In terms of this government originally targeting 20 percent of insured health care services to be covered by health care, now we're at 13 or 14 percent.

THE SPEAKER: The hon. leader.

DR. NICOL: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Being out there doesn't make health care premium increases legitimate.

My next question to the Premier: given that you oversee the richest province in Canada, why is it that you had to break your promise and increase taxes?

MR. KLEIN: Mr. Speaker, the only area where we have actually increased taxes is on the so-called sin taxes. Again I challenge the hon. Leader of the Official Opposition to stand up and say that he as the leader would recommend to the government to reduce those taxes back down to where they were. I don't think he's going to do that, because he understands the principles contained in the Mazankowski report and the rationale behind an increase in those particular taxes.

Overall we have kept our promise. There was a reduction in corporate income taxes. If the hon. leader of the Liberal opposition

lived in British Columbia, he would be paying on average \$2,105 more in income tax; in Saskatchewan, \$1,642 – these are dollars out of your pockets – in Manitoba, almost \$1,900; in Ontario, \$1,121 more; in Quebec, \$1,400 more; in New Brunswick, \$2,486 more; in Nova Scotia, 2,400 and some odd dollars more; P.E.I., \$2,700 more; and in Newfoundland, \$3,251 more. So what is he complaining about, Mr. Speaker?

THE SPEAKER: The hon. member.

DR. NICOL: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My final question to the Premier: given that Sheila Copps resigned after breaking her tax promise, will the Premier show the same integrity and resign?

MR. KLEIN: Mr. Speaker, Sheila Copps resigned because she did break her promise on a tax, and it was called the goods and services tax. With a big T. I would remind you that she ran again and got re-elected with a larger majority than she had the first time around, I think.

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

Municipal Financing

MR. BONNER: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It is clear today that when the Premier said that taxes were going down, he forgot to add: except for municipalities. Not only has the government cut jobs and services while raising taxes, a truly amazing accomplishment; they have continued to download their fiscal disaster on our cities and towns. As one observer noted: this isn't a stab in the back; it's a full frontal assault. My first question is to the Premier. Why are you dumping a fiscal nightmare, which has been created by your lack of vision, on our local governments?

MR. KLEIN: Mr. Speaker, the issue with respect to local governments isn't quite resolved. There may be other ways of skinning a cat. I can't be specific at this particular time, but I can tell you that the hon. Minister of Municipal Affairs is having ongoing discussions with the mayors of both Calgary and Edmonton. I heard Mayor Bronconnier and Mayor Smith on the radio today. Well, they may be a lot happier tomorrow; who knows?

THE SPEAKER: The hon. member.

MR. BONNER: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Again to the Premier: will the Premier explain to the mayors of Edmonton and Calgary why he chose to destroy their long-term infrastructure plans with yesterday's budget?

MR. KLEIN: Mr. Speaker, we haven't. You know, municipalities are political creatures much like the province or school boards or any other elected body. I know the problems firsthand relative to municipalities. I know that he had his head in the clouds many, many years ago, but I was dealing with an issue where literally thousands and thousands of people were laid off, primarily in the private sector. They lost their homes and their dignity because the price of oil took a sharp decline. I remember as the mayor being called up to Edmonton and sitting down with the former Minister of Transportation, since deceased, Henry Kroeger, a fine, fine man indeed, who laid it on the line. He said: Mr. Mayor, you have great plans for your city and you want to extend the northeast LRT, but I'm going to tell you that there is no money. Not a reduction in

grants but no money whatsoever. No money. And I said as the mayor: we'll go ahead. And we did it on our own. We did it.

MR. MASON: By borrowing.

MR. KLEIN: Yes, we did borrow, and interest rates were high. But I'll tell you what, Mr. Speaker; there was a problem in the city and people were looking for work and we kept people employed. We brought the project in a third under budget, but we did it on our own.

THE SPEAKER: The hon. member.

MR. BONNER: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. To the Minister of Municipal Affairs. You talk about partnerships with municipalities. Will you please explain to the House what kind of budget negotiations you were involved in with your colleagues to sell out our local governments?

THE SPEAKER: The hon. minister.

MR. BOUTILIER: Thank you. It's indeed my pleasure to answer the hon. member in this way. I'm very pleased to say, first and foremost, that the Municipal Government Act of Alberta is viewed as the top piece of legislation in this entire country, and we've been invited to speak relative to that. What I would like to say, though, relative to the Municipal Affairs ministry is simply this: the conditional and unconditional grants of \$98 million that we gave out last year to municipalities will be given out again this year to the municipalities – \$98 million, 100 percent – because of the important partnership we do have with municipalities.

THE SPEAKER: The hon. leader of the third party, followed by the hon. Member for Calgary-Buffalo.

Provincial Fiscal Policies (continued)

DR. PANNU: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Ralph's world, barely a year old, is crumbling around us, with big chunks falling on the heads of seniors and average Alberta families. Yesterday's budget contained no fewer than 70 taxes and user fee hikes, not the least of which is a 30 percent hike in the health care tax. To the Premier: what kind of government snatches away dental and eye care benefits for senior citizens in order to provide subsidies for the horse racing industry?

MR. KLEIN: Mr. Speaker, there is no such thing in this province as a health care tax. Unlike other provinces we don't have payroll taxes and we don't have other oppressive taxes to support a health care system. We have a system of premiums in this province to demonstrate to people that there is a cost attached to health. Those premiums were adjusted to bring them more in line with the reality of meeting the costs of insured health care services. There's been no adjustment since 1995. An adjustment, in accordance with the Mazankowski report, had to be made, and that adjustment was made.

1:50

THE SPEAKER: The hon. leader.

DR. PANNU: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. What kind of government imposes 70 tax and user fee hikes on average citizens while, at the same time, corporations benefit from a further \$81 million in tax breaks?

MR. KLEIN: Mr. Speaker, the only taxation increase, pure taxation increase, was on things that are entirely optional: cigarettes, alcohol. What was the other one?

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Speeding.

MR. KLEIN: Speeding. That really is optional. Those are optional, things that people want. You don't speed; you don't pay.

Mr. Speaker, I would ask the hon. leader of the third party: is he willing to reduce to where the fines used to be the penalty for speeding? You know, I would ask him that. If he doesn't want to answer it here, maybe he'll answer it in front of the media. Does he then think that speeding is a good thing? Does he not think that it's fundamental to the principle that those who break the law and those who use the system should pay the real cost of either enforcing the law or providing a service? That is fundamental to user fees and to fines.

DR. PANNU: Priorities, Mr. Speaker. What does it say about the government's twisted priorities that a \$724 million budget surplus is deemed more important than providing a long-overdue increase in monthly benefits for social assistance and AISH recipients?

MR. KLEIN: Mr. Speaker, you know, this hon. member has been in the Legislature long enough to understand what the law is. It's the law that a cushion has to be provided. It is the law. Is this hon. member telling us now that not only is it okay to break speeding laws but that we should break legislative law as well?

Municipal Financing (continued)

MR. CENAIKO: Mr. Speaker, today the mayors of Edmonton and Calgary are stating that they may sue the province over fuel tax. My question is to the Minister of Municipal Affairs. What does this say about the relationship between the province and the two largest cities in Alberta?

THE SPEAKER: The hon. minister.

MR. BOUTILIER: Well, thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Of course I'm very proud of the relationship I have with Mayor Bronconnier and Mayor Smith. I spoke to both mayors yesterday. In fact, we're going to be meeting again on April 4 with the hon. Minister of Transportation and my MLA colleagues as well as the president of the AUMA as well as the president of the AAMDC, Municipal Districts and Counties. The reason we're meeting is because we do have a good relationship.

Let me just for a moment say this. When I used to teach at the University of Alberta in the school of business, they said that one of the key characteristics of any organization is flexibility, the flexibility to respond to the environment in good times and bad times. I want to say that the money that we have advanced municipalities, both the city of Calgary and Edmonton, the \$255 million to Calgary and the \$182 million to Edmonton, for transportation was important.

What I would like to do is ask the hon. Minister of Transportation to supplement on this very important positive initiative that's taking place.

THE SPEAKER: Well, we'll go with the hon. Member for Calgary-Buffalo.

MR. CENAIKO: My next question is to the same minister, Mr.

Speaker. Can the minister explain how he sees his council being able to solve problems like this for the municipalities?

THE SPEAKER: The hon. minister.

MR. BOUTILIER: Yes. A very good question. As I mentioned earlier, the Municipal Government Act is viewed as one of the leading pieces of legislation in this country, and the minister's council on roles, responsibilities and resources, the first of its kind in the country – in fact, the Prime Minister's Urban Task Force has been inquiring about this positive initiative. What we see happening is that on April 4 we'll be meeting again with the mayors of Calgary and Edmonton. I think this dialogue is very important. We're going to continue to do that because as the environment changes, so does the relationship. One thing is for certain as we deal with both mayors: we're committed to serving that same taxpayer, because we are all not levels of government; we're all orders of government in serving that one taxpayer.

MR. CENAIKO: Mr. Speaker, again to the same minister: when will this government recognize the contribution that municipalities provide to the province and restore the funding to the appropriate levels?

THE SPEAKER: The hon. minister.

MR. BOUTILIER: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. As the hon. Minister of Finance indicated yesterday, we have a fiscal blueprint that is so important relative to the future. But I think that what's equally important is that the province of Alberta has been able over the last four years – if I could use an analogy. When you buy a vehicle in the province of Ontario, say a \$20,000 or \$30,000 vehicle, you pay \$2,400 on provincial sales tax. You don't pay 1 cent in Alberta, and I'm very proud of that. So what we will be doing in the partnerships with the municipalities is continuing to dialogue on some of the good ideas we've got from those representatives. I think that partnership serves all taxpayers very well.

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

Health Care Premiums

DR. TAFT: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The Premier promised Albertans that the only way taxes are going in this province is down. Yesterday he broke that promise. Perhaps for the next budget the Minister of Finance, instead of a new pair of shoes, should buy a new pair of flip-flops. To the Premier: what does this Premier say to Albertans when they elected members to his own caucus who ran on the basis that health care premiums would be eliminated and instead they have soared?

MR. KLEIN: Nothing has soared. The only thing that has soared is the tax on cigarettes, Mr. Speaker. That has soared; no doubt about it. If the hon. member wants to remove those taxes or bring those down to the level they were before, then I would say to him, as I said to the leader of the Liberal opposition, stand up and say so. Stand up and say: we want to bring taxes on cigarettes down so that cigarettes can become more accessible and readily available to all the young people, who later on in life might develop bronchitis or cancer or heart disease. You know, if he wants to stand up and say that, let him stand up and say that. That's the only tax that has soared, and I don't apologize for it.

DR. TAFT: I will stand up and say that I would like to eliminate health care premiums.

Given a 1996 cabinet decision that premiums would not be increased for seniors in the future regardless of any other increases to the public, how does the Premier rationalize to seniors who will not receive subsidies this broken promise?

MR. KLEIN: Mr. Speaker, seniors are protected, especially low-income seniors. Indeed, when we did the adjustments back then, we wanted to make sure that those seniors who could afford to pay would in fact pay and that those seniors who were having a tough time of it would be shielded, as they are today and as are other low-income people.

DR. TAFT: Given that an esteemed member of his own caucus says that health premiums are a tax every bit as much as income tax, does the Premier still cling to the ridiculous position that health premiums are not a tax?

MR. KLEIN: Mr. Speaker, a tax is a tax – as I say, a payroll tax. We could have gone that route, and I guess this is where the Liberals would want us to go. I don't know where they stand on this particular issue. If they would like us to have a payroll tax, or if they were the government, institute a payroll tax, maybe they can explain that to the media, or maybe the hon. member can stand up and explain it in the House. But I'll tell you that if we had a payroll tax, we couldn't have the flexibility to make the kinds of adjustments we made to protect and shelter seniors and shelter low-income families.

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

Funding Formula for Regional Health Authorities

MR. FRIEDEL: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My questions are to the Minister of Health and Wellness. In the budget tabled yesterday was a strong reminder that our government takes fiscal responsibility seriously. After a few years of high-rolling expectations reality can hit pretty hard. I fully support the concept of living within our means, but that should mean that everyone has to feel the pinch equally. There is, however, a significant appearance of inequity when the metro regional health facilities get an 8 percent, and in some cases plus, increase in their budgets, but the smaller boards only get 2 percent. I understand the basics of the funding formula, but these figures certainly put the issue of fairness to the test. I wonder if the minister could tell us just how much consideration was given to the concept that a basic level of health services must be provided to every region when this formula was first devised.

2:00

THE SPEAKER: The hon. minister.

MR. MAR: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I can assure the hon. member that my department's funding formula for health authority budgets is designed to ensure that regions are funded according to their particular health needs. What we don't want to have is a one-size-fits-all budgeting process, and we don't. What we do have is a population-based formula that does take into account the health needs of a particular region. The formula includes factoring in the demographics of the region and the data on the actual health care utilization in that particular area. It does take into account changes to regional populations. It also keeps regional funding relatively stable to make regional long-term planning easier.

Through this process of budgeting, we believe that it will help make our health care system sustainable into the future.

I should note, Mr. Speaker, that the process that we have has been internationally recognized as a fair way to budget for health care. We are one of the few provinces across Canada that fully uses this type of budgeting process. It's worth noting that the budget to each and every each regional health authority across this province did receive an increase. The hon. member is correct that the increase was as small as 2 percent and as high as about 7.5 percent, but it is a fair process.

THE SPEAKER: The hon. member.

MR. FRIEDEL: Yes, Mr. Speaker. To the same minister: could he tell us how much consideration was given to the possibility that a reduction in the level of service in a smaller hospital might actually result in higher costs to both the system and the patient if they have to go to, say, a regional or a metro facility where the daily cost of a room is known to be higher?

MR. MAR: This is a very good question, Mr. Speaker. I should say that one of the challenges that smaller rural health authorities have is to try and retain people within their own regional health authorities. If individuals from smaller regions end up coming into the major metropolitan centres to get their services, the money for their treatment follows those individuals. Successful regional health authorities in rural areas have repatriated those types of patients to ensure that services are delivered right in their own communities, and I think that is a very important lesson for all regional health authorities that are trying their best to maintain a certain level of services within their area.

MR. FRIEDEL: Once more to the same minister, Mr. Speaker. I wonder if he could tell us what, if anything, is being done to ensure that a reasonable level of basic health services is going to continue to be available in the regions where traveling to a distant regional centre is not an acceptable option.

MR. MAR: Mr. Speaker, our starting point is this. If we went simply with a population-based formula without a recognition of some of these distance issues and these sparsity issues, if we went strictly on the basis of population, then there would be a number of regional health authorities that would have had significant decreases in the amount of funding available for them in the upcoming year compared to the previous year. So the fact that each and every regional health authority got some increase is a recognition of the need for stability with the current level of services, but we must compel and challenge our regional health authorities to do as much or more with what they're getting, with the inclusion of a small increase for each of them.

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

Provincial Fiscal Policies (continued)

MR. MacDONALD: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Last year the Premier was making many promises. This year the Premier is breaking many promises. In fact, the Premier promised that the only way taxes are going in this province is down. Now, my first question this afternoon is to the Premier. Since the Premier said that taxes would only

go down, why are vehicle registration renewals soaring in price by 27 percent?

Thank you.

MR. KLEIN: Mr. Speaker, that is to reflect the cost of doing business, and that's not a tax. Admittedly, taxes went up on cigarettes and alcohol. They did, and those adjustments were made and are complementary to the Mazankowski report, indeed were recommended in the report, at least as it relates to cigarettes. I don't know about alcohol. I think it's quite reasonable in light of society's concern about smoking contributing to increasing health problems and to the increasing costs of health care services. Relative to taxes, the only mention of a tax, other than on cigarettes and alcohol, was corporate income tax, and that went down, down, down.

