

Legislative Assembly of Alberta

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

8:00 p.m.

Date: 2003/02/19

[The Deputy Speaker in the chair]

The Deputy Speaker: Please be seated.

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.

[Adjourned debate February 19: Mrs. McClellan]

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Leader of Her Majesty's Loyal Opposition.

Dr. Nicol: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's a real pleasure this evening to rise and make some comments on the Speech from the Throne.

The Speech from the Throne, as presented this week, makes a lot of promises. It really doesn't do a lot to outline the actual plans that the government intends to use to implement these promises. If we look at and put the Speech from the Throne in context with the list of legislation and the bills that we've already seen introduced, it gives us a sense of really a lot of talk and a lot of promise with little indication of any of the detail that's going to be brought about in terms of how we go about implementing it.

You know, the main focus that we get out of that Speech from the Throne is that the government is going to in a sense address the agenda of children. I guess the first reaction that people would have to that kind of a statement is: shouldn't that just be what government is about? The main focus of a government is to make sure that the young, those that can't help themselves, are the ones that get the major consideration in connection with any particular policy. This is why the government created a Ministry of Children's Services. This, to me, should have focused the idea that a government is committed and should be committed to looking at the impact on children of just about everything we do and what it means to the youth, to the people who will be Alberta in the future.

Yet now all of a sudden they feel that they've got to make a statement that children are important, and how do they do that? They introduce legislation which in effect creates a promise which sounds good when we look at the Speech from the Throne, but when you actually look at Bill 1 and see what it is, Bill 1 isn't really a promise to children. It's basically a bill which sets up another agency, whose mandate extends over all of the things that the ministries that we look across here and see on a daily basis are responsible for doing. Children's Services, Learning, Health, Justice: all of them are, in effect, part of what this agency is supposed to be doing.

If we look at the initial statements in the Speech from the Throne, they say: this is designed to increase the involvement of communities in the care of children. Well, Mr. Speaker, I challenge that that was the mandate of the commission for families and children back when it operated in the early 1990s, from about 1993-94 up through about

'95, when the recommendations were put in place that created the regional authorities for children and the Ministry of Children's Services. I guess I ask: what more of a community input could this province ask for or expect on behalf of their children than a group of people from the community – a group of people who have interest in children, a group of people who are affected, a group of people who have children – coming together and bringing their ideas on what the relationship should be between a child growing up, the family within which that child operates, and the government which legislates on behalf of its citizens?

When we look at Bill 1 in conjunction with what's in the Speech from the Throne, we see a group of people being appointed by the government as opposed to coming out of the community – appointed by the government – to give them an expression of what their interest is in children. I really think, Mr. Speaker, that that raises some real issues about what the accountability of this agency will be. Will they be accountable to the government, or will they truly be accountable back to the community? You know, that commissioner's process really brought into the discussion community people, people who wanted to commit an evening of their time or a number of evenings of their time to in effect describe what they felt should be the community's relationship to the children in that community, and that's what we need to have if we're going to have a true interaction between where we are as a province and where our children should fit into where we are as a province.

The mandate that is outlined in the Speech from the Throne doesn't follow through in Bill 1, you know, because it really doesn't talk about the relationship between the Premier's Council on Alberta's Promise and the designated Alberta Centre for Child, Family and Community Research that's outlined in the Speech from the Throne other than when we look at the Speech from the Throne, there's a direct funding partnership or funding connection between the two of them. That, I guess, raises some concerns about: why do we need another agency to in effect look at some of the issues of directing research?

Mr. Speaker, we already have the Alberta heritage fund endowment for medical research that can look at a lot of these issues if we expand the mandate a little bit. We don't need to create another bureaucracy to in effect administer research. I can't imagine a Centre for Child, Family and Community Research as described in this Speech from the Throne document having the expertise to actually conduct research. We need to have critical masses involved when we want to start dealing with research. If we're going to actually conduct primary research into issues like fetal alcohol syndrome, which is the primary area that they're going to start talking about – you know, they conduct research on the prevention of fetal alcohol syndrome. I suggest that that's the kind of thing that should be done in connection with a critical mass of primary researchers.

Had this Speech from the Throne indicated that what they were looking for was a centre that would bring together research, review that research, and make recommendations to government, that may be a reasonable mandate. But when they say "to conduct research," as a scientist my question immediately becomes: how effective is this going to be? In effect, we don't have, unless we're planning on funding this with, you know, hundreds of millions of dollars, which I hope isn't the case, that critical mass that's necessary to actually conduct that research.

So I guess what we really need is more care by this government in effectively describing for Albertans what they intend to do. What kind of a promise is that, you know, when you talk about conducting research under the auspices of an Alberta Centre for Child, Family and Community Research, when you don't describe the parameters

of it, when you don't describe enough to let Albertans understand? Will there be a critical mass there? I think the thing that we have to look at, too, is how this relates to a lot of the other things that are going on in the flow of that speech.

8:10

We go into a long discussion right after the focus on the Alberta Centre for Child, Family and Community Research, and we talk about education. We talk about the need for an education system that allows every child to reach its potential. Mr. Speaker, every Albertan should say: right on; that's what an education system should be mandated to do. But in the context of this speech, this mandate for the next year by this government, what does it say? Not very much of anything about what they're going to do to make sure that children, especially the children who are in need in this province, children that are having difficulty in the current education system – there's no indication here that we're going to have additional support for them. Twenty million dollars for textbooks? Well, that's probably a half a textbook per student at the high school level. Half a textbook.

