

Legislative Assembly of Alberta

Title: **Thursday, April 11, 2002**

1:30 p.m.

Date: 02/04/11

[The Speaker in the chair]

head: **Prayers**

THE SPEAKER: Good afternoon and welcome.

Let us pray. Our divine Father, as we conclude for this week our work in this Assembly, we renew our thanks and ask that we may continue our work under Your guidance. Amen.

Please be seated.

head: **Introduction of Visitors**

THE SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Airdrie-Rocky View.

MS HALEY: Thank you so much, Mr. Speaker. It's a great pleasure for me to be able to introduce to you and through you to the Assembly a young man who ranches with his family just outside the Coronation area. They have cattle and horses, and right now, I guess, there are some water problems out there, so there are not many cattle roaming around. Hopefully the snow will help.

He's also an educator, Mr. Speaker. He has an honours degree in philosophy along with his education degree. In the last while he's been teaching out in a small school called Byemoor in the Byemoor area. He's been teaching grades 3 to 9 math, grades 5 and 6 social studies, grades 4 to 9 phys ed, as well as computers. In his first year of teaching he was one of six Alberta teachers nominated for the first year of teaching award under the Edwin Parr award, which is an award in excellence. It shows how well rounded he is as a person, as a teacher, and as he will be as an MLA.

I'm absolutely delighted to introduce to you, Mr. Speaker, Mr. Doug Griffiths, the new MLA for Wainwright, who will be sworn in and will be able to join us down here on April 29. Just to finish that, he's accompanied by my administrative assistant, Loretta Fontana, who will be showing him around this afternoon.

Thank you.

head: **Introduction of Guests**

THE SPEAKER: The hon. Minister of Municipal Affairs.

MR. BOUTILIER: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Indeed, it's my pleasure today to introduce through you to members of the Assembly a young man from Fort McMurray who is studying at Mount Royal College in Calgary. He has visited every constituency in this entire province of Alberta, and it's my pleasure to introduce him as the new president of PC Youth of Alberta. I would like to ask Blake Robert from Fort McMurray to rise and receive the warm welcome of this Assembly.

THE SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Little Bow.

MR. McFARLAND: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's indeed a pleasure today to introduce, as I have for about the past nine years, a school group who left at 7 o'clock this morning to be here with us. The students and the parents that are with us today are from Hazel Cameron elementary in Vulcan. They have been up here, as I indicated, for years in the past, went to the trouble of fund-raising to get to be here, and mysteriously two days after the passage of a certain bill in this House had their school trip canceled. So today, regardless of money, regardless of the funds that they fund-raised,

five of the parents and eight of the students took it upon themselves to come up as part of their social studies class to see the Legislature and take in the Alberta science centre. I would ask that the five adults that I will now introduce – Mrs. Deb Hyslip, Mrs. Debra Wyatt, Mrs. Janice McCallum-Campbell, Mrs. Louise Markert, Mrs. Jane Machacek – and the eight wonderful students from grade 6 at Hazel Cameron elementary, who are in the public gallery, receive the warm welcome of this Assembly and our thanks for coming up here.

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

DR. NICOL: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's a real privilege today to stand and introduce through you to the members of the Legislature a young man that's become involved in politics. He's attending his first question period. He's a student at Grant MacEwan College, but he's very active in the Redwater constituency and has just been elected as a director of the Alberta Young Liberals. His name is David Cournoyer, and I'd ask David to stand and receive the warm welcome of the House.

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

MR. AMERY: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's indeed a pleasure to rise today and introduce to you and through you to members of the Assembly a guest from Lebanon who happens to be a former teacher of mine. Mr. Sayah is here with his wife, Mrs. Sayah, to attend the graduation ceremony of their son Dr. Sayah, who just graduated from the University of Alberta with a PhD in chemistry. Along with Mr. Sayah, Mrs. Sayah, and Dr. Sayah is a relative of mine who is a well-known Edmontonian, Mr. Kelly Tarrabain. They're all in the public gallery, and I would ask them to rise and receive the warm welcome of the Assembly.

head: **Oral Question Period**

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

Swan Hills Waste Treatment Facility

DR. NICOL: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Yesterday the Premier confirmed that Alberta taxpayers now own the Swan Hills waste treatment plant, a plant that was previously owned 100 percent by a private company. The terms of the Financial Administration Act are very clear. Before getting back into the business of being in business, the government must bring the deal before the Assembly. My questions are to the Premier. Why has the government failed to comply with the letter and spirit of the Financial Administration Act?

MR. KLEIN: Well, Mr. Speaker, I'm sure that we have abided by the spirit and the intent of the Financial Administration Act. I guess this whole matter could be dealt with as a subjective matter. I consider the plant and many others consider the plant to be a utility, although we try to find a way to operate it in concert with the private sector as efficiently and as effectively as we possibly can. The simple fact is that there is garbage to burn, very, very dangerous garbage, to get rid of, to destroy, to completely kill, and that's what this plant does.

Mr. Speaker, there is a cost to garbage. This hon. member in the city of Lethbridge pays municipal taxes – taxes – to have his garbage collected and taken to a landfill site. [interjection] Absolutely. Everyone in this room does the same thing. The problem with toxic waste – and it was identified – was that there was no process other than to gather this waste, put it in containers, and ship it someplace else. So in 1984 it was decided that Alberta would look after its own

waste. It would set up a process, a plant to deal with toxic, dangerous, dirty waste. I look at that plant, the Swan Hills plant, as a utility to save and protect the environment.

THE SPEAKER: The hon. leader.

DR. NICOL: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's still owned by the government.

Will the Premier commit to bringing the Swan Hills deal before this House for full public debate, as required by the Financial Administration Act? We have to have that public debate to comply with the law.

MR. KLEIN: Well, Mr. Speaker, I believe that I addressed that question yesterday when I indicated to the hon. member that if he wishes to submit a motion for a return outlining the kind of information he wishes to receive relative to the finances of the Swan Hills waste treatment plant, then I would invite him to put forward such a motion.

DR. NICOL: Mr. Speaker, yesterday I was asking for the financial information. Today I'm asking for the government to comply with the law. Will you bring that purchase back to this House so that we can debate it according to the Financial Administration Act? Follow our own law.

MR. KLEIN: Mr. Speaker, we took it back. Relative to the intricacies of the sale or the acquisition or the reacquisition, I will have the hon. Finance minister and the hon. Minister of Infrastructure respond.

1:40

MRS. NELSON: Mr. Speaker, when we entered into the arrangement to deal with hazardous wastes in the province of Alberta, we were on the frontiers in this area, and we were going out into a new venture that would deal with something that had never been dealt with in North America before. So to put forward a facility of this nature was breaking ground in every respect. When we made the deal for someone else to operate and take over the facility, there was a clause in the agreement that always anticipated that there had to be a relation back, if there were difficulties, to the Crown, because it was the Crown's initiative originally to move into this arena. So there is no conflict with the Financial Administration Act, because this was always part of the original agreement, and that's where it came back to the Crown.

Now, once again, let's be very clear: this is the only facility of its kind in North America. When someone talks about the financial burden of this facility, let me tell you very clearly that in a province like this, that deals with the type of development we have in the province of Alberta and the intense capital development that has taken place in this province, if we did not have the ability to dispose of hazardous waste right in our own backyard, we would experience far greater financial difficulties than anyone could well imagine, because there isn't another facility in North America. So this actually saves us money.

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

MS CARLSON: Point of privilege, Mr. Speaker.

THE SPEAKER: Point of privilege. Okay.

Tools Deduction Legislation

DR. NICOL: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Last year Members of this Legislative Assembly passed a bill that would provide tax savings for tradespeople. Now likely thousands of tradespeople are finding that as they do their taxes, there is no such tax credit on this year's tax form. The government has decided not to proclaim the bill which would make it the law. My question is to the Premier. How many hardworking Albertans are being declined a tax cut that they were expecting this year because that bill hasn't been proclaimed?

MR. KLEIN: I'll have the hon. Minister of Finance respond.

MRS. NELSON: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I'm sorry; I didn't hear the full gist of the question, but I understand that it had to do with the trades tax bill that was put forward last spring. The hon. member is quite correct that it has not been proclaimed. We're still assessing that bill, and when we're ready, we'll move forward.

THE SPEAKER: The hon. leader.

DR. NICOL: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. To the Minister of Finance: is the reason it hasn't been proclaimed this year because you needed the revenue to balance the budget rather than give the tax cut that you promised?

MRS. NELSON: Well, Mr. Speaker, when you put forward legislation, you have to do an assessment on the impact of it, and we clearly have been in that process, so we're not in a position to move forward at this point.

DR. NICOL: The House committed to providing this tax cut. Why is it, when they made that commitment almost a year ago, that the people who benefit from it haven't been given the opportunity to exercise that option? They need to be able to count on using bills that are passed in this House. To the Minister of Finance.

MRS. NELSON: Well, Mr. Speaker, I believe that our whip has corrected me and informed me that the bill was actually passed in November, so it hasn't been proclaimed as yet. I think Albertans expect us to take the time to evaluate these situations before we move forward on them, and that's the process we're in.

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

Teachers' Withdrawal of Voluntary Services

DR. MASSEY: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. As a result of Bill 12 many schools in the province are in turmoil. Students are disappointed, teachers are disheartened, and parents are frustrated. My questions are to the Minister of Learning. To restore extracurricular activities in schools, will the minister (a) call the president of the ATA to work out a solution, (b) widen the arbitration to include all the issues in the dispute, or (c) do nothing?

DR. OBERG: I'll take (a).

DR. MASSEY: To avoid frustrated parents withdrawing volunteer services in schools in support of teachers, will the minister (a) provide boards with money to negotiate fair settlements, (b) provide school boards with resources to reduce class sizes, or (c) do nothing?

DR. OBERG: I've already taken (a).

THE SPEAKER: The hon. member.

DR. MASSEY: Thank you. My third question to the minister: to heal the rift between the teachers and the department, will the minister (a) amend Bill 12, (b) speak to the teachers' general meeting next month, or (c) do nothing?

THE SPEAKER: The hon. minister.

DR. OBERG: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'd love to take (b), but they told me I couldn't come to the meeting.

THE SPEAKER: The hon. leader of the third party.

Bill 12, Education Services Settlement Act

DR. PANNU: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Frederick B. Henry, the Roman Catholic bishop of Calgary, has released a pastoral letter criticizing Bill 12. The pastoral letter, copies of which I will be tabling at the earliest opportunity, condemns Bill 12 in the strongest possible terms. My questions are to the Premier. Why did the government enact the legislation that Bishop Frederick Henry describes as "so punitive and insensitive that it will take a herculean effort to revive teacher morale and repair the damage it leaves in its wake"?

MR. KLEIN: Mr. Speaker, I guess Bishop Henry is entitled to his opinion. The way he outlines it is:

The President of the . . . (ATA) meets with the Premier and seemingly achieves through a direct meeting with the Premier what the ATA had not been able to get at the negotiating table, i.e. arbitration of all outstanding issues.

That is not true. Bishop Henry was not at the meeting. I know exactly what happened. Notes were taken. I'll be glad to provide Bishop Henry with those notes. There was agreement on a process for arbitration.

Then he says:

Within days the Alberta School Boards Association . . . meets with the Premier and persuasively argues for the exclusion of any consideration of classroom conditions and the limitation of wage increases according to a board's ability to pay.

There was no persuasive argument for the exclusion of anything. There was a straightforward, down-to-earth discussion with the ASBA. It stands to reason, if I'm going to meet with the ATA, that I would meet with the other side.

Then it goes on to make the assertion, uninformed, that "the Premier either spins or reneges on the agreement with the ATA." That is absolutely false, and for a man of the cloth to make that kind of statement is wrong. It is fundamentally wrong.

Now, relative to the issue: how many Catholics are in this caucus?

AN HON. MEMBER: Quite a few.

MR. KLEIN: Okay. Do you agree with the assertions of Bishop Henry?

SOME HON. MEMBERS: No.

MR. KLEIN: No. Well, then, that answers your question.

THE SPEAKER: The Minister of Learning.

DR. OBERG: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I will add to what the Premier has already stated. We will be addressing a letter back to

Bishop Henry, explaining what is wrong with his letter. It will also be CCed to the Alberta Catholic School Trustees' Association and Archbishop Collins in Edmonton. I will be demanding that he send this letter to the parishioners that he distributed his letter to.

THE SPEAKER: The hon. leader.

DR. PANNU: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My second question to the Premier: why did the government enact this divisive and one-sided legislation, that the Roman Catholic bishop of Calgary describes as pitting the Alberta Teachers' Association and the Alberta School Boards Association against one another, all the while ensuring that the government's underfunding of education continues unabated?

MR. KLEIN: Mr. Speaker, again, the bishop is entitled to his opinion. I don't agree with his opinion in any way, shape, or form. That's exactly what it is, because he said, "Many of you have been asking for my reaction," which I take as a synonym for opinion, "on Bill 12. Now that we have concluded our Holy Week observance, I am prepared to offer a few reflections for your consideration." Reflections, opinions – opinions that, by the way, are not shared by any of the Catholics in this caucus and certainly are not shared by me.

1:50

THE SPEAKER: The Minister of Economic Development to supplement this answer?

MR. NORRIS: Yes, Mr. Speaker. I have to rise as a devout Catholic all my life . . .

THE SPEAKER: No, please.
The hon. leader.

DR. PANNU: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My final supplementary to the Premier: why did the government enact this legislation that the bishop of Calgary says unfairly excludes from arbitration issues like pupil/teacher ratios, which certainly impact the workplace?

MR. KLEIN: Again, Bishop Henry doesn't obviously understand the complexities of this particular issue. One size does not fit all, Mr. Speaker, and there needs to be a long-term, detailed examination of this whole issue of pupil/teacher ratios, of sparsity and distance, of special-needs kids. A plethora of issues need to be examined in a straightforward and honest, open manner, and we need to take some time. By the way, I invite Bishop Henry: Bishop Henry, please, in the spirit of God and the Catholic church, will you participate with us to come to grips with what we do to make education sustainable rather than sending out these kinds of missives based on misinformation?

THE SPEAKER: To the Minister of Economic Development: if there was a point of privilege and the Minister of Economic Development would like to rise at the conclusion of question period, I would recognize him for such.

The hon. Member for Edmonton-Rutherford, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Glenarry.

Anthony Henday Drive and Deerfoot Trail

MR. McCLELLAND: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Over recent weeks there has been much public speculation as to the construction schedule of both the Deerfoot Trail and Anthony Henday Drive. I'm wondering if the Minister of Transportation

would set us straight on exactly what is happening concerning the construction timetable of the Anthony Henday and of the Deerfoot Trail?

Thank you.

THE SPEAKER: The hon. minister.

MR. STELMACH: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. In response to the question, the schedule for the Anthony Henday, which is part of the north/south trade corridor, is to have the Anthony Henday open to traffic by 2006. It will not be fully completed by 2006 because there will be a few interchanges to go in, but it will be open to traffic by 2006. The reason we'd like to expedite that is to work in co-operation with the city of Edmonton. The city has a number of major projects, as well, that will tie into the Anthony Henday. One of them is on Whitemud Drive. So once Anthony Henday is open to traffic, then they can start with their project on the Quesnell Bridge, I believe, and another project on Whitemud.

With respect to the Deerfoot extension, the bridge over the Bow and the Dunbow interchange are nearing completion. They'll be completed this construction season, and we will cap all of the grade. So then there's just a small area of the Deerfoot extension that isn't completed yet, but we've heard that the negotiations are now complete between the city of Calgary and CARMA. So that project will proceed. I'm not quite sure if they will be able to do it and start it in 2002, but certainly by 2003 we'd like to see that completed, the Deerfoot extension. The interchanges on the Deerfoot: we will expedite and try and do them as quickly as possible and ensure that all of them are done within a reasonable time frame.