MR. MacDONALD: Again, Mr. Speaker, to the Premier: since the Premier said that taxes would only go down, why are valid Alberta drivers' licences soaring by 38 percent?

Thank you.

MR. KLEIN: Mr. Speaker, that, again, is not a tax. That is the cost of doing business, and if he objects to paying the \$11.25, don't drive.

THE SPEAKER: The hon. member.

MR. MacDONALD: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Let's talk about family vacations, then, with the Premier. Again to the Premier: since the Premier said that taxes would only go down, why are families paying a 200 percent increase in registration fees for the family camper?

MR. KLEIN: Mr. Speaker, again, those are user fees to reflect the cost of delivering the service. They are not taxes.

THE SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Calgary-Bow, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods. [interjections] The hon. Member for Calgary-Bow has the floor. [interjections] Hon. members, please. Please, hon. members.

Speaker's Ruling **Oral Question Period Practices**

THE SPEAKER: This is called question period. I believe that starting this afternoon, in a few minutes from now, we are going to begin a process in this Assembly called the budget debate. I believe, if I look at the schedule, that it will go through to May 7. That means that the members of this Assembly will spend their time in this House on a daily basis, starting today to May 7, going through every conceivable line in a budget. Today is question period.

Injection Drug Use

MS DeLONG: Mr. Speaker, recently an AIDS group issued a news release claiming that barriers to methadone treatment for drug addiction are helping to sustain a public health crisis in our province. My questions are to the Minister of Health and Wellness. Can the minister tell this Assembly how large a concern injection drug use is in our province?

MR. MAR: Mr. Speaker, we know that 47 percent of new HIV cases in the first half of last year were from injection drug use. Addiction to injection drugs is a serious concern in North America. It is a serious concern in our province, sir. Injection drug use is not only

a tragedy, of course, for the individuals or the families involved but also for society as a whole, and it poses a serious health risk and expense to our health system. Every HIV infection averted decreases direct health care costs by \$150,000. The indirect costs averted are in the range of \$600,000.

MS DeLONG: Mr. Speaker, my final question is to the same minister. Since the human and health care costs of injection drug use are so high, can the minister tell us what the government is going to do to address the issue?

MR. MAR: Mr. Speaker, the Alberta Alcohol and Drug Abuse Commission, or AADAC, has been working for some time to address the issue of injection drug use, and AADAC's voluntary opiate dependency or methadone program has been operating in this province for nearly 30 years and has an active list of 330,000 clients. This department is currently providing some \$440,000 annually to support this program. We also contribute approximately \$120,000 for lab tests associated with the program, and there is consideration by AADAC at this time to working with stakeholders to explore the feasibility of expanding the methadone program into southern Alberta, sir.

THE SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands.

2:10

Provincial Fiscal Policies (continued)

DR. MASSEY: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Albertans see no difference between a user fee and premiums and taxes. A year ago the Premier said that the only way taxes are going in this province is down. My questions are to the Premier. Given that the Premier said that taxes would only go down, why are traffic fines going up by 20 percent?

MR. KLEIN: Well, Mr. Speaker, it absolutely astounds me that the Liberal opposition would be opposed to increasing fines for breaking the law, a law that is there to prevent people from speeding so that they won't create accidents that kill and maim individuals. It absolutely astounds me that they would be opposed to an increase in a fine for breaking a very serious law.

THE SPEAKER: The hon. member.

DR. MASSEY: Thank you. Again to the Premier: given that the Premier said that taxes would only go down, why are court fees increasing threefold and some as much as \$400?

MR. KLEIN: Mr. Speaker, the answer is the same. It's to reflect the cost of providing the service.

THE SPEAKER: The hon. member.

DR. MASSEY: Thank you. Again to the Premier: can the Premier confirm that his tax increases will cost Joe Albertan a thousand dollars a year?

MR. KLEIN: Mr. Speaker, if you don't smoke, it won't cost you. If you don't speed, it won't cost you. If you drive, it will cost you a very, very small amount more, which, you know, will go into the general revenue account and will help us deal with some of the

problems of infrastructure and health and social services and education and all the other priority areas.

Mr. Speaker, I think fundamental to the question is how much money is still left in the pockets of Albertans as opposed to other jurisdictions. You know, if the hon. member believes that it's folly in Alberta to pay taxes, he ought to be in, well, New Brunswick. I'm assuming that this hon. member – and I don't know if he's married or not, but I think he is. If he and his wife, earning over a hundred thousand dollars a year, were living in Newfoundland, they'd be paying out of their pockets \$5,486 more than they're paying in Alberta. Now, you know, it amazes me that the opposition would lament and complain about how bad things are here in Alberta when in fact if he and his family moved to Newfoundland, they would be out \$5,486 just on taxation, not to mention the multitude of user fees that they have to pay in Newfoundland as well.

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

Financial Management Commission

MR. MASON: Thanks very much, Mr. Speaker. Here in Ralph's world things are no longer excellent. Apparently, things have gone so far off the rails that Garth – I'm sorry – the Minister of Finance desperately needs some advice from a blue-chip panel on financial management. With the honourable exception of the former Auditor General of the province of Alberta, all members of this commission are businessmen with Tory connections. To the Minister of Finance: from amongst the 3 million Albertans to choose from, why couldn't the Minister of Finance find one qualified woman to sit on this commission?

MRS. NELSON: Well, the last time I looked in the mirror, Mr. Speaker, I'm a woman, and this committee is going to report through me. The Premier has put his faith in me to put forward a fiscal plan, and when I put forward the Financial Management Commission, I've asked people to come forward and give us some advice. I don't like to upset the hon. member opposite in the ND caucus of two, but the problem that you have is that the vast majority of the business community in fact do support the Conservative Party.

THE SPEAKER: The hon. member.

MR. MASON: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Now I know why they don't call it answer period.

Mr. Speaker, out of 3 million Albertans why couldn't the minister find one person who was not a white, middle-aged, male businessman?

MRS. NELSON: Well, Mr. Speaker, I asked people to come forward and volunteer to sit on this commission because of their background and their expertise. [interjections]

THE SPEAKER: Hon. members, the hon. minister has the floor.

MRS. NELSON: It's amazing, Mr. Speaker. They ask the question, but they don't want to hear the answer.

I've asked for this commission to come forward to review our policies on accounting and how we present our financial plans to this Legislature, something we did 10 years ago which was very successful when we were in an environment where we were running huge annual deficits and building our debt, which was accumulating at an unprecedented rate. I've asked for this committee to come

forward and have a look at our existing policies to give us some advice as to whether they are appropriate today. One thing I will say is that the Fiscal Responsibility Act, insofar as making sure that our budgets are always balanced, is not up for review. That will stay in place. But I've asked them to look at: are we dealing with issues such as capital in an appropriate fashion today? Is there a better way to deal with this, particularly if we enter into things such as public/private partnerships, and how would we deal with it?

The people I chose to go on this commission, Mr. Speaker, have had not only experience in the private sector but have been very creative in their own right, in their own corporate entities to put forward very successful plans, and I'm hoping we can draw upon that expertise. I've also included some retired people who have financial backgrounds, but also I've included the former Auditor General of our province so that he could in fact give an overview as to how this fits into public reporting and fits into the overall package.

THE SPEAKER: The hon. member.

MR. MASON: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Well, perhaps the minister will feel more comfortable answering this question. Out of 3 million Albertans to choose from, why couldn't the minister find one person who wasn't a Tory member, supporter, contributor, or backroom boy?

MRS. NELSON: Mr. Speaker, you just have to look at the distribution in this House to know that the vast majority of Albertans support the Conservative Party – they elected 74 members – and, quite frankly, the same with the business community, who has been very supportive of this party and of our Premier and of our government. So I didn't look for someone that supported the third party in this Legislature. I looked for people that were best qualified to do this job in short order. I've asked for them to come back and report to me by the end of June to give me some ideas of what we could in fact put in place, and I'm confident that they will give us the best guidance possible.

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

Agricultural Services Offices

MR. MARZ: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My question today is to the hon. Minister of Agriculture, Food and Rural Development. The agriculture industry has been severely impacted over the last couple of years due to drought and low commodity prices in the grain sector, and although farmers have a very good record of adapting to the constant challenges in that industry, there are times that like other industries they need to look to government for some expertise and assistance. Agricultural district service offices have been there to provide a high level of service to farmers over the years, and now those same farmers are very concerned about the news of losing those district offices. My question to the minister today is: what specific services will be lost as a result of the restructuring of those 51 district offices?

2:20

MRS. McCLELLAN: Mr. Speaker, it is certainly our contention that services will not be lost in the agriculture sector, that in fact services will be increased and enhanced. The hon. member suggests, and rightly so, that agriculture is a very dynamic industry in this province. It is constantly changing, which in fact shows by its

growth in this province. In that change and in that growth so have the needs of the people in the industry, and how they access their information and make decisions has changed considerably. Our foot and phone traffic in our offices has changed. We know that to respond to the growing industry and to the development in the agribusiness industry, we have to change and grow with them. That is what these changes will accomplish.

THE SPEAKER: The hon. member.

MR. MARZ: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Again to the same minister: given that in the past there were instances where municipalities actually provided space in their offices for district agriculturalists and other types of government services, will the minister give consideration to allowing ag specialists to relocate to municipalities if space is available?

MRS. McCLELLAN: Certainly, Mr. Speaker, collocations are an option we're looking at. We're probably exploring about 40 of those now out of our 51 offices that we presently have. Certainly through ag service boards, through research associations and forage associations a variety of ways that we could provide those services are being explored.

The other thing that we're going to do, Mr. Speaker, is that on April 2 we'll be opening an expanded call centre which will provide information by a person to calls for extended hours, and if that person cannot answer the questioner's question, they will be put in touch with a specialist or somebody immediately.

So we're exploring all options. I've invited the municipalities, the ag service boards to provide us with their intelligence on this, and I'm confident that with the partnerships we have out there, we'll provide better service to our agricultural industry.

THE SPEAKER: The hon. member.

MR. MARZ: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Again to the same minister: with the seeding season just around the corner, can the minister assure farmers that no services will be disrupted during this whole reorganization?

MRS. McCLELLAN: Well, Mr. Speaker, certainly the reorganization won't be concluded by seeding time, but our expanded call centre will be in place. Our web site, Ropin' the Web, which is a very popular way to receive information, will be in place. Our publications continue to be in place. We have Ag Financial Services offices in many communities in the province, which have very knowledgeable people in them as well. So our intention is not to disrupt service to our ag producers at a very busy time of year.

Provincial Staffing Adjustments

MS CARLSON: Mr. Speaker, this government is spending more of Albertans' money in order to hire more people who will tax more Albertans more money. At the same time, the government will hire fewer people to provide fewer services to fewer Albertans. No wonder Albertans are calling in to talk shows in droves to complain that this government has ripped them off. My first question is to the Minister of Community Development. Why is this minister cutting 65 jobs at the same time that Revenue is hiring 28 more tax auditors?

THE SPEAKER: The hon. minister.

MR. ZWOZDESKY: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. There are a number

of positions in Community Development that will be lost through attrition, and there are a number of other staff members, in some areas at least, who have asked for packages or early retirement. In the end, I think the hon. member probably knows that since the tragic events of September 11 we have done a lot of streamlining, and we're trying to make a better and more efficient operation throughout the department. But there will be some positions that have been vacant filled over the next little while as well, so there is a balance there.

MS CARLSON: This government cannot use September 11 as the excuse for every reason for cutting dollars in this budget.

To the Minister of Children's Services: why is this minister cutting 186 staff positions at the same time that Revenue is hiring 28 more tax auditors?

MS EVANS: Mr. Speaker, if I could just review, last year we had 475 new positions. During the past year there has been significant work, particularly in some of the child and family services authority regions. We have unfilled vacancies of about 160 at this moment, given some of the staffing realignments as well as some of the things that have been done in terms of our contract management. They are positions that are furthest from the child except where we have had difficulty retaining people to do the job, and they are positions which are not in any way putting children at risk. We believe that the staffing adjustments are very livable for this year. Through attrition we will also make sure that we are not going out and cutting, as the saying goes, any frontline staff or workers directly interfacing with children at risk.

MS CARLSON: Mr. Speaker, my final question is to the minister of agriculture. Why is this minister cutting 186 jobs at the same time that Revenue is hiring 28 more tax auditors? Who's speaking for rural Albertans over there?

MRS. McCLELLAN: Well, Mr. Speaker, I don't think I have to defend my position in speaking for rural Albertans out there. I'll let the actions deal with that.

However, on the issue of the 185 I would remind the hon. member – and I think she's been around here long enough to understand – that there is a difference in what is 185 FTEs or what is considered full-time equivalents.

Now, Mr. Speaker, I've stood in this Legislature and I know that it's not their norm to listen, but if they had, they would have heard that we are in the process right now of dealing with our staff. Under our labour agreements and out of respect for the valued work that our staff do in Agriculture, we will deal with them first. Some of them will choose to take voluntary severance, some of them will choose to stay in the job they are in, and some of them will choose to apply for another career opportunity.

Mr. Speaker, there will be changes. I have never made a secret of that. It is a restructuring that has been going on in Alberta Agriculture for the last three to four years. This is the last phase, and it is to represent the changing dynamics in the agriculture industry in this province.

head: Recognitions

THE SPEAKER: Hon. members, I would ask that you join with me in recognizing the seven hon. members I'm going to identify who were elected to this Legislative Assembly 13 years ago, on March 20, 1989. First of all, the hon. the Premier, the hon. Minister of Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development, the hon. Minister of

Sustainable Resource Development, the hon. Minister of Infrastructure, the hon. Minister of Finance, the hon. Minister of Seniors, and the hon. Deputy Speaker. Thirteen years ago, March 20, 1989.

Now, today in Recognitions I have seven hon. members who've identified a desire on their part to participate. Something that is quite unique, though, is going to happen today, hon. members. You have been circulated remarks in English, and the remarks of at least five members will be in the original language of their birth.

So might I first of all call on the hon. Member for Calgary-McCall, who will give his remarks in Gujarati.

International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination

MR. SHARIFF: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. March 21 has been declared by the United Nations as International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination. Today a number of my colleagues are going to speak on this subject in the language of their origin. We are indeed very blessed to have such a rich diversity in our Assembly. [remarks in Gujarati]

In 1948 the world community came together under the auspices of the United Nations to proclaim the universal declaration of human rights. As the world struggled with the horrible experience of apartheid in South Africa, where innocent civilians were massacred because of their race, the United Nations once again, in 1966, declared March 21 as International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination. From 1989 Canada has held this campaign on March 21 to raise awareness of racism and discrimination.

Since 1998 the Alberta Human Rights and Citizenship Commission has received over 80 cases annually citing complaints of racial discrimination. Despite the global efforts, this societal problem prevails in our midst. Together we need to work towards eliminating racial discrimination in our communities. [as submitted]

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

2:30

THE SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Calgary-East will give his remarks in Arabic.

MR. AMERY: [remarks in Arabic]

The International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination is observed annually on the 21st of March. On that day in 1960, police opened fire and killed 69 people at a peaceful demonstration in Sharpeville, South Africa. The Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination was proclaimed six years later, in 1966, and has been observed by the United Nations and member countries ever since.

The United Nations has targeted youth as the most important group that needs to hear the message against racial discrimination. The United Nations has brought forth a pledge for youth to help focus their goal of creating a society with equal opportunity for everyone. The pledge reads as follows:

As a young citizen of the world community, I stand with the United Nations against racism, discrimination and intolerance of any kind. Throughout my life I will try to promote equality, justice and dignity among all people in my home, my community and everywhere in the world.

These powerful words give youth a challenge to overcome the racism and a plan to act by. There are many opportunities to overcome racial discrimination in the world today, and this pledge recognizes that it all starts with the individual.

