

Legislative Assembly of Alberta

Title: **Wednesday, February 19, 2003**

1:30 p.m.

Date: 2003/02/19

[The Speaker in the chair]

head: **Prayers**

The Speaker: Good afternoon. Welcome back.

Let us pray. As Canadians and as Albertans we give thanks for the precious gifts of freedom and peace which we enjoy. As Members of this Legislative Assembly we rededicate ourselves to the valued traditions of parliamentary democracy as a means of serving our province and our country. Amen.

Please be seated.

head: **Introduction of Visitors**

Mr. Lougheed: Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to introduce to you and through you to the Assembly, in your gallery, the organizer and a participant in the weekend hockey game that lasted 80 hours, Dr. Brent Saik; Susan Saik, his wife, a major organizer; Angelica Hope, daughter; Vicky Saik, his mom; and Brenda Martin, another organizer and sister of Brent. Congratulations. Thank you for a job well done. Would the Assembly please greet those assembled, and I'd ask them to rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of the Assembly.

head: **Introduction of Guests**

Mr. Horner: Mr. Speaker, it's my pleasure to rise today and introduce a constituent and longtime supporter and for his young years a very knowledgeable, politically astute young man, Michael Cooper, who is seated in the public gallery and is a member of our association and on my board of directors. I'd ask Michael to rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of the House.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Economic Development.

Mr. Norris: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. [some applause] Thank you for that sustained applause. I would like to introduce to you a constituent of mine. We met during the election. He was either brave enough or foolhardy enough to join me waving at cars on the freeway at 7 in the morning, and we're both here to talk about it today. It's a real delight to have Rhett Peterson. Would you please stand and receive the warm welcome of the House.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Municipal Affairs.

Mr. Boutillier: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure to introduce today a good friend, someone who truly represents rural Alberta, like many members around this Assembly. He's the president of the Association of Municipal Districts and Counties. I'd like to ask Jack Hayden to rise. Jack is in our members' gallery.

Mr. Speaker, it's also my pleasure today to introduce a constituent of Fort McMurray who is a realtor and really a champion for affordable housing, a young Albertan from Fort McMurray, Tom Stratton.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Wetaskiwin-Camrose.

Mr. Johnson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'd like to introduce to you and through you Dr. Richard Pink, a recent graduate of Masaryk medical university of Brno in the Czech Republic. Dr. Pink has

come to Alberta to work under the supervision of Dr. Franco Leoni in surgery in Camrose for roughly the next year. Dr. Pink is seated in the members' gallery, and I'd like him to rise and receive the warm welcome of the Assembly.

head: **Oral Question Period**

Premier's Council on Alberta's Promise

Dr. Nicol: In its Speech from the Throne yesterday the government failed to deliver a vision for Alberta's children. Its showcase legislation is a bill that promises no money, no concrete action, and only another committee in the form of the Premier's Council on Alberta's Promise. To the Premier: can the Premier explain exactly how this new committee will protect children at risk? Isn't that Children's Services' job?

Mr. Klein: Indeed, it is Children's Services' job, Mr. Speaker, and I daresay that the hon. minister does a commendable, wonderful job of protecting children. But there is also a responsibility on the part of society to protect the best interests of children. This involves community leaders. It involves, of course, parents. It involves teachers. Basically, Alberta's promise to children is to bring all of these factors together, all the community factors, along with government to develop programs that serve the best interests of children. Nothing wrong with that at all.

Dr. Nicol: Can the Premier explain how this new committee will improve opportunities for learning? Shouldn't the Minister of Learning be doing that?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, again, the hon. Minister of Learning does a wonderful job in the administration of his duties to provide education to children and postsecondary students. He does a wonderful job. But, again, the promise to Albertans relative to children is to involve teachers, community leaders, parents – and I included teachers this time – to shape and mold children to become productive citizens in society. I find absolutely nothing wrong with that.

Dr. Nicol: Can the Premier explain what the difference was between this mandate and the mandate of the commissioner for family and children that started off in the early '90s? Why are we doing that all over again? Why don't we just act on the recommendations of that commission?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, I find it very strange indeed that the hon. leader of the Liberal opposition would oppose the involvement of community leaders, would oppose the involvement of parents, would oppose the involvement of teachers, would oppose the involvement of various nonprofit organizations that are involved with children, would oppose these people all coming together to co-ordinate efforts in the best interests of children. It's beyond me why he would oppose these things.

Education Funding

Dr. Nicol: Last year a government-appointed arbitrator negotiated a settlement with Alberta's teachers that the government refused to fund. Because of this, Alberta's school boards need at least \$142 million for classroom resources. Yesterday we heard that the government is committing \$20 million to classroom resources. To the Minister of Learning: if children are a priority, why did the government offer them \$20 million for classroom resources instead of the \$142 million they actually need?

Dr. Oberg: Mr. Speaker, yesterday we took the precedent-setting move of announcing in the throne speech that there would be \$20 million to purchase textbooks. This represents about 80 percent of the dollars that school districts use during the year to purchase textbooks. We wanted \$20 million targeted to what we heard from parents in the time that we were not sitting in the Legislature, that they wanted resources put in the classroom. These \$20 million will be resources that are directed directly towards the classroom.

Dr. Nicol: To the Premier: if children are a priority, why did the government spend \$33 million on the horse racing industry this year and you're only putting \$20 million into the classroom?

Mr. Klein: This is comparing apples and oranges and grapes and pears. Mr. Speaker, the amount that goes to the horse racing industry comes from funds generated by the horse racing industry and, of course, the lotteries associated with horse racing and gaming generally. I would remind the hon. member that that money goes to improve and to enhance an industry that is vital to the agricultural community in this province. It keeps literally thousands of people employed: trainers and groomers and lots of low-income earners who would otherwise be on welfare. So overall it's a good program. To compare that program to education spending or to the allocation of money to any other area of government endeavour is entirely unfair because we try to identify priorities. We try to split the pie as evenly as we possibly can.

I mean, there are within this caucus a number of areas where people think money ought not to be spent or money should be spent or more money should be spent. The Liberals have their ideas of where money should be spent. As a matter of fact, they have lots of ideas, Mr. Speaker. As a matter of fact, if we were to accede to the requests of the Liberals and the NDs and all the special-interest groups out there as to where money should be spent – in the first six weeks of 2003 the opposition parties and various stakeholders, special-interest groups have requested almost \$7 billion in increased provincial funding, and that's just in documented, on-the-record requests. That's in just the last six weeks.

1:40

Dr. Nicol: To the Premier: if children are a priority, why did the government spend \$105 million to upgrade VLTs and you're only putting \$20 million into classrooms?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, again, it's comparing apples, oranges, grapes, pears, and elephants, llamas, and everything else. First of all, the upgrading of VLTs is just like maintaining any other kind of property that the government is responsible for. We're responsible for various vehicles, for various kinds of infrastructure. These things become dated, and they have to be maintained. All the money that is used to upgrade these comes from the VLT profits themselves; in other words, from lottery money.

But, Mr. Speaker, I would like to point out that we do dedicate VLT revenues to various priorities of government. Here are just a few examples of how VLT revenues are helping to address priorities. Last year, 2002-2003, approximately \$42 million in VLT revenues went to Learning directly. Approximately \$50 million went to Health and Wellness. Another \$50 million went to Infrastructure, including schools. So \$142 million in one year alone out of VLT revenues went to priority government services.

We're talking about a revamp or a refit program that is about 10 years in the making, Mr. Speaker. So it stands to reason that these things need to be upgraded from time to time if we're to have VLTs.

Dr. Taft: Mr. Speaker, on Family Day hundreds of parents rallied on the steps of the Legislature to express their concern and anger over various problems in Alberta's schools. Not one government MLA accepted their invitations to attend. [interjections] I can hear their regrets; I'll pass them on. To the Minister of Learning: given that an arbitrator gave the teachers a 14 percent wage increase over two years and this government has only given school boards 6 percent to cover those wages, leaving an enormous financial shortfall, does the minister feel that there are millions of dollars of fat to be trimmed from the school system?

Dr. Oberg: Mr. Speaker, first of all, the arbitration settlement was a two-year arbitration settlement, not a three-year, which detailed 14.09 percent. What the school boards have actually received – and I will use the gross dollar amount – for the salary enhancement, which was the 4 percent and 2 percent, was \$118 million. For the grant rate increases, which were 3 percent and 3 and a half percent, they received another \$180 million, for a total of \$298 million over two years. The arbitration settlement, according to the Alberta School Boards Association figures, will cost \$260 million. Two hundred and ninety-eight million minus 260 million: I think the hon. member can do the math.

Dr. Taft: Let's come at it a different way then. Does the minister believe that there are sufficient funds available to schools to properly support the teaching of the curriculum without any parent fund-raising? A yes or no answer will be fine.

Dr. Oberg: Yes.

Dr. Taft: Given that there are schools in my constituency and across this province where the walls are cracked like dry earth, where rain routinely blows through the window frames, and where broken heating systems mean students wear jackets in the classrooms, how does the minister justify spending \$2.2 million on renovating his staff's own offices?

Dr. Oberg: I'm sorry, Mr. Speaker. I could not hear the final part of the question.

The Speaker: Please proceed.

Dr. Taft: Thank you. Given that there are schools in my constituency and across this province where the walls are cracked like dry earth, where the rain blows through the window frames, and where broken heating systems mean children must wear jackets in the classroom, how does the minister justify spending \$2.2 million on renovating his staff's offices?

Dr. Oberg: Well, Mr. Speaker, I would certainly invite the hon. member to come to my office. What he would see is some place that has not been renovated in quite a considerable while. What happened in the department's office is that they renovated because they joined several buildings together. Those were renovations that were approved and needed to be done, and the \$2.2 million was what was needed.

When it comes to actual construction on schools, we have put in in the last three years very close to a billion dollars, and that's just for new school construction and modernization and renovation. The hon. Minister of Infrastructure, who I'm sure would like to speak on this as well, puts in money each year for operations and maintenance that I believe is in excess of \$300 million.

The Speaker: The hon. leader of the third party.

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The Tory government's failure to fund the arbitrated salary settlement with the province's teachers has left a \$142 million hole in the school board budgets and created a financial funding crisis. The government caused this crisis. They provoked the strike with the teachers. They imposed an arbitration process. They are now forcing boards to cut core services. Finally, when a board chair speaks up, they respond with bullying and intimidation. My questions are to the Minister of Learning. Why is this government refusing to accept its obligations to fund the outcome of an arbitration process that it imposed on teachers and instead is forcing school boards to cut core services, increase class sizes, and incur crippling deficits?

An Hon. Member: Why don't you give the same answer, Lyle?

Dr. Oberg: Well, I will. Mr. Speaker, again I'll beg your indulgence here. I will give the same numbers that I just gave: salary enhancement, 4 percent and 2 percent, for a total of \$118 million; grant rate increases, 3 and a half percent and 3 percent, for a total of \$180 million; for a grand total of \$298 million that went to the school boards in the last two years as an increase. The arbitration settlement came in at \$260 million, leaving \$38 million.

Mr. Speaker, the hon. member knows full well that when it came to the arbitration arrangement that occurred, first of all, the president of the ATA wanted the arbitration. As a matter of fact, in a meeting with the Premier and myself he pointed that out, that he wanted arbitration. We were in a position where there was a strike going on. Obviously, the hon. member wanted the strike to continue so that students could continue not to learn. We put an end to this, so that's what the arbitration did.

1:50

The Speaker: I take it, hon. member, that you want to rise on a point of order.

Mr. Mason: Yes, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: Hon. leader, proceed.

Dr. Pannu: Mr. Speaker, my second question to the same minister: how can the minister expect school boards to find \$142 million of so-called efficiencies when they have already had to endure 10 years of this government's cutbacks and neglects?

Dr. Oberg: Mr. Speaker, I find that absolutely absurd. Obviously, the hon. member has not looked at the budget that has been tabled in this House for the last 10 years. The last time there was a budget in this House which showed a decrease for education was in 1994-95. Every year since that time, we have seen increases in education, \$298 million in the last two years. Education is something that this government takes extremely seriously. Two hundred and ninety-eight million dollars is a huge increase. When you take this relative to anywhere in the country, we are by far the largest increase.

Mr. Speaker, the other point that I will make today, which is a new point but is something that is on the per capita expenditure on education, is something that Stats Canada put out. It put us, believe it or not, in the number one position at \$1,970.80. The interesting part is that the next closest is 14 percent below us, and a place like Ontario is a full \$900, or close to 90 percent, below us. When it comes to funding in education, this government has gone above and beyond the call of duty.

Dr. Pannu: So is the minister accusing the School Boards Association of misinformation and, worse still, of lying when it says that the government has left a \$142 million hole in school board budgets? Will the minister answer that question honestly?

Dr. Oberg: Absolutely, Mr. Speaker. There have been some boards that have budgeted deficits, but they have budgeted deficits because they have those dollars in their operating surplus account. They have taken those dollars out. There was roughly \$110 million, \$115 million around the province in these accounts that have been accumulated over the years, and many of the school boards will be using those.

We have worked with individual school boards who are looking at running a deficit, and, yes, Edmonton public is one of those. We are currently working with them. Mr. Speaker, to date they have achieved significant savings. There was \$1.9 million that they have saved in Metro College. They wrote a letter to me yesterday or the day before asking that an amount be transferred from their operating capital account to their operating account, which was money from the sale of the administration building, which is another \$1.9 million. They said in the media that they would receive about \$3 million in savings. All of a sudden we're down to around a \$6 million issue on a \$600 million budget.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for St. Albert, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods.

Federal Health Care Funding

Mrs. O'Neill: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The provision of quality health care services is a vital and primary concern of this government. It is certainly paramount in the minds of Albertans and certainly for the citizens of my constituency of St. Albert. My question is to the Minister of Health and Wellness. In yesterday's federal budget the federal government announced upwards of \$34 billion for health care to the provinces and territories. Specifically, there is, as I understand it, an immediate injection of \$2.5 billion to be provided to the provinces and to the territories. Could the Minister of Health and Wellness explain to us what that translates to for our citizens in this province?

Mr. Mar: Mr. Speaker, the arrangement that was made among first ministers in Ottawa the week before last I'll try my best to explain in a relatively straightforward way. The first year of the deal has relative clarity, and it is, as the member has reported, \$2.5 billion this year coming through on a per capita basis, and Alberta's share – we've been working with our federal counterparts – would be in the magnitude of \$248 million coming this year. If at the end of the first year, 2003-2004, there's a federal surplus, then an additional amount of funding will come through in the amount of \$2 billion, which, if distributed on a per capita basis, will result in an additional \$200 million to the province of Alberta.

Now, the point is, Mr. Speaker, that this is a significant amount of money, but consider that we spend \$19 million a day on health care. The \$248 million that we are to receive immediately from the federal government would pay for about another 12 or 13 days of health care; not a great deal. So what it means to Albertans is this. This money, while appreciated, will help shore up what we currently do, but Albertans should not be expecting that their access to physicians or wait lists would be diminished overnight or that access to drugs would somehow be improved. Again, it's a significant amount of money but not when you consider the context of the amount of money that we currently spend on health care at this time.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mrs. O'Neill: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Again to the same minister. My question is with respect to the federal targeted money that was mentioned among the breakdown of the billions of dollars. I want to ask the Minister of Health and Wellness if he could explain to Albertans how that targeted money is going to be translated, again, for us, the Albertans, in the health care provision.

Mr. Mar: Well, Mr. Speaker, in the years after the first year of this deal, which is essentially a cash deal the first year, in the second year and out there is a great lack of clarity, and there's a lack of clarity in a number of areas. How much money will be provided by the federal government? The Prime Minister talked in the House of Commons about a \$17.3 billion deal over three years. His federal Treasury officials were briefing the media the next day in Ottawa saying that the amount of new money was really in the magnitude of \$10 billion, far short of anything recommended by either Senator Kirby's report or Mr. Romanow's report.

The issue is also muddled by the concerns about what will or will not qualify for these particular areas that were struck in the accord as being priorities, those areas being the issues of home care, diagnostics, catastrophic drug costs, and primary health care reform. As an example, Mr. Speaker, we previously used a federal primary health care reform initiative to fund our Health Link line, that will hook up everybody throughout the entire province by this summer to telephonic health advice, doctor-approved, nurse-delivered, 24 hours a day. That initiative was funded through federal primary health care reform moneys. When I asked federal officials, "If we expanded that Health Link line to an out-call service and not just an in-call service, would that qualify for the new pool of moneys for primary health care reform?" the answer was: we don't know because the definitions have not yet been established.

Finally, Mr. Speaker, there's a lack of clarity because we do not know how this money will be distributed. We don't know if it will be distributed on a per capita basis, which, of course, the province of Alberta would support, but if, for example, in the area of diagnostics the money is distributed on a needs basis, that money may end up going to other parts of Canada and might not ever make it west of the province of Ontario.

So it's for those reasons, Mr. Speaker, that the out-years lack clarity. It seems clear, however, that we'll have to wait for the next Prime Minister and the next government to be able to establish a deal for long-term, sustainable health care funding from the federal government.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mrs. O'Neill: Yes. Since the primary vehicle by which we receive the money for health from the federal government is through the Canada health and social transfer protocol agreement, my question to the minister here is: do we have any indication of how and when they are going to carve out moneys and specify moneys in that agreement that will be specifically related to the targeted areas?