MR. McCLELLAND: With regard to the Anthony Henday and the Whitemud freeway, why would we build the Anthony Henday without interchanges if building the Anthony Henday with interchanges would negate the necessity of widening the freeway?

MR. STELMACH: What we want to do is ensure that the Anthony Henday is open to traffic. The interchanges will be built, again, in co-operation with the city, because they have to move a fair amount of traffic, and they won't have a road to do it once they start their project on the Whitemud.

MR. McCLELLAND: Now to the same minister the really difficult question: who's going to pay for what?

MR. STELMACH: The Deerfoot and the Anthony Henday are fully the responsibility of the government of Alberta. We've also assumed full responsibility for the maintenance on the Deerfoot, and we will do the same on the Anthony Henday as part of the north/south trade corridor. The full cost of the construction will be borne by the province of Alberta.

THE SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Glengarry, followed by the hon. Member for Drayton Valley-Calmar.

Children with Special Needs

MR. BONNER: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. During question period on March 6 the Leader of the Official Opposition told the ministers of both Learning and Children's Services about a mother whose autistic child needs intensive behavioural intervention. Like many other parents this mother has been told by the Child Welfare Appeal Panel that her case is not in its jurisdiction, which means that her child has been denied the appropriate support. The Leader of the

Official Opposition also wrote a letter to the ministers of Children's Services and Learning to ask whose jurisdiction it is to address this case. To the Minister of Children's Services: why in over a month has the minister not responded to either a question or a written letter so that this mother of this child gets the help she needs?

MS EVANS: Mr. Speaker, we have actually been putting together the terms of reference with the expert panel and only this past week appointed a chairman. That has not been announced yet, but I can certainly announce today that Dr. Margaret Clarke has agreed to chair the expert panel. The information has been provided to the families, to the best of my knowledge, that we will be reviewing not only the programs for autism but all of the strategies for intensive behavioral interventions. There will actually be a thorough review.

And if I may take this opportunity, Mr. Speaker, yesterday in the House I advised that in terms of children who are receiving supports, resources for children with disabilities, the budget figure has increased from \$55 million to \$62 million. We are in fact providing more funds. Should there be some failure for this communication to reach the hon. member opposite, I apologize and will look into that. But clearly we have been advancing the case of children with special needs. It has taken some time because we were looking for some very well-placed people, knowledgeable in the industry but able to provide a thorough degree of input in our assessments, so that we can do this job properly.

THE SPEAKER: The hon. member.

MR. BONNER: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. To the Minister of Learning: why in over a month has the minister not responded either to a question or a written letter so that the mother of this child gets the help she needs?

DR. OBERG: Thanks. I believe that the Minister of Children's Services has just answered that question.

THE SPEAKER: The hon. member for Drayton Valley-Calmar, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview.

Diploma Exams

REV. ABBOTT: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I have received some calls from several members of my constituency, including students who are concerned about the upcoming diploma exams. Some who are writing the tests next week are concerned that the written sections of the biology and social studies exams have been removed, saying that this will not be as fair an assessment compared to last exams because they are better at the written portion of exams. Now, I've also heard from other students who say that these multiple-choice only tests will be easier and, therefore, are not fair to past writers. My questions are to the Minister of Learning. Why have these adjustments been made, and how will they affect students' marks?

DR. OBERG: Thank you very much for that excellent question. First of all and very briefly, the reason these adjustments have been made is because we had a very difficult time arranging for markers due to the Alberta Teachers' Association boycott of the Department of Learning. Mr. Speaker, what we have chosen to do is take out the written portion of the biology 30 and social 30 examinations – this accounted for roughly 30 percent of the exam – and we have replaced that with multiple-choice for the April examinations. The people in my department are one hundred percent excellent exam writers. They have been doing this for a long time, and they have

assured me that these exams, for those people who are wondering, will be just as tough, will not be easy. I feel that it is something that, unfortunately, we have to do. Diploma exams are necessary. If the ATA had not withdrawn their services, we wouldn't be doing this.

2:00

REV. ABBOTT: Well, as the Alberta Teachers' Association has encouraged teachers to withdraw their services from marking provincial exams, then who will mark the April diploma exams?

DR. OBERG: Mr. Speaker, in every discipline other than English 30 they will be mechanically marked, meaning that on the multiple-choice exams the marking will be done through a computer. For English 30 exams we do have roughly 50 to 60 exam markers who have qualified with our certification, and these are the people, whether they're from our department, whether they're from outside – we have some retired teachers; we have some PhDs from the universities – who have consented to mark. I even understand that there are some people in this very Legislature who are teachers who have consented to mark. I think that that's extremely important, and we are going to get through this. I continue to hope that we can go back to the situation we had which made us the number one jurisdiction in the world, the number one public education jurisdiction in the world, and I continue to hope that we go back to that.

THE SPEAKER: The hon. member.

REV. ABBOTT: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My second supplemental – and it's very important – to the same minister: considering the changes to the biology and social studies exams, will Alberta postsecondary institutions be accepting the grades from these exams?

DR. OBERG: Mr. Speaker, we have made contact with 18 of the provincial institutions, colleges and universities, and each one of these 18 institutions will be accepting the exams. We have not made contact with the four private university colleges yet. However, we anticipate that that will be occurring within a day or two. The quick answer to your question is, yes, they will be accepting them.

THE SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview, followed by the hon. Member for St. Albert.

Ambulance Services

DR. TAFT: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's been almost one year since the committee reviewing ambulance service was created. According to internal government documents, its report is already completed and its recommendations have been forwarded to the relevant ministers. My questions are to the Minister of Health and Wellness. How much longer must Albertans wait for this report?

MR. MAR: Mr. Speaker, the report prepared by the hon. Member for Calgary-*Buffalo* is an extensive one, and it does require some amount of effort for the three ministries that are affected by the recommendations in the report to deal with it. Those three departments are the Department of Human Resources and Employment, the Department of Municipal Affairs, and of course the Department of Health and Wellness.

We are in the process of examining it. There are some difficult issues to deal with because there is a patchwork of ambulance services across this province. Part of the difficulty is that some municipalities provide an excellent ambulance service and others don't provide any at all. One of the challenges, Mr. Speaker, will be how to ensure that whatever changes we make preserve the best of what we have and improve those areas where we are lacking.

THE SPEAKER: The hon. member.

DR. TAFT: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I can't imagine why the report has to be kept secret in the process.

Is the government prepared to act on the report's recommendation that ambulance services be funded provincially?

MR. MAR: Mr. Speaker, indirectly now they are, through grants to municipalities. Municipalities make the decisions as to what services they provide. To the best of my recollection – and perhaps I can be supplemented by the Minister of Municipal Affairs – the total bill that is covered by municipalities for ambulance services is in the range of \$40 million.

MR. BOUTILIER: Mr. Speaker, I would also like to indicate that in speaking to the Member for Calgary-*Buffalo* and also the Member for *Innisfail-Sylvan Lake*, one thing was for certain: they have spent so much time traveling this province consulting with our municipal stakeholders on this very important issue.

DR. TAFT: Well, I'm delighted they've done that. Why don't they release the report?

What is the government's position on the report's recommendation that ambulance services be subject to compulsory arbitration?

MR. MAR: Mr. Speaker, having not gone through the entire process of formulating our response to recommendations in the report, I can only say that the report has been well prepared. A great deal of work has been put into it, a great deal of effort by the members for *Innisfail-Sylvan Lake* and *Calgary-*Buffalo** but also by many stakeholders throughout the province. Much work has gone into this, but we have not yet formulated our response to the recommendations, so I cannot reply to that particular request of the hon. member.

THE SPEAKER: The hon. Member for *St. Albert*, followed by the hon. Member for *Edmonton-Ellerslie*.

Provincial Water Strategy

MRS. O'NEILL: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. People in my constituency are raising concerns about some of the recent media reports from Saskatchewan as well as from our own Minister of Environment that one possible way to better manage the safety and sustainability of our water supply is to increase the price people pay for water licences and water usage. My question is to the Minister of Environment. Is the province considering any policy which would substantially increase the price of water in Alberta?

THE SPEAKER: The hon. minister.

DR. TAYLOR: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Well, the simple answer to that is no, but I would just comment a little further and say that right now when people pay their water bills, whether they're for irrigation or in the city, they typically pay a conveyance fee. It's a conveyance fee to get the water to their house or to their irrigation farm. It is not a price on water. Typically, there is no price on water at the present time. So that answer still remains no.

As you know, Mr. Speaker, we have this water strategy that has been quite successful in attracting comment and discussion at a number of public meetings around the province. In fact, we originally scheduled 12 meetings. We've now had to schedule up to 15 meetings due to the demand for these. One of the issues that has

been raised by people at these meetings – it's not government policy – is that one could encourage conservation by putting some kind of price on water, but that's being raised by the public who are attending these meetings. This is not a government policy.

MRS. O'NEILL: While I understand that we're currently involved in the process of developing a provincial water strategy, is there currently any situation in the province where water is bought and sold like any other commodity?

THE SPEAKER: The hon. minister.

DR. TAYLOR: Yes, Mr. Speaker. Last year in the irrigation districts there was a trading of water, if I can call it that. As you know, Mr. Speaker, the irrigation districts, such as St. Mary, are granted one licence, and then they manage that licence inside the district.

To grow potatoes you need roughly 20 inches of water. Well, last year, for instance, St. Mary could only provide you 10 inches and me 10 inches, so what they would do is I would come to you, Mr. Speaker, and say, "Can I buy your 10 inches of water from you so that I can grow potatoes and you can grow a dryland crop?" You would kindly agree to that because of your kind nature, and then water traded in our area for up to \$150 an acre.

MRS. O'NEILL: Well, if water is treated essentially as a commodity in irrigation districts and through water co-operatives, what is to prevent this practice from leading to water exports or the buying and selling of water to the U.S. or other countries?

DR. TAYLOR: Simply put, Mr. Speaker, we have a law in Alberta that prevents the selling of water outside Alberta. It would be impossible for us to do. There's a law against that.

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

Calling Lake Fishing Zones

MS CARLSON: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The Official Opposition is on the record in several debates over many years demanding that the government take responsibility for fish stocks. Not surprisingly, at the 11th hour they are now making some attempt at action. The recently announced plan is for Calling Lake to be divided into fishing zones, with fishing being permitted only in the south end of the lake. This is quite typical of this government's policy: lofty goals but short on details. My questions are to the Minister of Sustainable Resource Development. Who is going to paint the line on the water so anglers know when they are in the north half of the lake and when they are in the south half? How can this ever possibly be enforced?

MR. CARDINAL: Of course, Mr. Speaker, only the Liberals would see something that negative in the very positive, innovative process that we are looking at. We know that there is a lot of pressure on the fish stocks in Alberta. We have only a thousand lakes that are fish-bearing lakes. We have 800 commercial fishermen that fish over 34,000 100-yard nets, and that is very hard to manage.

AN HON. MEMBER: How many, Mike?

2:10

MR. CARDINAL: Thirty-four thousand 100-yard nets. It's a \$5 million industry.

Then, on the other hand, we have the sports fishing industry,

which licenses over 300,000 fishermen. That's a \$350 million industry. Our economy is growing. Our population is growing. The demand is getting greater for our fish stocks, and we need to be very innovative in how we manage our lakes.

The specific project in Calling Lake is new and innovative. We're looking at how we can protect and enhance natural spawning grounds instead of depending on the fish hatcheries that are there. Although the fish hatcheries are doing a good job also, we feel that natural spawning grounds are probably the ideal way to enhance the fish stocks in those lakes, and that's exactly what Calling Lake is about.

At the suggestion of some commercial fishermen that are elders in the area to look at an innovative way of closing a portion of the lake by marking at the shorelines where the closure will take place and where it's going to be open – Mr. Speaker, it's an innovative way where natural spawning and stocking will take place. It's a good area also for nesting grounds for birds. Ducks Unlimited, in fact, yesterday said that they were fully supportive of that particular plan.

MS CARLSON: Mr. Speaker, this minister's own biologists don't agree with this plan. Why is he going ahead with it when his own technical staff tell him that it can't work?

MR. CARDINAL: Well, Mr. Speaker, we have over 2,000 staff in my department, and they do a heck of a job in managing our resources. Because there's some much pressure on our natural resources in the area of fisheries now, we have to be more innovative. It's something that hasn't been tried, but I know that the process has been tried in other jurisdictions, probably not in the inland lakes. Therefore, this plan will work.

THE SPEAKER: The hon. member.

MS CARLSON: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Can the minister tell us how many staff will be working to enforce and monitor this plan?

MR. CARDINAL: Mr. Speaker, of course, we are restructuring in our department, and we have over 100 conservation officers that can monitor this process. It's not a problem.

One thing to keep in mind. With these new processes in place, Albertans themselves will monitor the process. In fact, more than 99 percent of Albertans, I believe, are very, very honest. They wouldn't purposely break the law. They will no doubt follow what we've laid out.

THE SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands, followed by the Member for Red Deer-North.

Low-income Programs Review

MR. MASON: Thanks very much, Mr. Speaker. The minister of human resources has been sitting on the report and recommendations of the low-income programs review since last October. He's been promising to make them public almost as long. Implementing the approved recommendations from this review is a key strategy identified in the ministry's business plan. My question is to the Minister of Human Resources and Employment. Why does the minister continue to suppress the report and recommendations of the low-income programs review, especially in light of his repeated promises to make them public?

THE SPEAKER: The hon. minister.

MR. DUNFORD: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The MLA committee that was placed in charge of this exercise chaired by the MLA for Edmonton-Castle Downs did an excellent, excellent job, a very extensive review into all of the situations as they deal with low-income supports to Albertans, and has put together two reports. The first report is entitled *What We Heard*. Of course, upon its release that will provide, then, the opportunity for feedback to all of those various groups that did provide input. I understand that it was something like 6,500 Albertans who provided input, so it'll be very important for Albertans to see that the kinds of things that they had to say were in fact reported.

The second report is entitled *What We Recommend*. That is now the recommendation of that five-person MLA group. Again it'll be my responsibility to make sure, then, that we provide a government response to the recommendations of those reports.

The member is probably aware that there's an internal process that any minister of this government must go through. We are presently involved in the various stages of that internal process, and the member and other Albertans will see the reports imminently.

THE SPEAKER: The hon. member.

MR. MASON: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. How does the minister, then, expect this House to debate his budget estimates, which include the business plan, which includes reference to these reports, if we have not yet seen the report? How are we supposed to do that this afternoon, Mr. Minister?

MR. DUNFORD: Oh, I'm sure they'll find a way. We'll make sure that we provide as much information as we possibly can in terms of the questions that individual members might want to raise, and certainly as a minister I'll feel obligated to try to provide you with as much information as I can. Of course, at this point I'm not in a position to table those two reports.

THE SPEAKER: The hon. member.

MR. MASON: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It's a breathtaking disregard for the rights of this Assembly. What possible explanation can there be for this government's failure to publicly release the recommendations of the low-income programs review other than that the government has obviously decided to do squat for low-income people in Alberta and they want to keep that a secret as long as possible?

MR. DUNFORD: I think that on the floor of this House it's quite appropriate for members to speculate in whatever manner they wish. Again, I think we would revert to the situation of 6,500 Albertans who in fact took the time to make comments about the low-income support system that we have here in Alberta, which by the way, Mr. Speaker, is very extensive. In fact, we have some areas of support for low-income Albertans that are the . . . [interjections]

THE SPEAKER: The hon. minister has the floor.

MR. DUNFORD: Well, I'm sure the hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona in his time at university dealing with classes, when he tried to provide information, tried to provide some education, probably got interrupted a time or two as well, and of course the situation is happening here again today.