Today the push to end discrimination, prejudice, and xenophobia is more important than ever. Ending discrimination is key to achieving world peace and security, and tolerance is something that needs to be taught to our children. Some may say that Canada is too

remote to have any effect on the serious problems of racial violence in eastern Europe, the Middle East, or Africa, but each Canadian must do his or her own part in promoting the end of discrimination here at home as well.

For a future of true peace and prosperity, there cannot be any racial discrimination or injustice, and the International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination actively attempts to change the world for the better. I thank all the members that are joining me in recognizing this important day.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker. [as submitted]

THE SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Castle Downs will give his remarks in Polish.

MR. LUKASZUK: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. [remarks in Polish]

Today is International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination. This is a time to measure how far we have come, consider the obstacles that remain, and plan for how far we have to go in the fight against racism.

Canada has come a long way in eradicating racism and prejudice. Aboriginal peoples and immigrants play key roles in our economy, culture, and political affairs. Add as an example that I am of Polish descent and a proud member of the Alberta Legislature. However, as we reflect on this day, let's remember that much of the responsibility for eliminating racism lies with government. Legislation, education, and policies are the main tools to prevent discrimination in the future and build racial tolerance in the years to come. As Canadians and as Albertans we pride ourselves in being able to model to the rest of the world tolerance and acceptance of all.

Thank you Mr. Speaker. [as submitted]

THE SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Calgary-Fort will give his remarks in Vietnamese.

MR. CAO: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. [remarks in Vietnamese]

Mr. Speaker, the Alberta Human Rights, Citizenship and Multiculturalism Act states:

Whereas recognition of the inherent dignity and the equal and inalienable rights of all persons is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world;

Whereas it is recognized in Alberta as a fundamental principle and as a matter of public policy that all persons are equal in: dignity, rights and responsibilities without regard to race, religious beliefs, colour, gender, physical disability, mental disability, age, ancestry, place of origin, marital status, source of income or family status;

Whereas multiculturalism describes the diverse racial and cultural composition of Alberta society and its importance is recognized in Alberta as a fundamental principle and a matter of public policy;

Whereas it is recognized in Alberta as a fundamental principle and as a matter of public policy that all Albertans should share in an awareness and appreciation of the diverse racial and cultural composition of society and that the richness of life in Alberta is enhanced by sharing that diversity; and

Whereas it is fitting that these principles be affirmed by the Legislature of Alberta in an enactment whereby those equality rights and that diversity may be protected. [as submitted]

Those are the translated words from the Alberta law, but nothing is as true and proven as the fact that today in the Legislature of our great province we can hear many elected legislators speaking in many languages on the subject of human rights, citizenship, and cultural diversity in our blessed Alberta. It is a great honour for me to join my colleagues to speak in Vietnamese.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

THE SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Redwater will provide his remarks in Ukrainian.

MR. BRODA: [remarks in Ukrainian]

Thank you Mr. Speaker. I am very pleased to rise today and speak to you in Ukrainian. Today we have close to 300,000 people of Ukrainian origin in this province, most of whom are in the Edmonton area.

When our fathers, grandfathers, and great-grandfathers came to Canada, to this province, they settled in areas where other immigrants had settled. There were different ethnic groups: the French, English, Polish, German, Dutch, and so on. I know that when I started school, I could not speak English. My neighbours, who were French, also could not speak English. However, we played together and we respected each other. We learned to speak the English language. As a result, we learned to live and work together while maintaining our own culture, language, and traditions. This is what makes our country and this province a better place to live in today.

Thank you. [as submitted]

THE SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie will give her remarks in English.

Albertans for a Wild Chinchaga

MS CARLSON: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise today to recognize the outstanding work done by Albertans for a Wild Chinchaga. These Albertans have worked tirelessly to promote the importance of this northern ecosystem. They know that government's claims about having protected enough of the Chinchaga under the special places program is really just one more special excuse from the government. The government only protected the area that industry didn't want.

Albertans for a Wild Chinchaga have presented their case for protecting this area based on the needs of the animals and the plants, needs that must come before industrial and recreational demands. A protected area is more than little spots of green separated by gas wells. With Grande Alberta Paper finally put to rest, the government has a great opportunity to really protect the Chinchaga.

I congratulate the members of Albertans for a Wild Chinchaga and encourage them to keep making their voices heard.

Thank you.

THE SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona will provide his remarks in English.

Brian and Robin McKeever

DR. PANNU: Yes, indeed, Mr. Speaker. I am thrilled to rise today to recognize two great Albertans from Canmore. These two skiers, Brian McKeever and Robin McKeever, have brought considerable pride to Alberta. They represented Canada in the Paralympic Games held in Salt Lake City last week. They competed in four races and won two gold medals and a silver. Brian is the first Canadian male to win two gold medals during the same Paralympic Games.

Twenty-two-year-old Brian is visually impaired and his older brother Robin works as his guide. Proud of their New Democrat roots, these two brothers are not only accomplished athletes; they're also very active members of their communities.

Mr. Speaker, I would ask the Assembly to join me in congratulating warmly the McKeever family of Canmore for their great achievements.

head: **Presenting Petitions**

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

MR. MacDONALD: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I would like to present this petition to the Assembly on behalf of Mr. Darby Mahon from the constituency of Edmonton-Gold Bar. Mr. Mahon organized this petition, and it is a petition to express opposition to the provincial government's public emergency declaration that has forced teachers back to work without a contract or settlement.

Thank you.

head: **Introduction of Bills**

THE SPEAKER: The hon. Minister of Justice and Attorney General.

Bill 20 **Justice Statutes Amendment Act, 2002**

MR. HANCOCK: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I request leave to introduce Bill 20, the Justice Statutes Amendment Act, 2002.

This bill, Mr. Speaker, proposes amendments to eight pieces of Justice legislation, including the Civil Enforcement Act, which are amendments relative to the review of the Civil Enforcement Act that were promised and required when that act was brought forward; the Interpretation Act and the Motor Vehicle Accident Claims Act, with relatively modest amendments; the Limitations Act, with an amendment which essentially will clarify when the limitation period runs against a child or with respect to a child and corollary amendments to the Public Trustee Act to make that effective; and amendments to the Fatal Accidents Act and the Survival of Actions Act to clarify issues with respect to claims that can be made in the event of the death of a loved one; and then, of course, the Provincial Offences Procedure Act, which will put into effect the provisions which were raised in the budget yesterday with respect to the increase of traffic fines and the ability of the department to retain those increases for the purposes of processing those fines.

[Motion carried; Bill 20 read a first time]

THE SPEAKER: The hon. Minister of Finance.

2:40 **Bill 21** **Alberta Personal Income Tax Amendment Act, 2002**

MRS. NELSON: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I request leave to introduce Bill 21, the Alberta Personal Income Tax Amendment Act, 2002.

[Motion carried; Bill 21 read a first time]

head: **Tabling Returns and Reports**

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

MR. CAO: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I would like to table a study and recommendation report from my constituent on the WCB tribunal for rehearing of claimants' cases.

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

MS CARLSON: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I have three tablings this afternoon. The first is the required number of copies of the program from the Canadian business leader award dinner held last evening, where Brian MacNeill was recognized as the 21st award recipient.

My second tabling is the annual review for the Alberta School of Business, where they are celebrating 85 years of excellence.

My third tabling is over 1,500 signatures from Albertans who wish the government to protect the Chinchaga wilderness area.

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

MS BLAKEMAN: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. At lunchtime today I was very pleased to attend an event, and I'd like to table five copies of the brand-new brochure on Edmonton's downtown churches. This was a partnership project from five downtown churches that have produced this brochure for everyone's information.

Thank you very much.

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

DR. TAFT: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'd like to table the appropriate number of copies of 20 different letters written to either myself or the Minister of Health and Wellness from Albertans concerned about access to the drug cyclosporine for the treatment of aplastic anemia, and I am pleased to say that as far as I know, the department, working with the drug industry, has resolved their concerns.

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

MR. MacDONALD: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I would like to table this information for all hon. members of this Assembly. It is the actual forecast from the Power Pool for yesterday, March 19. Now, prices range here from 6.1 cents to, incredibly, at 8 o'clock last night 21.4 cents a kilowatt-hour for electricity. Temperatures go down; electricity prices go up in this deregulated market.

Thank you.

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

DR. PANNU: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I've got one tabling today. I'm tabling a letter from Nicholas Chamchuk of Edmonton. Mr. Chamchuk is opposed to the increase in health care premiums, which he insists on calling a tax, and he's opposed to it because this premium will hit seniors and low-income Albertans "hardest and disproportionately." So these increases are opposed by Mr. Chamchuk.

Thank you.

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

MR. MASON: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm tabling today a letter from the Canadian Bar Association president, Virginia Engel, addressed to the Premier. In her letter she expresses concern over the lack of resources being allocated to the Department of Justice, causing serious deterioration in the operation of the justice system.

THE SPEAKER: Additional tablings? The hon. Minister of Human Resources and Employment.

MR. DUNFORD: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased to table with the Assembly the 2000 annual report for the Alberta Veterinary Medical Association and also the 2000-2001 annual report of the Association of Professional Engineers, Geologists and Geophysicists of Alberta.

THE SPEAKER: Hon. members, before we deal with the next item of business, which would be a ruling with respect to the question of privilege, might we revert briefly to Introduction of Guests?

[Unanimous consent granted]

head: Introduction of Guests

(reversion)

MR. SHARIFF: Mr. Speaker, for the record, I am pleased to introduce to you and through you to the members of the Assembly a group of 15 members of the Association of Professional Engineers, Geologists and Geophysicists of Alberta women's club who are visiting the Legislature today. Seated earlier on today in the gallery were Mrs. Sheila Mitchell, Mrs. Kathleen Brittain, Mrs. Mary Nichols, Mrs. Edith Barchard, Mrs. Mildred Dofka, Mrs. Susan Rudge, Mrs. Norma Robertson, Mrs. Marian Gray, Mrs. Anne Skone, Mrs. Betty Scott, Mrs. Hilda Ross, Ms Donna Watson, Mrs. Margaret Hiller, Mrs. Marie Slusar, Mrs. Frances Reynolds, Mrs. Marilyn Forbes, and Mrs. Herta Hooper. I would like all hon. members in this Assembly to recognize their presence.

Thank you.

THE SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Beverly-Clareview.

MR. YANKOWSKY: Yes. Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise to introduce to you and through you to this House four guests who had a very interesting quilt on display in the Legislature rotunda this morning. Named the Heart and Hands quilt, it depicts the heartache caused when grandparents cannot see their grandchildren. It is my pleasure to introduce Florence Knight, national director of the Canadian Grandparents' Rights Association; Mr. Bill Miller, representing Grandparents Unlimited; Annette Bruce, representing the Orphaned Grandparents Association; and Mr. Rolf Sandl of Sherwood Park. Our guests are all seated in the public gallery, and I would like to ask them to please stand at this time and receive the very warm welcome of this Assembly.

Privilege Contempt of the Assembly

THE SPEAKER: Hon. members, the chair is prepared to rule on the purported question of privilege raised yesterday in the House by the Official Opposition House Leader. Before doing so, the chair confirms that the hon. member has fulfilled the notice requirements under Standing Order 15(2) by providing two hours' written notice to my office, which was received at 11:30 a.m. on Monday, March 18.

The Official Opposition House Leader alleges in her purported question of privilege that the Solicitor General has deliberately misled the House in connection with statements made on March 13 and 14 relating to reporting requirements for sex offenders. As was correctly pointed out yesterday by the Official Opposition House Leader in citing *Erskine May*, 22nd edition, at pages 111 and 112, the House "may treat the making of a deliberately misleading statement as a contempt."

Members may recall from the chair's ruling last week on a similar issue raised by the Member for Edmonton-Highlands that the authorities are very clear that a matter of contempt proceeds in the same manner as a question of privilege. If the chair finds there is a prima facie question of privilege, any member may bring forward a motion not later than the conclusion of the next sitting day. The matter then rests with the House as to how it wants to proceed.

Before ruling, the chair would like to remind members that alleging that another member deliberately misled the House is a very grave matter. The chair takes an allegation of deliberate dishonesty very seriously. The test for determining whether a prima facie case has been made that a member has deliberately misled the House is outlined in Joseph Maingot's work *Parliamentary Privilege in Canada*, the second edition, at page 234.

Before the House will be permitted by the Speaker to embark on a

debate in such circumstances (i.e. find a prima facie case and permit a motion to be moved), an admission by someone in authority, such as a Minister of the Crown or an officer of a department, an instrument of government policy, or a government agency, either that a Member of the House of Commons was intentionally misled or an admission of facts that leads naturally to the conclusion that a Member was intentionally misled, and a direct relationship between the misleading information and a proceeding in Parliament, is necessary.

To be clear, members, it is not the chair's role to scrutinize the accuracy of every word and statement uttered in this House. When statements made by a member are so inconsistent as to lead to the natural conclusion that the member has deliberately misled the House, then the chair must find a prima facie case of privilege. The chair has carefully reviewed the *Hansard* transcripts for question period for March 13 and 14 and would like to highlight the following excerpts.

2:50

On March 13, in response to a question from the Member for Edmonton-Centre as to whether her department was planning to reduce the reporting requirements for convicted sex offenders, the Solicitor General made the following statement to the House as part of her reply, at page 316 of *Hansard*:

No, we are not letting sex offenders out early. They still will be considered a high-risk offender, number one. The probation officers determine what they will do and where they will go.

On March 14 the Solicitor General made the following comment on the same issue, at page 364 of *Hansard*:

First of all, most of the sex offenders in this province that are on probation, not parole, are considered high-risk or high-profile offenders. That categorization has not changed.

I further quote:

The sex offenders designated as high risk or high profile will be reporting with the same standards as they always have. Let me repeat that it's the probation officers that make that determination, not the Solicitor General.

It is clear that the answer offered on March 13 indicates that sex offenders are considered high-risk offenders and will not be let out early, whereas the answer offered on March 14 states that most sex offenders are considered high risk and that there would be no change in reporting requirements for those sex offenders who have that classification. Clearly, there is a distinction between the two statements. The question then becomes whether this distinction amounts to the Solicitor General deliberately misleading the House.

It would be difficult for the chair to conclude that a contempt of the House arises every time a minister misspeaks or misstates department policy. Exactness in all answers to questions in question period would also require exactness in all questions. This would seem to amount to an impossible standard of perfection that would certainly go beyond the standard expected in any Westminster-style parliament. It is the chair's view that the statements on March 13 and 14 are inconsistent, and it would appear that the answer on March 13 was a misstatement regarding department policy. However, it is difficult to conclude that this amounts to a case of deliberate dishonesty so as to meet the test of a charge of deliberately misleading the House, particularly given that we have the word of the hon. minister yesterday in this House that this was not her intent. Accordingly, the chair does not find that this matter constitutes a prima facie case of contempt.

Before we proceed to Orders of the Day, the chair would like to remind the members of this House of a few basic parliamentary principles that seem appropriate in light of what has transpired over the past few days.

First, one of the practices of this Assembly is to allow for

ministers to supplement or to provide clarification to answers in question period at a later date. It is unfortunate that the Solicitor General did not avail herself of this opportunity before the matter led to a charge of contempt.

Finally, the chair would like to remind the members of this Assembly that there is a concept of ministerial responsibility in the Westminster model of parliament. This principle is fundamental to our notion of responsible government, where the actions of the executive are scrutinized every day in this Assembly. The chair would like to quote the following passage from page 29 of *House of Commons Procedure and Practice*:

The principle of individual ministerial responsibility holds that Ministers are accountable not only for their own actions as department heads, but also for the actions of their subordinates; individual ministerial responsibility provides the basis for accountability throughout the system. Virtually all departmental activity is carried out in the name of a Minister who, in turn, is responsible to Parliament for those acts. Ministers exercise power and are constitutionally responsible for the provision and conduct of government; Parliament holds them personally responsible for it.