Mr. Mar: Well, I should say, Mr. Speaker, that I have much time and much respect for the federal Health minister, Anne McLellan, and I will say that she and ministers of health and first ministers, as well, have much heavy lifting to do over the months to come to try to put some flesh on these bones that were established in the health accord. I think that there are some worthwhile things to pursue in the health accord, including setting aside money through a Canada health transfer, not CHST but a CHT. But with respect to the timing

and the establishment of such methods of funding, I think we are probably some number of months away. Again, the federal commitment was for \$2.5 billion immediately. Our latest advice is that that may still be several months away from now, so we cannot rely on that money immediately.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods, followed by the hon. Member for Red Deer-North.

2:00 Children's Services Adoption Web Site

Dr. Massey: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Placing wards of the government in caring, safe, and permanent homes is an objective all Albertans support. Handled properly, the Internet holds the promise of furthering such placements. My questions are to the Minister of Children's Services. How did the minister respond when cautioned that the Children's Advocate might object to some of the information on this site?

Ms Evans: Mr. Speaker, I have never been told that the Children's Advocate might object to some of the information on the site. The wonderful part of this site is that it is picking up where *Wednesday's Child* leaves off, a program that has long duration but in the last five years funded by the Dave Thomas Foundation and initiated by the now Minister of Learning. We've seen a 70 percent success rate of the 30 children that annually were placed there.

Mr. Speaker, I would just identify a couple of things about that site. That site identified on television, coming into your living room, to probably over millions of viewers if you look at all of Alberta, not only the child but the diagnosis, some very descriptive things about the very special needs of the child. At no time did the opposition or, in fact, any other member of the public raise any concern in the years that this program successfully evolved and adoptions were in place that either triggered or set off any alarm bells with people in the department, including the co-ordinator of freedom of information and protection of privacy. Everybody said that this is very much similar to what had been done previously with the video clips that have been provided through the great work of CFRN TV, which is where that program was initiated.

So to the hon. member opposite, although there were extensive reviews conducted departmentally on the features of the web site, making sure that it was absolutely secure in terms of not being interactive and allowing people to access further information, there was nothing – in other words, behind the site – that would give cause for alarm. The site was launched and to the greatest extent has been positive.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Dr. Massey: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. To the same minister: why wasn't the web site cleared with the Privacy Commissioner?

Ms Evans: Mr. Speaker, perhaps my other hon. colleague might want to respond in terms of the structure in government for the organization of the freedom of information and privacy commissioner.

Quite frankly, the FOIP co-ordinator for our department is part of the government's structure under the Human Resources and Employment ministry. That co-ordinator provided us assurance that this site was appropriate, did not raise any concerns – I think that during the process of evolving, the site may have raised some issues – cleared the site, didn't identify that there was anything further. When the commissioner responded again later and said that he was wanting some investigation, we were pleased to comply.

Mr. Speaker, I think the question that we will still be addressing is: on the longer term, contextually, should the minister go further when approval has already been given by the co-ordinator? That's something that I've already been in discussion on with my hon. colleague the Minister of Government Services, and in the future perhaps we will iron out just exactly what level should be accelerated to the commissioner's position, but we were satisfied that we had accomplished our objectives in our discussion with the co-ordinator and his approval.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Dr. Massey: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Again to the same minister: was cost saving a consideration in the hasty launch of the site?

Ms Evans: Well, Mr. Speaker, this site was not announced in haste. This site took a long time to prepare, and a lot of work was done by a lot of people to make sure that the site was appropriately done. Cost saving was never once mentioned, not to me, by any of the officials involved or anybody at all.

The one thing that has been stressed over and over and over again is that we've got in Alberta – and this is the true travesty – some 5,000 children who are permanent wards of the province who have not been able to be adopted, who have not been able to receive the benefit of a positive home. The web site, I believe, Mr. Speaker, with already 13 preliminary matches has shown some great success in enabling us to try and find proper homes for children.

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

School Boards' Amalgamation

Mrs. Jablonski: Thank you. Mr. Speaker, it is a top priority of this government to maintain the province's high-quality learning system. Alberta's students lead the country and much of the world on national and international tests. Our school boards have been an integral part of this success. My question is to the Minister of Learning. Is the Department of Learning going to reduce the number of school boards through amalgamation?

Dr. Oberg: Mr. Speaker, this was a question that was raised by a colleague of the hon. member as well as my own colleague. It came about from a meeting where we had 11 school boards sitting in one room at a time, 11 school boards of the greater Edmonton region sitting and talking about putting more resources into the classroom, more resources into education in general. I think the obvious question that came out of this was: "Is there any way that we can direct administration costs into the classrooms? Those administration dollars could be spent there." I responded by saying that the Commission on Learning will be looking at this. As a matter of fact, it was one of the questions that was in the paper that was put out, and I expect them to take a very serious look at it.

Mrs. Jablonski: To the same minister: will the Commission on Learning include considering the number of school boards that will best serve the interests of the student and best serve the communities as well as looking at the financial considerations?

Dr. Oberg: Mr. Speaker, first of all, when it comes to the number of school boards, we have reduced the number of school boards from roughly 120 down to the existing number of just over 60. I believe that local decision-making, that the grassroots process is very important in the school system.

In direct response to your question, the learning commission will be looking at all different factors. They have an open hand to look at all the factors when it comes to governance, and I would fully expect that they will be looking at the questions that you just asked.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mrs. Jablonski: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. To the same minister: when do you expect to receive the completed report from the learning commission?

Dr. Oberg: Mr. Speaker, initially the learning commission was due to report back at the end of June. They gave me their interim report at the end of January and at that time felt that they could not have a good, completed report by the end of June. They have subsequently stated that they would prefer to bring it in around the end of August or the first part of September. I told them that I would prefer to have it in in June, but over that preference was the preference to have a good, completed report, a good, thorough report, and that's what they will be doing. So I'm anticipating it towards the end of August or first part of September.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Norwood.

Electricity Deregulation

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. As utility bills go up, this government's credibility goes down. A quick visit to the web site altaliberals.ab.ca will show just how expensive electricity has become as a result of this Conservative government's boondoggle, this \$9 billion boondoggle. Now we find out that municipally owned utilities are the next victim of this expensive power play. My first question is to the Premier. How is preventing future growth of the generating capacity of municipally owned utilities going to lower costs for consumers of electricity in this province?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, it's all part of the general and overall deregulation scenario. If you're looking for easy answers, you need to look no further than the opposition benches. Their answer is always the same. At least I think it's the same, because we really don't know where they stand on this. Is it to reregulate or to spend more money? That might be their way, but it's not the Alberta way.

2:10

I'd like to point some things out. The easy answer ignores the fact – and they ignore the fact because it's politically good for us. Naturally they would ignore it. They ignore the fact that the actual cost of power in Alberta is less than half of what it was when deregulation began on January 1, 2001. On January 1, 2001, it was 13.1 cents a kilowatt-hour. Today it is 6.4 cents. That easy answer ignores the fact that with or without deregulation power generated by natural gas, as that price of natural gas is going up, naturally will be more expensive, then, when natural gas prices are high. I mean, it's quite natural that those prices will go up. The easy answer – and this is something they fail to mention; they fail to mention it all the time – ignores the fact that regulation helps hide or subsidize the true cost of power.

But what the opposition doesn't mention is the collective \$100 billion – can you understand? One hundred billion dollars – taxpayer-supported debt for electricity generation that Canadian consumers in other provinces will eventually have to pay. They never mention that. They never mention that in Ontario, for

example, every person in that province owes \$2,875 in an electricity debt. That's \$11,500 for a family of four. They never get out there and spread that word. I hope that you do. I hope that you do. We know that public debt is the Liberal way, Mr. Speaker. Public debt is the Liberal way.

Mr. MacDonald: Given that the easy answer for the Premier is a visit to altaliberals.ab.ca to see just exactly how much Alberta consumers can save from your electricity deregulation scheme, why does this government continue to attack local governments' rights to provide utilities to citizens at the lowest possible cost?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, we don't. But I would hope, in the interest of honesty, in the interest of political honesty, something the Liberals always strive for, I think, that they would put on their web site so all can see that every person in the province of Ontario owes a \$2,875 electricity debt, \$11,500 for a family of four. Put that on your web site and smoke it.

Mr. MacDonald: Mr. Speaker, I'm shocked at the Premier's reaction.

Why must Alberta consumers always take a backseat to this government's big business friends who are doing nothing but promoting electricity deregulation? The ultimate cost is always paid by the consumers of this province through higher bills.

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, relative to the question I'll have the hon. minister respond.

Mr. Smith: Mr. Speaker, the Premier is quite right when he says that the debt in Ontario that is supported by taxpayers is \$2,875. In fact, in Manitoba, a long-held ND bastion, that debt is \$7,200, and in Quebec it's \$5,500.

Mr. Speaker, the only people in here who have ever supported big business sit over there in the ND area. We're saying that we have real time, real pricing, transparent – we talked about a Speech from the Throne that talked about the value of our children. This government will not mortgage their future by artificially subsidizing electricity rates.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Norwood, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie.

Nonrenewable Resource Revenue

Mr. Masyk: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My constituents have been phoning, asking questions about rising natural gas and oil prices and how they affect the provincial revenues. To the Minister of Energy: how much money has the Alberta government collected in nonrenewable resource revenue and freehold mineral tax over the last three years, and how has it been spent?

Mr. Smith: Mr. Speaker, as much as this could be an extended answer, let me be extremely brief yet salient because it's important, because no other province in this dominion shares such a great wealth. In fact, in the year 1999-2000 our revenues were \$4.7 billion. In the bonanza year, where gas ran to over \$10 a gigajoule, the revenue for that year was over \$10.8 billion. In fact, in 2001-2002 it was \$6.5 billion. We estimate that it'll be around that area this year. Unlike the bonanza year, if you will, where it hit \$10.8 billion, natural gas has not hit that plus \$10 threshold in the last quarter. So that's \$22 billion over the last three fiscal years, 32 percent of total government revenue, and that was put into general

revenue and was used to provide funding for key services. For example, it runs the health budget on an annual basis.

The Speaker: Okay, hon. minister. We'll probably have a budget debate sometime this session as well.

The hon. member.

Mr. Masyk: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Again to the same minister: will Alberta continue to have such high revenues in nonrenewable resource revenue and freehold mineral tax in the future?

Thank you.

Mr. Smith: Mr. Speaker, I think that this year could accurately be described as one of uncertainty given the situation in the Middle East – the Iraqi situation has led to a war premium on oil – as well as the situation in Venezuela. The general strike in Venezuela has reduced shipments and increased the price of heavy oil. Alberta is known for its abundance of heavy oil, and the spread between light and heavy has never been so narrow. So there's ample evidence to show that this year, as a result of those two effects, has shown us some bonus revenue that wouldn't be expected in the future.

However, Mr. Speaker, natural gas continues to be a fuel of choice. We've had wonderful blizzards and great cold weather in the market area in the east. That demand for this product has continued to drive up the price. It's a freely traded commodity. It's a commodity that we use. We get good prices because we don't have pipeline costs to pay, but it's one that we believe, as the business plan states – I would rather be conservative than liberal in our estimates – still will continue to provide good, strong funding sources for this government.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Masyk: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. In addition to royalty resource revenue, the government of Alberta has a fuel tax of 9 cents a litre of gasoline. Could the Minister of Transportation please explain where this revenue goes? He can identify Anthony Henday separately.

Mr. Stelmach: Of the 9 cents a litre that the Alberta government collects in fuel tax, every penny is invested in road infrastructure either through capital grants to municipalities or on the provincially owned highway network system. Unfortunately, though, of the 10 cents of federal tax that is collected, I can assure you that none of that comes back to the province, at least at this particular time.

Energy Conservation Initiatives

Ms Carlson: Mr. Speaker, as a result of government bungling, energy prices have skyrocketed, and this province is not one step closer to meeting greenhouse gas emission targets. For five years the Official Opposition has been urging the government to show some environmental leadership by starting a retrofit loan fund. As other provinces have realized, helping consumers make expensive home retrofits with revenue-neutral loan funds is smart and effective. My questions today are to the Minister of Environment. Why doesn't this minister explain to his colleagues that demand-side management like home retrofits save energy and are important initiatives for preserving the environment and reducing Alberta's greenhouse gas emissions?

2:20

Dr. Taylor: Well, Mr. Speaker, that's exactly why this government

has established and funded Climate Change Central, an organization that's at arm's length from government, to look at these issues. In fact, we have further funded an office of energy efficiency. They have a different title for it now; it's just up and running. One of the things they will be investigating is the ways that consumers can actually save energy and what will encourage consumers to save energy. Is there a possibility that this organization may at some stage look at exactly what the member is talking about? That's for the organization to determine, but they will be looking at all options to encourage consumers to save energy.

Ms Carlson: Well, Mr. Speaker, since Climate Change Central has been in operation for five years and has so far accomplished absolutely nothing, will this minister admit to this Assembly and to the province that that was just another committee struck to do nothing, just to try and make this government look good when they refused to take any action?

Dr. Taylor: Mr. Speaker, I have to take exception to her comments, and I will get her the annual reports of Climate Change Central for the last several years and all the activities that have been accomplished. For instance, last year they organized at the University of Alberta a conference and a structure for emissions trading. Presently, they're working and talking to organizations about emissions trading, how those structures should be organized. I can go on and on and on with the activities that Climate Change Central has done, but rather than doing that, I'll simply forward to her the annual reports of Climate Change Central.

I think she should actually apologize to Climate Change Central for saying that they have done nothing.

Ms Carlson: Mr. Speaker, I'm just expressing the concerns I hear from people from Climate Change Central themselves.

Will this minister just do the right thing and commit to helping move this government out of the Stone Age and forward on an environmental policy by committing today to bring forward a retrofit loan program that will be revenue neutral for you guys that will help consumers move forward on this issue and save them some money?

Dr. Taylor: Mr. Speaker, once again, I don't think her constituents have talked to her about the ineffectiveness of Climate Change Central. I don't believe it.

In the larger issue, Mr. Speaker, I will say that we have as a government, very clearly, a climate change action plan, an action plan that we will be committing dollars to, I believe, in the upcoming budget – I hope – and we will be doing that as we go forward. Certainly the members of the opposition will see that we do have a commitment. We're presently talking to various industrial sectors about sectorial agreements as to how they can reduce greenhouse gases at an industry level, and we will continue with our planned investment in innovation and technology sectorial agreements, consumer buy-in among other issues.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands.

Education Funding (continued)

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I'm currently touring schools in my Edmonton-Highlands riding. What I see are schools like Eastglen high school, that is desperately in need of some upgrades and refurbishing. I see schools like Rundle elementary, where excellent programs to help high-needs students learn are

threatened. What I see, what parents and teachers see is an attempt to preserve excellence in the face of a government-created crisis in our schools. My question is to the Minister of Learning. Does the minister agree with his colleague the chair of the Tory Edmonton caucus when he talks about the schools funding crisis as being part of a concerted effort by the school boards and the school industry, including teachers, to make sure that they are at the head of the line for public dollars?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Dr. Oberg: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. First of all, I would definitely, definitely not call this an educational funding crisis. As I illustrated earlier in a response, we're talking 1 percent of a budget, that we will go in and attempt to work with the Edmonton public school board to take a look at and find out if there are ways that those dollars can be saved.

Our teachers are very highly valued professionals. Right now our teachers are at the highest level of any teachers in Canada when it comes to payment. The last arbitration settlement put them there. The dollars have flowed to the school boards in order to pay for those settlements. Again, I don't want to have to reiterate for the third time this question period about how many dollars we've put into the education system. We've put more money in the education system than any other province in Canada and, I would hesitate to say, perhaps any state in the U.S. as well.

Mr. Speaker, our results are number one in the world. Our teachers are the highest paid in the country. We spend more money than anywhere else in the country, yet you call this a crisis.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Mason: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Well, we call it a crisis indeed.

What does the minister have to say to parents who are concerned about the crisis in our schools? Or are they also part of the so-called school industry?

Dr. Oberg: Mr. Speaker, what I would say to those parents who are concerned about their children is: absolutely, I'm concerned about my children every day. I want to ensure that the education system that is there continues to be there. One of those ways that the education system will continue to be there is through fiscal responsibility. It's my job as Minister of Learning to ensure that fiscal accountability. It's my job as Minister of Learning to ensure that we continue to be number one in the world, and that's a challenge that I take very seriously.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Will the minister, then, tell parents who are concerned about crumbling schools, ballooning class sizes, and threatened programs caused by 10 years of Tory cuts why sending in the auditors is the answer to the school crisis?

Dr. Oberg: Absolutely, Mr. Speaker. First of all, I'll reiterate again – there seems to be a lack of listening in the Assembly today – that there has not been a cut in education since 1994-1995. The education system took the lowest percentage cut of any department when we went through it in 1993. Since that time, education funding has increased dramatically. Since 1995 education funding

has increased 46 percent. Over that same time frame we've seen a 6 percent increase in the number of students.

So I guess my message to the parents is that it is not a crisis. The reason we're going in with an audit team is because the Edmonton public school system is such a decentralized system that dollars are being put out to the schools, and realistically we're looking at where those things are spent. We have some schools that are running a large surplus. We have other schools of the 208 schools in Edmonton public that are running deficits. Quite simply, we're going to go in there and work with Edmonton public to find ways that they can achieve the savings so that they can balance their budget.

head: **Recognitions**

Strathcona-Tweedsmuir School Avalanche Victims

Mr. Tannas: Mr. Speaker, on Saturday, February 1, 2003, Alberta suffered a great loss when seven grade 10 students from Strathcona-Tweedsmuir school tragically lost their lives in an avalanche. Together with their families, friends, teachers, and classmates we mourn the loss of Ben Albert, Daniel Arato, Scott Broshko, Alex Pattillo, Michael Shaw, Marissa Staddon, and Jeffrey Trickett.