But a very extensive report, excellent recommendations, a process to be going through, and that's exactly what I'm doing. Now, I was designated, Mr. Speaker, this afternoon. Had they really shown the

concern that they wanted to make sure that the report was there, I have answered in question period previously that the release of those reports was imminent. There is a long period of time allowed for the debate of the estimates. You could have just as easily put me off for two weeks, but I'm here today and I'm prepared to stand in front of anybody in this House and defend the estimates, because what we're doing for low-income Albertans is right and it is proper.

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

Violent Offenders

MRS. JABLONSKI: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Sending violent offenders to jail for a period of time while their victims suffer a lifetime of physical and mental damage does not balance the scales of justice. The taxpayer is also a victim when they're required to pay for the offender's unproductive time while in jail and for the medical costs of the victim. My question is for the Minister of Justice. Should violent offenders be made to pay financially through some mechanism for their victims who suffer so badly that they become dependent on health care for a period of time or even for a lifetime?

MR. HANCOCK: Well, Mr. Speaker, under the Criminal Code there are provisions for offenders to pay restitution to victims of their crimes. Most often that's used in the area of property offences, but it can also be used in cases of bodily harm if that bodily harm and the damages caused can be ascertained easily. In addition, of course there are civil remedies that people have available to them, but that's not usually that productive because, I would hazard a guess, in most cases where serious and violent crimes occur, the people that are incarcerated have few resources and certainly don't have any income available to them while they're in jail.

Now, it's important to point out, however, that we do have in Alberta a great program operated by the Solicitor General, and she may wish to comment on our victims of crime fund which victims of crime can apply to for compensation. The money that goes into that fund of course comes from the surcharge on fines and penalties that are assessed. I know that's being reviewed, and the Solicitor General may want to supplement. Of course, she has also indicated that she is reviewing corrections services, and there may be some provision there for having offenders in our jails at least work and earn an income. But I think the biggest problem with the concept, while it might be an appropriate concept, is that prisoners would have to have resources in order to compensate victims, and too often that's not the case.

2:20

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

MRS. JABLONSKI: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My question refers more to the restitution to the taxpayer rather than to the victim, so my supplemental is: does retribution for a crime served through jail time paid for by the taxpayer while offenders are not required to pay any maintenance for their victims result in a fair and equitable justice system?

MR. HANCOCK: Well, there are many aspects, Mr. Speaker, to the concept of justice, and while we may be straying into the area of opinion here, in terms of policy it is our policy to make our communities safer by locking up violent people and by locking up the people who commit serious and violent crimes. Now, while most often the case that those would be in federal penitentiaries because on the provincial side we only have prisoners who serve two years

less a day, it still remains the same. The question is whether it's useful because the prisoners don't necessarily have the resources. If they do have the resources, in Alberta – and the hon. member will remember that last year we did pass an act in this House, the Victims Restitution and Compensation Payment Act. Under that act we do have the ability to take the proceeds of crime or to take property, with due process of the court, from a criminal and have it applied to a victim or have it go into the provincial coffers for other use, which in some small way does compensate the taxpayer for some of the activity that has happened.

THE SPEAKER: The hon. member.

MRS. JABLONSKI: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

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

On-the-Job Training Programs

MR. MacDONALD: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. This past January the Minister of Human Resources and Employment was made aware that over 34,000 taxpayer dollars were funneled between 1997 and the year 2000 into Wrenchmen Automotive, a business with alleged links to the Hell's Angels. The money was provided through training-on-the-job programs operated under the Canada/Alberta agreement on labour market development. The Liberal leader wisely asked the minister to conduct an investigation into this matter. All my questions are to the Minister of Human Resources and Employment this afternoon. Why do the public accounts show that in 1999 only \$10,700 was provided when training-on-the-job contracts released through FOIP show that \$20,460 was the amount allocated for that year?

MR. DUNFORD: I would ask the hon. member, with the information that he has for his question, to either send it over to us directly and we'll look into it, or if he wants to write a memo about it, that would be fine. We'll be glad to look into it. I, of course, don't have the information in front of me to be able to respond to the question.

THE SPEAKER: The hon. member.

MR. MacDONALD: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Again to the same minister: how many other problems have been identified with money provided under the Canada/Alberta agreement on labour market development for programs that are similar to this one?

MR. DUNFORD: Well, he's asking, Mr. Speaker, about other problems. One of the things that has been ongoing within our department for quite a period of time in terms of the labour market development agreements has been working with the Auditor General in terms of the audit itself and to try to provide some management tools under the ongoing contracts. We of course have been making some strides in that area. I think that in any reasonable review of the Auditor General's reports over the last number of years that I've been responsible for this ministry, we see the acknowledgment of improvements in that particular area.

Again, in terms of his actual question, though, about the number, I sense that there's another shoe to drop here with the next supplemental question so would just simply ask him again: to provide whatever information that he is requesting, simply send us a request for that.

THE SPEAKER: The hon. member.

MR. MacDONALD: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Again to the same minister: given that the Alberta Liberal leader, as I said before, wisely asked the minister to have the Auditor General conduct an investigation into this matter, when will the results of that investigation be made public?

MR. DUNFORD: Well, the hon. leader of the Liberal Party is in fact a wise person, and it's not unusual in any sense that he should ask a wise question. I suspect that there's been some benefit now due to the hon. member for having phrased the question in that particular manner.

Once again, it looks like he has some good information there, and I think we need to get the situation resolved, because we've been working very, very hard on these agreements, and we need to make sure that we're all the way home on that.

THE SPEAKER: Hon. members, prior to the recognition of the first of several hon. members to participate in Members' Statements, might we have unanimous consent to revert briefly to Introduction of Guests?

[Unanimous consent granted]

head: **Introduction of Guests**
(reversion)

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

MR. DUNFORD: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. In the gallery today we have a class of schoolchildren from my constituency, the Dr. Gerald Probe school. It's my understanding that there are 47 students accompanied by six parents and an undisclosed number of teachers. I would like for you and for all the Members of this Legislative Assembly to show a warm welcome to those people that we have here today from Lethbridge, Alberta.

head: **Members' Statements**

THE SPEAKER: The hon. Member for West Yellowhead.

Edson Atoms Edson Credit Union Canadians Edson Legion Sabres

MR. STRANG: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm very pleased to say that Canada's national sport is alive and well in West Yellowhead. During the week of March 16 the Edson Atoms earned a hard-fought-for silver medal in the Sturgeon-Pembina atom B2 league playoffs in Sangudo. This medal is a tribute to their never-quit attitude and good sportsmanship.

On the same weekend the Edson Credit Union Canadians won gold in their tournament at the Sturgeon-Pembina atom B league playoffs. They were undefeated in tournament action in Linaria.

Last but not least, the Edson Legion Sabres scored the winning goal on home ice on March 24 and won the provincial midget A tournament. As a number of players will be moving on after this season, the hometown win was an added bonus for them.

The game of hockey provides our young people with the opportunity to learn and practise leadership, teamwork, and discipline. All these young people have been outstanding ambassadors for the West Yellowhead region. I am pleased that they were representing us.

I would ask all members to join me in recognizing these Alberta athletes, their volunteer coaches and managers, as well as parents, families, and friends who support them all. Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

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

Provincial Fiscal Policies

MR. MASON: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. The Tory government pretends that it knows what it's doing when it comes to fiscal management. However, Tory fiscal management is just that: a game of pretend. Their philosophy is based on helping those who don't need assistance while abandoning those who do.

One needs simply to look at the recent budget fiascos to understand their style of management. Days after unilaterally breaking an agreement with Edmonton and Calgary regarding transportation spending and only after the real threat of litigation, the government magically found \$155 million to make the problem go away. Days later, after poisoning relations with Alberta's teachers, the Learning minister claimed that there was not enough money in the kitty to allow ambitious grade 10 students to take as many courses as they would like. After a justified public outcry the money suddenly reappeared. In a true insult to Albertans this government conveniently doled out \$4 billion in utility rebates mere months before the last election.

2:30

I don't want to give the impression, Mr. Speaker, that these were isolated slipups on the part of the government. In fact, the problem is much more entrenched. In an eight-year period the government managed to misestimate revenue by over \$21 billion. This is a deliberate policy allowing the government to plead poverty in the early part of the term and to appear as financial geniuses for finding hidden surpluses year after year. By giving away \$1.5 billion in tax breaks to the richest Albertans and \$1 billion in tax cuts for already profitable corporations and, worst of all, by consistently underestimating revenue, this government has put important core services at risk.

When the New Democrat opposition asks about education funding, transportation funding, and support for important programs like the community lottery board, we are consistently given the same response: wait and see if oil and gas prices stay high, and then maybe we'll throw a bone to Alberta's families. Should grade 10 students check the business section of the morning paper to see whether commodity prices are high enough to pay for their education? Should Albertans plan family outings . . . [Mr. Mason's speaking time expired]

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

National Wildlife Week

MS CARLSON: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Climate is Changing; Help Wildlife Weather the Storm. That is the theme of this year's national wildlife conservation week. As legislators it is very important that we take the time to consider how the policies, regulations, and laws that we discuss in this Assembly affect wildlife. We are all aware of the balancing act required in Alberta. We have a wealth of oil, gas, and forests that can and do provide immense material wealth. We also have ecosystems that can be quickly destroyed by irresponsible development, emission levels set according to profit margins, and inefficient use of water.

Alberta is also facing the challenges of the Kyoto agreement. To

address climate change and help wildlife weather the storm, the government must be committed to policies that are grounded in scientific studies. We need research that takes into account baseline levels and cumulative impacts. Short-term results are important, but we must realize that industrial and commercial developments will continue to impact the environment long after we have left this Assembly.

The effects of climate change and increasing temperatures have been documented in Alberta wildlife. The increasing temperature and decreasing levels of water in our lakes and rivers are affecting fish stocks. When fish stocks decline, the ecosystem of the body of water changes, and the effects spread to birds and other animals that feed off the fish. Shorter, drier winters are also causing havoc in our forests. While some people see forest fire as only a loss of merchantable timber, there are also animals that die as a direct result of the fire or indirectly as a result of lost habitat. Alberta's fossil fuel economy has a significant impact on climate change.

It's time for investment in new technologies and new ideas. Climate change is real, and we have to accept some responsibility. The laws of this Assembly must not focus only on dollars and economic growth. Our decisions affect water levels, air quality, and wildlife habitat. National wildlife conservation week gives us an opportunity to broaden our perspective and consider more fully the impacts of our decisions.

THE SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Drayton Valley-Calmar.

Drayton Valley Thunder Junior Hockey Team

REV. ABBOTT: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise today to recognize the solid efforts of the Drayton Valley Thunder junior hockey team, who last night defeated the Grande Prairie Storm to win the Alberta junior A hockey championships four games to zero. Led by the solid goaltending of rookie goaltender Clint Chalmers and high-scoring veterans like Jade Galbraith, the Thunder walked into Grande Prairie and beat the home team by a score of 8 to 3. Before playing Grande Prairie, Drayton Valley beat teams from Fort Saskatchewan, Sherwood Park, and Olds to earn the right to play for the championship.

As the MLA for Drayton Valley-Calmar I want to extend my best wishes and congratulations to coach Ian Kallay and all of the members of the Thunder, who have represented Drayton Valley admirably over the course of this year. The team has only been in existence for four years, and although it is comprised of players from all over the province and one from as far away as Anchorage, Alaska, our whole community of 6,000 people has taken these guys in as their own, and they have responded by bringing a championship home to Drayton Valley.

I also want to note that this past summer the Drayton Valley council agreed to join the International Association of Character Cities. Drayton Valley is the first community in Canada to join this association. Right here we have a fine example of a group of young men who have shown character and determination by winning the Alberta junior A championship, and their season isn't over, Mr. Speaker. Beginning April 19 in Drayton Valley, the Thunder will play the British Columbia junior champions in the best of seven series for the Doyle Cup. Then when they win the Doyle Cup, the team will travel to Halifax in May to compete in the national junior A championships.

I again want to congratulate everyone involved in the Thunder organization and ask all members of this Assembly to cheer them on as they do Alberta proud.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

head: Presenting Petitions

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

DR. PANNU: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise to present a petition signed by 500 Albertans requesting the Assembly to urge the government "to support the establishment of Chinchaga Wilderness as a legislated protected area."

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

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

MR. MASON: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I would like to present a petition signed by 115 residents of Edmonton, many from the Edmonton-Highlands constituency, petitioning the Legislative Assembly "to urge the government to not delist services, raise health care premiums, introduce user fees or further privatize health care."

head: Notices of Motions

THE SPEAKER: The hon. Deputy Government House Leader.

MR. ZWOZDESKY: Thank you. Mr. Speaker, I rise pursuant to Standing Order 34(2)(a) to give notice that on Monday I will move that written questions appearing on the Order Paper do stand and retain their places.

I'm also giving notice that on Monday I will move that motions for returns appearing on that day's Order Paper do also stand and retain their places.

Thank you.

head: Tabling Returns and Reports

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

DR. PANNU: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. As promised earlier this afternoon, I'm tabling appropriate copies of the pastoral letter by Bishop Henry of Calgary. It's a reaction to Bill 12.

I have two other tablings, Mr. Speaker. Both of these are letters written on April 10 and addressed to the Premier. They come from Fort Macleod, one by Harry Urwin and the second one by Georgina Lawrence-Donald, both expressing grave concern about the rumours that the Fort Macleod hospital either might be closed or the services might be severely curtailed. They're appealing to the Premier to take action on it and make sure this doesn't happen.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

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

MR. MASON: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I'm tabling five copies of a letter from the Edmonton Community Lottery Board addressed to the Minister of Gaming. The board is urging the minister to expeditiously process the funding applications which have fallen through the cracks, and they are identified as the Citadel Theatre, the Kenilworth facility upgrade for the ice arena, and the Edmonton Police Service for a police gym.

Thank you.

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

MR. MacDONALD: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I have three tablings this afternoon for the benefit of all hon. members of this Assembly. The first one is a notice to all Workers' Compensation Board employees on how to proceed to join a union, the

Canadian Union of Public Employees. This is a meeting that's going to take place at the Inn on 7th, quite handy to the WCB headquarters.

The second tabling I have this afternoon is another proclamation, a letter regarding Bill 207, which was the Alberta Personal Income Tax (Tools Credit) Amendment Act, 2001. It is urging cabinet to have this act proclaimed immediately, and it's signed by Bill Fraser, Kevin Johnson, and several other individuals.

My third tabling this afternoon, Mr. Speaker, is copies of a petition that has been organized again by Mr. Darby Mahon of Edmonton-Gold Bar. It is a petition supporting public and separate schoolteachers in their long, extended contract negotiations with their provincial government.

Thank you very much.

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

DR. MASSEY: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I have, with your permission, two tablings this afternoon. The first is a letter from Joanne Cuthbertson in Calgary-Currie to the Premier indicating her concern with the cynicism that's growing among Alberta parents with children in public schools based on the lack of government action to resolve the issues that face public schools.

The second is five copies of a subsequent letter from Joanne Cuthbertson to the Premier indicating her dissatisfaction with the circumstances that continue for our children and their families and teachers in Alberta schools.

2:40

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

MS CARLSON: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. On behalf of the Leader of the Official Opposition I would like to table the appropriate number of copies of a petition supporting services to persons with developmental disabilities in Alberta signed by 60 people who live in Calgary and other parts of southern Alberta.

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

MS BLAKEMAN: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I have a number of tablings today. I'll go through as quickly as I can. The first is a letter from John Reid of Calgary directed towards the Premier regarding the dissolution of the community lottery boards. He notes: "Not only is the Alberta Foundation for the Arts underfunded . . . now the government deletes this other positive program that at least allows non-profits to buy hard cost items."

The next tabling is from Shauna Kennedy, also of Calgary, directed to the Member for Calgary-Buffalo. She asks him "to take immediate action to help reverse the decision to do away with the [community lottery boards]. They are vital to the survival of the many organizations, including EMMEDIA," all contributing to the Alberta advantage.