The chair is continuously hopeful that members of Executive Council will continue to heed this principle in responding to questions regarding their areas of responsibility.

head: **Orders of the Day**

head: **Government Bills and Orders**

THE SPEAKER: The hon. Government House Leader.

MR. HANCOCK: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It would appear that in the drafting of the Standing Orders, there perhaps may be a misunderstanding with respect to the intention of the parties with respect to Committee of Supply on afternoons. I think it was the clear intention of all parties that Committee of Supply would last for the full afternoon and that the vote at 5:15 would conclude it unless it was earlier concluded by a lack of a member wanting to speak. I understand that the interpretation of the rules that we have been provided would suggest that a vote would be normally called after two hours rather than in accordance with that interpretation and that understanding that all parties I think had with respect to the way the afternoons would proceed.

Therefore, Mr. Speaker, after not less than two phone calls and not more than two voice mails of communication with members of the opposition, I would seek unanimous consent of the Assembly to waive Standing Order 58(4) to allow this afternoon's consideration of the estimates of the Department of Seniors to go beyond two hours, with the vote on those estimates to take place no later than 5:15 this afternoon as per Standing Order 58(5) or sooner if no one wishes to speak.

[Unanimous consent granted]

head: **Committee of Supply**

[Mr. Shariff in the chair]

THE DEPUTY CHAIR: We'll call the committee to order.

head: **Main Estimates 2002-03**

Offices of the Legislative Assembly

THE DEPUTY CHAIR: The first order of business is the 2002-2003 Offices of the Legislative Assembly estimates, and pursuant to Standing Order 58(8) we shall put the matter to question.

Agreed to:

Support to the Legislative Assembly	
Operating Expense	\$34,930,000
Office of the Auditor General	
Operating Expense and Capital Investment	\$16,716,000
Office of the Ombudsman	
Operating Expense	\$1,829,000
Office of the Chief Electoral Officer	
Operating Expense	\$1,760,000
Office of the Ethics Commissioner	
Operating Expense	\$372,000
Office of the Information and Privacy Commissioner	
Operating Expense	\$3,220,000

Seniors

THE DEPUTY CHAIR: The hon. minister.

3:00

MR. WOLOSHTYN: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. If I may, could you go through those estimates in the language of your choice, which you so eloquently used a few minutes ago?

Good afternoon. I'm pleased to be the first one up for the estimates. For close to a year now the ministry has been, I think, very effective in providing support for low-income seniors and households in the province through our programs. The new fiscal realities, however, have required that we make sure that our ability to continue with these programs is maintained. As a result, you will notice that our business plan is extremely focused on setting a direction for the ministry in the future. I must say that fiscal responsibility has to remain extremely important in our process, trying to maintain the balance between the fiscal realities and at the same time delivering the maximum amount of support that we can to the people in need.

Our expenses this year are projected to be \$304.6 million, down from \$307.5 million in 2001-02. The reduction is primarily due to the ending of the healthy aging partnership initiative, the housing program. Additional funds have also been transferred to the ministry to cover increases in long-term care rates, optical and dental services for low-income seniors.

The Ministry of Seniors business plan is "closely aligned to the Government of Alberta's core businesses of People, Prosperity and Preservation." The goals of the government are to ensure that Albertans will be healthy, independent, and that those unable to provide for their basic needs will receive assistance. The foundation of the Seniors ministry business plan centres around three core businesses: to "provide financial support and information services to seniors," to "support provision and management of seniors, family and special purpose housing," and to "provide planning and policy development for seniors and housing."

The Ministry of Seniors identifies several goals that ensure effective delivery of our three core businesses and meet the corporate goals of the government business plan. The first goal under seniors' services is to ensure that "seniors in need have access to financial supports that enable them to live in a secure and dignified way." These supports come in the form of income assistance programs like the Alberta seniors' benefit program. This income-tested program provides financial assistance to lower income seniors through a monthly cash benefit. This month over 125,000 seniors in Alberta, or some 40 percent, received cash benefits ranging from \$10 to \$235 per month. The seniors' benefit budget for 2002-03 is \$154.1 million, an increase of \$5.7 million over this last year's approved budget. The increase is \$1.5 million to fund new seniors coming into the program, and the other portion was to increase the

amount of support to the people in long-term care when the long-term care rates were raised.

The seniors' benefit program is also used to calculate the full or partial exemption of Alberta health care premiums. Currently over 165,000 seniors, some 52 percent of the total, receive full exemption on their health care premiums, and over 15,000, or 5 percent of the total seniors population, receive a partial exemption. With respect to the increase in health care premiums, I can assure you today that the low-income or ASB seniors will be protected. The partial exemption will also be extended to an additional 8,000 seniors who are just above the current income threshold for premium exemptions.

The special-needs assistance is for people with extraordinary cost pressures. We have what is called a special-needs assistance program. This program continues to provide financial support through lump sum payments to seniors on the seniors' benefit program who are experiencing financial difficulties. In 2001-02 this program was budgeted in the amount of \$17.9 million. It will provide emergency support to approximately 9,300 seniors in Alberta. In 2002-03 the base budget remains the same. As we know, Alberta Health and Wellness has discontinued the extended health benefits program for seniors, and \$9.2 million will be transferred to our ministry to assist low-income seniors currently on the seniors' benefit with dental and optical services and to partially compensate for the elimination of the health benefits program. I might add that that program did have many weaknesses, and the average payout on it was roughly \$120 per person through Health, as I understand it. Hopefully, we can focus the money and get a bigger bang for our buck. The seniors' special-needs program will continue to be there for the people who need it.

I would say now that seniors who are on seniors' benefit and have emergency dental or eye needs should contact us through our information line, 1-800-642-3853, and we'll take applications. The program details are being worked on, and when they are completed, we will distribute them to the seniors on the seniors' benefit program. I might stress now that any senior who does have difficulty should not hesitate to call, and people will assess the situation and see what can be done.

The second goal of the core business is to ensure that "seniors and their families have access to information and educational material about programs, services and initiatives that are designed to enhance their well being." We do that through our seniors' information services. We're dedicated to providing provincewide "access to accurate, up-to-date, and relevant information" about government and community programs and services for seniors.

In housing, moving on to the second core business of the ministry: "Support provision and management of seniors, family and special purpose housing." The first goal of this core business is to ensure that "provincially owned and supported housing to meet the basic needs of low-income families and individuals, seniors and persons with special needs is effectively managed and coordinated." In compliance with the rent supplement program, we are committed to providing adequate social housing while adhering to fiscal responsibilities. That's through our rent supplement program, and you'll notice in the provincial budget that the rent supplement program remains unchanged at \$15 million. It will take some creativity to try and meet the needs that are out there, and I do realize that rents are increasing and whatnot, but we are trying to work on some kinds of different approaches to help meet the needs of the people who are seeking support. I might say that a tenant in the rent supplement program is subsidized on the difference between a market rent and 30 percent of the household income.

From the rent supplement program we go on to the second goal of the housing division, and that's providing housing services. This

goal is to ensure that "seniors, low-income families and individuals, and persons with special needs have access to a range of housing [that is] appropriate to their needs at reasonable cost."

With respect to homelessness, our first priority is "to ensure a range of housing facilities and support services are available to homeless people, including emergency shelters, transitional housing, and special needs initiatives." The provincial homelessness initiative will continue to provide the \$3 million per year of funding to the seven major urban centres to assist them in implementing their community plans.

3:10

Those community plans were accepted by the federal government. We use them provincially and federally, and they are being used as a model by the federal government right across Canada. These same community plans have made it possible for Alberta communities to access 38 and a half million dollars in federal funds through the supporting communities partnership initiative. With funding support from all levels of government these community plans are the new standard in this country and have resulted in an increased capacity in support of an additional 1,100 individuals in emergency shelters and transitional housing, but with the growth of the province we are still in dire need of some more work in this area.

With respect to the federal affordable housing program, we're working and negotiating and trying to finalize a bilateral agreement with the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation. If we are able to reach an agreement, we may be able to access about \$67 million in federal funds over a five-year period, which will go towards the creation of affordable housing in the province.

In recent years the province has directed its energies largely between seniors' housing through the HAPI and SSHIP programs, and in the past three years there has been approximately \$15 million go through the healthy aging partnership initiative, or HAPI, and the seniors' supportive housing incentive program, more commonly known as SSHIP. As a direct result of these two programs, over 1,600 new supportive housing units have been developed. This is resulting in some areas getting their waiting lists for nursing care cut down because this is directed towards assisted living, and it's having a pretty good result. We've only retained a million dollars in the budget for this program this year. That's due to the restraints. However, I am hopeful that as the fiscal situation improves, we'll be able to reinstate those programs. We certainly have the wherewithal to implement them if and when that should happen.

Planning and policy. The third and final core of the Seniors ministry is: "Provide planning and policy development for seniors and housing." The goal in 2002-03 is to develop policies and plans that "effectively anticipate and address the needs of seniors and Albertans in need of housing supports." As part of the cross-ministry sustainable health initiative our ministry will focus on the implementation of the recommendations made by the Premier's Advisory Council on Health as they relate to healthy aging and seniors' wellness and supportive living and long-term care. We'll also continue the work begun in 2001-02 to develop and implement a long-range plan for the aging population in Alberta.

While the coming year will be a challenge, there is much that we can be proud of as we head into the 2002-03 fiscal year. The Ministry of Seniors will continue to provide low-income seniors with the supports they need to age in a secure and dignified way. The Ministry of Seniors will also continue to work with its partners at all levels of government and with the private and nonprofit sectors to develop appropriate, locally based housing solutions to effectively address the needs of low-income Albertans. Through the business plan and budget I presented today, our ministry will continue to

ensure that both our present and future clients are afforded the opportunity to experience a quality of life to which they aspire.

Mr. Chairman, I'd like to have my staff stand up in the back. They come here because their coffee break is over. Would you folks stand up and receive the welcome of the Assembly, please? [applause] They're so enthused about you. That goes for the deputy minister on through to my EA.

I will say in conclusion that we'll take a choice. We'll answer questions, and if you have questions that need some research or they aren't legitimate questions on the budget, I'll have them back to you in writing. At this point I'll welcome any comments from other members. Again, I repeat, I may answer questions here or not now or may give them to you in writing if they're good questions.

THE DEPUTY CHAIR: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

MS BLAKEMAN: Thanks very much, Mr. Chair. The minister and I didn't have a chance to work out a format for this afternoon. So just to let him know, I'm probably going to speak for about 20 minutes now, and then I have at least four colleagues that also wish to speak. Of course, I'll be looking for a second and third opportunity.

Now, there are moments when I find time in this Assembly truly Orwellian, and this is one of them. I appreciate that the minister believes in what he's doing and believes that what he has brought forward with this budget is really going to help seniors. That's certainly what he said, and this is the moment of Orwellian experience for me, because that's not what I'm hearing.

In response to a question that was asked in the House this afternoon, the Premier responded that seniors had asked for this, that they wanted to do their share. They had asked to take their share of the burden. I'm wondering – that may have been the case when the cuts first happened in seniors' programs in '93-94 – if the government has actually gone back and had other polls or other focus groups to ask seniors since then if this is really what they had in mind, if this is what they really understood the government was going to do to seniors as a group and as individuals once the seniors had agreed that they were willing to help the government get out of debt. That's not the response I get. They're pretty clear with me that they expected their contribution to the cause 10 years ago to be given back to them, to have those programs restored, to have the cuts restored. We don't see that here. We see further cuts and further change.

One of my first questions to the minister is: does the minister only see this Ministry of Seniors as responsible to and responsible for very low-income seniors? Does he not see a relationship between this ministry and all the rest of the seniors in Alberta? Does he see no need for a two-way dialogue or for any responsibility for programming there, or is it just low-income seniors?

Overall, this ministry is down by \$64 million, although to be fair, the actual programming dollars available for seniors is up by \$15 million. The housing has astonishingly been decimated. It's down by 49 percent, from \$160 million down to \$81 million, I think. So they've lost almost \$80 million into this.

Now, I also noticed that capital investment went from \$336,000 down to \$60,000, down by \$276,000. I'm wondering what this is. What is this amount of money going for? It may well be amortization or something, but I'd like an explanation and a breakdown, please. If it's more than one project, exactly what is it?

When I look at seniors services, which is vote 2 in the budget, I can see that there are incremental increases in every line item. So it has gone up a little bit in every area. The minister didn't give us the kind of detail that I'm looking for, so I would like an explanation for

what the increase in costs is for every line that I'm seeing under vote 2.

Now, under vote 2.2.1, the seniors' benefit, there's a small increase there of \$3 million. I think I heard the minister say that this was a volume increase for demand for the seniors' benefit program and also included the additional costs to the ministry of people receiving seniors' benefits who are, in fact, resident in long-term care facilities. So as a resident, for their room and board portion of their stay they have to pay, and in this case when they're receiving money from Alberta seniors' benefit, that in effect is subsidizing that cost.

I'm wondering why the project grants have gone down by \$50,000. Could we get a list of what those project grants went to in the past year and what the reasoning was for reducing them by \$50,000 this year?

3:20

Now, what has been really interesting is the changes to the special-needs benefit program. What we've seen is a program under the Department of Health and Wellness that was a universal program, available to all seniors – it didn't matter their age or their background or where they lived in Alberta or how much money they had; it was available to all of them – and that was the extended health benefits program. That program has been cut, and the \$23.7 million that funded it is gone, but what we do get is \$9.2 million turning up in the special-needs benefit pot. We didn't get an increase specifically in the special-needs benefit. What we're getting is another program that has to be administered by that particular program. So there's no extra money in special-needs benefits except that the special-needs benefit now has to administer some sort of extended health benefits program to very low-income seniors. But the rest of the seniors lost that program.

I'm just going to loop back quickly here to my first point, about how Orwellian this is. I don't think the rest of the seniors in Alberta agreed to have their extended health care benefits taken away from them. I certainly didn't see them in any of my travels standing up and going: "Please take this program away from us. This is a universal program for seniors. Please take it away and just offer it to low-income seniors." So I'm interested in what kind of research and backup data, focus groups, polling was done to back up the government's claim that seniors, in fact, asked for that.

Now, the housing is down by \$78 million, and my notes say: why? But I guess the minister has been very up front about it. This was the choice, it seems, of the ministry of where they were going to cut costs, and they took some \$80 million out of housing. Once again, I take a step back and go: really? Did the seniors in Alberta really want or did they really understand that what the government was going to be doing was not give them back any of the programs that have been taken away, not fund the programs better but continue to cut programs?

In particular, when I look at the number of seniors that are already living in subsidized seniors' housing – and I'll come to more detail on this program a little later on when I sort of go line by line – it seems to me that what we've lost here is money to build or money that would go into grants that would help to build more seniors' accommodation and more accommodation for social welfare housing.

You know, it's interesting. This last weekend the *Edmonton Journal* did a full double-page article on the Royal Alex emergency room and how busy it was, and several times in the article it said: "Well, you know, we just can't get people out of the beds upstairs because a lot of them are seniors who are waiting for long-term care beds or other appropriate beds or residences to open up for them."

We don't have those, so we can't move those people out. So we don't get access to those beds, and thus we now have people in the hallways."

I'm frankly astonished that this is the choice that the minister and the department, I'm assuming backed up by the government, would make when we know that this is such an issue in the health care field and the solution to it was accommodation for seniors, and they've decided not to go there. They've just cut it. It's not going to happen.

Now, to be honest, there is a little bit of money left there. So what are you going to use the money for? I'd like to know exactly what you're going to use the money for. I'd also like to know whether this money has been announced before, if it's part of an announcement that came out in a press release last year and this is just your incremental payment into a given project during this fiscal year. So I want to know what the money that's left in that pot is and what it's being used for. I think there's not very much. There's a million left in the seniors' housing incentive grant program, and there's a larger sum of money left in social housing. But I want to know specifically what those plans are for.