When we think of young people, our first thoughts are of the excitement and enthusiasm that they show each and every day, excitement for life, for learning, for experiencing new challenges. This tragedy has touched all Albertans. Perhaps we may find comfort and encouragement in the words from David Brower's *Let the Mountains Talk, Let the River Run*: "A ship in harbour is safe, but that is not what ships were built for."

May God bless Ben, Daniel, Scott, Alex, Michael, Marissa, and Jeffrey and all those who suffer their loss.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Clover Bar-Fort Saskatchewan.

World's Longest Hockey Game Cancer Research Fund-raiser

Mr. Loughheed: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's with great pleasure that I rise to bring recognition and congratulations to a dedicated group of individuals, led by Dr. Brent Saik of Ardrossan, who this past weekend succeeded in breaking the Guinness world record for playing the longest hockey game.

Dr. Saik and his teammates played their game until 4 p.m. on Sunday, ending 80 hours of play, surpassing the previous record by 11 hours. Dr. Saik, the goaltender for the blue team, defeated the white team by a score of 650 to 628. Even more impressive is the amount of money raised by these players for the Cross Cancer pediatric research centre. The initial goal was to raise \$50,000. They doubled that, and the money is still coming in.

In addition to the 40 players, also to be commended are the dozens of dedicated volunteers who kept the game going. I ask that all members of the Legislature join me in congratulating Dr. Brent Saik and his teammates and the volunteers for their dedication to the game of hockey and, moreover, their generous donation to the Cross Cancer pediatric research centre.

Thank you.

2:30

Barb Tarbox

Dr. Taft: Mr. Speaker, in recent months we've all heard of the campaign of Barb Tarbox to encourage people to quit smoking. Barb, who is dying of cancer caused by her own smoking, has given all of us a new model of courage, and she deserves all the tributes she is receiving.

Today I want to make a point of recognizing the courage and commitment of Barb's husband, Pat, and her daughter, Mackenzie. Pat and Mackenzie are sharing the last days of their wife and mother, the most important person in their lives, with thousands of others. At a point when anyone else would be demanding privacy and time for themselves and their family, Pat and Mackenzie are providing the time and space for Barb to carry out her campaign. They are making a sacrifice that none of us would want to make, and they deserve our gratitude and respect because of it. Barb's campaign will change the lives of many people for the better, and we will long remember her because of it. We must also remember the contribution her husband and daughter are making so that this campaign is possible.

Mr. Speaker, I'm sure every member of this Assembly will join me in recognizing the contribution Pat and Mackenzie Tarbox are making to a better world.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Buffalo.

Pierre Lueders and Giulio Zardo

Mr. Cernaiko: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. On behalf of all Albertans it's my pleasure to congratulate Pierre Lueders and Giulio Zardo, members of the Canada One two-man bobsled team. On Sunday this duo won a silver medal at the world bobsled championships in Lake Placid, New York. Mr. Zardo hails from Quebec, while Mr. Lueders resides in Alberta.

We are extremely proud of this team's accomplishments. Winning a medal is an incredible feat. Overcoming a number of obstacles to achieve this success makes it even more remarkable. This team has been together just for one year, so this medal is a tribute to their hard work over the past 12 months and ability to reach this level of distinction in such a short time. The duo also faced formidable weather during the competition. Temperatures dropped to minus 36 degrees Celsius, and winds reached more than 35 kilometres per hour. While other teams canceled their training runs, this team braved the cold to continue practising. Such commitment to excellence is an example to all of us.

We are extremely fortunate to have Mr. Lueders with us today, and it's my honour to introduce him to the Members of this Legislative Assembly. I invite him to stand and receive the warm welcome and congratulations of this House.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie.

Calvary Community Church

Ms Carlson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Today myself and my colleague from Edmonton-Mill Woods would like to recognize the Calvary Community Church in Mill Woods for their outstanding part of the programming that focuses on single parents and their families. As a part of their programming they have Just Me and the Kids single-parent support groups, which include Tuesday night dinners where the whole family can come for \$1, parenting courses, programming specifically for the kids. They provide letters to single parents to be able to get their taxes done for free. They have the Care Closet, which is a clothing bank. They provide food to carry families over as required, and they make sure the kids and even the moms have gifts at Christmas and Mother's Day and birthdays. They also provide celebration meals such as Thanksgiving and Christmas dinners.

We would like to thank this church for providing services that are greatly needed and very much appreciated in our community.

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

Bellerose High School Marathon Hockey Game

Mr. Horner: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Today I rise to recognize the courageous students from Bellerose composite high school in St. Albert who also took part in a grueling 79 hour and 59 minute hockey marathon. Out of respect for their marathon counterparts in Sherwood Park who were raising money for cancer, the students gracefully declined to go over the 80-hour point to ensure that their counterparts would receive the Guinness book record for the longest hockey game ever played. Not only did the students show class and character by allowing this to happen and the record to be received, but they also gave \$2,000 of their own fund-raising for their school to cancer research.

Forty students took part, but I would like to give special recognition to two of the student organizers, Brandon Jansen and Jeff Beaton. There were also two young ladies who took part in this painstaking game, Sue Beaudette, who finished the match, and Venessa Langhorn, who actually got quite ill and could not finish the event.

Once again, I would like to congratulate all the participants and volunteers from Bellerose composite high school in this outstanding display of heart and determination.

Thank you.

Freedom to Read Week

Mr. Vandermeer: Mr. Speaker, today I'm delighted to rise in recognition of the 19th annual Freedom to Read Week, February 23 to March 1, to reaffirm the importance of open access to reading materials. All Canadians have the fundamental right to have access to all expressions of knowledge, creativity, and intellectual activity and to express their thoughts publicly, as embodied in the nation's Bill of Rights and the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms. This basic right is essential to the health and development of our society and democracy itself.

Writers, publishers, librarians contribute to this freedom by making it possible for readers to choose freely what they read. Our librarians mark Freedom to Read Week by setting up displays and holding special events such as public readings and book displays about access to information and freedom of expression. Freedom to read can never be taken for granted. It is part of a precious heritage that allows us to choose what materials we read and take home from our local library.

Mr. Speaker, on behalf of the Minister of Community Development and all members of the Assembly I am pleased to support our libraries and Freedom to Read Week.

head: **Presenting Petitions**

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Shaw.

Mrs. Ady: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise today to present a petition signed by 2,600 Albertans, and incidentally my constituents, representing the communities of Douglasdale, McKenzie Lake, and Chaparral petitioning the provincial government to request immediate funding for six much-needed schools on the Calgary board of education's capital plan list for 2002-2003.

head: **Notices of Motions**

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods on a Standing Order 15 motion.

Dr. Massey: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I give notice that under Standing Order 15(2) I intend to raise a matter of privilege and, further, or in the alternative, contempt of the House.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona on a Standing Order 30.

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Pursuant to Standing Order 30 and after having provided your office with appropriate notice, I wish to inform you that upon the completion of the daily Routine I will move to adjourn the ordinary business of the Assembly to hold an emergency debate on a matter of urgent public importance; namely, the genuine emergency resulting from the government's failure to properly fund school boards for arbitrated salary settlements, operations and maintenance grants, and grade 10 credits.

Thank you.

head: **Introduction of Bills**

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Grande Prairie-Smoky.

Bill 3

Electric Utilities Act

Mr. Knight: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I request leave to introduce Bill 3, the Electric Utilities Act.

Changes to the Electric Utilities Act will build on Alberta's competitive environment and ensure a more level playing field to help attract new entrants into Alberta's competitive electricity market. Mr. Speaker, this is yet another example of Alberta's leadership in North America, and it represents another step in the right direction for our province and for all Albertans.

Thank you.

[Motion carried; Bill 3 read a first time]

The Speaker: The hon. Government House Leader.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'd move that Bill 3 be moved onto the Order Paper under Government Bills and Orders.

[Motion carried]

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Medicine Hat.

2:40

Bill 4

Alberta Personal Income Tax Amendment Act, 2003

Mr. Renner: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I request leave to introduce a bill being Bill 4, the Alberta Personal Income Tax Amendment Act, 2003.

Mr. Speaker, this bill will introduce amendments to provincial legislation, bringing it into consistency with federal and personal income tax legislation.

[Motion carried; Bill 4 read a first time]

The Speaker: The hon. Government House Leader.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'd move that Bill 4 be moved onto the Order Paper under Government Bills and Orders.

[Motion carried]

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Dunvegan.

**Bill 5
Line Fence Amendment Act, 2003**

Mr. Goudreau: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise today to request leave to introduce Bill 5, the Line Fence Amendment Act, 2003.

Mr. Speaker, this bill will clarify the spirit of the Line Fence Act, which provides direction to neighbouring landowners who share a common fence for the raising and containment of livestock.

[Motion carried; Bill 5 read a first time]

The Speaker: The hon. Government House Leader.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'd move that Bill 5 be moved onto the Order Paper under Government Bills and Orders.

[Motion carried]

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Beverly-Clareview.

**Bill 11
Auditor General Amendment Act, 2003**

Mr. Yankowsky: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. On behalf of the hon. Member for Calgary-Foothills I beg leave to introduce Bill 11, the Auditor General Amendment Act, 2003.

The amendments are designed to add further clarification to the Auditor General Act.

[Motion carried; Bill 11 read a first time]

The Speaker: The hon. Government House Leader.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'd move that Bill 11 be placed on the Order Paper under Government Bills and Orders.

[Motion carried]

head: **Tabling Returns and Reports**

The Clerk: Pursuant to Standing Order 37.1(2) I wish to advise the House that the following document was deposited with the Office of the Clerk on behalf of the hon. Dr. Oberg, Minister of Learning: an excerpt from the Alberta Teachers' Association brief and general argument submission to the arbitration tribunal under the Education Services Settlement Act.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Justice and Attorney General.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise today on behalf of the Premier to file with the Assembly a letter from Mayor Bill Smith of the city of Edmonton regarding recommendations of the Alberta Electoral Boundaries Commission. The letter notes a motion passed by Edmonton city council that calls on the government to direct the commission to maintain Edmonton's current number of seats in the provincial Legislature. The letter is being tabled at Mayor Smith's request.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Highwood.

Mr. Tannas: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I wish to table five copies

of a petition with over 370 signatures from Highwood and area residents requesting that the government of Alberta allow "Special Constables to enforce provincial statutes on Primary and Secondary Hwy's within the jurisdictional boundaries of our towns and villages."

Mr. Lougheed: Mr. Speaker, today I rise to table with the Assembly copies of a letter from our Premier to Dr. Brent Saik, the organizer of the longest hockey game in history and fund-raiser for cancer.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I'd like to table five copies of an announcement of a new awards program to recognize individual Albertans for outstanding achievements and contributions to the arts in the province. This announcement was made during the Canadian Conference of the Arts annual awards presentation which was held here in Edmonton in the fall.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview.

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm rising today to table copies of a letter from a seniors couple in my constituency who are living on a fixed income, and they're forwarding a notice from their landlord that says, "We were hoping to stabilize rents and expenses but due to utility deregulation, rents must again increase."

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I rise this afternoon to table over 1,500 signatures from Albertans from places like Rochester, Elk Point, Edmonton, Coalhurst, St. Albert, Calgary, Lethbridge, Slave Lake, Rosemary, Wetaskiwin, and Sherwood Park, just to name a few of the locations. These 1,500 Albertans are urging the Legislative Assembly and particularly this government to "reinstate natural-gas rebates immediately," whether it's an election year or not.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona.

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I have two tablings. I first table an Alberta School Boards Association publication, *Hot News*, dated February 7, 2003. The ASBA is concerned with the crisis in our education system. The \$142 million hangover from the teachers' arbitration is causing and forcing the school boards to lay off teachers and cut services to students. That's the first one.

The second tabling is the appropriate number of copies of a letter addressed to me by Mr. Richard Grynias of Edmonton. This is dated February 5, and in this one Mr. Grynias expresses grave concern about the crisis in education that's simply been deepened by the government's refusal to pay for the additional costs to school boards that arise from the arbitrated settlements for teachers' salaries.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands.

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I'm tabling today a letter from Sheila Greer of Edmonton dated February 7, 2003, and addressed to the Premier. She's asking the Premier to

allocate sufficient funding to the province's education system so that the crisis in our schools may be averted. She's also complaining of the behaviour of the Minister of Learning.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Shaw.

Mrs. Ady: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise today to table the appropriate number of copies of 855 letters that I received from constituents regarding provincial funding for the Calgary Catholic school district. Four copies of the tabled letters have already been deposited with the Clerk's office due to the volume.

Thank you.

The Speaker: Hon. members, pursuant to the Legislative Assembly Act I table with the Assembly the appropriate copies of the Members' Services Order 1/03, being Constituency Services Amendment Order (No. 11).

As well, pursuant to section 63(2) of the Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act I am pleased to table with the Assembly the annual report of the Information and Privacy Commissioner covering the period April 1, 2001 to March 31, 2002.

Pursuant to section 10 of the Electoral Boundaries Commission Act I am pleased to table with the Assembly the final report of the Alberta Electoral Boundaries Commission, entitled Proposed Electoral Division Areas, Boundaries and Names for Alberta.

Now, hon. members, we have some business to deal with. The hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods.

Privilege

Misleading the House

Dr. Massey: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise under Standing Order 15(2) a matter of privilege and, further, or in the alternative, contempt of the House. The issue of contempt deals with comments made by the Minister of Learning on November 25, 2002, on page 1483 of *Hansard* in his response to questions about class size. As *Hansard* reports, my questions were to the Minister of Learning, and the question was: "Given that class size was a major issue in the teachers' strike, what action is the minister taking to avoid a new budget-driven crisis?" The minister's response was: "Mr. Speaker, the ATA in their submission to the arbitration tribunal said that the awards could be funded by increasing class size and by decreasing the hours of instruction." In his reply the minister stated, as I said, that the ATA would be willing to accept increased class sizes as well as changes to hours of instruction. I have since received a copy of a letter from the president of the ATA indicating that the minister's reply misrepresented the position of the ATA, and it's rather clear. It says:

On December 5, 2002 I wrote to you concerning your frequently repeated statements that the Alberta Teachers' Association had invited boards to increase class sizes and/or hours of instruction in order to fund arbitrated salary settlements. In that letter I advised you that your comments misrepresented the position of Alberta's teachers and provided the actual text of our brief to the arbitration tribunal on this matter. I also reminded you that we had previously advised your deputy minister of our concerns.

He goes on, and he's copied MLAs.

2:50

The effect that all of this has had is that the minister has misled the House in his reply and for reasons unknown. The minister's response was not a misstatement of a few words, which might be interpreted in different ways. He was commenting directly on the ATA submission to the tribunal, intentionally citing the ATA's position, although apparently inaccurately.

Mr. Speaker, as you know, Erskine May's *Parliamentary Practice*, 22nd edition, defines contempt as

any act or omission which obstructs or impedes either House of Parliament in the performance of its functions, or which obstructs or impedes any Member or officer of such House in the discharge of his duty, or which has a tendency, directly or indirectly, to produce such results may be treated as a contempt.

Marleau and Montpetit, speaking to the issue of contempt in chapter 3 of the *House of Commons Procedure and Practice*, state:

Any conduct which offends the authority or dignity of the House, even though no breach of any specific privilege may have been committed, is referred to as a contempt of the House. Contempt may be an act or an omission; it does not have to actually obstruct or impede the House or a Member, it merely has to have the tendency to produce [the same] results.

Further, Mr. Speaker, John Maingot's *Parliamentary Privilege in Canada*, 2nd edition, provides the most direct citation in this particular case of contempt. When speaking of the requirements for a prima facie case of contempt, Maingot argues that

it must be shown that the Member was obstructed in his work relating to a proceeding in Parliament and not simply while he was performing his representative duties in his constituency or in other myriad areas . . . nor simply in his private [member] capacity.

Mr. Speaker, quite simply and to the point, I was obstructed or at least was the victim of the same results in performing my duties in the House as one of the members, as a member of the Official Opposition and, even more specifically, Her Majesty's Official Opposition critic for Learning. Information was given by the minister which is not factual. There's a copy of the letter from the arbitrator who speaks to the issue, and in that letter the arbitrator says: accordingly, it would be inaccurate to suggest that the ATA advocated increasing instructional hours or class sizes.

Had the minister provided a statement which reflected the actual position of the Alberta Teachers' Association, my line of questioning and the way I performed my duties could have been substantially different. Therefore, the minister's obstruction is apparent. This had nothing to do with my private capacity nor did it have anything to do with performing the representative duties in my constituency. This obstruction occurred directly and unequivocally in performing my House duties.

Mr. Speaker, in an example case suggested in Maingot's work on pages 233 and 234, a prima facie case was apparent because the RCMP misled the minister, who in turn misled the House and a member of the House in question period. In this circumstance the infraction was much more severe. The minister had the correct information at his disposal and did not accurately present the information. In the case mentioned in *Maingot* at pages 233, 234, it is stated that

before the House will be permitted by the Speaker to embark on a debate in such circumstances . . . an admission by someone in authority . . . either that a Member of the House of Commons was intentionally misled or an admission of facts that leads naturally to the conclusion that a Member was intentionally misled, and a direct relationship between the misleading information and a proceeding in Parliament, is necessary.