The next is a letter that's directed to the Alberta Council on Aging from Edwin and Chris Callaghan. They note that the recent elimination of the extended health benefits for seniors wasn't much, but it helped reduce their bills, and this is going to leave them without any resources.

I have the correct number of brochures from the Candora Society of Edmonton, who spoke at the rally today for the community lottery boards. Candora stands for Can Do in Rundle and Abbottsfield. These are communities in Edmonton.

Finally, Mr. Speaker, I'd like to table five copies of a media release from the Edmonton Community Lottery Board announcing the dissolution of their board effective May 31 and regretting the withdrawal of the program.

Thank you very much.

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

DR. TAFT: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I have one tabling today, and it's done with permission. It's a letter from a constituent who is a tax adviser, and it comes with attachments expressing serious concern about public confusion over Bill 207, the Alberta Personal Income Tax (Tools Credit) Amendment Act, 2001.

Thank you.

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

MRS. O'NEILL: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I wish to table today a letter addressed to me from Mrs. Joan Trettler, who is the chair of the board of trustees of St. Albert Protestant schools, in which she asked me to table this letter with respect to the concern around Bill 12.

THE SPEAKER: The hon. Minister of Economic Development.

MR. NORRIS: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. On this glorious Alberta day I rise to table the appropriate number of copies of excerpts of a speech yesterday from the president of IBM Canada, who has chosen Edmonton and Alberta to set up their e-business. I'd like to read a small excerpt of why they made that decision: what stands out is the many ways in which . . .

THE SPEAKER: Hon. minister, if you're tabling it, there's really no need to read anything. All members will have a copy.

Thank you.

MR. NORRIS: I will table it because they chose Alberta because of the positive business environment.

THE SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Little Bow.

MR. McFARLAND: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'd like to table the appropriate number of copies of a letter received from one of my constituents, Angie Stober. She outlines her unequivocal support for the government's position on dealing with the pending arbitration process. Interesting reading.

head: **Projected Government Business**

THE SPEAKER: The hon. Official Opposition House Leader.

MS CARLSON: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. We would ask that the government share next week's projected government business with us at this time.

THE SPEAKER: The hon. Government House Leader.

MR. HANCOCK: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. As all members will know, we will continue throughout next week in Committee of Supply, but to be more specific: Monday at 9 p.m. under Government Bills and Orders Government Motion 23 with respect to the confirmation of the appointment of the Auditor General; then under second reading bills 22, 16, and 20; Committee of the Whole, Bill 11; and as per the Order Paper.

On Tuesday, April 16, in the afternoon under Government Bills and Orders in Committee of Supply the main estimates of Sustainable Resource Development will be considered, and then at 8 p.m. under Government Bills and Orders in Committee of Supply the main estimates of Infrastructure. Time permitting, Bill 23, Bill 16,

Bill 20, and others as per the Order Paper may be considered.

On Wednesday, April 17, under Government Bills and Orders in the afternoon, day 11 of 24 of Committee of Supply, with the Department of Energy being considered. At 8 p.m. under Government Bills and Orders, again in Committee of Supply, the main estimates of Agriculture, Food and Rural Development. Time permitting, second readings of bills 21, 23, 24, 25, and as per the Order Paper.

On Thursday, April 18, in the afternoon under Government Bills and Orders, day 13 of Committee of Supply main estimates, with the Department of Environment presenting their estimates and thereafter as per the Order Paper.

THE SPEAKER: Hon. members, the chair was advised earlier this afternoon, as all hon. members will appreciate, that the hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie wishes to rise on a purported question of privilege. Hon. members might follow under Standing Order 15.

Privilege

Contempt of the Assembly

MS CARLSON: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I am rising on a point of privilege this afternoon against the Minister of Finance and the Premier under Standing Order 15. More specifically, we believe that a contempt of the Assembly has occurred by the Minister of Finance because she was responsible for the Financial Administration Act and by the Premier because as President of Executive Council he is ultimately responsible for noncompliance with legislation. He has also exhibited full knowledge of this noncompliance over the past two days of questions to him on the Swan Hills waste treatment plant. The contempt that we will be discussing is a breach of the Financial Administration Act, specifically section 42, with regard to the operation of the Swan Hills waste treatment plant.

The Financial Administration Act in section 42(2) states that the government may not purchase shares or enter into a joint venture or partnership unless that transaction is specifically authorized by an act or a subsisting regulation that was in force before the commencement of that section. We have seen no regulations come through, nor has the Premier or the Finance minister referred to those in any questions asked of them. Shares include "any equity . . . or interest in the capital, property, profits or earnings of a corporation."

The Special Waste Management Corporation Act was repealed in 1997, and under the Interpretation Act a bylaw is not considered to be a regulation. In dealing with this point of privilege, there may be some discussion about a bylaw giving them an exemption from bringing this deal before the House, but according to the Interpretation Act a bylaw is not the same as a regulation, so this particular loophole does not apply in this particular case. The government is also prohibited under section 42 of the Financial Administration Act from bringing an appropriation bill or estimate that would involve the Crown entering into a joint venture or share transaction unless the transaction is authorized by the act. We'll see that in the last two years of budget estimates it has occurred where there have been line items speaking to dollars in the act.

We've heard arguments over time by the Premier saying that there is nothing he can do about the amount of money required to pay down the debt each year because it is written in law. Well, the Financial Administration Act is also law. In section 42 it states that before getting back into the business of being in business, the deal must be brought to the Assembly for full debate.

We have included in our package both to you, Mr. Speaker, and to the Government House Leader a great deal of information laying out the history of this plant and instances that we believe justify that this breach has occurred going back as far as the year 2000 in

October. There's a press release in here talking about reaction to Bovar's announcement for the plant that would be given back to the government for \$1. It's our opinion that when that transaction occurred, we saw the first breach happen.

2:50

We asked for independent audits. We talked about at least \$442 million in Swan Hill losses. We gave the government other options for dealing with the hazardous waste treatment plant; specifically, seven of them. In *Hansard* of last year, in May of 2002, we again raised questions about this and the finances of the Swan Hills plant, and we asked for information to a written question, which was then denied to us by the Minister of Sustainable Resource Development.

There have been recent articles in the newspaper about this particular facility being back in the business. Specifically, as part of a budget of tough choices, the government has chosen to include \$26 million for operating expenses and \$2 million for capital investment in this plant. Clearly a breach under the act. Articles in newspapers have attributed the following information from the spokesperson for Alberta Infrastructure, David Bray: that the government would not release quarterly figures for the plant and that the government does not have an obligation to release information because the plant was privately owned for a number of years. These are indications that the government is now back in the business, which has been also confirmed by the Premier in his responses to questions yesterday. Any losses or profits resulting from this are borne by the taxpayers, and they have a right to full disclosure in terms of what's happening and a right to decide what has happened.

We see the annual report for 2000 stating that despite significant cost reductions and the campaigning of the Swan Hills Treatment Centre, there was not sufficient hazardous waste flowing to the centre to maintain it as a viable operation. They go on to talk about how waste is handled and that the facility operated on an as-needed basis, further evidence of the need for a full debate of the issue so that the people of the province can decide if the government should participate in this business in accordance with the act under discussion.

In summary, Mr. Speaker, our key points are that the financial viability of this plant has long been in question; Albertans are split on the issue. The government has resisted attempts of the Official Opposition to obtain information about this operation, having said several times, on one hand, that they would provide it and then denying it. Taxpayers are already into this deal for over \$500 million including cleanup costs. It is our role as Official Opposition to examine government operations and policies and offer alternatives. Without full disclosure we cannot perform our elected function. The responsibility of the Premier is to uphold his own laws, which means, in this particular case, bringing the choice for this decision, to be in business or not to be in business to operate this plant, before the Legislature so that we can have full and open debate and so that the people of the province actually know what is occurring and can participate on a fully informed basis, where they can let their views be known to all of us.

The Minister of Finance as the minister responsible for the Financial Administration Act has a responsibility to bring this forward. We believe that the terms of the Financial Administration Act are clear in this regard.

The Special Waste Management Corporation Act was repealed in 1997, so we believe that a breach has occurred twice: once when the government took back ownership from Bovar and again when they went into an agreement with Sensor Environmental to operate this and to continue to fund this plant in this province. They've tried to consider some corporation bylaws as regulations in this case. We believe that under the Interpretation Act the bylaw is not considered a regulation. Under section 42(3) the government is also prohibited

from bringing in an appropriation bill or estimate that would involve the Crown entering into a joint venture or shared transaction unless the transaction is authorized by an act. For two years now there have been line items in the Infrastructure budget for the operation of the plant, and I refer you specifically to this year's budget, program 2.1.12. These line items were not present when Bovar had 100 percent control over the plant. The reappearance of this budget item indicates that the government is back in the business of being in business.

Lastly, I would refer to a statement made by the Premier in 1996 regarding the spirit of the act, where he stated:

We're tying our hands . . . because [this] government is now out of the business . . . of loans, guarantees, and investments to business, period . . . From now on if any of these kinds of deals are to be made, they must be made right here in the Legislature and before the eyes of the public.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

THE SPEAKER: Hon. Government House Leader, as the details of this point of privilege have just begun to unfold in the last couple of minutes and as the individuals who are cited in this point of privilege are not here, perhaps the hon. Government House Leader would want to wait until Monday before making a formal response. But if he wishes to proceed now, that's fine too.

MR. HANCOCK: I was prepared to make a few comments but was going to ask precisely for that. This is a very detailed question of privilege. While I'd be delighted to deal with some of the issues that have been raised off the cuff, it would be more appropriate, because of the nature of the question raised, to be able to deal with it fully and completely in a discussion on Monday.

THE SPEAKER: Agreed.

head: **Orders of the Day**

head: **Government Bills and Orders**

THE SPEAKER: The hon. Deputy Government House Leader.

MR. ZWOZDESKY: Thank you. Mr. Speaker, after continuing communication on this issue with the Official Opposition and the third party, I would first seek the unanimous consent of the Assembly to waive Standing Order 58(4) to allow this afternoon's consideration of the estimates of the Department of Human Resources and Employment to go beyond two hours, with the vote on these 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 shall call the committee to order.

head: **Main Estimates 2002-03**

Human Resources and Employment

THE DEPUTY CHAIR: As per the Standing Order the first hour is allocated between the minister responsible and opposition members, following which any other member will be able to rise and speak to the estimates.

The hon. minister.

MR. DUNFORD: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I, of course, am here this afternoon to present the 2002-03 estimates for Human Resources and Employment. Now, this ministry has four components. We have, of course, the department itself, Human Resources and Employment, but we're also responsible for the Alberta Labour Relations Board, the personnel administration office, and the Workers' Compensation Board. Now, ladies and gentlemen, I'm asking for \$1.061 billion to support the work of the first three entities. The WCB is entirely financed by employer premiums and is not a part of these budget estimates.

First, the Department of Alberta Human Resources and Employment. Within this department we have three components: people, skills, and workplaces. Our first range of programs is people investments, and you can see that in program 2 of the estimates document. Expenditures will be about \$742 million, about 4.4 percent more than last year, and that is about two-thirds of the department's overall spending. Supports for independence come into this area. The SFI program provides financial benefits and helps people get skills and experience for work. It provides earning exemptions to ensure that people are better off working. Twenty-eight thousand families need supports for independence to cover their basic living costs, but let me tell you about some of these people.

3:00

In central Alberta this year a financial benefits worker received a call from a client that she had served actually a number of years earlier. The caller was actually hiding in a rural area. Her husband was in jail, and she had no food. She had been abused. The worker dealt with police, victims' services, a landlord, community agencies, and others, and within a month her client had a new, safe place to live. Now, this woman still has a long way to go, but she has a chance now for a new life.

It happened in north Edmonton as well. A client receiving supports for independence believed she could not work because she had poor physical health. She attended a HOPE workshop provided by career and employment counselors, and it helped her see her possibilities instead of her limitations. She is now enrolled in call-centre training and is looking forward to starting employment. We helped this client get a new lease on life, and I'm sure that the chairman that today is overseeing these activities would appreciate stories like this, based on his background of an extensive career in social services.

People in need can also include people with disabilities. The assured income for the severely handicapped, well known as AISH, is among the most generous programs of its type in the country. The caseload has been rising by 7 percent a year, about 2,000 people, as a result of a growing and aging population. In the year ahead we will provide about \$361 million in financial and medical benefits to about 30,000 Albertans, and this is an increase of \$26 million. Even with fiscal restraint across government our programs protect Albertans who need it most, and we will always give people a hand up, but we are prepared to consider whether we can spend resources better. We have asked Albertans whether social programs are doing all that they could be doing. This spring the government will respond to recommendations of the MLA committee that reviewed low-income programs, and I'm sure that the hon. members here in the House today representing the third party will be glad to get up and question me at some length on those particular areas.

We have also told eligible families about the Alberta child health benefit, a program for low-income working families. It provides premium-free medical benefits for children. Prescription drugs, basic glasses, dental work, and diabetic supplies are covered. Each

child receives about \$260 a year in medical benefits. This, by the way, is less than one month's welfare benefits, so their parents do not need to quit their jobs to go on assistance to meet medical needs.

Another important program is family maintenance. It helps single parents and parents in blended families get child support orders or agreements. Receiving child support payments can mean the difference between a family being independent or needing to turn to the provincial government for support. Last year the program helped 23,000 clients. Programs like family maintenance and the child health benefit are triple wins: wins for children, wins for parents, and wins for taxpayers.

The second area that is key, in our view, is the skills investment area. These are programs that help move people into workplaces. There are nearly 1.7 million Albertans working. Unemployment rates are at about 5 percent. Average weekly earnings continue to rise, and employers are finding it a challenge to attract all of the skilled workers they need. This year my department will devote over a quarter of a billion dollars to ensuring that there are trained people for jobs and jobs for people.

Those investments include the skills development program. Let me tell you about a 21 year old in Red Deer. She had dropped out of school in grade 10. She was unemployed. She wanted to do better and started with academic upgrading. It was quite a struggle for her, as you can imagine. In fact, staff even helped with tutoring so that she would get through her grade 12. She then registered at Red Deer College. She'll be graduating from the legal assistant program this year and is assured of getting a good job. The skills development program gave her a second chance.

There are others who want a first chance. Many Albertans with disabilities will tell you that their biggest barrier to employment is not their disability itself but the attitudes of other people about their disability. Let me tell you about a college graduate in management studies and rehabilitation practice. She is a full-time employee with the city of Edmonton, and she's blind. The disability-related employment supports program – the acronym for that is DRES – provided \$7,000 worth of computer hardware, some software that reads aloud, and a scanner. That sum, equal to eight months of AISH benefits, has actually helped her move into the workforce, and of course she's not on AISH. This year we will invest \$7.3 million in DRES and the supports for associations that help people: people with disabilities who want to work and employers who see ability first and disability second.

Now, yesterday I was presented with the minister's Employability Council report – this was chaired by the hon. Member for Olds-Didsbury-Three Hills – and we'll be responding to its recommended strategies. We will help people get the skills and experience they need to be successful.

The summer temporary employment program will provide summer jobs to about 3,800 Albertans. Under the \$113 million labour market development agreement with the federal government Alberta delivers career services to employment insurance clients. That agreement helped a man in Donalda who had been laid off from the oil industry. The self-employment program meant that he could get employment insurance benefits while he started a new business. He built a plasma welding and creative metal fabrication company. He is now patenting a new invention, has two full-time employees, and subcontracts to several shops in the area.

In a network of offices across the province we help people who visit our labour market information centres, career development centres, and Canada/Alberta service centres. These offices help people be successful at work with a seminar on how to find a job or information on why one career path suits one person better than another career path might.