I'm interested in how the vision of having Albertans live in dignity with the best possible well-being and independence reconciles itself with the choices that have been made in this particular budget, where we now have to have already disadvantaged seniors who will have to know or find out somehow that to get their extended health benefits – glasses and dentures and things like that, even foot care – they will have to know to go and apply to the special-needs benefit program.

Now, in the past the special-needs benefit program hasn't exactly been able to turn on a dime, and I think at one point the minister was almost six months behind in processing claims. So what has the minister done to that department and the staffing there and the processing that's able to be done in order to handle an additional \$9.2 million of extended health care benefits that people are now going to have to apply for? I want to know what kind of public relations programs, promotion, and advertising programs the department is going to put in place to let those low-income seniors know that this is no longer a universal program for them. They will have to go through the department, phone the number that he mentioned in his response, fill out yet another set of forms, and get in line and wait to get these benefits that used to be a universal program.

One of the other things that I've noticed as I went through the government estimates for this particular department is key performance measurements. Now, I am really angry about this government's two-faced approach to performance measurements. We keep hearing that there's a business plan, we keep hearing that it's for three years, and I look down and what does it say? "Measure under development." Well, how long are you going to have these measurements under development? How on earth can you be measuring what your department is doing when you don't have a performance measurement? You know what? You didn't have one last year either, and you've managed to change performance measurements in this department every darn year. How can you possibly be measuring your outcome? You can't be. Now, the minister laughs. This is amusing to him, but I think it's important for people to be able to judge what the government is doing, and they have no measurements that the government is providing that they can look at from this department.

Even when we look forward into the future, what are the key performance measurements with a target of 2002-2003? "To be established." How long is this going to go on, Mr. Minister? This is what you presented last year. This is what you're presenting this

year. When are we going to see what your actual plans are and what your targets are and what your key performance measurements are? This government blabs on and on and on about how transparent it is and easy to understand and how open it is in all these performance measurements. You don't have the performance measurements. They're not there. Why not? Why is this at least the second year for this ministry? You've only been in operation two years. You've only presented two budgets. Why is this the second year that I'm looking and there are no key performance measurements?

When I looked under, you know, "percentage of eligible seniors receiving Alberta Seniors Benefit," the measurement is "under development," the target "to be established." Then the rest of our key performance measurements are going to be on satisfaction of people. We're going to do satisfaction polls again to find out whether the programs and services that the ministry is offering are effective. Why does this government keep choosing to do some sort of popularity poll, *People* magazine's fave of the week satisfaction review, to be able to judge its performance? Those are very poor performance measurements, yet those are the other ones I see. Either you don't have them, or it's some sort of popularity poll that's coming out.

Now, the minister touched briefly on the social housing agreement with the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation, and I think this is the question that I asked the minister in the House here 10 days ago or so in which there was \$67 million that was available for Alberta, but we have to put some money up. So where is that money in this budget that we're supposed to be putting up in order to qualify for this money? Are we just going to kiss this money goodbye and not have access to it, or is the minister expecting that this would all come to fruition next year, in 2003? Fine. I'm willing to accept that, but let's get the information on it. Although I will point out that waiting for the money until 2003, if that's what the minister's doing – that's another year that there have been no starts in housing for seniors, whether that's long-term care beds or whether that's specialized housing.

3:30

Here's another key performance measurement: "Satisfaction of housing clients with quality of accommodation, and services where appropriate." Well, the methodology was revised in '99-2000, so I don't have a lot to compare to. This is the other trick: either don't have a key performance measurement or keep revising them often enough that you don't ever accumulate enough data to be able to go back and look at whether there's improvement or not. I'm wondering with this particular key performance measurement why this is the choice of the measurement. Why aren't you measuring how many seniors need housing that got it? Why are we measuring the satisfaction of clients that got it? Why aren't we finding out how many need it that we're not able to serve? I think that would be a more useful piece of information to work with when we were looking at planning for future resources.

I can already see that my time is going to go very quickly, and I have barely stubbed my toe on the number of questions that I have for the minister. I will at this point recognize that he's not going to have time to respond to everything I've done plus what my colleagues would like to ask, so I would appreciate getting the responses in writing. I understand that I'm asking for the ministry to do work, and it's not easy to do a fast turnaround on these questions. But I'll be expected to vote on this budget on May 9, and I would really appreciate having the answers back to my questions prior to that.

DR. TAYLOR: How are you voting?

MS BLAKEMAN: I don't know how I will vote as far as the budget is concerned when I don't have the answers to the questions that I've asked. I want to see the kind of planning that I expect to see from this government with this kind of money, and I'd like to see those answers back before I have to vote. Don't you think that's reasonable, that I would have information?

DR. TAYLOR: Hurry up, Stan; get her those answers.

MS BLAKEMAN: Thank you to the Minister of Environment for his assistance in urging his colleague to get on with it here.

I'm assuming that the major strategy for 2002-2003 "Partner with Alberta Health and Wellness and Alberta Finance to support the cross ministry Health Sustainability Initiative" is where we see the transfer over of responsibility for the extended health care benefits. If that's not what's being talked about in this sentence, could I have an explanation, please, on what is being talked about, what the strategy there is hoping to accomplish, and, hey, what the heck, a performance measurement to go along with it?

When I look at the overall statement of operations by program, we have again disposal of capital assets. Could I get some information, please, on what was disposed of? That it made the ministry money, fine. I just want to know what it is that they sold off or got rid of. I think it's probably housing stock, capital gains of some kind, depreciation of some kind. Got to be something. We're talking \$12.6 million, so it's got to be something. Let's find out what it is.

Now, I'd also like an explanation, please, of why it's anticipated that the revenue for the Alberta Social Housing Corporation is going to drop by \$52.6 million. This must be a partnership or the government has – anyway, why aren't we getting the revenue? It's showing up in the books as dropping from a comparable forecast for the end of this year of \$129.5 million to \$76.9 million. How come?

I've just got a few seconds left. Maybe I'll break here. I'll see if there are any answers, and I'll let some of my colleagues get their questions on the records as well. I'll be back. Thank you.

THE DEPUTY CHAIR: The hon. minister.

MR. WOLOSHYN: Yes. I normally would wait for all of this, but I think a few misconceptions have to be clarified. First of all, I never said, the Premier never said that we polled seniors and they asked for a reduction. That's an absolute statement that I cannot accept. However, having said that, I would not want to pay income tax, I would not want to pay property tax, I would not want to pay health care premiums, and neither would anybody else in this House.

DR. TAYLOR: I would.

MR. WOLOSHYN: He can.

The reality is that we are under some degree of financial stress, and we've tried to in the ministry target the people that are most in need.

When you speak of the extended health care benefit plan, I hope you are familiar with the plan. Here's what was eliminated. A provider for an oral exam charges \$55; we paid \$20. An X ray: we paid \$5 towards it. The administration of this whole plan was cumbersome. It is gone for all seniors. That's a decision made by Alberta Health, and as the Minister of Seniors we approached them for support. They were kind enough to transfer some staff to administer and some money over to the budget, and we will be reworking the plan so that it gets more money, less administration, and has a bigger bang for the buck.

Would I have liked to see it applied to all seniors? Yes. Is that

feasible at this time? No. So we will focus on the ones that are the most in need, the ones that we were supplementing before. I hope that misconception of the plan has some bearing on you. I believe from the information received from my colleagues in Health that the average payout was \$120 per year total. Eyeglasses – I could go through the whole plan, hon. member, but I won't bother.

Your question on the decrease in the income and expenditure on the line on the Social Housing Corporation is a good question. That's flow-through money. There are debentures, if you will, I guess, against the approximately \$2 billion worth of stock that the Social Housing Corporation holds, and Treasury determines how much is going to be a pay-down on it. They give that as income; we pay it down as an expenditure. So it's a flow-through.

That's one of the problems with this total consolidated budgeting that makes it appear that our budget has gone down considerably from last year to this year. Actually, that's not the case. It's just what was applied to it. You may want to know that we are involved with some 17 different agreements with Canada Mortgage and Housing that go back to 1972, and a lot of this triggers how those agreements work. But it's not a decrease nor an increase in the budget. It's a matter of how that's being addressed.

The other one. You're absolutely right; I did not put \$67 million in the budget for affordable housing. That's a five-year program. That's a program that, yes, we want to access. When we access it, I'll go through the proper channels to procure the funding that we would need for this year, and we don't know at this point what it will be because we don't know where it's going to go. We have some very strong positions on how we want that to be done, and it's not going to be just a simple grant. We have to ensure that those moneys give us the greatest number of units for the dollar, which will mean that we'll be working through the housing corporations. This program is tailored to each province or each province negotiates its own, so we have to work it in with our needs, and I'm hopeful that we will have some sort of agreement with the federal government at some point down the way.

Comments that we're not doing anything in housing I think are irresponsible. In the last three years there have been some \$50 million put into seniors' housing through the two programs that have triggered about an equal amount or more from the housing authorities, which has resulted in 1,600 additional units. Those are assisted-living units, which takes the pressure off of nursing units, which puts seniors in better care than they would be ordinarily. I think that's one heck of a good step.

3:40

When you go to the next portion and you look at what's happened in this province in homelessness in the last two years between ourselves and the federal government and collaboration between the communities, I think it's nothing short of remarkable, so good that the federal government uses our plans, our format across the whole country. The city of Grande Prairie, the hon. member who is there – their format is being used in rural Quebec, and Calgary is being used in all the cities. So for you to sit there and say that we're doing nothing I think is irresponsible or else you are totally uninformed. I don't mind your taking cheap shots at me, but be careful how much you shoot, because I have to react sooner or later.

With respect to your comments on this ministry not being responsible for all seniors, another irresponsible comment. We have the responsibility for all housing – homeless, social housing, seniors housing, and, yes, the seniors' low-income program. Where would you direct your attention? The affluent senior or the one in need? Where would you put your money? To the person who needs it or the person who wants it and may have other means to get by with?

We have chosen to direct our resources most appropriately to them. Would I like more in the program? Yes. Is it affordable at this time? No. Is it responsible to go and say we're going to get it? No.

I'm honest with you. We don't have a performance measure. I put it on paper. I don't make one up for you. Then you sit there and whine: why don't you have one? Give me a good one back that we can use. I don't mind. I'll take your suggestions if they're worth taking, but you read a document, you go through it – you probably don't even know that seniors are subsidized in their premiums as a couple up to \$44,000. There are a lot of people in this province who have families and who are paying full premiums, and they don't make \$44,000.

I'd like to say also that with health care premiums we've got some 400,000 people across this province who don't pay all or part of it. That's because we're trying to be sensitive to it. So, Madam Member, I don't mind answering your questions. If you have questions that are sheer questions on the budget, my staff will answer them out of *Hansard*. If they are ramblings on and criticisms with no merit, they'll go unanswered.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

THE DEPUTY CHAIR: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

MS BLAKEMAN: Thanks very much. I'm really interested in how keen the minister is to get on this side of the House and to put me in his chair. So I really appreciate his support in constantly asking me how I'd prefer to run his ministry and to be on that side. So thanks very much, and hopefully it won't be very long.

A couple of questions coming directly out of his responses to me, and then I'll let one of my colleagues up. I would be very interested in exactly what was covered under the extended health benefits program, which is now being cut. The minister mentioned two things. An oral exam: is he talking about a dental exam? Is that what was on the list that's now going to be cut? Let's see what it is that's being cut.

In fact, if the justification for losing this was that the ministry was paying so little money, then how much money were they paying? I guess what I'm going to be interested in here is: how much are seniors now going to have to pay out of their own pocket? On top of the health care premiums now they're going to have to pay what? According to the minister, an extra \$120 a year to make up for what the government was paying on average for the extended health care benefits. Well, the minister may think that that's a nominal amount of money and sniff at it, but I think that for a lot of seniors in Alberta that's a significant amount of money. So let's see what exactly was on that list and how much the government was paying for that they now say they won't be.

Finally, I'm really interested to hear the minister say that there are people that are making \$44,000 a year that are receiving a full or a partial health care subsidy that are seniors. That is really interesting. If he can table, please, some concrete information about that – I'm obviously not asking for names or addresses but certainly a profile that's going to give us exactly who these people are. I'd be most interested, because I think that if there's misinformation being flung about here, that might have been some of it being flung.

Thank you, and I'll return later for other questions.

THE DEPUTY CHAIR: The hon. minister.

MR. WOLOSHYN: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Just to make it clear. If I did not say that it was senior couples with \$44,400 as of last year that received partial health care premium subsidy and downward to full, then that's the clarification: \$44,400 for senior

couples. Below that, they start to get support on the health care premium, and that will continue.

With respect to your other comments I'll just give you the printout from Blue Cross. For a complete oral exam – I assume it's a tooth exam; that's what an oral exam usually is – the cost would be \$55; the plan would pay \$20.84. For an X ray, \$15; the plan pays \$5.55. For cleaning below the gum line, \$74; the plan pays \$27.78. Complete upper denture may be up to \$650. I think that is low. The plan would pay \$246. For the partial standard lower denture, \$250; we would pay \$95. Then once every three years for single-vision glasses up to \$57, bifocals up to \$77.50.

Yes, I would like to have seen the plan perhaps enhanced or whatever, changed. What we're doing with it is we're going to focus the money so that the people who need it will get the payment that they require to meet the full service.

I think that's about what you had asked. We'll let other members have the floor.

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

DR. MASSEY: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I appreciate the opportunity to make some observations and ask some questions about the Seniors estimates that are before us this afternoon. I would like to, I think, focus most of my remarks on the business plan that the ministry has put forward. I, too, I guess, am a little distressed at the rather primitive state we seem to be in in terms of the department's development of performance measures. I'll be interested in the Auditor General's comments with respect to these performance measures, because I'm sure that his attention will be drawn to them.

The core business plan, number 1: "Provide financial support and information services to seniors." I was looking on page 331 at the kinds of goals, and I think that most of us would agree that they are worthy goals. I would like to ask about the kinds of measures that are being considered; for instance, 1.1.1, "work towards adjusting provincial income benefits for lower-income seniors, in particular to reflect the changing personal supports needs of seniors as they age." I think that's an important one in that it does get adjusted, and I would be interested in knowing how that's going to be done, what's being considered. Is it a basket of measures that the ministry is going to look at in trying to determine that level of support?

I think that relates to 1.1.2, the "development of a benchmark measure for 'sufficient retirement income.'" How are you going to go about determining what is sufficient income? How are you going to monitor that, and how will it change? As the minister knows, one of the problems with the social assistance plans and AISH is that it hasn't changed. So, hopefully, any measure that is put in place is one that will be responsive to changes in the cost of living and other expenses that seniors face.

In all of the performance objectives there are interspersed actions by the department, either agreements that they're going to be working on or plans that they're going to be working on or co-operative projects with other departments that they're going to be working on, so if I bounce around, it's because they are interspersed with those kinds of activities. Under 1.1.4, "simplify eligibility criteria and administration of Alberta Seniors Benefit to improve fairness and clarity of the program," again I think a goal that we all would applaud as worthy, I wonder if one of the criteria that they'll look at is adequacy. How adequate is the program? I think adequacy is as important in that program as it is in 1.1.5, to "improve the effectiveness of Special Needs Assistance for Seniors program" to make sure that those most in need are processed in a timely way. Again I think it raises the question of adequacy.

3:50

If there are measures being developed, I also think that it's important to look at the effect the programs and applying for those programs has on the applicants. I say that, again, from experience in our constituency office with people on social assistance programs and for some of them how very, very difficult it is to apply for assistance and the feelings that they get of not being worthy, that somehow or other it's their fault that they're forced into this position to ask for help. So I think that with how the applicants feel in terms of their treatment, doing it efficiently and quickly is important, but doing it with some compassion and some concern for the applicants is also important. There's a whole list of goals there, Mr. Chairman, that beg, I think, some performance measures, as do the rest of the goals.