The work gives examples of an authority, which might include a minister or an instrument of government policy. In this case, Mr. Speaker, the authority is from the president of the organization that gave the minister the information. Given the circumstances and the nature of the question, clearly the person giving the information to the minister is the one who is stating that the minister misrepresented that information, and I already read part of that letter. Further, the proceedings in parliament, specifically question period, are directly linked to the information, as it was part of the minister's operation in that proceeding.

Mr. Speaker, this is clearly a case of contempt of the House and, further, or in the alternative, a matter of privilege. The minister gave me and the House inaccurate information and either directly or indirectly obstructed and interfered in the performance of my work and rights. If we cannot count on accurate information being brought before the House, I believe it is a grave concern for the principles of accountability, democracy, and fairness, which you and I hold as a standard for this Assembly.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Learning.

Dr. Oberg: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It gives me great honour to be able to stand and dispute the claims that have just been put forward on a point of privilege.

Mr. Speaker, first of all, a point of privilege is a very serious matter. Saying that I have infringed upon the rights of any member of this Assembly is something that I take very seriously, and I would ask that you rule on this immediately to put this to an end.

I will refer to what the hon. member has stated in his letter to you of January 30, 2003.

In his reply the Minister stated that the Alberta Teachers' Association advocated that they would be willing to accept increased class sizes as well as changes to hours of instruction.

I will then, Mr. Speaker, quote from page 1483 of *Alberta Hansard*, which, as the hon. member has correctly quoted from, was in a question about class size, and I believe that this should be quoted again. I answered the question that was posed by the hon. member by stating, "Mr. Speaker, the ATA in their submission to the arbitration tribunal said that the awards could be funded by increasing class size and by decreasing the hours of instruction." I will say that there probably was a typo or I did misspeak in that the comment was: increasing the hours of instruction.

Mr. Speaker, I would like to draw your attention to a document that was tabled on December 3, 2002. It is sessional paper 700 of 2002. I would draw your attention to page 16, which is section 4 of the general submission by the arbitration tribunal on the Edmonton public school board system. I will say in preface to this that this is a very similar document as to the first six cases that were put forward by the arbitration tribunal. Section 4, ATA's General Submissions, says, "This is a summary of the ATA's submissions about the general considerations which the Arbitration Tribunal should take into account."

I will then turn to page 25 and refer you to section (q), which is out of the same section that deals with the ATA's general submission to the arbitration tribunal.

School boards can accommodate higher salaries and benefits by adjusting instructional hours or class sizes – both of which are outside the scope of the Arbitration Tribunal by virtue of section 23 of the Education Services Settlement Act, though both affect the quality of the teaching work place. Some school boards can use surpluses. Accordingly, there can be no argument about their ability to pay for the increases being sought by the ATA.

In summary, the ATA is seeking end rate grid adjustments of between 18% and 20% for the various school districts, spread over the mandatory two-year term of the collective agreements.

Mr. Speaker, I will also refer you to a document that was tabled today, and that document was an actual part of the submission to the ESSA that the Alberta Teachers' Association made. Again, in prefacing this, I will say that this document was not provided to us until the president of the Alberta Teachers' Association made this available to us. This document is from an ATA brief of general argument to the arbitral tribunal. I will quote halfway down the page, which is section (b):

Nevertheless, for most jurisdictions this is not an issue, in reference to the fair and reasonable compensation.

For those few jurisdictions at or near deficits there are a number of potential methods for implementing reasonable awards, which may or may not be carried out:

- Reduce programmes
- Reduce non-teaching services
- Raise teaching hours of instruction
- Seek power to levy local taxes, establish foundations or other schemes to increase revenue
- Close small schools
- Apply to merge jurisdictions

Then I will quote again.

All of these are clearly inferior to what the ATA has always advocated – often in unison with affected school boards – as the only proper solution:

- Seek greater Government assistance for public education.

3:00

Mr. Speaker, there were a lot of words that came to mind when I heard that I was being brought up for a point of privilege. Probably the first one was shock, the second one was dismay, and the third one was sadness that this hon. member would bring this forward. It is very clear in what *Hansard* has stated that I have brought forward what the ATA has put forward in their submission. I in no way said that the ATA advocated it. In fact, in *Hansard* there is no word that says advocate there. It said that the ATA put it in their submission.

Mr. Speaker, on December 3 of 2002 the arbitration tribunal was tabled before this Assembly and was open for all members to see and read. This afternoon a part of the actual submission to the ATA was also tabled in this Assembly which said exactly the same thing.

I am extremely distressed that this point of privilege could damage my reputation in this Assembly, that this point of privilege is false, that this point of privilege is not indicative, hopefully – I have held the hon. member in esteem. He has always been a very esteemed colleague. I feel that this takes him over the edge. I believe that what was stated in *Hansard* is a direct response to what was tabled in this Legislative Assembly, and I would also add and urge the Speaker to take immediate action on this point of privilege as for every minute that this false point of privilege hangs out there, it is damaging to me personally. Mr. Speaker, I would urge you to act promptly, and I would urge you to act in the right manner.

Thank you.

The Speaker: Hon. members, the chair has listened attentively to the arguments made on this purported question of privilege brought by the Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods and is prepared to rule, primarily because the chair has had several weeks to deal with this matter rather than just the last five or six minutes.

In brief, the member alleges that his ability to perform his duties was obstructed by the Minister of Learning's answers to certain questions concerning the Alberta Teachers' Association on November 25 and December 3, 2002. The member alleges that the minister misled the Assembly in these responses, which led to an alleged contempt of the Assembly. The only way that this could be a prima facie question of privilege would be if the chair found that the Minister of Learning had deliberately or intentionally misled the Assembly.

In his January 30, 2003, letter giving notice of his intention, the Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods does not directly allege that the minister deliberately or intentionally misled him or the Assembly. The parliamentary authorities are quite clear that for there to be a contempt, there must be a finding that there was some intention to mislead the House. Leading parliamentary authorities on this subject were canvassed in the chair's March 20, 2002, ruling.

In this case, before the matter can be dealt with, there must be a finding under Standing Order 15(6) that the purported question of privilege was raised at the earliest opportunity. Leaving aside the question of what circumstances would allow something done in a previous session to be the subject of a question of privilege in the next session, there is a very real issue about the timeliness of this application. In his notice the Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods indicates that this was the earliest he could raise the matter "as the Legislature had adjourned before I learned of the information which has caused me to take this action." The information consisted of letters from Mr. Booi, the president of the Alberta Teachers' Association, and from Mr. David Jones, the head of the government-appointed arbitration tribunal under the Education Services Settlement Act.

Of course, the member could not have had this information as the letter from Mr. Jones was dated December 17, 2002. It cannot be overemphasized that Mr. Jones was responding to a December 11, 2002, letter from the Minister of Learning asking for clarification of the ATA's position, which, in turn, was prompted by a December 5, 2002, letter from Mr. Booi questioning the minister's interpretation, which was the day after the fall sitting concluded. How could the minister have deliberately misled the Assembly if he was not advised of the positions of the parties until after he had spoken?

At best, this is a dispute between members as to facts or interpretation of facts. It would not necessarily be a point of order, and I do not find that it gives rise to a prima facie question of privilege.

The chair wants to take this opportunity to remind members that an allegation of deliberately misleading the House is a very serious matter that is hardly ever made out. Members, however, of a certain age may remember the Profumo affair in England in 1963, when a minister was found to have deliberately misled the House, or the Eggleton affair of February 2002 in the Canadian House of Commons, but these are extremely rare instances. The member cited a 1978 ruling from the Canadian House of Commons involving the RCMP and the then Solicitor General, but as Marleau and Monpetit state at page 87 of the *House of Commons Procedure and Practice*, there was a finding that the minister had been deliberately misled by officials. There is no such allegation here.

While members have a duty to be vigilant in their questions and answers, occasionally mistakes may occur. The chair is not suggesting that such occurred in this case but wants to remind members that our procedures provide members with an opportunity to provide additional information following Oral Question Period, and certainly the chair would never deprive a member with an opportunity to take the floor to indicate that he or she was wrong.

head: Request for Emergency Debate

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona.

Education Funding

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'd like to speak to the motion that I put on the record earlier today. I will certainly request your indulgence because I have to convince you and the members of this House that there indeed is a situation again, an emergency, and for that reason we should suspend the regular business of the House to debate my motion. So I certainly ask for your forbearance. I'll be brief. I'll try to strictly use only those arguments and reasons and facts that I think are pertinent to arguing for genuine urgency.

Speaking to urgency, Alberta students are already paying the price for this government's stubborn refusal to fund the arbitrated salary settlements and to restore operations and maintenance grants and grade 10 credits. I urge you, Mr. Speaker, to allow this debate to

proceed this afternoon. The government's failure to address this most urgent matter is creating a genuine emergency, an emergency requiring the immediate attention of the members of this House.

Speaking to urgency, Mr. Speaker, the Alberta School Boards Association said, "The \$142 million funding gap facing school boards . . . will turn into a chasm that students across the province will fall into, if the government doesn't foot the bill." The ASBA continues, "Every board in this province will hit the wall – and we are talking cuts to teaching staff, ballooning class sizes – and potentially school closures."

In some school districts cuts are already being made. Edmonton public schools have already canceled or postponed various projects and made significant cuts to their purchase of supplies, equipment, and services. Even with these cuts, Edmonton public schools are still anticipating a \$13.5 million shortfall in this year's budget.

So returning to the issue of emergency, Mr. Speaker: why do we need to debate this issue this afternoon rather than wait for the budget debate? The reason is that the school funding crisis that we need to debate today has been caused by past government decisions. The single biggest contributor to the schools' funding crisis is the arbitration settlements reached with the province's teachers last June.

Speaking to urgency, past decisions of the Tory government are causing today's crisis in our schools. The government provoked a strike with teachers. The government imposed an arbitration process and are now refusing to assist school boards to fund the salary settlement, leaving a \$142 million hole in school board budgets. Instead, school boards are being forced to cut core services. When school boards dare speak up, the government response is bullying and belligerence and sending in the auditors.

The school funding crisis is a genuine emergency, Mr. Speaker. We need to debate the school crisis in this Assembly this afternoon. I urge you to rule in favour of allowing a debate on this Standing Order 30 request to proceed this afternoon.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

3:10

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Learning on this motion.

Dr. Oberg: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker, and I will stay strictly with the urgency of this motion, as I believe that is what is being debated here today. Budget 2002 was passed in this House, in this Legislative Assembly, back in April of 2002. Included in that were increases to the Alberta school boards' budget of, for the fourth time today, \$298 million. In June of this year an arbitration settlement came down which awarded teachers 14.09 percent. That enabled our teachers to be the highest paid in Canada. Indeed, it took a four-year education teacher's pay to, at minimum, \$42,867 and a six-year education teacher, at maximum level, to \$72,893, which is the number one rank in Canada. There are also benefits on top of that. The arbitration award totaled \$260 million over the two years. The school boards were given \$298 million.

The third time line that I would stress that this is not urgency today is that the school board knew about the settlement. The school board knew how many dollars they were getting as of September 1, 2002. August 31 is their fiscal year-end. September 1 is the first year of their new budget. Mr. Speaker, they knew how many dollars they were getting. They knew what their teachers' costs were, what the arbitration settlement was at that time, back on September 1.

So speaking directly to the urgency, these are the same situations that have been there since September 1. I feel that there's definitely no case for urgency in this Standing Order 30 today.

The Speaker: The hon. Government House Leader on this point.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'd just like to add three points to the comments made by my hon. colleague with respect to the urgency. The opposition well knows and the leader of the third party well knows that in the session one of the most important pieces of business that we do is to debate supply, and there will be an opportunity at an appropriate time to debate supply, not once but three times.

The hon. member can anticipate the third-quarter results, which have to be published before the end of February, and he knows that the common practice is shortly thereafter to bring in supplementary supply. I can assure him that he will have the opportunity to debate supplementary supply shortly after the third-quarter results are published.

He can also anticipate an opportunity to debate interim supply, which is normal, because we have to provide for supply to be available immediately after the start of the new fiscal year, April 1. So in the event that full supply has not been completed prior to the end of the fiscal year, interim supply must be in place, and the hon. member has been in this House long enough to know that he will have an opportunity to address all issues of funding through the process of the interim supply debate. Then, of course, the House spends a good month debating the full supply, and he'll have that opportunity.

So it seems premature to bring up an issue around funding at a time when we've started a session, most of the time of which will be devoted to discussing the issue of funding.

The Speaker: Hon. members, let me first of all confirm that the leader of the third party did give proper notice of his intention to seek permission to present this motion under Standing Order 30. Notice was received by my office yesterday, by 1 o'clock, so that requirement had been met.

One of the key considerations that has to be made with respect to the urgency arguments is the whole question of whether or not members will have another opportunity to discuss the matter in question. As this is only the second day, well, perhaps even arguably the first day, of this particular session and some suggestions would be that we'll be here till probably September or October, one would think that since considering the Speech from the Throne has been scheduled this afternoon, there would be an opportunity this afternoon to begin discussion of this subject matter if one so chose. The hon. member himself would be given some priority in terms of the speaking order with respect to the Speech from the Throne. That's one of the courtesies provided to the leader of the party in this Assembly. Having done that, then the other alternatives provided and outlined by the hon. Government House Leader, including the estimates themselves, would certainly provide an opportunity.

So I would suspect that there will be ample opportunity, and the chair does not consider this matter a matter of such degree of urgency that warrants the postponing the business of the session this afternoon. Therefore, the request for leave is not in order.

The hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands on your purported point of order.

Point of Order

Allegations against a Member

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. The Minister of Learning is having a tough day, but he's 2 for 0 now. During the question period the hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona was asking questions to the hon. Minister of Learning, and in his response to that question I heard the hon. minister say that the hon. member wanted the strike to go on, that he wanted the children to continue not learning, or words to that effect. I did step out and look

for the Blues and wasn't able to find them, but perhaps they are there and you have them. That's the best of my recollection of the comments.

I would argue, Mr. Speaker, that this violates Standing Order 23(h), (i), and (j).

(h) makes allegations against another member.

I think it's clear that the suggestion that the minister made that the hon. member wanted a strike and wanted children not to learn was an allegation.

(i) imputes false or unavowed motives to another member.

Clearly, this is the case. Obviously, the minister's suggestion implies or asserts that the Member for Edmonton-Strathcona had motives in challenging the minister on his policies which were unavowed, and quite clearly I would assert that they are false.

(j) uses abusive or insulting language of a nature likely to create disorder.

Quite frankly, the suggestion that the hon. Member for Strathcona, who has spent his career promoting education as a professor at the University of Alberta in the Faculty of Education, would like children not to learn is insulting in a very profound way. I would suggest that the minister is out of order and should do the honourable thing and apologize.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Learning.

Dr. Oberg: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Over the past year we have been involved in numerous discussions in this Legislative Assembly about the whole issue of the strike that occurred, and the hon. members opposite have many times stated that this government wanted a strike. As early as today they said that it was the government that imposed the arbitration.

The ultimate outcome of not stopping a strike, of having a strike that goes on, is that students do not learn, that the teachers are not in the classroom. That is the ultimate consequence of continuing a strike. The only way that we could have gotten the teachers back to work was through the arbitration agreement that the Alberta Teachers' Association told the Premier they wanted as well. So if you say that it was a government-imposed arbitration that the strike was to continue, then the next step is that students would not learn.

Mr. Speaker, I do not find in 23(h), (i), and (j) that there was any intention to impute motive. I was quite simply stating a fact, stating a consequence of a continued strike action, stating a consequence of things that would have occurred if there was not an arbitration process. That is quite simply what was stated in this House today.

3:20

The Speaker: Well, let's take a look and see what was actually said, which would probably be very helpful. The hon. Minister of Learning, in responding to a question – and we'll skip the first paragraph of his long answer and go to the second paragraph.

Mr. Speaker, the hon. member knows full well that when it came to the arbitration arrangement that occurred, first of all, the president of the ATA wanted the arbitration. As a matter of fact, in a meeting with the Premier and myself he pointed that out that he wanted arbitration. We were in a position where there was a strike going on. Obviously the hon. member wanted the strike to continue so that students could continue not to learn.

Now, a cursory review of section 23 in our Standing Orders would suggest to me that the making of allegations against another member or imputing false or unavowed motives is a no-no and not part of the tradition of this House. Sometimes I suspect that hon. members, particularly ministers, actually listen to the questions that are being put their way, and when they do that, they tend to probably respond

to some words. So may I also quote, then, some words issued by the hon. leader of the third party? I quote from the question.

The government caused this crisis. They provoked the strike with the teachers. They imposed an arbitration process. They are now forcing boards to cut core services, and finally, when a board chair speaks up, they respond with bullying and intimidation.

Section 23, hon. members, refers to accusations against hon. members, not accusations against the government. So no matter how inflamed the hon. Minister of Learning might have been in listening to the questions from the hon. leader of the third party, the hon. leader of the third party was providing the nuances that he has the right to provide in his questions. However, the hon. Minister of Learning did cross the line by making a specific accusation against the leader of the third party. So I am now going to invite the hon. Minister of Learning to revisit his remarks and perhaps make comment with respect to his remarks.

Dr. Oberg: Well, thank you very much, Mr. Speaker, for this opportunity to speak. I will certainly take the best of three in today's actions and apologize to the hon. member and withdraw my comments.