We're running an ad campaign right now called Click, Call, Come in, to show the many ways you can get information about careers learning and employment. People can click on our ALIS web site. I have a sweater that has that web site down a sleeve. Unfortunately I'm not able to wear it today, but for the information of all members, that web site is www.alis.gov.ab.ca, or any member of the House that's thinking of a career change can call the career information hot line at 1-800-661-3753 or come into our offices across the province. So there you have it: click, call, come in.

We have another way for people to get service. Now, listen to this. We actually go out and talk to them. Careers in motion is a career-related motor home, like a bookmobile, only built for looking for work and training. Originally the vehicle was an air quality testing unit used by the Environment department, and we've all seen that unit up and down the highways in Alberta. Well, now it's going to have a little different look to it. It was purchased by our department. Clients in the Slave Lake Alberta Job Corps repaired and refurbished the unit. The exterior was painted and covered with decals last month. So if you're on Alberta highways this summer and you see a big multicoloured vehicle with the stickers "geologists rock" and "I heart resumes," meaning of course "I love resumes," our staff inside are going to help people be successful at work. We're really excited about the ability of this government to get out from under the dome and to get out to where Albertans are and carry these services to them.

3:10

Now, we also provide skills to Albertans, and we are also part of Alberta workplaces. Employment standards ensure that employers and employees have balanced rights and responsibilities. We received an e-mail three weeks ago from an entire family. Their son had not been paid wages he was owed. Employment standards investigated, and the teenager now has the money that he had earned. He also has an important life lesson: family and government can work together and solve problems.

In employment standards and other workplace enforcement areas of the department our approach is to first educate and then enforce a regulation. So we want to first educate, then regulate. Our officers are in restaurants, retail outlets, autobody shops, factories, and hotels across the province. They provide training on how to calculate overtime and holiday benefits or how to arrange shifts in compressed work weeks or how late a 16 year old can work at a gas station. Employers and unions who receive training and information from our staff have said that our officers helped clarify their obligations and ensure a better workplace. We will devote \$4.4 million to employment standards initiatives this year so that we can continue to help people and workplaces be fair.

We also want Alberta workplaces to be safe. This year's business plan sets my personal challenge to Albertans: reduce the workplace injury rate by 40 percent over the next three years and keep 15,000 lives from shattering. I have talked with families who lost a parent to occupational disease, and I've talked with families who lost someone because of what somebody called an accident. We're going to remove the word "accident" from the English language as far as we in Human Resources and Employment are concerned. There are no accidents. All workplace injuries and fatalities can be prevented.

I am challenging Alberta workers and employers to change. I've asked for advice from 15 Alberta businesspeople and employee representatives about how to make their work sites safer. They will send me a proposal shortly. I am asking members today for their ideas. On May 8 at the workplace safety 2.0 forum in Edmonton I will ask more than 100 Albertans what they are prepared to do to make workplaces safer. The target is clear: reduce injury rates and save lives.

The final component of our workplace investments is labour relations. Mediators are on call, ready to help with formal labour negotiations, and our facilitators are involved in helping make workplace relations more balanced and productive. Let me tell you the difference a facilitator can make. A transit worker was injured and could not return to his old job. He identified a position he would like, but the employer did not agree. The case ended up as a human rights complaint against the union and a grievance against the employer. A facilitator was called in. He identified some common ground and showed that the worker, union, and employer all had different understandings of the employer's duty to accommodate. With the facilitator clarifying each group's obligations and some additional information about the identified position, the grievance was resolved. The case did not progress to an outright battle, and the worker is back on the job. It was a win/win scenario for both the worker and the employer.

The second component is the Alberta Labour Relations Board. It uses dispute resolution practices as part of its daily routine. These efforts result in fewer disputes going to formal hearing, which lowers costs and makes for a better result. Last year 53 percent of applications were resolved without formal adjudication.

The third and final component of the ministry is the personnel administration office, or PAO. It is the government's central human resource agency. PAO's budget of \$8 million supports the work it does to build a strong public service.

As an employer we face the challenge of changing demographics. About a third of our employees are over age 50, and many are near retirement. We must ensure that we have employees ready to replace those who retire, employees who have high skill levels, solid knowledge bases, and a commitment to ongoing development. As we come out of the recent hiring freeze, we are focusing our efforts on recruiting and retaining skilled workers, knowledge transfer, and succession planning. We want to bring new people to the public service like students and recent graduates. Our internship program provides opportunities to these individuals looking to begin their careers.

The Alberta public service offers incredible potential for growth and development along with challenging and interesting work. We continue to have a positive relationship with the Alberta Union of Provincial Employees, and we are in the first year of a new three-year agreement that expires in 2004. Our employees value their work. Our most recent survey shows that 84 percent of staff are satisfied with their jobs in the public service.

We place great importance on providing the supports our employees need to acquire and develop the knowledge and skills to do their jobs successfully. We involve our employees in our business planning process and help them to understand how their work contributes to the achievement of the business plan goals. We keep our employees informed about changes that will impact their jobs and work, and we provide expected outcomes on the employees' work and recognition for their contributions.

In a recent briefing the Conference Board of Canada stated that the impact of leadership cannot be understated when building a strong public service. They go on to cite the Alberta example of the deputy-led corporate human resource development strategy as the leading practice in this regard. We have a proud reputation here in Alberta of setting our own course and leading the way. The members of our public service have risen to the challenges placed before them, and today we are respected as one of the best public service organizations in the country, an honour that has been hard earned.

The Ministry of Human Resources and Employment has been an active part of thousands of Albertans' lives over the year and will

continue on in the year ahead. We make a difference to individual people every day in communities across the province.

I look forward to hearing any comments and questions from hon. members about these estimates. For any budget-related questions that I don't answer today, I will provide the Legislature with written answers.

THE DEPUTY CHAIR: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

MR. MacDONALD: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. It's a pleasure to participate in the estimates debate this afternoon regarding the budget for this fiscal year for Human Resources and Employment, or as an AISH client at a rally I attended at a church a couple of weeks ago stated, "It's the Department of Human Resources and Nonenjoyment," because AISH levels are far too low, and there has not been, certainly, an adequate adjustment made to compensate for inflation in the last number of years.

The hon. minister has pointed out that it's a program that is unique, but it certainly is not the only program of its kind in the country. We need to improve it.

At this time, as I understand it, Mr. Chairman, the debate this afternoon on the estimates is going to – if you could clarify for me, I would be very grateful. The debate is going to be a number of questions, and then the hon. minister is going to provide answers, and if not, there will be written answers at a later date. Okay. Thank you very much.

3:20

It is a very important issue, and the poor and the powerless are also an important part of the fabric of this society, of this province. We have to address the benefit programs for SFI and AISH. There were questions earlier and there have been persistent questions by all hon. members regardless of their political affiliation about just exactly what's going to happen with the low-income review. We need answers now. Last fiscal year there was actually money that went from the hon. minister's department back into the general revenue fund, and I think that is just a shame. It is acting in a manner that I do not consider responsible, because there are many people who need an increase in their SFI rates or in their AISH rates. They need it now. They don't need to wait any longer for this low-income review. I don't know what else it's going to tell us. The minister spoke about the market basket initiative, I believe, and I'm going to be very anxious to see what the afternoon's debate brings us in answers.

Now, low-income Albertans have opportunities to improve their financial situation and attachment to the workforce; there's no doubt about that. On page 271 of the estimates under 2002-03 Key Initiatives, it states, "Implement approved recommendations from the MLA Committee to Review Low-Income Programs." Spending in this area is only going up \$15.4 million, or 2.1 percent, and this is comparing total program spending on page 263 of the estimates for program 2, and it's called People Investments. When we use the words "people investments," let's not forget the poor and the powerless.

This amount is going up, as I said, \$15.4 million. What impact will this increase have on the program? How much of this increase is simply going to be lost to inflation? Inflation was discussed in question period yesterday afternoon, and it was recognized at over 2 percent. How long has it been since many of these individual programs offered, such as AISH or SFI benefits, have seen an increase in the amount provided to clients? We've all received a wage increase in here. I can look at the productivity rate of Albertans in here, in *Measuring Up*, in the 2000-2001 annual report.

Our workforce is skilled and productive, and it's good enough for us to tie our wage increases to this. Why do these citizens of this province have to wait and wait and wait for a review? I don't think it is, as Alexander Mackenzie would say, responsible government. I'm not talking about the Prime Minister; I'm talking about the blacksmith.

Now, will the minister, Mr. Chairman, be implementing any increases to any benefits provided to other Albertans in this fiscal year under his Department of Human Resources and Employment? Also, what has happened to the idea that came up last summer – we touched on this briefly a moment ago – about seeing increases in some areas for benefits to accommodate exceptional costs of living in those areas? Certainly I believe the AUPE – it is recognized by many, including the hon. minister, that they have a very solid relationship built up, a mutual respect and trust, which is an excellent reputation whenever you're dealing with collective agreements, and I would like to think that that relationship will continue to be built on mutual respect and trust. I would urge that respect be shown for the Alberta Teachers' Association, the same way the government respects the AUPE. Now, that certainly needs to be done. At this time in the afternoon I'm not going to get into that because I want to first off deal with this issue of – I believe the needs of the poor and powerless are not being met.

Does this budget acknowledge any changes coming from the recommendations from the low-income review, or will there be supplementary estimates for those changes? Certainly if we as hon. members of this Assembly are going to enjoy compensation levels that are rated to some sort of productivity gain, perhaps it's time to take SFI rates and AISH rates – perhaps it's going to be in the recommendation. Perhaps those rates should be indexed to the increase in the cost of living, because the cost of living in some of our major centres, Mr. Chairman, has certainly gone up with electricity deregulation.

You know, candle power has taken on a whole new meaning in this province since people have had to pay the deferral rates and pay these new costs, these added costs to their electricity bills. Something I would urge the hon. minister to do is to take these programs, these income-support programs, and index them to the cost of living.

Natural gas is another issue. It's another costly bill at the end of the month for people who are living on very, very modest income; \$855 a month does not go very far.

Now, my next question to the minister would be: why were the changes not implemented for this budget year? We've had the low-income review. If it has not, why not? We often hear, Mr. Chairman, that with Alberta's economy in such good shape demand is down for many of these programs. But what are the numbers as far as applications for assistance compared to the actual number of cases that exist? It would be interesting to see if the decline is in the number of applications or the number of approved cases. Or is it a combination of both?

I have one more question at this time before I cede the floor, I believe, to the hon. minister. There has been a significant decline in the number of SFI files. I believe that before the draconian cuts started, there were 90,000 files in the province, and now we're down to between 24,000 and 27,000 files, roughly one-third of what there were before. How many of those files or individuals that were named in those files have turned up in this Canada/Alberta labour market agreement under some sort of continual or perpetual training scheme: I'm going to ABC college for six months to learn how to write a resume, and then I'm going to the next place to learn how to conduct myself in an interview, and I'm on this sort of treadmill? How many of those files have wound up – because these are very expensive programs, like \$100 million a year roughly. This is unique in an agreement between provinces and the federal govern-

ment, this Canada/Alberta labour market agreement. If the minister's department has done any study on this, I would be interested to know where those folks have wound up.

Now, at this point, Mr. Chairman, I believe I will cede the floor to the hon. minister. Thank you.

MR. DUNFORD: Well, I appreciate the opportunity to respond at this time. If our list gets too long, you know, I'm going to end up doing all of the speaking, and really I think it's important that we hear what hon. members are concerned about.

3:30

Not in necessarily any particular order, but I do find the last question of significance. We will make sure that we record in *Hansard* that that specific question has been asked because I'd like to have the answer myself and don't have it here today, but we'll see what we can find.

If there is anything that motivated me to see a restructuring of family and social services and career development, it was this very item that the hon. member is on, because even though this government, as any government, ultimately will be evaluated by what they do for the poor and the powerless – and I do like that phrase. Just to digress a minute, the rich and the powerful can always look after themselves no matter what government does. As a matter of fact, governments spend a lot of their time like they're in a big checkers game because we make a move and then people respond, and then of course we have to make another move.

But as it relates to the poor and the powerless, what we're onto here is a significant motivation for why we have now in this province a Department of Human Resources and Employment. Now, I don't think anybody would deliberately play any sort of a game with an Albertan that needed support, but let me tell you about the two different interests that were in existence in this province when we had family and social services and we had advanced education and career development operating somewhat as silos.

There is no question that it is an honourable intention for a government and for a society to have low numbers of welfare clients, because we want people not to have to rely on that type of support. Everybody wants to be independent themselves. They want to look after their family themselves. We don't even dispute that. We accept as a reality that they, the poor and the powerless, and we, the middle class and the representatives of the people, and the rich and the powerful all want the same thing: they want independence for themselves and for their families. So an honourable motivation for family and social services was to reduce that 92,000 as low as they could possibly get it. As a matter of fact, I think the numbers – well, I'll tell you what. The number that is being forecast now for the end of '01-02, which we've just passed, is actually 26,830, so let's use that number.

This was an honourable, honourable activity for family and social services. They want that number down, but if they can't get them into the workplace, where are they going to put them? Well, they can put them in training programs, because then, under the way we do our statistics, they would not be on welfare. They would be in training programs. So there I am as the minister of career development and here we have people, then, that are being recommended to us, and what do we do with that? We have a motivation, if we're going to spend taxpayers' money on training programs, that we won't just be training for training's sake, that we'll be training so that people can actually get employment. Like, what a concept. So what we would be doing in career development is saying: "Well, look. We will provide contracts for private providers." And this is where most of it happens, through private providers. "We will

provide contracts, but we will want outcomes." Unlike the federal government, which is involved in inputs, in Alberta we are always outcome based, and we want 70 percent of the people that go into our employment training programs to have meaningful employment six months after they are finished that training program.

It's getting back to what the hon. member was asking about, but now do you see what might be a conflict there? If I'm a private provider and I know that my contract is based on getting 70 percent of my clients into the workplace, I might be just a tiny bit selective on who I'm going to take into this particular area. There was how the silos were working. And, ladies and gentlemen, if you don't need any other reason in the world as to why we have a Human Resources and Employment ministry, it is for that very reason.

We now have those people. There cannot be any sort of ping-pong even contemplated, because if they are our clients, if they come to us in a mode of needing low-income assistance, if they come to us in a more traditional welfare situation, we now have not only the resources, but we have the talent within our department. We now have the skills, we have the knowledge to start moving them through into training and into the workplace, and we don't have to cross department lines. It is all up to us. So we will take full responsibility for the numbers of Albertans that come into our programs and for the numbers of Albertans who move on with their lives, and we hope that we will make a meaningful difference in the lives of thousands of Albertans, because now there are no governmental structural impediments to having that happen.

I hope that long after I'm gone from this ministry, every member in this House will see the significance of what was done in May of 1999 by bringing the adult social services, by bringing the career development, and by bringing the labour portions of government services under one umbrella. I think it was an excellent move, and I can't tell you how honoured I've been to be its first minister.

AN HON. MEMBER: And a good one at that.

MR. DUNFORD: Thank you for that.

I would hope that successors would be just as passionate as I am about this particular mandate.

In terms of the low-income review, yes, those reports are waiting. One of the things that we're dealing with as we're now moving through the system – I have a philosophical opposition to labeling people and then sending entitlements. I wonder why we would do that. Why wouldn't a government see people as a collection of individuals? Why wouldn't we do that? Why wouldn't we be interested in taking each individual as a person or as a family and look at what are the particular needs that they should have. Why should we be forced into saying that you are an AISH person or you are a this person and then you get these entitlements? So we were looking at that.