If I look on page 332, in support of seniors, I look at 1.2.2: "To develop effective ways to ensure seniors, seniors' families, and seniors service providers are well informed about . . . programs." That, I think, for seniors is a particularly thorny problem. It's very, very difficult to ensure that seniors have the information that they should have to access programs. I was looking at the Ontario government web site and their business plan. I think it was the Ontario government. There's a measure that they use in terms of visits to the web site. They keep track of how many seniors log on to the web site. That is one measure that might be useful, but I say that knowing that it would be interesting to know how many seniors actually use the web to access information. Again I think it's a measure that gave them some indication of how widespread knowledge about their programs was and in terms of getting it to seniors.

I also noticed – I think it was again on that same web site – under 1.2.3: "Collaborate with other ministries and organizations to support provincial strategies to inform and educate seniors [et cetera] to protect themselves against fraud and other crimes." Again it seems hit and miss. The only time it really seems to be drawn to seniors' attention is when there is an actual case of fraud and it's reported in the media and becomes highlighted in their lives in that way. That's really a very incidental way to go about it. I wonder about the approach that was taken in Ontario, where they were actually using programs in schools to educate students about programs for seniors so that that knowledge would be in the family and the possibility of it being more widespread was made more possible. I thought it was rather a different way of trying to get information to seniors. But I think that whatever is put in place has to be systematic. It's not fair to leave it in terms of chance that seniors will be informed about ways that they can protect themselves against crime and that their personal safety can be enhanced.

The last one. I guess I look at the measure here, the "satisfaction of seniors with information provided." Again, you know, it's a satisfaction measure and somewhat important, but I think there are other measures in terms of actually affecting seniors and their lives in this performance section that are much more important.

Of all the actions in this ministry's mandate, I think those actions concerned with housing are of huge concern to seniors. In the last couple of years I've had the opportunity to look at a lot of seniors' accommodation, from what was available in Small Town, Alberta, to day care homes in this city to some of the private homes that seniors with means can access. One of the things that you come away from that experience struck by is the huge variation, the great variation in the living conditions for senior Albertans. You go from very, very cramped, one-room accommodations, where that room is shared with another senior, to suites where seniors are being able to subsidize and top up the accommodation. So accommodation for seniors is really an important issue. When they have to seek help,

for a lot of them it means breaking up their homes and disposing of furniture and then looking at an appropriate accommodation. For those seniors, cost and availability and quality are really very important, and my fear is that sometimes cost and availability overtake quality in terms of what's available.

I'm not quite sure how you get at that, but I wonder if the department has or keeps track of the kinds of housing stock. The plan says that there are 36,000 housing units and that those are across a range of accommodation, from self-contained apartments to cottages and lodges. I wonder: is there an inventory of that stock kept, and is there a monitoring of it to see how it changes over the years? Again I recall seeing in a business plan of another province a monitoring of the stock showing how different classes of that stock are increasing or decreasing and are available for seniors. So the whole look at the stock that we have available I think is appropriate.

One of the things – and it's mentioned in a couple of places in the business plan – is the proceeding to transfer or to try to move the housing solutions to community-based housing organizations. Is it the intent of the ministry that that's the preferred way they would like to go, that they would like that taken over by organizations or community groups?

I'm sorry; I'm sort of bouncing around. I'm still on goal 2, at 2.1.6: "Revise the Rent Supplement Program to ensure that rent supplements are targeted toward communities with the greatest need" and that they can be operated. I guess the question is: how will that be determined? Will there be some sort of a measure developed so we can see that that is actually what's happening?

At the top of page 334 there are some performance measures where we get again another satisfaction measure. I think satisfaction measures, particularly for seniors, are important in terms of how they feel about things, because at that time in their life many of them are very vulnerable, and how they are treated I think is extremely important. I wonder if there isn't need here for some cost measures. What is the cost of some of the accommodation that's being supplied and again the availability measure? How much is available in different classes?

That goes to 2.2.4 at the top of page 335, "to increase the supply of low-cost housing within the areas of highest need." What is the stock? How is it changing? What is the condition of that stock? I'm sure that the department probably has that information at hand.

4:00

I guess 2.2.5 would almost require the same kind of a measure or monitoring to determine, you know, what kinds of housing solutions, what kind of available housing is there in remote communities, including the aboriginal communities, and what is the state of the housing stock there.

The same for 2.2.6. I think it begs information and some benchmarks being set in terms of emergency shelters. I think we have that information on emergency shelter beds in the province. I'm not sure we do about transitional housing and special needs housing, whether they are designated as such. It would seem to me that the ministry in the next year, as they seem to be serious about taking on the task of developing some performance measures, could really develop a set of measures that would be useful not just in monitoring what was happening to the housing stock in seniors' programs but that could be used as a useful planning tool in trying to determine the future directions of the department and future budgets.

I think that with those comments, Mr. Chairman, I'll conclude. Thank you.

THE DEPUTY CHAIR: The hon. minister.

MR. WOLOSHTYN: Thank you very much. I do appreciate your observations, hon. member. I'll see if I can cover in general terms most of the questions that you've asked.

You made reference to the community groups. We did go out and respond to the various urban areas as they were telling us a couple or three years ago that they have a better handle on their needs than we do. I didn't dispute that. I think that was accurate. I'll give you Edmonton. We worked through the Edmonton Housing Trust Fund, for example. As the identifiers with it we flow a couple of million dollars a year or whatever it is through them, and we rely on them largely then to pick, if you will, again with the federal government, which has been generous, the projects that go ahead.

I'll give you a good example. We have been through some joint ones. I believe it was Grace manor by the Salvation Army that was CHIP money, that was homeless money. They do hard-to-house seniors, hard-to-house other people, and they were meeting a need. So we do work with these groups. We do have to work with them. Consequently, they would have to show, for example, before they pick a project that it is needed and that there is some source of operational funding so we don't get a whole bunch of projects up there and suddenly no way to operate them, because then that creates its own set of problems. We've done that, and it's variable across the whole province.

We've got numerous housing authorities which have some of their own stock and administer our own. For example, there's a new project in Fort McMurray that we were partnering as a province with the Wood Buffalo housing corporation. I think we're tripling the number of units that will be available for social housing. I could be wrong on that. We're roughly tripling the number of units for social housing by supporting them in making a very large – forgive me; I've forgotten the name of the project – social housing project on something that used to be referred to as river lot 13. What we're doing there is we have worked out an arrangement with them where we will move our rent supplement program from the private ones to these units as they become filled up. We have worked out with them a level rent so it doesn't drive it out, and quite frankly it will triple the number of units.

We're also working on some other areas, and if this federal money comes through, we'll go into the affordable housing market.

So that's how we try to work with the community groups, and it isn't the same across the board. I will not go, if we get the agreement with the federal government, on a per capita arrangement or anything like that because we have to address where the need is greatest, for one, and, secondly, where the groups are most able to do what they're doing.

You highlighted one area that I'm not very proud of. I had the occasion to travel north with the hon. Minister of Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development. We went to some remote communities with some people that were there, and quite frankly the housing conditions in some of these usually aboriginal, nonreserve communities are terrible. We have to do something there.

MS CALAHASEN: It's a shame.

MR. WOLOSHTYN: It is a shame. What was done previously in these sort of one-size-fits-all programs didn't fit. We need two things: first of all, we need a local solution, which may vary from community to community. We have to ensure that the people in the community do have a large input on what's there – and it may vary – and who occupies it. One aspect that is going to be somewhat of a change is that everybody who occupies will have to pay according to their ability to pay, as opposed to: we move in.

So I hope to get that. That will be largely contingent on if we can

do a couple or three or four things. And it's not very easy. You don't snap your fingers and have it happen, because some of these communities are also members of a larger housing authority. For example, in the Wood Buffalo regional municipality we have the Wood Buffalo housing corporation. They are responsible for Fort McMurray and outside.

So we have to get partnerships going along the way, but the main thing is that we have to get appropriate housing. Now, just to give you a good example of what appropriate is, in the 1970s somebody put trailers into some northern communities. They had plumbing in them. They had propane heaters. They didn't have any water to hook up to nor sewer to go to, so you have a place plumbed up with nothing to hook up to. Some of them still are not hooked up. What's worse yet, they're living in the middle of a good source of firewood and they've got a propane heater. So these are the kinds of stuff that when I talk about a community and what's appropriate, you know, it's not just: here, go build a house or haul a trailer out. So that's something that we're trying to work on, and that was a good point.

The other thing that we've worked on within the government to see what's needed – you know that a lot of our clients are on AISH, as you referred to. There's supports for independence, if you will, and the people on that. We have single families on there. So we do have a whole host of them. We've done some things, albeit we didn't publicize it too much. For example, we moved in a direction with the housing authorities that the rents must be set for a year for people in the rent-geared-to-income housing, the stuff that we own, simply because if they haven't improved their status during the year, I want that money they make to go towards improving their living standard, not to rent. However, if their income rises – and we have the formula of 30 percent – then the next year, for which I believe the cutoff is September, at that point they would be reassessed and their rent will go up accordingly.

You say: what if their income goes down? Then the onus is on the tenant to apply, and it's an automatic approval if your income goes down by more than \$35. Remember, it's 30 percent of your income, so it means a \$10-a-month rent. If it goes down more than \$35, they can apply to get their rent adjusted downward at any time. It can't go up; it can't come down.

We've taken and put caps on the seniors' rent-geared-to-income housing. The whole business of working with these authorities on the stock that we have, for example – we have a lot of stock. Some of it is in communities where they don't need it anymore. Because of agreements that we have with Canada Mortgage and Housing – and this is not laying fault; it's a reality that we're dealing with – we can't dispose of it very easily. When we dispose of it, I want to reprofile it, like you were indicating, where it goes into an area of need.

We have, for example, in Edmonton the Greater Edmonton Foundation, which administers our lodges and our rent-geared-to-income or self-contained seniors' apartments. They haven't moved into the assisted living concept. They're currently working with the Capital health authority and ourselves on a pilot project in a lodge that they replaced, the Ottewell lodge, to see if they can go into assisted living to some degree. Now, that's a big step for a lodge operator, but we do have a large number of people who are not appropriate in a normal lodge setting and are not appropriate for a nursing home. We're trying to fill the gap, and that's where a large amount is \$50 million. It's so low it's not in the newspapers every day. A lot of good work has been done there through authorities right across this province. A lot of it is turning up, for example, in the David Thompson. I picked up an article in the Red Deer newspaper where their waiting list for extended care has dropped in

a year from 102 down to 18. They attribute that directly to the fact that they've got some of these assisted living or supportive housing units that we worked with authorities to build. So there's a lot of activity there.

4:10

With respect to the room sizes, you're correct. You can go to different places and have different rooms. We've had the lodge assistance program in existence through what used to be public works and now is Infrastructure. Forgive me; I don't know the number per year, but they've upgraded lodges right across this province. You can go into a lot of them where they've taken and made the room sizes bigger, and yes, we're going away from the double-occupancy concept for a variety of good reasons: one, getting along, and room space also. You will find lodges that are smaller. The other interesting thing we found in a couple of lodges the authorities renovated is that people don't want to leave them. They don't want to go into better quarters. That's home. It was an interesting thing when you go and talk to them.

So we're continually trying to improve that business. We know what stock we have, and again we don't administer it, or very little of it, directly through the ministry. It's done by the housing authorities, and depending upon where they are and what their goals are, sometimes their desire to get into higher care may not be as great as I would like it to be, but then I can't fault them for that because they're staying within what they feel is appropriate.

I do want to add at this point, too, that the housing authorities in Edmonton and Calgary and other communities around the province do get significant support from the municipalities for the lodge programs, so it's a partnership right across the board. It's the housing authority; it's ourselves; it's the municipality. The housing authorities have done a very good job of administering those things, and as you know, they came into being in '92-93 or thereabouts. Prior to that they weren't there, and again it takes a little bit of creativity on the part of my staff to work with all these, because different groups want different things. There are different associations because they can levy that, and the different municipalities want to be in different housing authorities.

You also had a very, very good point when you referenced special needs and the hit on the people, the emotional impact, of having to ask for assistance. The staff that work with seniors are there only so long as they are compassionate, and I mean this quite sincerely. They are very, very good, and most seniors when they come to us are coming because they do have a very specific need. We may be the last resort, or are the last resort. They are treated with dignity. They are treated properly. Also, if they can't get out and they phone, we'll send staff out to their homes, so it's not a matter of you can't get in.

We've taken the initiative now to move some of our Seniors offices. I believe in Calgary we've got an arrangement going with the Kerby Centre because that's where the seniors seem to focus. In Edmonton the Standard Life building seems to be working quite well, so we'll leave that alone. We're working with a centre in Red Deer to see if they can help. In Lethbridge we've got an arrangement with one of the Lions' seniors' centres there. The whole reasoning behind it is that that's where the seniors congregate, and if we're working with communicating, if we have staff in place there, then hopefully the networking will go out and we'll get a greater number of them.

I do want to stress that when a senior makes an application – and yes, we have to have criteria or else there would be no limit on it – if they feel that they have not been treated properly, then we do have an appeal mechanism. Sometimes, although very rarely, because as minister I try to avoid that, if occasionally something else comes, I

don't make the decision. I'll ask the staff to review it and see. The staff have been very good at, yes, following the guidelines but sometimes using a bit of heart and seeing how it works out.

We've got just stacks and stacks of letters and cards from seniors who have received support from special needs, and those cards are very, very heartwarming. You know, whether it be with teeth or a furnace or a roof repair or a bed or a new stove or a washing machine, the list is endless. But to them, to their quality of life, when we say we want their quality of life to be improved, we mean it. Yes, you can get a microwave out of the seniors' special-needs program if you can't afford to buy one. People say: "What? A microwave? It's a luxury." Not necessarily. It may be the difference between eating cold food and warm food, and you don't necessarily use a stove every time you want to cook a meal, although I don't promote microwaves for everybody. A television set: people call that a luxury, but if you're still in your own home and you're the only person there, is that a luxury or is it a need? We will get those. We get some criticism of: where are you going there? But the staff that look after it I say are very, very good, and they look at each situation individually.

The other thing that's happened – and I'm very proud of this. We had a long waiting list and not through a whole influx of staff – although there's a little bit of an increase in that – but through a desire to fulfill life, we've turned the time around. For some time it took months. If the application is done up where it flows through properly, we can usually get a cheque into their hand in a three-week turnaround, which is quite remarkable. You'll find people for whom it's a month, five weeks, or six weeks if you have to go back and forth to get clarification, but it's there.

The biggest problem with the program is, however, that some people seem to think that it should have no criteria around it. "It's there. I want it. I deserve it." We can't do that. There are limits to it. As you noticed in my presentation, I indicated that this year we've helped some 9,300 people.

This ties back to the extended health benefits. We saw, for example, that a good portion – and don't ask me for numbers, because I can't give them to you off the top of my head. We were assisting a lot of the seniors' benefit people with supplements for dental work. Now, with this program, which we have modified, if you will, with the dollars that we get from Health and Wellness – and hopefully they'll be sufficient; I don't know if they will or not – we'll probably be able to give better service to the senior. If you were listening to what I read out to the hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre, there was always just one-third and two-thirds left over. So if you're broke, you don't have it. Then they would go through one program, come back to us. It was duplication; it was frustration. So although it appears as sort of, shall we say, a ripple, it may in fact – and we hope it will – be an improvement for the low-rent folks. Am I happy that the seniors above the thresholds won't get it? Of course not. But looking at the thresholds where they apply, we feel hopeful that it's not going to be too big of a financial thing.

There was another one. You had referenced the rent supplement program, and I think I explained that we do target that.

So, hon. member, that's roughly the way we go about some of those things. I do appreciate your comments. I think you've looked at the information well. I will not apologize for not having the performance measurements in place. I am very strict with the staff. If you don't have the tool that will give us the performance measure that we want at the end of the day, then let's not have any there and let's work on it until we get something. I can assure you that with the ones where we don't have it yet, we're working on them. So hopefully in time, whether it be next year or the year after – and I'm not going to promise that it's going to be next year – we'll have the

ability to measure our performance with the kind of accuracy that the folks in this Legislature deserve.