The Speaker: That matter is ended.

head: **Orders of the Day**

head: **Consideration of Her Honour**

head: **the Lieutenant Governor's Speech**

Mr. Jacobs moved that an humble address be presented to Her Honour the Honourable the Lieutenant Governor as follows.

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

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

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Cardston-Taber-Warner.

Mr. Jacobs: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It's truly an honour for me today to rise in the Legislative Assembly and move acceptance of the Speech from the Throne. The speech that was presented by Her Honour the Honourable the Lieutenant Governor, Lois Hole, served to open the Third Session of the 25th Legislature, but it was done in a manner consistent with the best traditions of honour and duty that the office of the Lieutenant Governor represents.

To begin with, Mr. Speaker, I would like to express how grateful I am to live in the province of Alberta. It is a land that is blessed with natural beauty, with pristine mountains and crystal-blue, clear water. It has huge tracts of good agricultural land and an abundance of natural resources: oil, gas, coal, timber, to name a few. As I travel this province and see the diversity – the crops, the herds of cattle, and the scenic beauty – I am filled with a sense of pride and gratitude that Alberta is my home.

It is a pleasure to address the Assembly on behalf of the constituents of Cardston-Taber-Warner. I am proud to represent the people of this riding. I have deep roots in this area as I was born in southern Alberta and raised my family in the community. I am committed to my riding and dedicated to bringing my constituents effective and efficient responses to the issues of this province and the challenges that all of us face together. I am also devoted to voicing their concerns, making sure they are heard. These individuals have elected me as a representative, and it is my job to reflect the views

of my constituency to the government. I try to do so with humility and respect and in a manner suitable to the people of my constituency. Mr. Speaker, the constituency I serve has experienced steady growth, allowing for the development of flourishing communities that help to enable our province's prosperity. These contributions have assisted in the development and the continuation of our province's favourable economic position and our ability to offer such a high quality of life that makes Alberta the best place in the world to live.

I should note, however, Mr. Speaker, that even though these rural agriculture-based communities have made positive contributions to Alberta's success, they are today experiencing some challenges; for example, the high cost of electricity generation and delivery, the delivery of health care and education, and also the challenge of loss of population due to the challenges of economic sustainability of family farms and small businesses.

Alberta has many natural advantages which have served as the basis of this province's thriving economy, but our natural advantages have been met by our equally innovative resource of people. It is because of their hard work, ingenuity, and independent attitude that this province is a leader and a great place to live. Alberta has maintained an economic agenda that ensures the existence of a viable free enterprise environment and that provides its businesses with the tools necessary to compete in a global market. Our province's economy remains strong. Alberta held its ground during a time of global economic uncertainty last year, and despite this slowdown that continues to some extent today, our province enjoys a leading economic position.

Over the last 10 years Alberta has had the fastest growing economy in Canada. It is projected for 2003 that Alberta will continue to be a leader with a solid economic performance. Alberta consistently rises above other provinces, having the highest investment per capita in the country. Our unemployment rate is anticipated to remain low, while an additional 40,000 new jobs are expected to be created. The province's vibrant economy clearly not only provides for a healthy job market but also translates into new opportunities for Albertans. As growth continues, this province will also be focused on an approach to maintain our sustainability. This disciplined policy will allow the government to put money towards the province's priorities while ensuring that the finances of this province remain on track for Albertans.

I agree, Mr. Speaker, that the challenge we now face is to stay the course and keep things steady as we grow. The government is committed to its sound fiscal principles. As the Premier reinforced in his televised address, the government will stay centred on getting rid of what is left of our provincial debt, and I commend him and thank him for that. Alberta has put into place sustainable fiscal management plans. These plans include both balanced budgets and debt elimination to render certain our province's continued growth and prosperity. I believe balanced budgets, debt elimination, low taxes, and a minimum of regulation are vitally important to this province's continued prosperity. We must continue to create an economic environment where people are free and are rewarded for their efforts.

3:30

Mr. Speaker, coming from a primarily rural constituency, I feel it is my duty today to represent the views of many families involved in farming and agriculture. Agriculture is an imperative sector both to our economy and our history. Alberta was built by farmers and ranchers while today agricultural societies continue to play a crucial role in the development of this province. Agriculture is one of the founding elements of our economy. Alberta is the second largest

agricultural producer in Canada despite having only 10 percent of the country's population and 22 percent of its farms. Clearly, our producers know no bounds in developing innovation strategies and embarking on cutting-edge research. It is evident that the agriculture sector plays a vital role in our province's leading economic presence.

As Her Honour pointed out, the government has made a commitment to those in the agriculture sector. The Speech from the Throne reaffirmed the province's dedication to this industry and the people who make it thrive. This government recognizes the significance of food producers across the province. The government will also provide assistance to Alberta producers through a comprehensive portfolio of agriculture safety net programs. These programs show the dedication of the government to an industry that affects all Albertans, be they urban or rural.

Farmers and ranchers across the province can feel assured that their government is committed to addressing the concerns and difficulties agriculture producers face during uncontrollable situations. The government is exploring long-term solutions to maintain the vitality of the agriculture industry. The government is modifying and altering assistance programs for farmers and ranchers in order to alleviate the hardships faced when drought strikes. It is looking into crop insurance programs to enhance these measures, making them more responsive to the needs of farmers. Program flexibility will also be increased to accommodate heightened pressure on the livestock industry.

This year the government will focus on innovative strategies and advanced research to help build an even stronger agriculture sector. These directions will aid in the development of accelerated growth, increased prosperity, and environmental preservation throughout the industry. All members should realize by now that agriculture is not an outdated industry. It is a strong, vibrant, innovative sector that will continue to make Albertans proud well into the 21st century.

Mr. Speaker, I would now like to shift my focus and speak on an issue that has sparked much controversy and debate, the Kyoto protocol. No one should doubt that citizens across this province are committed to a clean environment and are more than willing to do their part to maintain a healthy Alberta. The state of our environment is an extremely important issue, but we must ensure that it is addressed in the most appropriate manner and does not come at the expense of stunting our economic growth.

Mr. Speaker, the Kyoto protocol is not the answer. While having good intentions to pose a solution for the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions, good intentions are not good enough. It is not the right solution for Alberta or for Canada. Within Kyoto's international approach there are difficulties. We are seeing problems already in the methods and the science of this design. We need a made-in-Alberta strategy to deal with the unique circumstances of our province. We must develop a plan that is suitable for Albertans, recognizing the environmental concerns and embracing the appropriate solutions while not compromising the economic outlook of our province.

Mr. Speaker, I would now like to turn my last remarks to addressing the importance of our children and our families. I certainly agree with the Speech from the Throne in that our children are our greatest resource. These individuals are our future. Therefore, it is vital that we give them every opportunity to grow and develop to their greatest potential. I was pleased that in the throne speech a commitment was made by the government to create an environment where children could achieve their divine potential. I believe that all the areas of commitment that were made in the promise are important. However, I also feel that a great effort should be made to strengthen families. The family is the basic unit of society, and I believe that for a province or a nation to be strong, it must have strong families. These

should be families that are accountable and responsible for their own welfare and ones that work together to achieve their goals and objectives.

I would like to note that when I speak of families, I refer, for the most part, to the traditional family, consisting of a father, mother, and children, where each member of the family recognizes their role and responsibility and works hard to succeed. These are the kinds of families that created the foundation for what this province is today. Therefore, I believe, Mr. Speaker, that it is imperative for the government to find ways to create a climate to encourage families to stay together and work to achieve success. Families also need to be responsible and accountable to solve their own problems.

Mr. Speaker, I believe in the old adage that it takes a village to raise a child. This village includes grandparents, extended family, teachers, educators, and the community at large. I certainly commend teachers and educators for the vital role they play in teaching our children. It is said that in the first five years of a child's life the child learns the moral and social values that last a lifetime. Therefore, I believe that the home is the most important environment for the child and that a good home and strong family is vital to raising children to become honest, hardworking, and responsible adults.

Mr. Speaker, the issues I have focused on are only some of the important issues facing Alberta. The Speech from the Throne outlines a promise to our children and an agenda for our future. This message highlights many crucial areas that the province will continue working on to find the best strategies and solutions to Alberta's ongoing challenges.

The Speech from the Throne is an extremely important message and one that I am proud to move acceptance of. This speech illustrates the government's leadership and commitment. This message also shows that our government will continue to find new and improved ways of doing things. We will not sit back and be complacent but will discover innovative solutions, ensuring that the high quality of life Albertans enjoy today will continue. I am proud to stand in this Assembly and support these directions for our future and our continued growth and prosperity.

I thank you.

Mr. VanderBurg: Mr. Speaker, it's with extreme pride that I second the motion for consideration of Her Honour's Speech from the Throne.

It is indeed a privilege to rise this afternoon and reply on behalf of the constituents of Whitecourt-St. Anne. My constituency is fortunate enough to enjoy wide economic diversification, and this results in issues and concerns relating to agriculture, energy, sustainable resources, economic development, infrastructure, health care, education, and utility bills. These are very real concerns to the residents of Whitecourt-St. Anne as well as throughout the province.

The Hon. Lois Hole talked about this government's commitment to both agriculture producers and rural communities. I do agree with Her Honour that they are the backbone of this province. As a member of the Standing Policy Committee on Agriculture and Municipal Affairs I am continually impressed with the complexity of important agriculture issues in Alberta. More importantly, my participation in this committee has heightened my awareness of the very real needs of local producers in Whitecourt-St. Anne. I am fortunate to have had the opportunity to bring these agriculture concerns directly to the attention of my colleagues, including the Minister of Agriculture, Food and Rural Development. Mr. Speaker, her commitment to the sustainability of agriculture is commendable, and I'd like to thank the Member for Drumheller-Chinook for her hard work. She is a true champion in the eyes of rural producers.

3:40

I also enjoyed Her Honour speaking of ensuring the long-term stability of the energy sector. These industries generate revenue for government programs but, more importantly, stimulate economic growth. In the Whitecourt-Ste. Anne constituency the lack of frost this last fall has delayed exploration in the petrochemical industry, but since the new year the weather has been much more seasonal, so the oil and gas sectors are now back to their normal winter routines. This is great news for the families in the area as well as the economy of Whitecourt-Ste. Anne.

Her Honour also talked about the consumer side of the energy sector, and this refers to customer choice and service in rural areas. Dramatic increases in utility bills are causing very real hardships in my constituency. Whitecourt-Ste. Anne is home to many low-income and fixed-income households. Unfortunately, Mr. Speaker, these people find it ever more difficult to pay these increasing bills when their sources of income are not increasing accordingly. I can say with confidence that half of the phone calls, faxes, and e-mails received by my constituency office are directly related to these issues. I realize that a great deal of progress has been made on delivering new generation, but a lot more needs to be done to help the people who do not have the finances to pay for the escalating utility bills. I look forward to the debate in this Assembly regarding the proposed legislation that will help to address these issues. I'm confident that this government will find a way to ease the burden on low-income households across the province.

Mr. Speaker, I agree with Her Honour that one of the key supports for a strong economy is a solid infrastructure. This is very true in my constituency, and thankfully some of the work necessary to keep up with Alberta's growth has already begun. Last year I was thrilled to be part of an announcement of \$63 million being dedicated to twinning 50 kilometres of highway 43 in Whitecourt-Ste. Anne. This highway has been known for years as the Alaska cutoff and is now a large part of the Canamex north/south trade corridor, that runs through Alberta to the United States and Mexico. It also serves as a gateway to Alaska and the Mackenzie highway. The economy is usually the first reason used to invest in highway infrastructure, but twinning this 50-kilometre stretch will improve the road safety by spreading out traffic, improving intersections, and helping the larger trucks and resource-based equipment get to their destinations. I am committed to ensuring that steady progress is made on this project until its completion in four years.

Her Honour pointed out how the government will continue to reform Alberta's health care system to improve access and quality. Mr. Speaker, many constituents in Whitecourt-Ste. Anne are concerned about the state of health care in their area but do not see boundaries or administrative procedures as important issues. The concerns I hear over and over again regard ensuring effective health care that is delivered in a timely manner. By building on the work that has already been done, I'm confident that progress will continue as the government strives to make health care even more efficient.

Her Honour also talked about the value-added strategy to take advantage of the enormous potential of Alberta's economy. Mr. Speaker, I'd like this government to pursue two very important issues in northern Alberta and in my constituency. First of all, the softwood lumber issue remains a very important issue and continues to have dramatic effect on the local economy. The lumber industry is a major economic component of the Whitecourt-Ste. Anne constituency. While it suffers, so do the spin-off businesses, and the overall result becomes negative for all communities. My hope is that all sides will soon come together to finally settle this dispute. This industry needs to have both the Minister of Sustainable Resource

Development and the Minister of International and Intergovernmental Relations push hard for a resolution.

The second issue is the issue of economic development of mineral extraction in northern Alberta. I am presently working on a strategy driven by industry to create investment in the precious mines and minerals sector. Alberta has a potential to launch another lucrative resource-based industry. Junior mineral companies can use today's technology coupled with Alberta's rich resources to develop this exciting new industry. I believe that continued exploration combined with the right investment will create mining opportunities in this province within the decade. The possibility of creating substantial revenue for the province and an opportunity for new and stable employment truly does exist. There are several new diamond mines operating in the Northwest Territories. With less than \$3 billion of investment, the people of the territories will see a return of \$50 billion.

I believe that Alberta could invest substantially less and generate similar revenues because of our existing infrastructure and well-trained workforce. Diamond discovery is not new to Alberta, and I'm sure that most of you know that in 1958 Alberta's first diamond was found in my constituency, around the Evansburg area, by a local farmer. So prospectors living and working in my constituency have told me of the great potential for diamond and gold discovery in Whitecourt-Ste. Anne. As we speak, these same prospectors are working on projects in northern Alberta that have huge potential for mineral extraction. I thank both the ministers of Energy and Economic Development for their encouragement to help this industry develop.

Mr. Speaker, this is just a snapshot of some of the many issues on the minds of residents of Whitecourt-Ste. Anne. This year I hope to build on the successful meetings that I've had with the mayors, the Reeves, school boards, REAs, gas co-ops, and other authorities representing the people of Whitecourt-Ste. Anne. These representatives have a lot of work to do, and I would like to assist them however I can. I do enjoy partnering with them, as we all play a large role to ensure that Alberta remains the best place to live, work, and raise our families.

In closing, Mr. Speaker, I'd like to thank my family for their love and support. I'm very fortunate to have a spouse that supports me. We all know how stressful this job can be at times. My staff both in Edmonton and Mayerthorpe take this job as seriously as I do, and I thank them for that. We will all remain very diligent about responding to the concerns of my constituents. I've always said that I'm not interested in bringing government representation to Whitecourt-Ste. Anne, but I'm truly interested in bringing the interests of Whitecourt-Ste. Anne to this government. I would like to thank the people of Whitecourt-Ste. Anne for giving me the honour of speaking on their behalf today.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona.

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I want to start by thanking Her Honour the Lieutenant Governor of the province for delivering the speech yesterday afternoon with her usual grace and humour and thank her for her continuing outstanding service to the people of Alberta. She makes us all proud.

With respect to the substance of the throne speech, I must confess that I found the speech disappointing. This Speech from the Throne finds the Tory government in the middle point of its mandate. What a difference two years make. Two years ago the money to buy votes in the March 2001 election was just flying out the door. This Tory government spent over \$4 billion in rebates of all kinds in the lead-

up to the last election. Albertans we talk to have no interest in petty jurisdictional squabbles with Ottawa, that the government seems so keen to ignite. The government wants to keep attacking the Canadian Wheat Board, even when all three Alberta districts elected through democratic process pro Wheat Board directors. The government seems to be out of touch but doesn't see it that way. The government wants to keep fighting yesterday's battles over Kyoto despite the fact that the doomsday scenarios that the Tory government used and the millions of public dollars that the provincial Tories used to frighten Albertans with last fall are nowhere in sight. Anything to take the focus off the failings of this government.

Right now there are two issues making our phones ring off the hook more than any other; namely, high utility bills and the funding crisis in our schools. Albertans are currently suffering the double whammy of high utility bills because of this government's bungled deregulation scheme and sky-high home heating bills. On March 25, 1998, the Premier stood up in this Assembly and promised Albertans that electricity deregulation would make electricity cheaper and that their bills would be lower. The Premier has not been able to keep that promise. Far from lower bills, power bills across the province have nearly doubled as a result of deregulation. While jurisdictions like California and Ontario are wisely backing away from electricity deregulation, the Tory government here plunges blindly ahead. The throne speech refers to changes being proposed to electricity deregulation. Just like four years ago, the government is promising to fix the problem the second time around. This time, however, Albertans are likely to not take the government at face value.

3:50

Two years ago, at the same time as the last provincial election, it only took a month of high natural gas prices before this government stepped in with rebates. We started out with rebates of \$50 per month. This was later tripled to \$150 per month. Now the Minister of Energy tells us that natural gas prices will have to stay high for a whole year, for 12 months, before rebates are even considered. Before a provincial election, natural gas prices had to stay high for only a month before rebates kicked in. After an election they have to stay high for a full year. This is cynical politics at its worst, Mr. Speaker. When the Tory government are looking for votes, they suddenly care about the hardship of high heating bills. Two years before an election it's not on their radar screen.

That's why my colleague from Edmonton-Highlands has called on the government to enact a consumers-first gas price, featuring automatic rebates anytime the price of gas rose 20 percent above the five-year rolling average. It is our gas, Mr. Speaker. Why shouldn't Albertans enjoy the benefit of it? We deserve a rebate system that protects consumers from spikes in the prices, that's free from political interference and manipulation and gives our consumers an advantage over the rest of the continent.