By the way, because there have been rumours out in the community at large, AISH is a program that this government is very, very proud of. There are no changes contemplated to AISH as we're standing here speaking. So all of those who will be reading *Hansard*, for those members today that send *Hansard* out to their constituents, I hope that they're hearing what I'm saying. I don't know where and how it ever happened that people would have to be so terrified that they would be phoning our office in a hysterical state trying to reach members of government, phoning MLAs' offices, talking to me directly as the minister responsible and talking about how the AISH payment was going to be reduced to \$600 a month. I have no idea of where that got started. And I want to say here as strongly as I can that if there's any member in this House that either started that rumour or even portrayed that rumour, they ought to be

ashamed of themselves. Now, I don't know that it happened, but I expect every member here today to walk away from this debate saying that they heard the minister say that there is not going to be a decrease in the AISH payment. Okay? Do you hear me? [interjection] Well, hon. member, if I'm making you feel uncomfortable, that's simply too bad. I don't know that the \$600 came from this room.

3:40

AN HON. MEMBER: It came from your department probably.

MR. DUNFORD: No, I don't think so, because the department would know and understand.

So I expect every one of you hon. members who have a list of constituents that phoned you and pleaded with you to do something about the \$600 to phone them back and say that you were able to do something for them, that the minister is not going to reduce it.

I'm taking up too much time here, but I want to just indicate that with the low-income review, look at the numbers, understand that we're still in a downward trend in terms of caseloads, understand that we are increasing the budget, and then understand that we are going to be looking at a system where we can provide the assistance that we need for Albertans who need our assistance. I believe that the hon. member talked about shelter rates in his comments – we'll check *Hansard* to make sure – but we are as aware as anyone else about the differences that are happening throughout this province. Fort McMurray is one situation; Calgary is another situation. We're starting to see some pressure in my own community of Lethbridge. So we know that shelter rates have to be looked at. We're anxious for a market-basket measurement because now we will finally have a logical and a reasonable gauge by which to start to compare what it actually costs for a person to have to live in a particular community. Thank goodness we will be finished, hopefully, with that low-income cutoff nonsense that's gone on for too long, where people have been able to bash whatever government is in power, not just ours, and simply use a LICO system as the definition of poverty. Can you imagine how ridiculous a low-income cutoff is in Oakville, Ontario? I mean, half the people, then, are in poverty in one of the richest communities in Canada. So out with LICO and in with market-basket measurement.

The rest of the questions, of course, we'll deal with as best we can.

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

MR. MASON: Thanks very much, Mr. Chairman and the hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre, for letting me proceed here. I'd like to express my appreciation for the minister's comments and indicate that I think that a certain amount of progress has been made since the days of the mid-1990s and the cuts that took place then and the changes in policies that occurred then. We're no longer in the position of giving people on social assistance one-way bus tickets to British Columbia, and we're beginning to deal with some of the issues that exist within this department.

I want to say generally, Mr. Chairman, that I believe that it's the objective of government and the objective of this department – or it ought to be – to allow people to live in relative comfort and dignity when they become dependent for whatever reason on government assistance. I also agree that it is an objective and ought to be an objective to help people to become independent of assistance where that is possible and where it is not possible, to avoid any sort of discrimination against those people or single them out in any way but recognize that assistance is necessary for them to have a productive life and simply get on with it and not in any way denigrate them for being in that position.

I want to talk a little bit generally about some of my experiences working in municipal government and for the last year and a half as an MLA for an area that has a fairly high level of poverty, that has significant numbers of low-income people and people who are on assistance. One of the things that I concluded a number of years ago working with these communities is that a community approach is a very good one to take and, in fact, that programs ought to be enabling people to become independent and productive. There have been a few that I've seen in which people are encouraged to set up their own small business or their own business in the home, and they have been given skills and resources that allow them to work cooperatively with partners in the community.

One of the other things that I think has been very significant, Mr. Chairman, in a number of places, including such places in the United States, is dealing with the question of housing and providing people with equity in housing. I know that our rules currently do not allow that, but one of the ways that people become independent is if they're given a stake in the community in which they live, and one of the best ways to do that is through allowing them to provide some equity in their housing situation. I don't think that that's part of the current government thinking at all. I think, in fact, that the philosophy has traditionally been that if you're dependent on government assistance, we shouldn't be helping you to buy a car or a house or any of those other things, that that's not the responsibility of the people of Alberta. But I think it has to be framed, in a way, as what's the best long-term interest of the individual and the people of Alberta, and that is to help people get on their feet.

I would just make those comments generally, Mr. Chairman. I'm not maybe a traditional New Democrat in some senses in that I believe that government welfare programs which create long-term dependency are not desirable, but allowing people to create some equity in their lives is probably one of the most effective ways to help those people become independent of government assistance. On the other hand, I want to say that when people must, of necessity, be dependent on government assistance, then that assistance must not be at a level which produces indignity on the part of people. I think that some of the rates that we are paying in social assistance are continuing to have that effect. They continue to be, in our view, far too low to allow people to live at or above the poverty line. So that is a continuing problem as far as we are concerned.

Now, I know that the minister has talked about the market-basket measure, and I think that that's an interesting approach and something that I think we need to look at fairly seriously, but I want to raise the question of the caseloads and the reductions of the caseloads and ask the minister what the reason is for the reduction. Is it entirely due to the improvement or the continuing strength of the economy, or are there reasons why people who might be dependent on social assistance in Alberta would choose to leave the province as a result of deficiencies there?

I want to talk a little about labour, and I want to go back to the pastoral statement if I can just find it here because I thought that the bishop had some interesting points. I don't think that this is subject to dispute by the Premier or members opposite, because I think the bishop certainly understands the church's teachings, at least. It says:

In its social teachings, the Church firmly maintains that labour unions have an essential role to play in preventing the violation of the dignity of human work and serving as a mouthpiece for the struggle for social justice. Without unions, working people frequently have no voice in society.

3:50

He goes on to say:

Through labour unions, workers are also able to press for changes in public policy and participate in a broader social movement for the

building of a just society. In effect, the Church maintains that labour unions are an indispensable element of social life. No one may deny the right to organize without attacking human dignity itself. The right to organize also includes the right to assembly.

I wonder if the minister can share with us whether or not that is consistent with the department's philosophy relative to labour.

The labour movement in our province continues to maintain that Alberta has amongst the least favourable labour relations climates from their perspective and the least favourable labour legislation anywhere in the country. I wonder if the minister could share with us any plans he may have to assist unions to increase their ability to improve the lot of their members, and that includes the ability to organize unorganized workers in this province.

One of the key indicators in any society, in taking a cue from what the minister said, is how society deals with its poorest people. I agree with that, but I also say that in a practical way, the most effective way historically to improve the lot of the poor in society is indicated by the level of unionization that exists in that society, and Alberta has amongst the lowest levels of unionization in Canada. So, clearly, if we really want to make sure that everybody participates in the economic advantages of Alberta, one of the indicators we should be looking at is the extent to which the workforce is unionized, and we should be looking at ways to amend labour legislation and practices in order to facilitate the organization of unorganized workers.

I want to ask specifically the minister if there are plans to amend the Labour Relations Code and whether or not the minister will be bringing forward legislation to bring Alberta's labour legislation into line with the Supreme Court decision regarding second-party picketing.

Mr. Chairman, that's maybe it for me at this point. I have a couple of questions about the Workers' Compensation Board before I take my seat. I see that \$6 million has been budgeted for the appeals for Workers' Compensation Board that wasn't budgeted for last year, and I'd like to know if that's for the review of lengthy cases and why the WCB isn't paying for these appeals itself. I wonder if it maybe ought to be doing that.

So with that, Mr. Chairman, I just want to come back to the issue I raised in question period today, and that has to do with the low-income review. I guess my problem is that if recommendations in the low-income review have an impact financially on the department's budget, then we ought to see that. I'd like to know if, in fact, this budget reflects changes or anticipates changes as a result of the low-income review and provides funding for changes and, if it does, then why we are dealing with that without the review being released. If not, then of course I'd like to know why not. But, basically, I'd like the minister to stand up and release the two reports. I'd be very interested to see them.

I continue to get calls on a regular basis to my office, Mr. Chairman, to the minister, about these reviews, and lots of people have put a lot of stock in them and a lot of hope for themselves and their families in these reviews, and I don't want to disappoint them. They are certainly getting increasingly impatient about waiting for them, so I would encourage the minister to release them as quickly as possible and to share with the House before we vote on the estimates any elements of those reports which have a bearing on the budget.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

MR. DUNFORD: Edmonton-Highlands in his opening remarks touched on the substantive but also the fundamental debate about how a government needs to provide for its citizens. I'll put it this way. His view is one of the positions that's taken in the debate when

he used the terms "comfort" and "dignity." No one wants to argue that any person shouldn't have comfort and shouldn't be dealt with in a dignified way. What it denotes, however, is that the government, then, is obligated to provide to all of its citizens a quality of life type of support.

The other part, then, of that debate is the fact that many people view support for its citizens to be of basic needs, to make sure that the basic needs of the individual or of the family are provided for. That's a continual debate. The debate will go on long after the Member for Edmonton-Highlands and I have both drifted off to whatever our next careers are going to be, but it is essential and fundamental, of course, to the argument. I think there's obviously not only personal philosophy that is involved in that, but there are, you know, the political philosophies that are in there as well.

Certainly he talked about housing, and that is again one of the challenges that not only our department has but certainly the Department of Seniors. I guess he has already had his estimates; hasn't he? I haven't read *Hansard* yet to see all of the answers that he provided in estimates, but I'll need to do that. Again I think there was an acknowledgment about the market-basket measurement and perhaps some interest in how that will work.

The hon. member also made a very profound statement, and that is that long-term dependency is not desirable. In that, we share. Now, whether he's not a traditional socialist and I'm not a traditional capitalist or not a traditional conservative or whatever, we agree. We agree on that specific point. So always the challenge as you look at the level of benefits is: is the benefit enough to provide for the basic need and yet not providing, then, the sort of long-term dependency? It's a challenge; there's no question. It's a challenge, and we're out there every day trying to do that, and of course we face the scrutiny and then also at times the criticism of people that don't see that we have that sort of situation in balance.

As far as Bishop Henry's statement, you won't have any trouble with me in recognizing the fundamental and significant role that trade unions play in a democracy. You'll find me defending, you know, the right of people to bargain collectively. I won't waiver from that sort of thing, but if you expect me to hand it to them on a plate and to make it easy for them, no. No, we're not going to do that. There's work that any labour union organizer has to go through, just as the person that tried to put that business together, tried to find a product or a service and put his house probably on the line, put probably time with his family on the line so that he could go out and not only provide a living for his family or her family but also, of course, for other families that were through the employees. So that work and that effort and that collaboration with all of those people deserves some sort of recognition as well. So union organizers out there, do your work. We're not going to stand in the way of it, but we're obviously not going to give you, you know, a gold-plated methodology, I guess, in order to be signing the people up.

4:00

In terms of the actual question, though, about amending the Labour Relations Code, the current business plan is that sometime this summer I'll put together an MLA committee, and they will go out and they'll talk to the stakeholders about whether or not there are precise sections of the labour code that need to be, one, reviewed, and then, secondly, would need to be amended. As you might expect, I've been getting lobbying from various groups on both sides of the employer/employee spectrum and some allegations or assertions of problems that are out there, but we've also been receiving significant requests from stakeholders: "Don't touch it. It works fine. Look at the results of the labour relations in Alberta. Look at the low amount of productivity that's lost due to strikes.

Look at the high number of negotiations that are resolved right at the local level. Look at the high number of mediation successes, and of course look at the high number of successful arbitrated awards.”

[Mr. Tannas in the chair]

The \$6 million that now shows up in the estimates from WCB is there because a year ago the Appeals Commission was kind of attached to WCB, and they sent their budget to WCB and received the resources, then, that they needed to run their operation. The hon. member is aware that during this fiscal year we will be taking the Appeals Commission and moving it over under the umbrella of the Human Resources and Employment ministry, but we will also be levying WCB for that particular fund. We don't have that legislation in place at the present time, but that bill is going to be introduced imminently.

Low-income review. The answer is, yes, there are changes that are contemplated within the low-income structure as to how we go about using building blocks to provide benefits for people. But to the best of our ability in looking at it, we can provide for any of those prospective changes, which have not been approved at this point, but we'll be able to accommodate them within the budget estimate numbers that you are seeing in front of you today.

There was a question about a decrease in caseloads. You know, because of freedom of information and protection of privacy and just common decency and courtesy as well, we don't have good tracking mechanisms for people that leave our caseload. We're not going to be putting any electronic bracelets on anybody. So they move off our rolls, and in many cases we know that they've gone into the workforce directly. If we've moved them along from social assistance to the training providers in career development, we can perhaps track them a little longer and a little better, but if somebody stops filing for assistance under SFI because they have won the lottery or have found a job or whatever, we don't have a good way of tracking that as yet.

With that, Mr. Chairman, I think I've covered most areas.

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

MS BLAKEMAN: Thanks very much, Mr. Chairman. There are five issues that I just want to raise with the minister. I'm aware that we don't have a lot of time to debate this afternoon, so I'm more than happy to receive his responses in writing, but I will warn him now that toward the end of my remarks I'm going to talk about the document produced by his department called Culture Steps Forward. So if he wants to have his staff supply him with information on this, I'll be talking about it toward the end of my remarks. By the way, I do appreciate having staff from the ministry here with us today, a big help to the minister, I know. They do very good work, and I appreciate what they are trying to do for all Albertans.

The minister asked if perhaps I would have been responsible for rumours about the AISH rates being cut. I usually regard this minister as quite a reasonable man, but I have to say that that was uncalled for and an unreasonable statement to make. I don't know of any MLA that would willingly frighten their constituents in that way . . .

MR. BONNER: The most vulnerable.

MS BLAKEMAN: No doubt. Vulnerable constituents.

. . . and then spend hours on the phone and in person trying to reassure them that the government wasn't out for them personally. I'm not going to cause myself that kind of work, Mr. Minister, and I'm sure you understand that.

What I really do see that is driving these concerns and this eruption of activity from people covered by the AISH program is fear. They are already struggling on a number of fronts, or they consider themselves to be struggling on a number of fronts, and rumours get going: “There's this MLA review that was out there. Why aren't they responding back? Why aren't we hearing? It can only be bad news, blah-blah.” Off they go from there, and there's no stopping them. I agree with my colleague from Edmonton-Highlands. The faster the government will produce that report and release its response to it, the better for all of us. I will join in encouraging that that happens. I'll leave it at that. It's of great concern to people that are on AISH, and they need to know what's happening for their own lives, for stability and for planning purposes. The government is a big one on talking about planning but doesn't seem to understand that those affected by their programs also need to plan. So the sooner we could get information about that and what's being contemplated, the better.

The next subject I want to talk about is housing. I know that this is not an issue that falls under this minister, but his department is offering programs that certainly have a housing benefit component to them. I will make a plea to this minister to press his colleagues who may be in a position to assist with housing for hard-to-house individuals, any kind of affordable housing. Most of my constituents live in apartments, and we are really experiencing a difficult time right now. That rental housing market was depressed for a long time. Now they're doing very well. Rents are rising steeply and regularly. I have constituents who are phoning me, telling me that their rents are going up every three months and sometimes jumping substantially. The example I've used before is jumping from \$590 to \$900 for a senior couple in an apartment. This hurts, and it's very difficult for people on fixed incomes or low incomes to plan how they are going to find an additional whatever that was, 310 bucks, out of nowhere every month. So anything this minister can do in talking to his cabinet colleagues to encourage the government to come up with innovative ways to work with other partnerships – I don't care what kind of partnerships – to get new housing would be appreciated.

These are dire circumstances for many people, and it does not work for the provincial government to say: “Well, we can't participate in that,” or “We don't believe in it,” or “We don't like it,” or whatever, because the private sector will not build affordable housing. We've given them the time to do it. They've had 10 years to do it. They don't do it because they can't make money. They're a private sector. They're there to make money. I don't blame them for that, but what are we going to do in that gap where we're looking for housing that's affordable for the people buying or renting it? We have the responsibility there because it won't fall to anyone else, and no one else will pick up the slack. So a little plea there.