THE DEPUTY CHAIR: Hon. members, the chair just wishes to bring to your attention that as per Standing Order 58(3) the first hour is restricted to the hon. minister or a member of the Executive Council acting on behalf of the minister and members of the opposition. That one hour has now passed, so any other member wishing to speak may do so now. The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

4:20

MR. MacDONALD: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. I rise this afternoon to participate in the budget estimates debate on the Seniors ministry, and it is certainly a ministry which is very, very important to many Albertans.

At this time, Mr. Chairman, I certainly would like to express my gratitude on behalf of the constituents of Edmonton-Gold Bar for the co-operation and the diligence of the department in supporting the new Ottewell Place Lodge. There were a number of department officials present last fall at the grand opening, and I have heard from the residents and I've heard from management that it is an excellent facility. There was a lot of care and attention taken, I believe, in the design of this facility by the Greater Edmonton Foundation, but it would not have been possible without the support of this government and this minister, and at this time I would like to express my gratitude to the minister and his department.

Now, there's more work to be done with affordable, accessible housing for seniors, but I would encourage all the members of this Assembly, if they are interested, to please tour Ottewell Place. As I said, it is a well-designed facility, and the residents seem quite content with its layout. There are certainly other areas of the city and other areas of the province that need this, and again I would encourage the minister to make affordable, accessible housing for seniors his top priority, the top priority of the department.

There certainly are issues around the population and the aging of the population in this province. We are a young, vibrant province. There are demographic pockets within the province where there is a significant population that is 65 and over, but on average, Mr. Chairman, I remind all members of this Assembly that 10 percent of Alberta's population is 65 or over, so we do not have an aging crisis. An aging population is not driving up our health care costs. It is not ensuring that affordable housing is too expensive. None of those things.

There are pockets in the province in various constituencies, including the one that I'm honoured to represent, where it is above that 10 percent, but it is not the problem that some maintain it to be. If you compare us in this province to B.C., to Saskatchewan, to Manitoba, currently those provinces have over 14 percent of the population aged 65 and above. Here, again I emphasize, it's 10 percent and seniors cannot be blamed for our high costs of health care delivery in this province. We've got to make sure that when Alberta seniors need medical attention or care, they're not made to feel guilty about this. It's the furthest thing from the truth, Mr. Chairman.

I note that there was a study done, and it was released I believe 18 months ago. It was entitled *Alberta for All Ages: Directions for the Future*. This was a policy initiative, and I'm sure it is a document that is guiding the initiatives of the hon. minister and his staff. You know, it is fine to begin to prepare and plan for a population over the age of 65 that will be perhaps 14 percent of the total population, and it is my information that we're at least a decade out, perhaps a little bit more. It'll be the year 2015 before demographically, Mr.

Chairman, we have 14 percent of the population over 65. This sort of prudent planning I would certainly encourage the ministry to continue, to develop plans and prepare and use the document *Alberta for All Ages*.

Now, I would also encourage the minister to ensure that all our support programs are inflation-proofed, that they have a mechanism. I would like to see it reviewed annually. We certainly know that the cost of utilities, whether it be natural gas or electricity, the cost of apartments – as more and more people come to the city looking for work, costs are going up, and seniors' incomes are not going up at the same rate. I think this should be done annually. There should be a review of all benefits. It should be tied to the consumer price index, the inflation rate, or whatever. I would certainly encourage the minister – and it was reflected in a bill we had in the last term of this Assembly – that the disposable income of seniors should be set up so that it is rated at the inflation rate or consumer price index increases. I would really encourage the minister to have a look at that.

Now, anytime we talk about seniors, we need to look at what strategies are going to be put in place by the Seniors ministry to improve the efficiency and the consistency in the administration of the Protection for Persons in Care Act. Mr. Chairman, I believe that while the Protection for Persons in Care Act is well intentioned, well meaning, it is not adequate. I'm encouraging the minister in charge of seniors to have a look at this. As I understand it, last year the reporting line received 499 reports, to be precise, of alleged abuse. One-third of these reports were substantiated, and that is too many. That is too many. That's more than 130 cases across this province.

We need to have a look and a study to see if we can improve the Protection for Persons in Care Act. Perhaps it's time we had a uniform set of standards across this province for nursing homes. There should be a minimum set of standards, whether it's a private, for-profit or a not-for-profit facility, so that families can be guaranteed that their loved one is going to be cared for. This is an issue that I really think we should have a look at quickly. I would like to see it done immediately, but I realize that sometimes the wheels of government roll slowly. This is very, very important. As well meaning as the Protection for Persons in Care Act is, again I would stress that I do not believe that it is adequate. This, I think, is backed up by the fact that one-third of reports were substantiated. That's just frightening, that some of the most vulnerable citizens of this province are without protection.

Now, a number of strategies have been implemented in statistics on seniors, and at the risk of repeating myself, I would again remind all members of this Assembly that we do not have an aging crisis in this province, that our seniors are not driving up the price of health care and making it inaccessible, and that they are not a burden. They built the foundations off our current prosperity, and I think that should be reflected in government policy. There should be a set of rules in place for seniors that will not suddenly change on them and reduce their disposable income to the point where they have to worry and fret about making ends meet at the end of the month.

4:30

Now, this gets me to the Alberta seniors' benefit program. I believe as of last year there were 180,000 seniors receiving benefits from the Alberta seniors' program, and there were, as I understand it, about 125,000 seniors in the province who were not receiving the Alberta seniors' benefit. Of the 180,000 seniors receiving benefits, there was just a slight decrease from the previous fiscal year. But it is interesting to note that of those seniors, Mr. Chairman, 126,000 received a monthly cash benefit that averaged \$110 per month. I would be interested to know if the ministry has any idea of what

percentage that \$110 per household would be on a monthly basis if you were to compare that – what percentage would it be of the monthly budget for that household?

There were seniors who also received full subsidy of their health care premiums. Now, there are 126,000 seniors receiving full subsidy of their health insurance premiums. That tells me that household income is not adequate, that statistic alone.

I understand that all seniors eligible for a cash benefit received an increase of over 10 percent beginning on April 1, 2000. That was a result of a review of the benefit criteria. Is there going to be another review? I was encouraging the minister to do this annually. When is the next review going to occur? We need to, I think, encourage at this time the minister to improve the Alberta seniors' benefit program, because you look at the number of seniors who are receiving the benefit, and the program certainly is warranted. I think it's money well spent so that people can have a secure and safe retirement.

There were almost 11,000 applications for the special-needs assistance program for seniors, and that was a 43 percent increase in applications over the previous fiscal year. Now, this program provided benefits to almost 7,000 senior households, for a total expenditure of 13 and a half million dollars. Close to 8,000 seniors received support from this program, and it's interesting to note that the number of seniors is greater than the number of grants because couples submit one application. Benefits ranged from \$100 to \$5,000, Mr. Chairman, and the average amount per benefit was \$2,000. Whenever you see an increase of 43 percent from one year to the next, that is quite significant. There is a significant increase in the special-needs assistance grants this year. It's going from roughly \$16 million to \$27 million. What sort of an increase in applications does the minister anticipate for this year? Does this tell not only that minister and his department but all hon. members of the Assembly that perhaps there is a large gap in the income of some seniors for what they need to have a respectful, decent retirement and what they're currently living on? Now, if the minister could clarify that for me, I would be very, very anxious to receive his clarification. If at some point in the future the minister would like to correspond in writing, I can certainly wait for the answers.

In conclusion, I too have a few words. I must express my dismay and my disappointment at the Alberta Seniors' budget having lost extended health benefits, the universal program that provided over \$23 million in benefits to all seniors. Granted, in here there has now been a shift in this money; it has been reallocated to the special-needs assistance program. Now, I could be wrong and the hon. minister will correct me, but if there was this huge increase in the number of applications, is the minister not taking money from Peter, so to speak, to pay Paul? I hope not. I certainly hope not, but it is worth noting that \$9.2 million has been reallocated to special-needs assistance for seniors, and as a program, Mr. Chairman, people need it. I understand that there has been a \$14.5 million saving in benefits to seniors, but I just hope this isn't an issue of acceptability and that we are making seniors jump through hoops, so to speak, to get what they need to have an independent, respectful lifestyle. When we look at this and compare it or couple it with increases in health care premiums, I certainly hope that the hon. minister is going to get a chance to work in co-operation with the Health and Wellness department in that respect to ensure that the priorities are there and the commitment is there to provide for our seniors.

Now, in conclusion, Mr. Chairman, I would urge the hon. minister to continue to look under every available rock for money to provide affordable and accessible housing for our seniors population. I know the hon. minister is a very busy individual, but at some point, if he has not already had a visit, phone the Greater Edmonton Foundation

and perhaps visit Ottewell Place. This hon. member and the residents would be very delighted to see the minister pay a visit.

Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman.

THE DEPUTY CHAIR: The hon. minister.

4:40

MR. WOLOSHTYN: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Hon. member, I do appreciate your comments and your observations on Ottewell Place. They're very accurate, and the Greater Edmonton Foundation has over the past few years literally replaced almost all of their lodges and upgraded them, Ottewell being the last one.

With respect to Ottewell, there's one further step, and I think I did mention it to the other member, but perhaps I didn't. We in consultation with the Greater Edmonton Foundation insisted that they not take down the old lodge and try it for some form of new program. They chose to enter into a pilot project of which we are supportive and a part of, financially and otherwise, with the Capital health authority to see how they may get into assisted living. The Greater Edmonton Foundation offers a whole host of suites, if you will, in lodges. A lot of their people really are at the need level where they could be in assisted living, yet they haven't crossed that threshold in a formal way. Hopefully, the experience in Ottewell lodge, the old one – you know where the site is; you've been there – will be that once they get it running, as it's not operational yet, we'll move it over and will be perhaps coming up with some creative things in other areas.

Your observations on the special needs are perhaps not quite accurate. The extended health benefit program is canceled, yes, and I went through it just a little earlier as to what was on there. The special needs per se is not going to \$27 million but is showing much of the transfer for teeth and eye glasses for the ASB, or seniors' benefit. The \$9.2 million is part of that special needs and that budget line, which bumps it up. Special needs as they were still stay at the \$16 million or whatever the number is there. So that doesn't show in your copy, but that's why the number is in flux. That is going to be set aside. The program is not developed yet, although we're not turning away anybody on the seniors' benefit plan – and I stress: on the seniors' benefit plan – who may have an emergent need for either teeth or eye care. They would qualify for special needs. But that will be set aside and administered totally separate so I don't lose one program or blend it into the other, and that's a concern that I have there.

With respect to the jump in applicants, there are two reasons for that. The first one is that we relaxed the criteria for accessibility for the special needs, and secondly, the program, as it continued, became more well known. Consequently, we had more applicants, and if they meet the criteria, we're trying to meet their needs, if you will. If you add to that the fact that they do get one time a year up to \$5,000 – some get the maximum; most do not. It's based on a specific need that they have, and they can apply every year. Yes, you are right. It is \$5,000 per couple. Per household is a better way of putting it. Rarely would you have that need. If there were two individuals in the same household who had a specific medical need, I know the staff would have a good look at it. So your observations there are good.

We have an ongoing review of our programs, and yes, I would like to tie it to some kind of a factor to go up. We did give it a pretty good boost there awhile ago, and when the fiscal situation is such that we can do it, we'll be looking at it again. In the meantime we want to ensure and monitor that it is working right.

The special-needs program does give us that bit of flexibility, and I might say that that program is the only one of its kind in the

country. I can say nothing but good about it, because people who are desperate and without income have a place to come. Generally, for the most part, as you know by the applicants versus the approvals, they know the criteria quite well and they do come away with assistance. So that gives us a bit of breathing room. The other part, as you know, is that when you go into COLA programs or whatever, they become universal. On a limited budget I am one of these people who want to target it more to the higher need, and that's why, for example, we're not going to get in a panic mode and just rubber-stamp a program that I wasn't too comfortable with and get it rolling along.

Now, when you say affordability – and this is one that we could have a good discussion on, I guess – the full premium subsidy for a senior couple is at the \$37,000 level. That's roughly what a first-year teacher gets I believe here and in Ontario. That's not that small when you consider the whole picture, so we're pretty generous here. But remember that the partial subsidy, albeit not as great as we'd like it to be, goes up to \$44,000. That will be a little higher now with this increase. I don't know what the numbers are yet. They'll be cranked out. So really when you look at where our efforts to help cut in, those thresholds are not that low. Would I like them higher? Of course I would. If I could lift them up tomorrow, I would. We're working on it. Maybe I'll get some leverage and get it up there. So we feel that perhaps it is hitting pretty close to the right balance.

I do have a concern, and I'll be very frank with you. When you get a threshold, you always have people on either side of it that may have a bigger need than is perceived. That's one thing that's giving us a concern. We're trying to work and identify if, in fact, they are there and if they are there what we can do about it. We know every household has a different set of standards around it.

Your comments about the seniors not being a problem I really appreciate. I'm going to take you along sometime to help me with my speech. I sincerely believe that you are one hundred percent correct. I'd go one step further: seniors are an asset, a current asset. I think that's one of the myths that goes around. Yes, if you get older, you may have more of a need for medicare than when you were young like you. I had that experience just lately. I'm damned glad we had a good health care system, or else you'd have a different minister. Overall, we can't attribute rising health care costs and all that to seniors directly.

One area that I think we'll be looking at as we're reviewing health care – at least, I hope we look at it – is the whole area of whether we can become more cost-effective. This is where we're getting into assisted living, getting the continuum from lodge to assisted living to nursing home. Nursing home care is quite high. I do believe a lot of the people in there could be better served in an assisted-living environment, where they have more independence. It's also more cost-effective, but you can't compromise medical care to cost. So that's one thing that I hope, in terms of the reviews that are going on, will be looked at. Maybe we can do some work there. We are targeting that housing. We are chiseling money wherever we can.

As you are likely aware, the whole area with the Protection for Persons in Care Act is administered by Community Development. We have a very close relationship with them, and we do investigate, if you will, virtually every case that's there. I have a much bigger concern over that. Some of it hit the media a little bit along the way. It's one thing to have an institution monitored. That's far easier than dealing with the situations where you have individuals who are subjected to abuse up to the point where we seem to require shelters for seniors and this kind of thing. This abuse – emotional, financial, whatever – is usually inflicted by somebody very, very close, a family member or a good friend. That's an area that really concerns me.

We've tried to collaborate and work with various agencies that are involved in other areas – seniors' fraud, that kind of thing – with the Calgary police, the city police. You've got the Wise Owl program, all sorts of programs that are coming out. They're to protect seniors in some way. We try to be supportive where we can, but we don't want to be intrusive because we don't want to wreck a good program by getting too involved in it. There is a lot of work going on. We are constantly trying to, you know, keep ourselves up to date and be as helpful as we can where we can.

Let's face it. I do have one problem when it comes to the abuse of seniors, and that's the lack of criminal charges being laid. That's something that I'll be discussing with the police, with my colleagues, and whatever. I don't know why that's there, but if we're going to stop the abuse, whether it be financial, out of some other province through the electronic media or not, we do have to have a mechanism of charges, some kind of retribution to have others dissuaded from doing the same kind of activity.

So, hon. member, I do appreciate your comments. We'll look through *Hansard*, and if there's something that we can give an answer to, we'd be glad to do it. Thank you very much.

THE DEPUTY CHAIR: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona.

4:50

DR. PANNU: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I want to note that I was reassured when the minister said that the seniors are an asset. Being one, it's good to hear that the minister says this. I hope he really means it too. Having said that, let me get down to a few questions that I have for the minister, but before I ask those questions, a few general remarks.