Turning to the genuine emergency being created by this government's refusal to adequately fund schools, it's important for Albertans to understand why there is a financial crisis in our schools. It's not – I repeat: it's not – the fault of school boards. The financial crisis is being inflicted by policy changes made by this provincial government, changes made after school boards had finalized their budgets. It wasn't only the arbitrated settlement with teachers. The Tory government also changed the formula for calculating grants for plant operations and maintenance. The government also capped credits for grade 10 students. The combined impact of failing to pony up for the arbitrated salary settlements and the above policy changes have left a multimillion dollar hole in school board budgets.

Unlike senior levels of government, school boards are not allowed to run deficit budgets. This leaves school boards with no alternative

but to cut core services, and these cuts will be highly detrimental to our students. We are talking about increasing class sizes, laying off 350 teachers in Edmonton public alone, cuts to the international baccalaureate program, closing schools. The list goes on and on and on. First, the government provoked teachers into going on strike; then they imposed an arbitration process. Now, instead of ponying up to pay for the arbitration award, the government is instead forcing school boards to cut core services. Then when school boards speak out about the resulting financial crisis, the government responds with bullying and intimidation. It is a government that rules by intimidation and fear: if you dare to speak out, we'll send in the auditors, and if you dare to speak out, we'll threaten you in other ways.

The Alberta School Boards Association has calculated the shortfall from the arbitrated salary settlements alone at \$142 million across the province. Michele Mulder has this to say about the funding shortfall:

The \$142 million funding gap facing school boards on the teacher salary front will turn into a chasm that students across the province will fall into, if the government doesn't foot the bill. Edmonton Public is not alone in facing cuts to teachers and programs . . . Every board in this province will hit the wall – and we are talking cuts to teaching staff, ballooning . . . and potentially school closures.

Students are being made to suffer because of the government's refusal for the past eight months to fund this funding shortfall. This is wrong and must be set right, Mr. Speaker. The government's refusal to pony up for schools brings into serious question its sincerity of the so-called children's agenda.

The throne speech talks about a bright future for children and youth being the government's highest priority. Well, actions speak louder than words. Meaningful action to assist children is more than setting up a council with a nice-sounding name. It is to undertake concrete initiatives to assist children. Yesterday's federal budget contained hundreds of millions of dollars in initiatives for child care and to give children a better start in life, especially children from low-income families. This government must back up the fine rhetoric in the throne speech with concrete actions to help children in similar ways.

Turning to postsecondary education, there's a growing crisis of affordability for postsecondary students. The University of Alberta has just announced a 6.9 percent overall tuition increase for students next year, and the University of Calgary is contemplating a similar increase. On top of this, the differential tuition that has just been introduced will lead to a further doubling of tuition in faculties such as medicine and law. Community colleges like Grant MacEwan have announced a general tuition increase of 10 percent. Postsecondary education is an investment in the future of our young people. It's a public investment worth making, yet it scarcely rated, as I mentioned, in the throne speech, and certainly there were no concrete initiatives to address the crisis of affordability in postsecondary education. Provinces, such as Manitoba, with far fewer fiscal resources have been able to freeze postsecondary tuition fees. The question that Albertans are asking is: why not Alberta?

Despite the fact that health care is the number one priority of Albertans, yesterday's throne speech surprisingly had very little concrete to offer. Albertans should perhaps be grateful that the government seems to be backing away from some of the more negative recommendations of the Mazankowski report. These are the recommendations that involve delisting of services and user-pay medicine through schemes like imposing health care deductibles.

The return to appointed regional health boards is a real step backwards. The scrapping of health boards, that were two-thirds elected, after barely more than a year is a real slap in the face of local democracy in this province. It is clear that the Tory government

doesn't want to have to be responsive to concerns at the local level. It wants a free hand to impose its own health reforms. This is extremely disappointing and regrettable. Albertans will be poorly served through the increasing centralization and control over the health system in the ministry of health. Rural Albertans, in particular, had better watch out.

The throne speech contains a vague commitment to reduce waiting time for surgery and to see specialists. Here, too, actions speak louder than words. Since the last election, waiting time for MRIs, for joint replacements, for heart surgery are all going up, not down.

Turning to affordable housing, \$67 million of federal affordable housing moneys have been left sitting on the table for almost a year waiting for the province to match them, yet the number of homeless Albertans continues to rise. The number of Albertans who have been forced to live in temporary or substandard accommodation is growing even faster. Yesterday's federal budget contained even more financial support for affordable housing and to fight homelessness. Will those moneys be left on the table by this provincial government as well? I sincerely hope not, but I fear that they will, Mr. Speaker.

This throne speech promises changes to the government's fiscal framework. What exactly is the fiscal bottom line of this government? I'm afraid we won't know the truth until June, long after the spring sitting is over and after it's too late to do anything with the money other than apply it to debt reduction. This government has underestimated the budget surpluses to the tune of well over \$20 billion in the last 10 years. Another multibillion dollar surplus is likely in this year's budget while the funding crisis in schools continues to hover over our heads and is nowhere near being addressed. The human deficit continues to grow.

As the spring sitting of the Legislature gets under way, Mr. Speaker, the New Democrat caucus will continue to focus on the real priorities of Albertans, and we look forward to the work of this House as the session unfolds.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: Hon. members, Standing Order 29(2)(a) kicks in, so we have five minutes under our rules.

That being the case, then I'll call on the hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

Ms Blakeman: Thanks, Mr. Speaker. I was expecting other government members to be speaking, but I'm happy to be granted the opportunity to rise and speak in response to the Speech from the Throne. I'm remembering that last year the Member for Drayton Valley-Calmar felt that I hadn't said enough positive things. I think he said that I hadn't said any positive things about the government, so just to aid him this time, I thought I would put the positive things up front so that he would be sure to hear them.

4:00

I was very pleased to see the commitment to integrating the homelessness plans. That is very important for, certainly, members of my constituency, but overall I think it is a concern of a number of people that we haven't had a good, comprehensive handle on the programs that we're offering for the homeless. I think there has been confusion, certainly. We've even seen it in this House over what exists or who's responsible or who's funding who or how or how much. So I think that is a very positive step, and I congratulate the government on having done that.

I also note and I approve of heartily the move to commit to more affordable housing and to working with the feds on more affordable housing. I mean, the province is jumping on the federal bandwagon

here, but that's okay. That's a good bandwagon to jump on, so I don't blame the province at all for taking advantage of the plans and programs the federal government has put out. I know that there was \$67 million that was up as a matching grant. I know that the government still hasn't quite found the money or where all of that's going to go, but I'm looking forward to any future announcements about how that's all going to work. So two really positive moves forward that I have spoken about many times in this Assembly, and I'm glad to see that, in fact, the government is moving forward on it.

Now I have to move into a series of: here's a good idea, but . . . I have to be suspicious here. I think George Orwell would have loved this government because its use of propaganda and spin is a perfect and classic example of the ministry of truth, and I'll just give you a couple of examples of what I'm talking about.

[Mr. Shariff in the chair]

I think I need to get clarification on what the government is intending through the Speech from the Throne because in the past I have a couple of examples of the government saying one thing and in fact doing another; for example, saying environmental controls around Bovar, but in fact what we get is health warnings to pregnant women not to eat the wildlife or the fish because of contaminated groundwater and snow around Bovar. The government has said that they want to look after children, and then we have cuts in prevention programs. The government says that they want to support healthy lifestyles, but then they won't let adult sport organizations have access to casinos which would keep the programs they offer affordable and accessible. So clarification is what we're looking for. The good idea, but – I'd like to see exactly what the government intends by this.

When it's talking about increasing the Alberta seniors' benefits to seniors in lodges and, I'm assuming, nursing homes, although they're not specified, I'm waiting for the other shoe to drop here because I also know that there's a discussion going on behind closed doors about increasing the co-payment in these care facilities. So is this going to be an instance where the government gives seniors living in those facilities an increase in Alberta seniors' benefits and immediately takes it away by increasing the co-payment? I'm looking for a clarification because that I don't think is going to give the seniors what is stated in the throne speech, which is extra services. I think they're going to get exactly the same thing for more money.

I'd like to raise another point about a possible increase to co-payment, something I think we need to keep in mind if, in fact, that's what the government is considering that may well be a way for those facilities that have no other means of raising money. If the government is not going to give them an increased grant, increasing the co-payment is the only way for them to get the additional money they need to pay the higher electricity bills, natural gas bills, food costs, everything else that's rising for them.

One of the circumstances I've run across is that even for someone with a reasonable pension, once they're paying that co-payment, anywhere between \$900 and \$1,100, that may be leaving this senior's spouse or partner with fairly limited means. So if you had a take-home pay from your pension of \$2,000 but one of the couple is, in fact, in a care facility and is paying \$900 or a \$1,000 or \$1,100 towards the co-payment fee, you're leaving the other spouse with \$800 or \$900 to live on, which is not a lot of money. I don't think we can assume in this day and age that everyone has their mortgage paid off nicely, so we may be creating a difficulty there.

I was very interested to see the discussion of integrated support, and I ask the government to please not leave Albertans hanging on

this. There are a number of individuals out there who are very, very worried about these support benefit programs, and my concern is that if we have different levels of support programs that are integrated – we have the widows' pension, we have AISH, we have SFI, and we have seniors, just to name a few. We haven't seen an inclination in the past from the government to raise all boats to match the one floating highest out of the water.

What we've seen is a tendency to lower them all to submarine levels, and I have a concern there about which programs would be reduced, if in fact that's going to happen, and some reassurance to people that we're not going to have the highest level of support program dropped to the lowest level or to some mid range. Has this happened before? Yes. Indeed it has. We had the government cut almost a dozen universally accessible programs for seniors, cut them all, and provide one program in exchange which was limited as to who could access it, and it gives, in fact, less benefits. So there's one very concrete example of what I'm talking about. I'm wondering if perhaps the age-related benefits discussion is taking place around this integration. This is the discussion that the Minister of Seniors didn't seem to know anything about, so perhaps that's where it was all taking place.

One of the areas that really has very little credibility with me – and let me start by saying as I venture into this area that zero tolerance is a lofty ideal and a good one. But in this particular example the government fails to give any examples of a successful zero tolerance program instituted anywhere, in any corrections system anywhere in the world. In my experience – and I'll admit that I haven't investigated every single one but more than most, I think – I haven't found any prison in the United States, for example, that's been successful with a zero tolerance policy on drugs, violence, or gang relations.

My concern particularly around drugs is that I don't want to see this be an excuse for a lack of action on harm reduction strategies. I think we are jeopardizing the health and safety of our own government workers; that is, the people that are working in the prison systems. If the government is not willing to look at harm reduction strategies like a needle exchange program, which is going to help reduce the number of cases of hep C and HIV, for example, you know, when we have inmates who get into fights or we have to have prison staff come and break that up or deal with them in some way, if we continue to have those levels of infection, the people that ultimately get infected are our government employees.

I call upon the government to make sure that those kinds of harm reduction strategies are going into place. Frankly, it may well be a good idea – I'm yet to be convinced – to try and pursue that course wholeheartedly, but they must be balancing it with harm reduction strategies or they really are, I think, running the risk of harming their staff and putting those inmates through more than what they were sentenced for.

I also had a concern about the statement that was made about arts and culture. It's referring back to a robust economy, that somehow that's going to sustain a thriving arts and cultural sector. That is part of it, but I continue to call upon the government and to look to the government to adequately fund arts and culture. That, in fact, has not been happening. There's been no increase in actual real funding from this government for the arts and cultural sector since 1988. None of these groups or organizations or individual artists get to go to Home Depot and say: please sell me the lumber to build my set or whatever at 1988 prices. They don't get that benefit, and we really need to look to that.

4:10

I hear people saying: oh, well, you know, there's been no problem; that sector has stepped up to bat every time; it's not affecting them.

Yes, it is. We've lost a number of companies in the last 10 years: Stage Polaris, Nexus, Mile Zero, Phoenix Theatre. We've had a number of large organizations, especially those affiliated with the government's art stabilization fund, suffer serious financial crisis; for example, Alberta Theatre Projects, again Stage Polaris, the Citadel, the opera, the Edmonton Symphony, and the Calgary Philharmonic, all groups that were supposed to have been helped by the government's art stabilization fund, all of which, after they were on this program, suffered severe financial instability. So 10 years of this government has not been good for the arts.

Issues that I didn't see addressed in the throne speech that I was really hoping to see included an increase in the number of sitting days. The reason for that specifically is that I sit on the Public Accounts Committee, and that committee, mostly through the decision of the government members on it, keeps defeating my motions to sit longer and to have more meetings. As a result of that, I think we need to be very alive to the fact that that committee only meets when we're in session. If we have a very narrow sitting time, we are getting through less than 50 percent of the ministries for scrutiny and review, and I think that's a serious problem for Albertans, for people who work for the government, for people that are interested in how the government does business. More than half of the government ministries are not being reviewed or scrutinized, and I think that's a serious problem.

Now, this is easily addressed. We could meet outside of session. We could meet more than once a week in session. There are certainly ways to do that, but the way it stands now, we're sitting for approximately 12 or 13 weeks when we're in the spring session, a couple of weeks when we're in the fall session. You take off the first week and the couple of weeks we spend in meetings with the Auditor General and you're left with between nine and 11 actual ministries and ministers that appear before the committee. I think that's a problem.

We know by looking at other provinces that, in fact, only one other province goes ministry by ministry. We could switch to a system where we identified issues and pursued a different issue each time. I'm more than willing to look at that, but I still think that we need to be able to cover all of the importance of what our financial and public accounts are about.

I am concerned that I'm not seeing a commitment from the government to upholding democratically elected bodies. I think we've had some pretty chilling examples in the last couple of years where the government has a group that doesn't agree with them and that's it; they're gone, be it a school board, a regional health authority. Now I even see that democratically elected directors for the Wheat Board are being talked about in the Speech from the Throne. It looks like the government is out for them on that one. I think that's an issue, and I'm disappointed that the government isn't willing to address it and be more supportive of democratically elected boards.

I'd like to see a follow-through from the province on its promise of having a rebate kick in for the gas prices. That didn't happen. [interjections] Oh, I'm sorry. I've run out of time. Thank you.

The Acting Speaker: Standing Order 29 kicks in. Any questions?

There being none, the chair recognizes the hon. Member for Calgary-Buffalo.

Mr. Cernaiko: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It's an honour to once again respond to the Speech from the Throne, delivered by Her Honour the Honourable Lois Hole. Today I'd like to talk about how the important plans talked about in the Speech from the Throne will affect the people living in Calgary-Buffalo.

Over the past two years I've talked about the unbelievable diversity of cultures, ethnic backgrounds, and incomes in downtown Calgary. My constituency office has received dozens of letters and hundreds of phone calls regarding a long list of issues. Her Honour referred to health care, building safe communities, and protecting seniors and children. These concerns reflect the views of my constituents in Calgary-Buffalo.

People want an accessible, seamless, and dependable health system. Mr. Speaker, I can assure you that people in my constituency simply want health care reform to happen right now. More money will not solve the problems facing our health care system. I believe that this government needs to continue changing health care delivery in 2003 to meet the increasing needs of Albertans. I was happy to see Her Honour explain that the government will continue to reform the health care system to improve access and quality. I also agree with Her Honour that access includes getting good advice quickly and easily no matter what the day or the time.

Mr. Speaker, I have talked to several seniors who remain concerned about their health care coverage as Alberta revamps its health system. The scope of coverage, including what services are covered and what will be taken from their benefits, remains a major concern. I'm confident that the answers to these questions will become clear as health care reform moves forward.

Many seniors who call my office also have problems paying their power bills. This troubles me a great deal as these people have worked hard throughout their lives. Many have served in the armed forces, and most of them are unable to contribute to the workforce. I agree with Her Honour that we owe seniors a debt of gratitude, but I do not feel that this debt is being paid as long as these people have a problem paying their bill because they are on fixed incomes. Her Honour referred to extending programs for seniors to ensure that they have shelter. There are many people in my riding who feel that they have the ability to find their own way in their lives after retirement, but as long as skyrocketing power bills continue, many residents have to choose between paying their power bill and buying groceries. My hope is that legislation planned for this session will protect low-income households from future increases.

Critics are quick to point out that deregulation alone is responsible for high power bills. Mr. Speaker, this simply is not the case. Albertans would be paying higher power bills under the old regulated system. However, this government has the ability to refine the structure of the current system to attract new investors and increase competition and value for consumers.

Mr. Speaker, I strongly believe in a Conservative government that is concerned with the safety of children and people who are unable to care for themselves. My constituency office receives many calls from people asking for information about SFI or AISH benefits. Many homeless people rely on drop-in centres for shelter from the elements. I was pleased to hear Her Honour speak of Alberta's commitment to protect children and give them the best possible start.

In 2001 I was given the honour of chairing the review of the Child Welfare Act. The general consensus from 600 written submissions and over 130 meetings is that Alberta's current Child Welfare Act does a good job of laying out a clear, effective framework for protecting children, but there are many areas open for improvement.

One of the goals of the Child Welfare Act review was to find ways to reallocate resources to improve the effectiveness of the current system. One of the most important facts we learned is the importance of early childhood development. The first three years are the most important years of a person's life, and age three to six is the second most important stage. My goal was to find a way to build a legal foundation that protects children and supports families through the child's early years.