Third thing. When the minister and I met in Public Accounts earlier this spring – is that possible?

4:10

MR. DUNFORD: It seems like a year ago.

MS BLAKEMAN: It does.

I asked the minister some questions about programs that his department might be providing specific to women, and I think he thought I was joking. I wasn't. Every year I ask the minister responsible for women's issues what programs he is offering for women, and every year I get referred to other government departments, one of which is the Department of Human Resources and Employment. So on the record, about this budget we have in front of us, I'm asking the minister again: what programs are either

specific to women or are structured in such a way as to be understanding the specific barriers in front of women and helping them to leap over those barriers?

MR. BONNER: In lone-parent families women outnumber men.

MS BLAKEMAN: Thank you. I'm reminded by my colleague again about the situation – I'm sure the minister's aware of this – of the lone-parent families headed by women. They're placed amongst the poor. They hold the highest percentage as a group. I'm urging the minister to take me seriously. I know it's easy to come back and say, "Well, the government doesn't believe in being gender specific, and all programs are gender neutral," but let's get real. We know that different programs affect men and women differently, and I'm prodding the government a bit here.

Now, I'd like to turn to the document *Culture Steps Forward*. I would like to say that I think some pats on the back are due to the department for taking the initiative on this project. It's no surprise to the minister that I come from the arts sector. Everything in here I've probably personally experienced, and culture is an important sector for this province. We struggle sometimes in getting recognized outside of the boundaries of what is Community Development. If nothing else comes out of this report – and I hope much will – I can tell you that it's been a tremendous confirmation for people in the cultural sector that they are worthwhile Albertans to be recognized by another department and to be taken seriously.

Now, there are a number of questions, of course, that are going to come out of this, and I'll launch into that. I'd like to get the minister on record, and I don't know if he can give this to me verbally. In writing, as I said, is fine, and then I'll just ship the answers out to the people that I'm corresponding with.

So, first of all, the obvious question: has there been an official departmental response? I don't think so. I'm not aware of one, but if there has been one, then where is it? Could it be released publicly and when? I'd be interested in knowing what the department has learned from this. This is more or less a straight reporting back of what happened in the process, but I'm wondering what was learned by the department, and hopefully further by the government, that it can use and work into future plans.

Now, a big part of being an artist in Alberta is being self-employed and the intermittence of that employment. People aren't aware that in Alberta our artistic companies – our ballet companies, our operas, our symphonies, our theaters – don't have enough money to be able to employ a company of people that are paid year-round. Therefore, every cultural worker gets a gig for a very short period of time. For example, if as an actor you would be successful in auditioning for and getting a part in a play, you would then have probably three weeks of rehearsal, two to three weeks of performance, and then your job is over and you start over. You're back out on the streets or you go back to the restaurant where you work as a waiter, and you look for the next job. Of course, we plan ahead and we try and line up a whole season's worth of work and all of that sort of thing, but the truth is that it's a very intermittent work schedule for us. I've talked a lot in this House about how the artists subsidize the arts in Alberta, because of course they do go back to work in a restaurant because they've got to pay their rent, and that in itself is keeping that person available to us to continue to give us the benefit of their art rather than them just leaving for Toronto where they could work full-time. So the artists do subsidize the art.

One of the things that's been identified in this report is the difficulty of securing access to group health, disability, and life insurance. Even a small family-run business can probably score some sort of plan, maybe even through the Chamber of Commerce

or through some other grouping together. Even a company with just a few people working for it can get access to some sort of plan to get disability insurance or life insurance at a reasonable rate because you're going at it as a group. But for an individual artist, which most of our cultural workers are, they have no access to that, so they're paying 100 percent of health care premiums and things like that: full rack rate, to use a phrase used in the hotel industry. The disability insurances are beyond us. They're simply beyond us. It's too much money. You know, it's coming in at \$50, \$60, \$75 a month. We just don't have that kind of money. So there is no disability insurance, and if you're a designer, as my friend is who fell off a ladder and hurt his back, he had to get his friends to come in and finish his work for him because there is no disability insurance for him. We live in terror of getting hurt because there's nothing to help us there. As we get older, it becomes even more serious for us because the likelihood that we would get injured is more severe and it would have longer lasting effects.

So I'm looking to see whether anything has been looked into as a result of this identification of that access to some kinds of insurance schemes. Has the department done any research? Is it likely to do any research? Does it care? Having identified and heard this information, what are you going to do with it? Can you report back to us on that?

Your department offers – you did talk about it with a great deal of passion and body English – skill development programs. One of the other issues that's arising for us is that we actually are a highly-skilled cultural sector. Many of us have bachelor degrees and master degrees in what we do, but when we look at skill development and lifelong learning, your programs don't help us because of a couple of reasons. There's actually a pretty clear quote here. You've got a quote on page 39, footnote 28.

There are other programs offered by Alberta Human Resources and Employment for which self-employed culture workers may be eligible that will be treated in the section "Careers in Culture." However, the majority of ARE funding is dedicated to programs supported by E.I. funding.

I hope the minister is aware that cultural workers don't qualify for employment insurance. So that right there cuts cultural workers out of any program you offer where you have to have E.I. qualifications. We don't get it because we're self-employed workers. We can't even buy into it if we wanted to buy into it. They won't allow us to. We are actually an identifiable sector under employment and revenue.

4:20

So what has been done or what would your department consider in looking towards accommodating people in this sector who did want to work with midlevel skill development? We are not entry-level workers, but if we wanted to upgrade – for example, when we look at some of our administrators, we're falling behind because our companies generally would have paid for professional development, but in this day and age that's the first category that goes out of the budget. As you know, our cultural money, the AFA money, has been frozen since 1988, since before the creation of the current foundation. So our operating funds that are coming through there have been frozen for a long time. We can't pay our own people for skill development or professional development. So even in comparison to other nonprofit sectors and volunteer-based sectors, we can't keep up. There's another area that your department could be helpful in. If like me, for example, someone moved out of strictly arts management into nonprofit-sector management, that would be more difficult for someone to do today because their arts management skills are going to be not as up to date as someone outside of that sector. Am I making sense? Okay. Good. So that was that program.

I must be really close to the end of my time here, and I just want to make sure that I ask the question and put on the record that I'm interested in what the philosophy of this department is. There were obviously philosophical choices that were made to group together what's grouped together under this department. This minister has been in it long enough and obviously has a very clear guiding light for where he wants the ministry to go. So aside from all of the well-written bureaucratese descriptions that you get, those lovely things on web sites that say that this is what our department does, I'm interested in the longer, farther reaching discussion about why you made the choices to put these groupings together. What are you contemplating by doing that? It seems to say that we only value people that work, and if you don't work, then we'll help to make you work. And if we can't help to make you work, then we really don't like you. Now, that is being terribly exploitive and full of hyperbole, and the minister understands that, but you see where I'm going. It's the choice in grouping together the programs you grouped together when we had the change in ministries. You've had it running long enough that you must know why you did it and whether it's working. I'm interested in why, so if I can hear that.

I must be close to my time. Okay. I'm going to go back then. If I've got a couple of minutes left, I'm going back to the Culture Steps Forward document. We know that it costs much less money to create a permanent long-lasting job in the cultural sector than it does in industry or commerce, significantly less. I think the last time I looked at the numbers, it was \$40,000 to create a job in the cultural sector and \$200,000 in manufacturing or industry or something. So I'm looking again for what strategy the minister is looking to employ that might work in conjunction with his colleague the Minister of Community Development to look at job creation. This government has made the choice to put a lot of money into developing innovation and science, technology, agriculture, and rural development in the short time I've been in this Assembly. It's been a concentrated effort, and a lot of money and resources have been directed there. Would you consider directing even a fraction of the same amount of attention, money, time, and resources to the cultural sector, knowing that you get such an incredible payoff? And that's just in job creation and employment.

Our money stays here. Cultural money stays in the community. We're not paying people who leave here. We're not paying people who can even afford to take a holiday outside of here. So our money really stays in Alberta and contributes to the local economy, going round and round. I'm pushing the minister on this, but, boy, there's an opportunity here, and I would like to see the government and the minister take it.

Thank you very much for this time, and I'd appreciate the minister responding to me in writing.

THE CHAIR: The hon. Minister of Human Resources and Employment.

MR. DUNFORD: Yeah. I'll just take a couple of minutes. We will respond to most of that in writing.

A reference was made to our officials in the gallery, and I have not introduced them at this point. So I'll now do that, if they could just sort of wave when I say their names. We have Dan Thompson, with our department as director of budgets and forecasts; Ellen Hambrook, who is director of business planning, performance measures, and corporate projects. Lorne Saul-Demers is acting director of human resource policy and consulting with the personnel administration office. Mary Anne Wilkinson is acting executive director of corporate human resource development with the PAO.

Just quickly on the philosophy of the department. If I direct you

to page 270 of the document and you look at our vision, we have six words there. It's the '02-03 government and lottery fund estimates. You know, Churchill one time apologized because he only had a couple of days to develop a speech, so he went on to give a 20-minute speech. He said: if you'd given me two or three weeks, I could've gotten it down to two or three minutes. It takes a lot of work to get something concise, and we hope we have with our vision: "Alberta works because we invest in people." Our mission: "To provide a continuum of services and information that enables individuals to succeed in the changing workforce, fosters safe and healthy workplaces and assists people in need." So that's part of the philosophy.

I want to advise the member that I'm probably going to try to utilize some of her talent, skills, and knowledge because she did raise the issue about EI funding as part of a gateway or a selection process for many of our labour development agreement programs. This is something that the federal government has put in place. Provincial ministers from right across this country, despite whatever sort of political affiliation, I believe are unanimous. I can't think of a jurisdiction that is offside on this. We are lobbying the federal government to remove that restriction. There are all kinds of people that are here within our communities, within our province that aren't eligible for employment insurance. The hon. member has indicated an excellent area that we could probably develop as a further argument as we lobby the hon. Minister of Human Resources Development Canada. While I can't say that I've ever been an artist and I'm certainly not an actor – I mean, what you see is what you get – I do know of the huge economic development that is involved in the arts and culture in this particular jurisdiction. The employment being generated by the arts is huge. So I do agree, and yes, we will respond to these questions.

The last point: I want to apologize if my comments about AISH rumours were directed at anyone inappropriately. Please forgive me for that.

4:30

DR. PANNU: Mr. Chairman, I've been listening to the minister carefully. I commend him for his sort of congenial forthrightness and refreshing candour. I hope these remarks on my part earn some brownie points later on with him, but we'll see.

I want to just raise a few questions in a few minutes. The minister, in responding to the hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands, tried on the one hand to acknowledge that human dignity is important, that not only should we deal with people in need in a dignified manner but also do whatever we can to make sure that they can maintain their human dignity while they live under circumstances which we recognize need our assistance and help.

In that context, the minister referred to basic needs as a criterion, and I agree with him. The notion of basic needs itself – I hope the minister will agree with me – varies, of course, from society to society. We need to ask: what are the basic needs in our kind of society? What is the level at which we should consider those basic needs met? Although in a generic sense having a roof over one's head, having something to eat, and being able to meet other basic needs such as clothing and health – those are normal, generic things, but the levels at which these needs are recognized as important varies. We live in Alberta, and there, of course, the notion of comfort comes in, which is variable. You took some mild exception to the notion of comfort. I don't think you meant to say that people who come to the government of Alberta for help under conditions that we recognize are legitimate should be left in a state which is not comfortable.

The market-basket method, Minister, that you mentioned is

certainly one that needs to be, I think, looked at, because it does provide some flexibility. You referred to Fort McMurray and Calgary and perhaps even Lethbridge, and there may be other places. Grande Prairie, I think, is another one of those spots where there are pressures and problems. So long as the market-basket method is used to move away from a one-size-fits-all approach, I would welcome it.

I do have a few questions which I want to pose to the minister related to the move to the MBM model. The budget documents draw attention to some changes in the average monthly caseloads for the supports for independence program, and I think there are reductions anticipated here. My question to the minister is this: are these anticipated reductions in supports for independence in any way related to the use of the MBM, that shifting to the market-basket model might lead to redefining the cases and thereby lead to some reductions? Or should I assume that there is no connection between the commitment being made here to move to the use of the MBM and the reductions? I would like the minister to explain what the grounds are which have led him to anticipate these average monthly caseload reductions in supports for independence.

The second question related to this is: is the market-basket method or model going to be used as well in the case of AISH rates of payment and determination? You did, Minister, try to disabuse anyone who was listening inside the House and outside of the alleged rumour that the rates might be cut to \$600 a month, and you said no to that. But my question to you is: is it likely that if the market-basket model is applied to AISH recipients as well, that might mean a reduction of payments to these recipients depending upon which communities across the province they live in? So that's a specific question related to the possible impact of the MBM application to AISH recipients.

The second question related to AISH. Surely you were, I think, quite forthright in suggesting that the \$600 a month rumour is baseless. I welcome that from you. I hadn't heard about it, by the way. I wasn't aware of this rumour going around, but I do have a question. I think there is an anticipated increase in the number of AISH cases in your budget over the next three, four years from 26,700 to 33,200, and the increase between the year that has just passed into the new year, this year, 2002-2003, is estimated to be an increase of 2,025 cases. This is in the business plan on page 220, I think. In light of this anticipated increase in the business plan, what's likely going to be the impact of this increase on the AISH payments to recipients? Can you give us any indication that the AISH payments will increase at least to keep pace with the increase in the rental situation and the inflationary pressures that people, whether they live on AISH or live on larger incomes, have to deal with? That's my second question related to AISH.

The one question, I guess, which my colleague from Edmonton-Highlands asked the minister – but you perhaps weren't able to answer it – is a question on labour legislation changes in light of the Supreme Court's decision having to do with secondary picketing. Are the labour laws of the province of Alberta going to be brought in line with the decision of the Supreme Court, and if so, are you planning to proceed with it during this current year? That was just a thing overlooked in your notes. That's the question that I have for you. I hope you will address it this time around.

Of course, you know, your philosophical position that any Albertan who is able to work or who may be presently on assistance should be encouraged in every possible way to move away from that dependence to becoming independent income earners – there's no dispute over this, I think. I think it's a laudable goal. It's an important goal. It's one way in which we can help people regain their dignity, maintain it, and enhance it by becoming independent

income earners. I fully agree with that goal, but people who work and yet remain poor and need assistance remain in a situation in part because of some of the policies that your department and this government have with respect to our minimum wage.

4:40

With the minimum wage the level at which it is, an Albertan who worked, say, at the level of the minimum wage, if he worked 50 hours a week, not 42 and not 46 and not 38 but 50 hours a week, and worked for 50 weeks out of 52 weeks a year, worked full-time – and we know that people who work on minimum wages don't have that privilege of working full-time all the time – he would make a maximum of \$15,000.

Now, there are lots of Albertans, usually young, some without very productive skills, but they get help and learn some skills. Then they find themselves in a situation that regardless of how hard they work, they remain in need of assistance. Dependence doesn't go away because they're ready to work, able to work, committed to work, and do work. Is there any, first off, acknowledgment that there may be a relationship between the persistence of dependence and the legislated level of minimum wage, either as a regulatory consequence of legislation – in other words, the relationship between government policy and minimum wages and living in poverty in spite of working hard? What's your answer to it? Is there any consideration to looking at that relationship and then addressing it in a way that is positive and provides incentives to people who move away from dependence on assistance, go into the workforce, go into the labour market, to stay there and feel encouraged by their income to continue to work hard and become responsible for meeting their own needs and maintaining their dignity and maintaining their families?

So those are some of the questions, Mr. Chairman, that I have for the minister. Perhaps he'll be kind enough to address them.

MR. DUNFORD: In light of the number of speakers that still want to get on to this afternoon's discussion, maybe I'll just cherry-pick a little bit here. Of course, we'll respond to the other ones in writing.