The minister and the ministry that he presides over are responsible for both seniors' services and, of course, the provincial housing programs for both seniors and nonseniors who need help. Overall, Mr. Chairman, the minister's good intentions notwithstanding, the current budget that we're discussing is bad news for Alberta seniors. Not all of this is contained, of course, within the Seniors ministry budget. For instance, a 30 percent increase in health care premiums is certainly quite serious bad news for seniors. The cancellation of eye care and dental care adds to this new burden for seniors. The accommodation charges for long-term facilities went up in this province by an average of 15 percent in January 2002. Looking at the numbers here, the budget doesn't really provide a commensurate increase in rent supplement, for example, which is reference 3.3.2, to help particularly low-income seniors who are faced with these increases. I'd like the minister to comment on this. Hopefully, he will comment on this.

There seems to be sort of a considerable robbing here of Peter to pay Paul in the budget. One example: the Alberta seniors' benefit payments are being increased to cover increases in accommodation charges in long-term facilities for some seniors, but the fact is that the middle-income seniors are being asked to pay more and more, including, of course, the new burden of health care premiums and the costs that they will have to incur now for eye care and for dental care. These are seniors who have worked all their lives and have paid taxes all their lives. They do look forward to a comfortable retirement. These seniors generally live on fixed incomes. The point has been made again and again, and I think all of us recognize this, yet more and more taxes, charges, and user fees are being imposed, which they have to shoulder.

The bottom line here, of course, is that the ministry's funding in Budget 2002 is being reduced from \$340 million in 2001-2002 to \$275.8 million in the current budget that we are debating. This is a

19 percent budget reduction, Mr. Chairman. When I look at the number of dollars that are being cut, it comes to about \$65 million, \$66 million less than was the case in last year's budget. I may as well pose this question here. Under Major Strategies and Budget Highlights for 2002-03 there is a statement there in terms of what the ministry proposes to do. I'm looking at one that says: "Finalize an agreement with the federal government that will provide access to approximately \$67 million over five years to assist Alberta communities in developing low-cost housing."

Now, there is some money there. My question to the minister is this. This money, I guess, became available last fall. What are the roadblocks in negotiating an agreement with the federal government on this? Would you please make clear where the problems lie, what the conditionalities are, whether or not it's the matching funds condition that stands in the way? If that's the case, please do let the House know about it. I'm curious. It's a substantial amount of money, and although it's over five years, it's something that certainly will go some ways in compensating for the budget cut here that the seniors are facing now in this year's budget.

Let me go on from there. The biggest single reduction as a result of this cutback in budgets is in the seniors' supportive housing incentive program. That is really one of the things that I worry about most. What are the consequences of this going to be for seniors, and in what particular areas? Referring here to line 3.4.1, the seniors' supportive housing incentive grants certainly have been more or less eliminated, from \$31.7 million last year to only \$1 million here. I'm asking the minister to explain why this is the case. Is it that the need has disappeared, or is there some other reason why this cut has been made?

While I'm on that data, I have some questions about line 3.3.2, rent supplement. It's the same as last year. With increases in the order of 15 percent or more even for the poorest of seniors, how is this amount likely to be adequate in meeting the dire difficulties that rent increases are going to pose to seniors who are going to look for adequate rent supplements?

Similarly, if you go to line 3.2.1, lodge assistance grants have also been frozen at last year's level. What are the consequences of freezing those lodge assistance grants? Lodges usually have our seniors who have the lowest incomes and very, very limited means to support themselves.

Then going down to line 3.5.4, social housing. The cut there is quite dramatic, from \$71.5 million last year to \$20 million this year. That really is quite a devastating cut, as I can see, knowing the needs that both low-income Albertans and seniors have for housing. I'm not sure how these funds were divvied up between providing for the needs of the homeless who are not seniors and seniors who need housing because of their situation of a low income and situations that border on poverty.

Mr. Chairman, there's perhaps one other question, if I can quickly go to that. Otherwise, I'm going to sit down and perhaps ask the minister to respond to some of these questions. Many other questions have been asked by other hon. members, so I won't repeat those. But these are some that I think perhaps need addressing here by the minister.

Thank you.

THE DEPUTY CHAIR: The hon. minister.

MR. WOLOSZYN: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I'll just go through these as best I can. Line 3.5.4, that you're referring to: that's flow-through moneys that we get from Treasury to pay on the debentures outstanding on a \$2 billion portfolio, and that'll go up and down depending upon what the requirements are from year to year. That's

largely also governed by the 17 agreements we have with Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation. That's flow-through moneys. You can't count that as an up or a down. Next year it may be up higher or down lower. I think a year ago it was 120 or something. That bounces all over the place, and that's just the way we have to present our budget. It sometimes does give people the wrong impression.

5:00

With respect to the lodge assistance grants I do believe that the grants, if you'll notice a little further, if my memory serves me right, went up last year. We subsidize occupied units, so consequently if there aren't going to be any more units, there isn't going to be a need for any more. So we can predict that one pretty close, and it arose from the year before as some more units came onstream. Although I'd like to see that one jump quite a bit because that would mean we've got a lot more housing onstream, that is not a problem.

The one that is going to be difficult is the rent supplement program. It has been a problem because of the rising rents. Now, what we have to do is – and you'll notice that although Alberta's economy is still pretty good, it's sort of flattening out – find a way where we can get more bang for our buck. The rent supplement goes into a private situation, as you know, and it supplements between 30 percent of the income to the market value. I don't like to be held too much hostage there. In McMurray, for example, it will be cutting in this spring, I guess. We'll have close to 120 units where we actually will triple our units there and have it for the same funding. There are some places where we're asking the people, the management bodies, to go see, rather than just automatically the rent goes up and we pay you, if they could find suitable accommodation. So whether it will create a problem down the way, I'm not sure. We're going to have to monitor that one very closely. We had troubles. I can anticipate some problems there, but everything doesn't work in a perfect world. We try to serve as many people as we can with it.

With respect to the two programs, the supportive housing, these were onetime funding programs. SSHIP came through Community Development. HAPI came through Health and Wellness and then was transferred to Seniors, where it was more appropriate, and those programs have been expended pretty well. They've run out. So it's not that anything dramatic happened. The money is gone. It wasn't replaced. We have a million dollars left, and that's why it went up from the high number down to a million dollars on that particular line, whatever it was, because we've left a million dollars in there carried over as a contingency fund for what might happen there. I'm hopeful that as things in the province improve and if we are able to access more money, we'll be able to go back in and get some more programs similar to SSHIP and HAPI, because quite frankly those have been very, very good programs. They've put units on the market. They've put them under the management bodies that looked after it, and those have worked very well. I'd like to see more of that happening, and I could say that it's a onetime thing.

You asked the question with respect to why we haven't signed off with the federal government. I'd ask you this question, and you can nod yes or no. If you were presented with a program that said, "We'll give \$12,500 and you'll give \$12,500 and we'll give it to a private developer and in 10 years he can own the building without any reference to the rent," would you call that affordable housing? Just a straight donation to developers. That's what was presented in August.

The ministers from across the country met with the federal minister, and I do have to say to the federal government that I did appreciate their co-operation. They went back and revisited the program and have indicated that they would work with each

province separately. Some went further. For example, I think British Columbia was on. They got some retroactive stuff because they were into it pretty big, and they're now a have-not province, as you know, so they signed on quickly. Quebec had some things going, and I believe they've signed on. The other two I'm not familiar with, but just to give you an example, Newfoundland and Labrador were not interested in any new units. They wanted repair money. Alberta supported their position. We don't need repair money, although we could use some. We need new units. We have to put the program together in such a way that it targets the areas of need. We don't want to have it per capita, and we want to ensure that if we need the affordable housing in Edmonton, in Calgary, or Red Deer, or wherever, that's where it goes.

There's also the other component to it, which we are working on with them. We want to work out a program on the remote housing side but also for the communities. Our definition of remote is something we're working on. We've drawn a line through the middle of the province, and it's anything north of this particular line.

Other programs – and this is not laying fault; this is trying to profit by previous errors – were just straight, unilateral programs. So now we've got housing, for example, where we're short in one community and want to dispose of it in another. Because of our tie-ins with Canada Mortgage and Housing and the agreements we have, we can't sell this house and take the money and put it over here very easily. Sometimes we can; sometimes we can't. We're trying to make sure we don't get into that kind of a situation again. I'm very optimistic that we will end up getting an agreement signed. I was hoping it would be done by now. When the agreement is signed, that's when the onus is on myself to take it through the channels of government to ensure that we do have whatever assets we need to match that. So, consequently, we are working on it. We want to get a program that is tailor-made for Alberta, and that's quite frankly what we're trying to do.

The other comments you had I don't think were quite accurate. The accommodation charges in the extended health facilities did go up, and they haven't been touched for five or six years. You know what's happened to room and board in between. It's a difficult thing, but I for one do not believe that room and board should be paid by Alberta Health, for example. We've directed the support to the individuals on seniors' benefits. Low-income individuals who can't afford the increases were helped. No problem. The ones who can afford it didn't get help. You have to appreciate that in their nursing care, they are also getting with that – and this is appropriate, and I support it a hundred percent – all their health needs, one hundred percent.

Some problems are created. I don't know what the solutions are, but sometimes you have the split, where one of a couple goes into care and the other doesn't, and we're looking at the effects of that, then, because that does have an effect, and we're aware of it. What the solution is I'm not too sure, but whenever those come up, we try and deal with them on a case-by-case basis. So that's where part of that problem is.

If you compare, for example, Alberta to other areas of the country, our extended care rates are still very, very low, and some places, would you believe, actually asset test them. I'm dead against that, although I'm in favour of income testing. Some provinces asset test before they help you out. I believe in the income test, which I think is quite fair, if you will.

So I think, hon. member, I did cover most of your questions, and, like you say, the capital programs we'll work on. When we get more money, we'll try and get them going, but so far we've had a pretty good run on them. We've just approved a series of projects, so we'll have a bit of a lag. If we get it fairly soon, we'll look at it, but we won't be hurt too badly.

DR. PANNU: Mr. Chairman, just a very short question I forgot to ask. It's an important one. To the minister. In my constituency we have a fairly large Francophone population, and there was an attempt made by the Strathcona community to set up a Francophone seniors' facility there. I did make a representation to you on that. I wonder if there is in the budget a particular line item or items that you can draw my attention to that might assist the community in moving forward on that project.

MR. WOLOSHYN: I'm familiar with the project that you allude to, and I must say that, yes, I do recall the meetings. We did help them acquire the land, and the way our programs work, which I stand by, they have to raise their portion, if you will, of the money before they can qualify. If we have another SSHIP or HAPI program and they've got their funding in place, certainly they'll be looked at like anyone else. We've had good successes with that, and they're working quite well. As a matter of fact, I'm scheduled to be meeting with that same group again fairly soon. They assured me that if we assisted them in the acquisition of the property – that was my previous ministry – they would have a stepping-stone for fundraising. We've done that. We've made it very easy for them, you know, around the whole business, as you're well aware if you've met with them, and certainly if there's a program in place and they meet the criteria, they'll be right up here with anybody else.

THE DEPUTY CHAIR: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

5:10

MS BLAKEMAN: Thanks very much, Mr. Chairman. I'm aware that the vote gets called in five minutes, so I will come back during the debate of the appropriation bill with additional questions and comments for the minister, but just in the few minutes I have left, perhaps I can give him some questions that can be answered in writing.

In the debate on the Seniors ministry a year ago I was asking about funding for seniors' centres, and the minister said at the time that he was considering it. I'm wondering what happened to that.

I'm also interested in whether there's been any policy development or any cross-ministry work with the Department of Government Services on life leases or legislation for life leases or policies for life leases or any consumer awareness material being produced or anything for seniors, anything at all, around information for life leases.

Also, I notice that there's a change in the FTEs, the full-time equivalents. I'm interested in where those went, and I'd like a breakdown, please, of the subvote and the program, how many FTEs in each of those.

Additionally I'd be interested in how many or in what percentage of the new long-term care beds that the government was funding in this fiscal year and next, if the money is carrying over, the money went to private providers or private corporations as compared to the percentage of funding that went to public or nonprofit providers like Caritas, for example.

I'm wondering if there's any information the minister is able to share on the Polish heritage seniors' site, which is a mixed-use site just north of the Prince of Wales Armories in Edmonton-Centre.

I took the minister to task and he took me to task on the performance measurements that are listed. I've gone back and looked, and there are five performance measurements that appear in the documentation that has been made available to me. I notice that for two of the five there's no performance measurement and for the other three of the five they're measurements of satisfaction. So the minister takes umbrage at my points, but I will continue to make

them. I think it's important that we have something to measure against, and satisfaction polls aren't it.

I'm looking at your core business 1, "financial support and information services to seniors." It starts out by saying that "many seniors have private pensions, savings and other sources of income." I'm just wondering if in fact this has actually been studied by the department. Or are you using statistics from Stats Canada? How do you know how many seniors in Alberta have other forms of income? So if you can provide me with that information, please.

I'm looking at strategy 1.1.1, "work towards adjusting provincial income benefits for lower-income seniors." I'm wondering if this was in fact achieved or what work is anticipated. It says: work towards adjusting this. Are you anticipating achieving this within this fiscal year? What's the deal with that?

Under 1.1.4, "simplify eligibility criteria and administration . . . to improve fairness and clarity of the program," do you have a target or, hey, a performance measurement on what's a reasonable period of time to take to process these applications for Alberta seniors' benefit? I know there has been a struggle in the past with that. I'm interested if there's a target that the department is now working with or a target that they've set to process these in a certain period of time.

I will say, when I look at goal 1.2, "access to information and educational material," that this department does a good job. It does one of the better jobs of all of the departments in the government. Once seniors get pointed in the right direction and get the telephone number, when they phone, they get the information. It's there. They also produce a number of information pamphlets that are very helpful, and I've noticed that. Of course, I do a lot of work with seniors in my constituency, and that material has been helpful.

I asked about the funding of the seniors' centres already. Particularly when I look at goal 1.2.1, the strategies under that . . .

THE DEPUTY CHAIR: I hesitate to interrupt the hon. member, but pursuant to Standing Order 58(5) I must now put the following questions. After considering the business plan and proposed estimates for the Department of Seniors, are you ready for the vote?

HON. MEMBERS: Agreed.

Agreed to:
Operating Expense and Capital Investment \$275,654,000

THE DEPUTY CHAIR: Shall the vote be reported? Are you agreed?

HON. MEMBERS: Agreed.

THE DEPUTY CHAIR: Opposed? Carried.

Shall the vote on the 2002-2003 offices of the Legislative Assembly estimates approved earlier be reported?

HON. MEMBERS: Agreed.

THE DEPUTY CHAIR: Opposed? Carried.

The hon. Government House Leader.

MR. HANCOCK: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I would move that the committee rise and report and beg leave to sit again.

[Motion carried]

[Mr. Shariff in the chair]

MR. LOUGHEED: Mr. Speaker, the Committee of Supply has had under consideration certain resolutions, reports as follows, and requests leave to sit again.

Resolved that a sum not exceeding the following be granted to Her Majesty for the fiscal year ending March 31, 2003, for the following departments.

Support to the Legislative Assembly, operating expense, \$34,930,000; office of the Auditor General, operating expense and capital investment, \$16,716,000; office of the Ombudsman, operating expense, \$1,829,000; office of the Chief Electoral Officer, operating expense, \$1,760,000; office of the Ethics Commissioner, operating expense, \$372,000; office of the Information and Privacy Commissioner, operating expense, \$3,220,000.

Seniors: operating expense and capital investment, \$275,654,000.

THE ACTING SPEAKER: Does the Assembly concur in the report?

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Agreed.

THE ACTING SPEAKER: Opposed?

SOME HON. MEMBERS: No.

THE ACTING SPEAKER: So ordered.

The hon. Government House Leader.

MR. HANCOCK: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I would move that we adjourn until 8 p.m.

[Motion carried; the Assembly adjourned at 5:19 p.m.]