The committee's starting point was to have the best interests and well-being of children in mind along with the fundamental responsibility of parents for their children. I traveled around the province and met with hundreds of stakeholders who each expressed their views and opinions about Alberta's child welfare system. I would like to thank each of them for their time and for sharing their experience and their opinions with me. Late last year the committee finished the review process and developed 55 recommendations for improving child care in Alberta.

I was also happy to hear Her Honour talk about meaningful change in the level of safety and well-being of Alberta's children. As we heard in the Speech from the Throne, the first piece of legislation introduced in this Assembly will help establish a community network to preserve this government's commitment to children. The Premier's Council on Alberta's Promise Act will bring every sector of Alberta to the table to build the Alberta Centre for Child, Family and Community Research to look at issues and challenges faced by children and families to achieve the ultimate goal of giving Alberta children the best possible start. This is a relatively unique approach to bring all concerned parties to the table to look after the best interests of children.

4:20

I will be introducing legislation this session that will contribute to the well-being of children and safety of inner-city communities. As I've mentioned in this Assembly before, Calgary-Buffalo is home for people from all economic classes. For example, Mr. Speaker, there are a number of multimillion-dollar condominiums located near areas ravaged by crime. Since my days as a police officer I have known this to be the reality of urban life, but since becoming an MLA, I've had the opportunity to help communities and law enforcement officials increase the safety and well-being in their neighbourhoods.

Soon after the last provincial election, Mr. Speaker, a resident living in my riding told me about a law passed in Manitoba to help communities reduce street prostitution. I'm very excited to introduce similar legislation in the form of a private member's bill later this spring. I will introduce legislation that will reduce crime, save crumbling communities, and help people to feel safe walking around their neighbourhoods.

This government's vision for health care, the protection of children, and maintaining the well-being of vulnerable Albertans continues to be the focus of my role as representing the needs of my constituents. I'm honoured to represent everyone living in Calgary-Buffalo, and I will continue to enjoy working with the members of this Assembly.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Acting Speaker: On Standing Order 29, any questions for the hon. member? There being none, the chair will recognize the hon. Member for Olds-Didsbury-Three Hills.

Mr. Marz: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, for this opportunity to speak to the Speech from the Throne. I'd also like to thank Her Honour the Honourable the Lieutenant Governor for her inspiring speech yesterday. The entire speech was moving and thoughtful.

There are a number of areas in the speech that will be seen as crucial to the well-being of my constituency of Olds-Didsbury-Three Hills. These areas are: a sustainability fund, the Alberta advantage for our children, an information system for health care, improvements to crop insurance, infrastructure, and increased funding for low-income Albertans.

The Lieutenant Governor stated in the New Fiscal Framework

section that “the new capital plan is part of a larger fiscal framework the government will implement to bring predictability, sustainability, and more discipline to its fiscal management.” My constituents in Olds-Didsbury-Three Hills have expressed concern over the boom-and-bust cycles that we have faced as a province over the decades. The sustainability fund, which will take the peaks and valleys out of government spending, will bring reassurance to my constituents that when government makes promises for services, the money will be there even in tough times.

I commend the hon. Premier for his restraint in spending and the development of a rainy day fund. Rural Albertans understand planning for hard times. It’s something we’ve done for generations. My constituents come to me time and time again and applaud our government for having balanced budgets, paying off debt, and being accountable. I’m reassured that these principles are still first and foremost in the government’s agenda. It takes a strong commitment and will and leadership to remain true to these goals, and I believe our government is up to the task.

The Lieutenant Governor stated that the Alberta advantage should be “a promise to our children.” I believe it’s important that one generation does not reap the benefits of the Alberta advantage alone and leave nothing for future generations. The Alberta advantage is something that must be sustained for all generations for our province to be successful and to continually prosper.

In the Premier’s televised address he mentioned the development of a wait list registry to be up and running by this summer. This commitment was matched in the Speech from the Throne when the Lieutenant Governor stated, “. . . fully implementing a co-ordinated system to provide one-stop access to information, assessment, and continuing care referrals . . .” I strongly support this initiative. It will allow my constituents and all Albertans to monitor their wait list, allow them to plan their surgeries and tests more effectively. I believe this registry will also better enable patients to make more informed and timely decisions about their health. This should also make for shorter waiting lists.

It was also stated by the Lieutenant Governor that the government will set limits on how long Albertans should wait for selected services like consultations with specialists and some major surgical procedures. That’s certainly good news for patients on waiting lists. However, I do offer a word of warning or caution to our Minister of Health and Wellness that any such policies that be drafted, to ensure that those who drive the health care system do not use such policies against taxpayers for their own profits and ultimately drive up the cost of health care.

The government’s commitment to battle diabetes is also an issue that is dear to me and a number of my constituents. It makes me proud to see that this government is taking a leading role in fighting this disease. I also urge the Minister of Health and Wellness to examine the high cost of needles and diabetic strips that type 1 diabetic patients are faced with every day.

My constituents will be happy to know that this government will “continue to improve safety nets that allow farmers and ranchers to make the best management decisions for their operations.” The people of Olds-Didsbury-Three Hills will also be happy to know that Alberta’s producer-driven crop insurance and safety net changes will provide farmers with the most extensive and comprehensive set of risk management tools available in all of Canada.

I also stand committed with the farmers in my constituency on allowing an alternative marketing system for wheat and barley producers. My constituents support this government in its struggle against the Canadian Wheat Board. The Alberta government wants a Canadian Wheat Board and federal government regulation to stop standing in the way of opportunity for Alberta producers. The

province will continue to pursue marketing choices for Alberta producers because the Canadian Wheat Board system is holding back many producers and investors from pursuing value-added opportunities. We’re not advocating the abolishment of the Canadian Wheat Board. Simply, we’re trying to provide marketing choices like those producers in Ontario now enjoy. In a free and democratic society we should settle for no less.

The issue of infrastructure is a hot topic in my constituency. We need new roads, bridges, and more school modernization for us to continue to be a first-class community. I’m encouraged to see that the Minister of Infrastructure will have more resources at his disposal to address these pressures.

The increased stress on low-income earners due to a higher cost of living has not been forgotten by this government either. In her speech the Lieutenant Governor stated:

The government will increase monthly payments to low-income seniors who live in lodges and receive the Alberta seniors’ benefit to ensure that they can obtain the additional services they require to remain independent and healthy for as long as possible.

I commend the rationality and understanding of this government to recognize that these boom times do have a downside of higher inflation and that we are doing the best to offset these increased costs.

Overall, the people of Olds-Didsbury-Three Hills will be delighted in the bold direction that this government is headed. Showing fiscal restraint in boom times is a commendable characteristic. Providing state-of-the-art medical information systems, recognizing farmers as the backbone of this great province, and increasing funding to both infrastructure and low-income earners shows that this government has its priorities clearly set.

Once again, Mr. Speaker, I’d like to thank the Lieutenant Governor on another excellent speech.

Thank you.

The Acting Speaker: Under Standing Order 29, any questions for the hon. member? There being none, the chair recognizes the hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods.

Dr. Massey: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, for the opportunity to respond once again to the Speech from the Throne. As always, it was a delightful experience to have the Lieutenant Governor in the Assembly dispensing not only the Speech from the Throne but some generous hugs to those that were here to hear the speech. I don’t think it’s well known that there is more to those hugs that you received from the Lieutenant Governor than just the warm hug. It’s often accompanied by some rather sage advice whispered quickly in your ear or some comments on current issues that I always find more than interesting. So she does just an excellent job of representing the monarch in our province and is a credit to the position she holds.

The Speech from the Throne started with a bright future for children, and I’m delighted that that’s there because I’m one of those people who firmly believe that getting youngsters off to a good start serves us all so well in the future and, more importantly, serves them as individuals. It’s a time in life when their language is being developed, and it’s a time when they’re learning to question their environment. It’s, more importantly, a time when their social development is well under way. The failure to ensure that the best kind of conditions are in place for those things to happen is well documented in research. Youngsters that have been products of deprived situations have great difficulties with language and social development. As I said, it’s well documented. It’s something you can act on with the assurance that what you do will have great positive implications down the road.

4:30

We haven't all the details yet, but I look at what's happening in early programming for youngsters elsewhere, and I notice that a number of states, if they're not actually doing it, are considering moving to full-day kindergarten for five year olds and optional half-day kindergarten for four year olds. The last progress that we made in terms of kindergarten programs in the province was the introduction of the half day, and we even lost that for a brief period of time in the mid-90s. So I hope that when we see all of the throne speech translated into program and action, there will be some movement in providing programs for young children, younger than five years of age, and also an extension of the opportunities for five year olds to engage in preschool programs.

I think that there's a problem, and I took the opportunity when the Children's Services minister was kind enough to invite me to her office to talk about upcoming legislation to talk to her about the difficulty of her department trying to work with children and their families when they don't have control over the SFI funding. If the preservation of family is a high, high priority, then it would seem to me that the Children's Services ministry would be in the best position to know what families need and to assess the impact of programs like SFI on families and to make some adjustments when necessary. I hope it's something that might be seriously considered as we look at a bright future for children that they are dealt with under one department, and I think the umbrella that's best, obviously, is the Ministry of Children's Services.

I was interested in Alberta's promise that's in the speech because it's an inviting notion, that you could marshal all the private and the volunteer organizations in the province in the best interests of children and that somehow by creating an organization you could raise money and you could further their efforts. I don't know what the polite word for it is, Mr. Speaker, but I was surprised, frankly, that there wasn't some reference to the source of Alberta's promise. If you go to the web site and you place the term "America's Promise" into the computer, it'll come up with a document that indicates that America's Promise is based on five efforts:

1. Caring Adults.
2. Safe Places.
3. Healthy Start.
4. Marketable Skills.
5. Opportunities to Serve.

Just coincidentally, it's very, very similar to what we have in the throne speech, and I thought that they might at least acknowledge where they got the ideas from. It's one thing to borrow ideas; as an academic I'm still somewhat sensitive in terms of, if you're borrowing people's work, your obligation to credit where it came from.

America's Promise was quite different from what we have before us in one major way, however, and that is that it was a nonpartisan effort. It was former President Carter and the wife of a former President, Nancy Reagan, Bill Clinton, and I think there was a fourth, a Republican, that joined together to create America's Promise. It was deliberately nonpartisan; they wanted the entire country to be mobilized behind the idea.

I thought: what an opportunity lost in the throne speech when you see the attack on the federal government in the latter parts of the speech. What an opportunity this would have been for the government to show some leadership, to enlist the other provinces. In fact, there's an Ontario program that's much similar to this that I understand is faltering. What a wonderful opportunity this would have been for the government to reach out to other provinces and say: now, let's make this a national effort, regardless of the kind of political party you belong to. What kind of a great impact, the potential that has for children all across the country, not just Alberta.

But as I said, I think it was unfortunately an opportunity lost, and the government has at least the obligation to let the public know where the ideas came from in the first place.

Moving on and still under A Bright Future for Children, the \$20 million for school resources was most welcome. I think any help that schools can get they welcome. It amounts to about \$35 a student, which, if you translate into today's book prices, would be about a textbook per student. I'm not sure that it comes anywhere close to what schools need in terms of resource money, that it makes it possible to buy the kind of computer software, the kind of computers, the other kinds of basic resources that they need.

I would be curious and I'll be curious when the budget comes forward to find out what the figure of \$20 million was based on – how did you come up with a number like \$20 million? – and that it was a number designated for classroom resources, because for the last few years in this House we've heard that there are adequate resources in the classroom. When asked in question period, we are constantly assured that, yes, there's adequate money for basic classroom resources, that there's no reason for parents to fund-raise because the money is there. Yet, lo and behold, we have a sum of \$20 million placed in the throne speech to accommodate those needs. So, again, I'd like to know why. Where did the figure come from? I think that that \$20 million raises the whole question and a more basic question in terms of the funding of education in this province, kindergarten through postsecondary, because what we lack is any kind of a rationale for the money that is doled out by the government to those institutions.

Unlike other jurisdictions, a number of American states have developed adequacy formulas that are public – the public can access them – and say: this is the basis on which we provide money for textbooks; this is the basis on which we provide money for teachers to your jurisdictions. There is a clearly laid out rationale for the moneys that schools receive. I'd submit that the time, Mr. Speaker, for that kind of a rationale to be developed in this province is long overdue, that going from year to year and having an increase somehow or other based on the money that was received by boards or by institutions the previous year and not in any way related to the kind of costs they face is not acceptable. It's a poor way to do business.

4:40

I look at the adequacy formulas developed elsewhere, and there are different ways of doing it. I know that the state of Oregon uses an expert panel that sits down and looks at an elementary school and says: "Look, if you have an elementary school of 340 children, these are the kinds of things they are going to need. They're going to need a librarian. They're going to need a teacher for every 17 children in K to 3. They're going to need a counselor for every 250 children." So the adequacy formula lays out very carefully what a school will need. They have a similar specification formula for middle schools. They operate a lot of middle schools. They have the same for high schools, and I know that the model that they use is a 1,000-student high school. The advantages of having some standards in place, even if you haven't got the money that year to finance them, is that they at least set some goals. They allow legislators and they now allow the public to know where the government is going and to make some judgments about the adequacy of the funding that's being provided. It's not easy.

The people in Oregon use an expert panel to come up with the adequacy formula, but other states have tried some rather complicated statistical analysis not very satisfactorily. Other states have used exemplary school districts, school districts that do very well on tests and various measures. They use that as the model and try to

fund all of the school districts across the state to a similar level, giving them the same resources.

So, again, the need for an adequacy formula has never been more apparent than when you read the Speech from the Throne. The postsecondary institutions in the province, I know, are still trying to recover from the cuts of the mid-90s. They've never really come out of those cuts, and you see now the pressure for differential fees at the two major universities. You see the constant pressure on tuition, and there seems to be no end in sight. Again, I think part of the problem is that there's no rationale for how the money is distributed to those institutions other than on the basis of the previous year's funding.

Thank you.

The Acting Speaker: Under Standing Order 29, if you have any questions. There being none, the chair recognizes the hon. Member for Calgary-Fort.

Mr. Cao: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It is my great pleasure and honour to rise today and respond to the Speech from the Throne delivered by the Lieutenant Governor, Her Honour Lois Hole, to open the Third Session of the 25th Legislature. It is with great esteem that I support the values and direction delivered in the Speech from the Throne, and I thank the Lieutenant Governor for doing an excellent and gracious job.

The speech is an important message outlining the agenda and standards for the upcoming session. These plans are more than just ideas but, rather, directions and goals of where the government is heading and how we can continue to build the best place in the world to live, in Alberta. This plan also embodies the hopes and dreams of our fellow Albertans and provides the directions for how these ideals become realities.

Mr. Speaker, I'm very proud to stand in this Assembly today representing all my constituents of the riding of Calgary-Fort. I'm committed to working hard with all my colleagues to ensure that individuals who have elected me will have effective representation. I'm dedicated to providing my constituents with efficient and comprehensive responses to Alberta's ongoing concerns.

Over the last year Alberta remained committed to sustaining our province's high quality of life. Mr. Speaker, I would like to take a moment to reflect on 2002 and highlight some of the many achievements and accomplishments our province has attained. Alberta's health care system was ranked among the best in the country by the Canadian Institute for Health Information. Alberta became the first province to establish a pharmaceutical information network. This network allows for the exchange of electronic medical information. The government increased education spending to \$3.5 billion for 2002-2003, while adult learning increased over \$1.3 billion. The government established 165 new scholarships for apprentices. Alberta became the first province to launch widespread immunization to infants for bacterial infections and meningitis. The Queen Elizabeth II Golden Jubilee Recognition Act created scholarships and awards acknowledging exceptional talent in youth in the areas of citizenship and art. The government upgraded current technology to find innovative strategies for the reduction of carbon dioxide emissions by 85 percent in heavy oil extraction. This was achieved through a joint venture with Canadian oil and gas producers in an oil research project.

I would like to note that none of these achievements would have been possible if it were not for the hard work, commitment, and dedication of Albertans across the province. The year 2002 shaped up as a favourable and prosperous year, but it was not without challenges. As the Lieutenant Governor stated, it is our pride that stems from meeting challenges head-on. Our government and its

citizens responded efficiently, effectively to the complications and difficulties that this province faced.

Alberta expressed its opposition to the Kyoto protocol and was to the utmost vocal in its resistance, as Her Honour expressed. Albertans are dedicated to doing their role to address global warming. Our province proposed a made-in-Alberta solution to reduce emission of greenhouse gases while not jeopardizing the global competitiveness of the Alberta economy. The Climate Change and Emissions Management Act supports climate change measures but reiterates the ownership of our natural resources. The proposed plan balances the environment's protection with Alberta's economic growth.

The year 2002 saw those in the agricultural industry feel the hardships of difficult drought. Alberta experienced the most horrendous drought conditions this province has faced in 133 years of recorded weather history. Our government responded by providing \$324 million in aid to Alberta farmers through the farm income assistance program. The province also suffered the worst grasshopper infestation in 30 years; \$10.3 million was given through a cost-sharing program to compensate farmers for their losses. These responsive measures were taken to ease the difficulties of Alberta farmers and the industry that we depend on every single day.

The government and citizens across the province responded to the challenges put before them. These difficulties test our ability and our effective responsiveness to new pressures but aid in making Alberta stronger.