The market-basket measurement will not redefine the criteria for being eligible for assistance; okay? I believe that was your question: whether we would be using that to redefine how you actually entered. Where the market-basket measurement will come in won't be a redefining of whether you qualify, but if you do qualify, it'll talk about what level of assistance you should require. Of course, market-basket measurement will not be involved in any reduction, then, to AISH payments.

In terms of the secondary picketing, that would be one of the areas that the MLA committee would be mandated to go out and hear reports on. I have had a briefing about the recent court ruling, but I don't have it with me in my documents. At least I can't put my hands on it. So I'll have to respond.

Just to spend a minute or two on the minimum wage, and I believe that this is one of the most misunderstood programs that we have in our area. Certainly anybody can read what the minimum wage is, but what we have in Alberta is something like less than 2 percent of the workers actually on minimum wage, and when we investigate that area, we find out that most of them are students. I think, to our benefit, that at the last refinement of the minimum wage here in Alberta we removed that discrimination between an adult and a student or however we made that determination. Now there is only one minimum wage level. Most of the people that are working for minimum wage in Alberta today, as we are speaking, are young, single, and students. If, in fact, we have constituents in your area –

and I certainly have constituents in my area – that are working at minimum wage, here's where we can start to kick in, then, some of the other benefit levels that we have. If somebody is a family member that's trying to provide for their family, well, then, we have supports that can bump up that particular level of earnings that they have, and if they happen to have children, we have an excellent, excellent program of providing medical and dental and school benefits and others, you know, to that particular family.

In my view, it doesn't present the whole picture when one just looks at the minimum wage. I think we'd look at minimum wage as one more low-income support level for Albertans. I can't prove this, because I don't have the empirical evidence in front of me, but if you take a look at youth unemployment rates and level of minimum wage, it seems like there might be some correlation. Now, I know I'm treading on difficult ground here because I can't prove it, but if one were to forget simply other economic and sociological values and variables that might be in play here, if one just looked at youth unemployment and minimum wage across Canada, you find something very, very interesting, and that is that where the highest minimum wages are, you have the highest youth unemployment levels. So is there a message there? We're not sure. Somebody some day should really take a look at that.

What I'm proud about in Alberta is that we have less than 2 percent on the minimum wage. And let's not forget this is starting; it's a minimum by definition. We get people into the workforce. Employers take a chance on them. We find that many of them within a very, very short time receive increases, move up and start to receive benefits and then move on to the career. There's always an argument around minimum wage – I understand that – but you won't find me as a representative of this government and a person concerned about the development of employment opportunities not really considering very, very carefully any proposed change to minimum wage.

THE CHAIR: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Glengarry.

MR. BONNER: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. I'd like to add just a few comments and questions this afternoon for the Department of Human Resources and Employment and say how pleased I am to have the opportunity to ask a few questions of the minister and his department. When we look at the overall budget for the department of over a billion dollars, it certainly is a lot of public money. It's a lot of public money to spend on some very important groups, programs that affect some of the most vulnerable members of our community.

I have a number of areas here that I would like to touch on, and these are primarily concerns that constituents have forwarded to me. I know that they've also forwarded them to the minister, and he's been very good at supplying them with answers, and they do let me know when you answer. So Gary and Robert say thank you even if they don't agree with your answers.

4:50

Of course, one of the areas that they're most concerned with are the benefits in AISH and how these have not increased over the years. Certainly it is a program that they are totally dependent on and a program where they feel very, very susceptible if there are changes, if there is a reduction in those changes. It certainly has had a huge impact on them in the last year, probably two years, with the housing situation as it is in Edmonton, where we have had rents going up every three, six months, and it's biting more and more into what they have. So at some point some of these people are having to make the decision as to whether they maintain their medications

to the level they would like or, you know, eat properly and eat well-balanced meals. Of course, if they do have the complication of, for example, diabetes, where they do have to eat a very restricted diet, then it certainly adds more and more stress in their lives.

As well, what happens here is that in some of these cases these people are also receiving Canada pension plan benefits, and they are supplemented by AISH. Now, then, what is built into the Canada pension plan is an inflation factor where these recipients get more money. They're very concerned that when they get more benefits with their CPP, in fact the amount from AISH is clawed back so that, in effect, they don't see any increase at all. So could the minister inform us as to whether there are any proposed changes which would stop this clawback in their AISH benefits when they do get their increases in Canada pension plan?

Another area that I see here is that supports for independence is decreasing 5.7 percent, or \$17.2 million, from last year, and the department has stated that this reduction is because fewer households are expected to need the support. Could the minister please just outline how they did their projections and how we expect fewer people to require supports for independence?

Just a few more questions in regards to those people who are on supports for independence. Could the minister also indicate how he will be accommodating the increasing costs of medical benefits for some of these people and what changes those individuals who are on supports for independence are likely to see in the coming year? Will the supports for independence be increased to a significant amount that will reflect at least a portion of the costs that these people will be incurring in the coming year?

Previously we have seen a drop in what was actually used in the resources allocated for SFI compared to what was budgeted, and what I would like to ask the minister: was that because there ended up being less of a need, or is it possible that some people who could have qualified did not apply? Is it possible that because of the situation that these people find themselves in, they are not aware that they could have the benefit of this program? Has the department ever looked at how well it is making its programs, such as supports for independence, known to those who may potentially need it?

I do have some other areas here that I would like to talk about, and certainly one, Mr. Minister, is this goal 4, "Alberta has a fair, safe and healthy work environment." We certainly know that when we have a huge influx of workers, it does provide quite a number of challenges not only for our communities but for safety in our workplace programs. Certainly, because of the great influx of construction workers into the province, we have people who are working in jobs that they're perhaps not as well trained for. We also see where contractors are asking people to take on roles that perhaps in a situation where there wasn't such a demand for workers, they might not be asked to be doing these things.

So when we are looking at this whole area of safety, this idea of compliance by companies, compliance for workers to follow safety codes doesn't seem to be filling the bill, because the number of injured workers continues to climb during this era of rapid economic expansion. The number of injured workers certainly grows at a greater rate. Is it a possibility with occupational health and safety that we will be seeing more inspectors out in the field that will be looking at this particular situation?

As well, could the minister please provide us, if he has these figures, with the safety records, for example, of unionized members versus members that are in CLAC as far as accident rates go or union workers versus non-union workers or even CLAC versus non-union workers to see which group is the best trained and which does have the safest working conditions?

Now, as well, one question a number of injured workers through-

out the province have been asking me is on the whole idea of the changes that are going to be taking place in the act and where the appeals process is going to be moved: totally away from WCB, and for lack of a better term, where it's operating now at an arm's-length distance, it's going to be moved under the ministry. At one time, if my understanding is correct, appeals used to come to the minister's department. I stand to be corrected if this information is wrong, but their concern was that if in fact there are those cases which occurred before the present system was introduced, does the department have a fiduciary responsibility to these people? Does the government have that responsibility, or does that still fall back to the WCB.

[Mr. Lougheed in the chair]

I know that the hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar has a few more questions, so at this time I will take my seat and wait for some answers. If you'd like to answer some now or see what the minister would like to do.

Thank you very much.

THE ACTING CHAIR: The minister.

MR. DUNFORD: Okay. Thank you. I'll try to be quick, because I know there are still more speakers.

The member began by indicating that this was a lot of public money, and I do agree. If I want to be defined in a number of ways, I hope that one would be a compassionate person, but the other one obviously would be that I could be defined as a steward of taxpayers' money, because I take that very seriously.

5:00

A previous member had noted how we had lapsed money. That is not inconsistent with my experience and my record as a minister of a portfolio within this government. I think I've been able to do that every year except perhaps in one occurrence. Not that we're trying to do that on the backs of anyone, but it's more important that we have sustainable funding. When we find opportunities, then, to lapse dollars, it is really usually because of some onetime occurrences rather than any decreases of benefits. We simply haven't decreased those benefits.

I want to focus this time, though, first of all on some of the workplace areas rather than on the earlier ones. We can answer those in writing. Under legislation before 1988 the actual appeal of a WCB decision went through an appeal mechanism that was actually the board of directors of WCB and not the department. The reform or the revisions in 1988 set up this Appeals Commission, but it was still bolted onto the WCB system. The reforms now of 2002 are going to unbolt that Appeals Commission and move it into this area.

In terms of workplace health and safety, 26 percent of the injury incidents at the workplace are workers in the first six months of their employment, and a full 40 percent are within the first year. So the hon. member is onto an excellent area here about new and inexperienced workers. I would want the hon. members, however, to know that we are currently involved with a workers' compensation partnership where we are focused on a huge educational campaign for this particular group. Now, I haven't heard the ads on the radio, but I know that there are ads for the radio. It's just that I don't happen to listen to the same radio stations that young workers listen to, so I'm not necessarily hearing them. There are posters, and it's called: Pick out the New Guy. Of course we show, then, a pictorial arrangement that clearly indicates the target audience that we're looking for.

In terms of compliance, we will not be adding more inspectors, but through changes within our administrative and our procedural areas we've actually reduced the office time that our inspectors have to spend. So they are in the field on a higher percentage of time basis, and we have substantially increased the number of inspections over the last little while.

[Mr. Tannas in the chair]

I'll have to read *Hansard* to understand the references to union versus CLAC and union/non-union and CLAC/non-union. You know, with the Christian Labour Association – not to presume what the results might be – I would expect that any organization that has CLAC as their employee representatives probably would have a good safety record just from: would it not be Christian to, of course, have a safe workplace health and safety area? I don't know what those numbers are, but we'll certainly be looking into that.

On that, maybe we'll allow, then, any other speakers to use the remaining time.

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

MR. MacDONALD: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. I have still a few questions for the hon. Minister of Human Resources and Employment. Before the time runs out in a few minutes, I would like to comment for the record that the minister certainly has worked very hard at improving some of the deficiencies that were in the department which the hon. minister inherited.

Now, certainly there needs to be more work done with employment standards: some of the chronic violators, repeat offenders. It is no way to save a dollar by not paying young Albertans, in particular, the money that they have earned, and it is not fair to other small businesses that do. It's not a level playing field when one company is violating the Employment Standards Code. How can a company that is not and is paying overtime wages and vacation pay and whatnot to all its employees – it's very difficult to compete whenever someone else is cutting corners like that. I would encourage the minister to continue to ensure that employment standards are enforced.

Again, with the minimum wage, I think it should be reviewed annually, just the same as with my pay and that of all other hon. members of this Assembly. Our compensation levels are reviewed annually. Why can't we do the same thing for the minimum wage?

In the time that I have, I have to mention the youth employment rate and this initiative that was discussed with a great deal of fanfare by various government departments to prepare for growth, building Alberta's labour supply. I will have to remind at this time all hon. members of the Assembly that youth unemployment – I believe this is the bracket between the ages of 16 to 24 – is 10 percent, whether it be in the female or male category. I think that the female category is slightly lower than the male category, and this is too high when you look at the unemployment level of the rest of the workforce. It is double, as a matter of fact, and we need to get those people in that age group active in the workforce, active in training programs. I don't necessarily agree with this notion of fast-tracking people into this province at this time for skills that are in short supply. I think we should be first trying really hard to train those people. I can understand certainly if every rock is overturned in pursuit of these valuable employees, but I don't think that's been done. Certainly in the First Nations population across this province there are large pockets of high unemployment, and I would urge that in the next year the government explore that, Mr. Chairman.

Now, I have to get my items that I want to discuss here in priority

in the time I have. I receive complaints constantly from across this province in my job as an opposition critic about the claw-back of the Alberta child health benefit. I see on page 220 of the Human Resources and Employment business plan, where there is information on the caseloads, that the caseloads for the Alberta child health benefit will go up by 10,000 from roughly 70,000. Oh, it's more than that. It's up to 84,000 for the fiscal year 2004-2005, and that's a significant increase. I'm not satisfied that that is prudent. That is federal money, and it's been redistributed, Mr. Chairman, and I don't know how this is working. With this increase in the number of files or the number of caseloads, how is this going to be financed? Who is going to lose, and who is going to gain? If I could have that question answered, I would certainly be very grateful.

5:10

Now, for the labour relations review that's going to go on and is going to be struck, I would urge the hon. minister to take members of the Official Opposition and put them on that committee. Let's have an all-party committee on this labour relations review. Certainly it won't be as long in reporting as this low-income review. I think that this should be an all-party committee, particularly after what's happened with the teachers and the major falling out, the major deterioration in the relationship between – I don't believe it's this minister's fault, Mr. Chairman; I certainly do not – the Alberta Teachers' Association and this government. I think it's shameful and that it was not necessary. If we're going to have a look at the labour code, perhaps if this was an all-party committee, it would be a way of somehow starting to rebuild that faith in the system. We can all look at the proclamations about how fair and impartial the Labour Relations Board is. It's the mission statement; it's the goal. It's a good goal, but it's going to be difficult if there's going to be no balance on this committee. I'm sure the hon. Member for Edmonton-Glengarry is going to be very anxious to serve on that committee.

Now, for the safety review that is also going to be initiated for this year, I would encourage the minister to work very hard at that. The hon. minister has a very important goal, which is hopefully achievable. In the past there has been an initiative to start the call centre up the street here so that individuals can phone in if they have any concerns or questions about occupational health and safety law and regulations. It's a good product, but I think it's poorly marketed. It's a matter of marketing that call centre so that each and every worker in Alberta knows about it. Now, how that is going to be achieved I don't know, but I would encourage the marketing of that call centre. The hon. minister was talking about a web site or stickers. We could work with the sector of the economy that rents industrial tools and have a sticker not on every tool that would be rented but certainly on some of the tools that are rented on construction sites. So if a person picks that tool up in the morning, they're going to see that, whether it's a web site or a 1-800 number, and if they have any questions, they can call about occupational health and safety regulations and laws. There has to be a better way, because if we can reduce workplace accidents – fatalities are another matter – perhaps we can do something about the WCB. You know, a 27.4 percent increase in premiums in one year, then a double-digit increase previous to that, and who knows what it's going to be next year: that's too much. That is too much. I think we can work and we can improve the system.

The hon. member spoke about something that's dear to my heart, random independent inspections. I'm not going to be too critical, but certainly this minister on his watch I believe has increased

enforcement of his rules and regulations through the courts, and I would encourage him to continue to do that regardless of the cost. It is necessary and has to be done, and it sends such a strong message. When the new CEO of the WCB signs a contract, it should be a public document so that we know what the compensation rate and the severance package will be, Mr. Chairman. That's very, very important.

THE CHAIR: I hesitate to interrupt the hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar, but pursuant to the understanding agreed to unanimously by the Assembly earlier this afternoon, I must put the following questions. After considering the business plan and proposed estimates for the Department of Human Resources and Employment, are you ready for the vote?

HON. MEMBERS: Agreed.

Agreed to:

Operating Expense and Capital Investment	\$1,061,451,000
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THE CHAIR: Shall the vote be reported? Are you agreed?

HON. MEMBERS: Agreed.

THE CHAIR: Opposed? Carried.

The hon. Deputy Government House Leader.

MR. ZWOZDESKY: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I would move that this hardworking committee now rise and report the votes and request leave to sit again another time.

[Motion carried]

[The Deputy Speaker 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 department.

Human Resources and Employment: operating expense and capital investment, \$1,061,451,000.
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THE DEPUTY SPEAKER: Does the Assembly concur in this report?

HON. MEMBERS: Agreed.

THE DEPUTY SPEAKER: Opposed? So ordered.

The hon. Deputy Government House Leader.

MR. ZWOZDESKY: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's been a very good day and a very good week, and in light of the hour I would move that we now call it 5:30 and that we adjourn until 1:30 p.m. on the following Monday.

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[Motion carried; at 5:18 p.m. the Assembly adjourned to Monday at 1:30 p.m.]