4:50

Mr. Speaker, I would like to shift my focus to the Alberta economy. As we face global economic uncertainties, the government has begun developing long-term strategies to sustain the high quality of life Albertans have worked hard to achieve. Despite ambiguities and uncertainties in the world community Alberta's economy remains strong and continues along its pattern of growth. Over the last year the province led the rest of Canada, experiencing the highest growth rate among all the provinces. It is projected that in 2003 Alberta will again be a leader, with a presence among the top provinces, with the highest economic growth. Alberta continues to prosper and meet new highs as the inventory of major Alberta projects reaches a new record, indicating \$85.2 billion and 934 projects.

Mr. Lukaszuk: How many?

Mr. Cao: Nine hundred and thirty-four projects.

Our province was also recognized by the Fraser Institute with an award honouring Alberta's fiscal performance. The institute ranked our performance as number one across Canada.

Our province's continued development has helped us to maintain our solid financial position. This growth has not only occurred in sectors that have proven favourable to Alberta but also come from diversifying towards new innovations and strategies, offsetting the volatility of the market in energy. As the Lieutenant Governor alluded to, this new strategy has become crucial in sustaining the long-term growth and prosperity of our province. Through the work of the Financial Management Commission Alberta will once again be the leader in finding innovative ways to pursue our fiscal priorities, and although the government will be developing new ways to manage Alberta's finances, the government remains dedicated to sound fiscal management, balanced budgets, and debt elimination.

As Her Honour Lois Hole expressed, a strong economy allows our society to invest in initiatives supported by its people. Alberta's policy of sustainability permits excess dollars to be transferred into

health care, education, social assistance programs while keeping a strong financial record. Alberta has one of the highest median incomes across the nation, but it is important to note that it also maintains one of the lowest poverty rates in the country.

However, despite our province's economic growth, wealth, and success there are Albertans that are in need of assistance across the province, and these citizens may be more vulnerable due to disabilities, special needs, or unique circumstances. Low income and poverty are consequential concerns. They are issues that affect communities throughout Alberta. Despite our low rate of impoverishment not all Albertans are isolated from the hardships of poverty. Our province is devoted to reducing impoverishment by giving these individuals the support and the instruments needed to help them help themselves.

Mr. Speaker, the government remains committed to providing for those that may be most vulnerable. Alberta recognizes the unique situation they face, the importance of supporting these individuals. The government continues to put into place instruments and measures to assist these citizens, utilizing their strengths and encouraging their talents while providing them with opportunities to contribute to the growth and prosperity of our province.

Mr. Speaker, the Alberta government offers programs and services to children, seniors, and families in need. Housing assistance is provided to low-income families and those that are most vulnerable in society. As Her Honour conveyed, shelter is a basic necessity in which our government will ensure that those in need will have access. The province is addressing housing concerns through rent supplements, social housing, special-purpose housing. Other areas of support for those in need come in forms of income assistance, tax cuts, child care support services, subsidies for child care, health coverage, and job training.

The government is reviewing and modifying its assistance programs, finding new ways to deliver these services efficiently, effectively to those who are vulnerable. The low-income review is mapping the future agenda for the single-income support program. The government is designing this new program to be less complicated and easier to understand while focusing on what is most needed for those with low incomes. Employment training programs will be altered to assist Albertans, giving them confidence and identifying their strengths. These initiatives will provide relief to individuals while giving them the necessary tools to ease difficulties and become independent. Mr. Speaker, the government recognizes the need and remains committed to delivering assistance to alleviate economic pressures while designing programs and providing tools to utilize the strengths and talents of every Albertan.

As you can see, Mr. Speaker, Alberta had a busy year in 2002, and stemming from the direction given in the Speech from the Throne, 2003 will shape up to be just as busy. However, the government has mapped out an agenda that ensures our province's continued success. Glancing back, we see Alberta as a great success story. Looking forward, Alberta is leading in many important areas. If we have any issue, it is the issue other jurisdictions would love and wish to have. To me, Mr. Speaker, Alberta's issue is not the lack of public revenues, but it is the challenge of divvying up amongst stakeholder groups. My analogy is that the Alberta pizza has been ever growing in size, but the arguments are in the slicing. I envision a need to find a new, innovative, and daring way to slice the Alberta public pizza. For that reason, I will introduce a private member's bill, the financial summit act, with the intention to open up a new way, a co-operative way for all stakeholders and interested groups to share fairly, equitably, and openly. We have only one pizza on the table. The bigger the slice here means a smaller slice there.

In closing, Mr. Speaker, I would like to thank you for the opportunity to respond to the Speech from the Throne. I am very

pleased to support this message as it represents and exemplifies our government's solid record, leadership capability, vision for the future, goals for continued prosperity, and commitment to the people across our province.

Thank you.

The Acting Speaker: Standing Order 29 kicks in now. There being none, the chair recognizes the hon. Member for St. Albert.

Mrs. O'Neill: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. First of all, I would like to acknowledge today the Lieutenant Governor, Her Honour Lois E. Hole, for her delightful and insightful delivery of the Speech from the Throne yesterday in this Assembly's Chamber. I would also like to say and recognize the fact that I am very proud and have always been in admiration of this wonderful woman who represents the Queen in our province and, indeed, whom I have the honour of representing since she is a constituent of mine in St. Albert.

Six years ago, Mr. Speaker, I rose in this Assembly and spoke in response to the Speech from the Throne, in 1997, and I indicated that I believed then that the sky is not falling. I spoke figuratively then, and I speak figuratively today to say that I still believe the sky is not falling. As a result of 9-11 I can also say that I believe the sky is not falling, literally, as well in Alberta, and please God, it will not.

[The Speaker in the chair]

Why I say this is because I feel that the theme of yesterday's Speech from the Throne, the message of our government, is that we live in a province that is well blessed, a province that is well governed. The direction that was indicated in the Speech from the Throne yesterday is one of optimism, not only for today, and for the delivery of good governance and the enabling of good services to the people of Alberta during this year and during this term, but also for the whole of the province and this country, because I think it sets an example of what we want to leave for the future, for our children.

5:00

In particular, of course, the Speech from the Throne yesterday spoke about a bright future for our children. We do enjoy, as I said, a very high quality of life today. We have, through the work of those who went before us, those in the far distant past and those in the immediate past who have helped to build, a province that is caring, that I do believe is fiscally responsible, that has cleared the deck of debt for us as citizens and looks to the future so that we don't burden our children with that debt that they would have to pay off without providing for the services that growth and the future will demand.

Yesterday's Speech from the Throne spoke about the challenges that we will be facing in the future, and indeed those are challenges that we face in microcosm, I would say, in my constituency. As the speech indicated and as the government direction has articulated in yesterday's message, we spoke about the direction of Alberta's Promise, Bill 1, that will look to of course providing for and acknowledging our responsibility as government, a promise that we must make to our children and to future generations that we will provide them with the opportunity for a healthy lifestyle, for a good education, and for the circumstances under which and within which they can grow and become not only productive but very, very loving, caring, giving, and responsible citizens of both the province and the country.

In particular, I want to speak about the reference to the children and the opportunities. Yesterday's speech spoke, again, of the opportunities of early intervention that we must pay attention to for children who are at risk and for the responsibility of the government to care for those children and supplement their needs if the commu-

nity at large and the family, of course, does not provide it. But we also indicated in the speech that as a government we have the responsibility to create the circumstances for the family to provide for their children and the children of the broader community as well.

I'd like to take a moment to boast about St. Albert because there are lots of things that I can boast about in St. Albert, not through my efforts but through the efforts of those who work so hard for and within the community to create these educational and caring opportunities.

We have three school districts who govern education in my community. We have the St. Albert Catholic, the St. Albert Protestant, and the Francophone boards, who provide a wide range of programs, from the gifted to those who are indeed special-needs children. They provide it right across the spectrum from nursery school, as we used to call it, or ECS, right through to grade 12, which has enabled my community to send thousands of our residents to postsecondary institutions not only in the greater capital region but also across this province, this country, and this continent.

I'd like to also indicate that certainly in St. Albert our students outperform the Alberta and Canadian averages for academic excellence, which is something that I noted when we got a printout of how our students are doing. We do outnumber the rest of the province both with regard to the number of recipients and to the amount of the awards for Rutherford and Louise McKinney scholarships. That's a feather in our cap but a feather in each of the caps of the individual students who have worked so hard. In other words, it has paid off for them to study hard, and they are putting their brains to work to earn not only a good education but some money for themselves.

The other interesting thing that I want to indicate, because the direction was planted in the speech yesterday, was the fact that our school dropout rate in St. Albert is among the lowest for the province's urban areas, and I attribute that to: the quality of the programs that have been put in place will continue to be put in place and continue to be enabled by virtue of our Department of Learning to be available for the children not only in my constituency but indeed across this province.

I also feel that I want to acknowledge the fact that we are in St. Albert a very well-educated community. Seventy-six percent of our residents and our workforce have a postsecondary education, which is a high percentage. The responsibility for us as a government – again, it was indicated in the speech yesterday – is to continue to ensure that we have the wherewithal for our residents to become an active partner in what we are called: a continuous learning community. We do have the presence of Athabasca University in our community. We have Fairview College in our community as well as those residents who attend NAIT, Grant MacEwan, and even as far south as the University of Lethbridge. A number of our residents attend both the campus courses here in Edmonton as well as by way of residence the University of Lethbridge. They do attend the University of Alberta, of course, as well, which has a strong component of research as well as teaching capabilities and excellence.

Yesterday's speech also indicated that we are challenged as a province with our infrastructure both horizontal and vertical, and my community is no exception. I am pleased to say that because we are within the jurisdiction of the Capital health authority, we have Sturgeon community hospital, which attends to the needs with both day and overnight surgery procedures provided there as well as day programs not only for those who require them on an ongoing basis but for those who also need them in crisis situations.

We also have demonstrated over the years that we are a caring community through our long-term care health facilities, and I am happy to acknowledge the fact that most recently it has been

announced that we will have a new P3 project, a long-term care project that will be adjacent to the Sturgeon hospital by the Citadel company, who will be doing it, and a redevelopment of the Youville home, which has quality of care par excellence but has a building that prohibits it and restrains it from providing the most current wherewithal and ambience with which to care for those who have needs of long-term care.

I want to also mention that, of course, with the Speech from the Throne there was mention of the government's plan to develop a new capital plan to address the infrastructure. My constituents have told me over and over and over again that the peaks and valleys roller coaster is something that they can't tolerate much longer. So the indication from the Speech from the Throne, knowing that we as a government are going to address this and level it off and give some predictability as well as sustainability to not only invest properly our revenues, dedicate them, and provide for capital and infrastructure needs, is a very, very hopeful sign and a welcome sign to my constituents in my community.

In yesterday's Speech from the Throne, too, there was mention, of course, that "a strong economy and a solid infrastructure enable a society to respond to the needs of people, especially those who are most vulnerable." That is the responsibility that I know our government takes very, very seriously. We always want to help those to help themselves, but we take seriously our responsibility to help those who cannot help themselves. That is why there is mention in the throne speech of this focus, if you will, toward affordable housing to help people to be not only independent but to be able to afford within their own budgets a decent circumstance under which they can afford their own space and the responsibility for their own space.

I would be remiss, Mr. Speaker, if I didn't speak about what I consider a very healthy approach to reforming our health care system in light of what we all know is a top priority of this government. We do need to reform it in order for us to implement such strategies as increasing the scope of practice for those who are health care providers. It is key to making the system work efficiently and economically, but it is more key, if I could say that, to making sure that those who are in need of health care services are able to access it with the least amount of hoops to go through, of mountains to climb, of side roads to take and so that they can get service quickly, readily, and appropriately from the appropriate provider.

5:10

I do welcome the opportunity that we will be receiving by way of funds from the federal government, but I must say that as a government we take our responsibility seriously to provide health care for the citizens of Alberta, and we are finding ways to do it which are most efficient, most efficacious, and most productive not only for those receiving but for those delivering the skills that they have so appropriately acquired in their respective professions.

I want to conclude by saying that as the Speech from the Throne concluded with our affirmation of our position within the country of Canada and our provincial role, I share the pride of our government in making sure that we and fellow Albertans realize what a role we play, what responsibilities we graciously and generously accept to play our role to make this country strong and to make sure that the environment in which we all live as Albertans and Canadians is one that is economically strong and socially responsible, and that's what I believe is the message the Speech from the Throne delivered yesterday.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: Hon. members, the provisions under Standing Order 29(2)(a) now are available. The hon. Member for Grande Prairie-Smoky under provision of Standing Order 29.

Mr. Knight: Yes, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: Please proceed.

Mr. Knight: Thank you. To the Member for St. Albert. I listened and heard your comments with respect to what was said in the throne speech, and the support of children, of course, is extremely important. I have a question for you with respect to FAS. It was mentioned, of course, in the throne speech, and it's such an important issue, I think, for Alberta's children. My question would be: do you have any idea what might be our initial steps to confront and combat this extremely serious situation for Alberta's children?

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mrs. O'Neill: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and thank you very much to the Member for Grande Prairie-Smoky for his question. We all know that FAS knows no socioeconomic bounds. It is not limited to a particular segment of our society, so from my perspective – and I must say that that's what our community volunteer centre through our St. Albert Help Society, in co-operation with FCSS and those preventive measures that they're all engaged in, are engaged in: a campaign of education to educate the women who will be carrying these children to make sure that they do not consume alcohol while they are pregnant. It is a preventable disease, and indeed it will only be prevented through awareness, through education, and through the responsible actions of those who carry our future children.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Deputy Premier.

Mrs. McClellan: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I just wanted to make a few brief comments, although the Speech from the Throne could involve many areas that one would like to speak on.

First, I want to add my compliments to Her Honour the Honourable the Lieutenant Governor on her very gracious and very human presentation of our speech. We are indeed fortunate in this province to have this gracious lady as our Lieutenant Governor. Others have commented on the very heartfelt way that Her Honour presented the speech.

I wanted to mostly comment in my few moments, Mr. Speaker, on the promise to children. I feel very strongly about it, this government feels very strongly about it, and I commend the hon. Minister of Children's Services for her efforts in ensuring that all children have an opportunity to reach their potential. Part of that, certainly, is education, and we have talked a lot about that today. It is an important area to all of us, whether it's an urban school who faces many different needs or whether it's a rural school who faces many different challenges.

I'm just going to narrow my comments to a school I'm fairly familiar with, which is a little school in my constituency, the school at New Brigden. I want to talk about the dedication of not just the teachers, because they are dedicated in that area, but of the whole community, that works very hard to ensure that that school, with under 50 students, a school that was built in the 1950s, has a lot of pride. Ministers that have visited it have noted how well it's cared for by our local custodians.

Mostly what I want to comment on is the quality of education that these young students get. It may seem that when you're in a school that has triple grading, that has shortened noon hours and recesses to accommodate busing, there could be some disadvantages. But last spring there was a nationwide scholastic challenge. I apologize; I don't recall the name of it. There were some 50,000 students across Canada who took part in it, and it was for grade 8 students. I was so

proud to learn that a young lady, Sheila Pratt, from that small school placed four points below the Canadian champion, who was a young student who was in a gifted program at Queen's University.

So this young lady in grade 8, with a full education in this small school, faced that challenge. But there was even more pride when I realized that the second-place winner – and Sheila, incidentally, was first in Alberta – was also from that school, a young man, Darcy Blair. He would have been first had he been competing in Manitoba, Saskatchewan, or British Columbia. He placed second in our province. This was a competition that was very broad. It was across all of the subjects. It wasn't limited to mathematics or social studies or language arts. It made me realize just how important our commitment is to these students wherever they are and whatever their school makeup is. Every child in this province has the opportunity to reach, to the best of their ability, their potential. I just applaud the teachers, the community, the parents council, who have worked so hard to ensure that excellence occurs in that very small school. So nobody will tell me that there is this distinct disadvantage to living far away from major centres, 210 miles from any of the three that are within distance, and that you can't achieve it and that it doesn't take the whole community to provide a valuable education to our students.

5:20

Having said that, I was also very pleased to acknowledge the strong commitment to agriculture. Mr. Speaker, 2002 is a year that I think most of us in that industry would like to wipe off the calendar, didn't feel sad about when we stroked December 31 off and entered into this new year. Of course, we're all encouraged by the increased moisture. I believe the city of Edmonton has more snow now than it has had in the past seven years. I know that it's somewhat of a struggle for snow removal, but I can tell you that it has given our agricultural producers a great lift, particularly east of the city, where they have had four years of drought conditions and at least have now the potential of some runoff and some spring moisture. We will continue to work very hard to improve our safety nets, our risk management tools for producers, and I will have a greater opportunity to speak to that, of course, when we debate agriculture later on in the year.

The health system improvements and reform go on, Mr. Speaker, and must go on. We do have to continue to improve access and quality. Those of us who represent rural ridings understand that maybe even better than most. Whether it's 10 minutes to an ambulance is not our first concern; it's that we have very well-trained people who can manage situations on the spot. I remind people that 99 percent of the resources that drive the economy of this province are produced in the rural areas of this province, and with that comes a great deal of concern for the safety of the individuals who work in somewhat hazardous industries.

The focus on people is evident in this speech, whether it's safe communities, education, health.

Again, I will close by saying that I and, I believe, all of my colleagues in government will continue to keep our promise to the children of this province that they will have the opportunity to realize their dreams and to have a very bright and successful future.

With that, Mr. Speaker, I would move that we adjourn the debate.

[Motion to adjourn debate carried]

The Speaker: The hon. Government House Leader.

Mr. Hancock: I would move that we adjourn until 8 this evening.

[Motion carried; the Assembly adjourned at 5:23 p.m.]