You know, Mr. Speaker, I would have felt much more comfortable if I had seen some suggestion in this that there was going to be a review – never mind more actual dollars but a review – to talk about what's critically needed for children that are having trouble in the education system. Why are children falling out of the education system? Why are they being sidelined in the education system? It's one thing for the government to stand up and say: our children are performing exceptionally well. But what happens is that they do a preliminary study with their tests and they design the exam so that a certain percentage of the students will get that percentage. This is the way they work.

The Deputy Speaker: Hon. leader, I'm sorry for the manners of one of the ministers.

Hon. minister, I wonder if we could take your turn, and I'll put you down on my list. You're next but not while somebody else is speaking. That's just plain bad manners.

Hon. leader.

Dr. Nicol: That's all right, Mr. Speaker. We have to accept the fact that there are some people that don't know how to behave in the province.

As we look at some of the rest of the stuff that goes on in here, there are some questions that also come up when we talk about the idea of the advanced education system and the postsecondary system. No reference in this document to the government's position or what the government intends to do about the issues of differential tuition. You know, is this going to be the future for Alberta students, where they have to look at the cost of the program they want to go into, where they have to look at it from the point of view of if it is reasonable to expect their parents to pay more than their neighbours' or their friends' parents pay for them to help to get an education, to be further in debt at the end of their schooling system? I would have liked to see some reflection in this document about the idea that, in effect, the government has a position and it wants to make a statement that says: advanced education in any field should generally be available to every student in our province.

Mr. Speaker, the next section of the Speech from the Throne goes on to try and relate the economy, a strong economy, and how this ties back to children in our province. I think that once we get by the first couple of statements, we realize that the government doesn't really make that work, and then they go on and talk about some of the other issues that the government is going to look at. If we're

really interested in looking at what constitutes a strong economy from a child's point of view in this province, it's opportunity, it's training, it's a belief in a future, but it's also the things that come out when we look at: why is it that some businesses like to come? I know that when I worked at the school of management at the University of Lethbridge, there was a lot of work we did following what made communities or what made countries attractive to businesses.

You know, Mr. Porter from Harvard had done a lot of work evaluating the relative competitiveness of different communities, setting out parameters to look at what constituted competitive communities. One of the things that came down on almost every one of his criteria was the idea that it wasn't just necessarily the financial opportunities and the financial aspects that determine where a company is located. They looked for infrastructure. They looked at education for their employees' kids and, also, education opportunities and upgrade opportunities for their employees. They looked at the environment and recreation opportunities. None of that's talked about in here. None of it is dealt with in the context of what creates a strong economy.

It's interesting that they go on to talk about, especially at the start, the agriculture community. The government has just released a whole new series of opportunities for crop insurance. You know, it provides a little bit more significant coverage, but what it doesn't do is really address the broad-based issue of what should be the risk management decisions being made by farmers and the public as it plays a part in that risk management process. They, in effect, don't try to tie together very many of the programs except to say that there'll be no more ad hoc programs, which I support fully, Mr. Speaker. I hope that they're able to carry through with that, because that only distorts whatever kind of risk management signals a properly designed program would be sending to producers. So let's hope that in the next year or two we actually see that that can be sustained.

The other interesting part that comes up. I think that as we go across the province, I probably run into just as many people saying, "What's the government doing about the Wheat Board?" as saying, "Why aren't they doing something about the Wheat Board?" I raise this again, the same as I did during the debate on the bill last term, in the sense, Mr. Speaker, that this is a process where the producers have a right through a democratic process to express their opinion. They expressed that opinion as recently as last fall in board elections. In effect, the statement made by the farmers through a democratic process was to elect people to that board who supported the single-desk concept. So I guess I have some questions about: what is it that the government is doing trying to second-guess a democratic process that's in place for producers in this province?

The other thing that the government talks about is the energy sector. They're talking about electricity here as well in this Speech from the Throne. I guess what we need is a little more explanation and a little bit more clarity, even when you look at Bill 3, as to the impact of a statement like: "While progress has been made on delivering new generation to meet growing consumer demand, there are still issues to be addressed around [consumer] choice and service, particularly in rural areas." What does that mean to the REAs? What does that mean to the groups that have, in effect, been serving rural Alberta for years providing them with access to reliable electricity? Where do they stand under this new process? We need to see that that's made clear.

8:20

They also talk about that they're going to "introduce legislation that will refine the structure of the electric industry" and "provide

consumers with a new regulated option to purchase power at a rate tied to the competitive wholesale market.” I guess that a red flag went up when I read that, Mr. Speaker, in the sense of: is this going to be some kind of an adjustment to the five-year regulated rate option? Is it going to be an early cancellation, like some people have asked me, that they’ve heard might happen? I guess that that’s where we need some clarification. If this is a transition program for people who choose to leave a five-year program that the government put in place, that would be useful. If it’s a substitute, why is it that the government can’t carry through on a commitment that they made to people who wanted to see how this shook out over the first five years of a new electricity sector? I always stumble when I have to say deregulated sector, because it’s very obvious that under the new electric industry in Alberta it’s a much more heavily regulated sector than it ever was before. It hasn’t really helped reduce the cost of electricity for Albertans. It’s made, in effect, a really differentiated system where people have to face uncertainty and face higher bills.

Mr. Speaker, I’m going to leave my comments and my debate about electricity and all that until we debate Bill 3, so I won’t burden everybody with it twice. We’ll, in effect, only have to deal with it in one case. I’ll cover my issues about deregulation when Bill 3 comes up.

The other issue that comes up is: what are we going to do about the environment? There’s a very short section in this bill about Alberta’s relationship to its environment, the role of the environment in Alberta, and of course there’s reference made to Kyoto. But the one that really has some concern is the government’s initiative to bring forward a water management strategy. Mr. Speaker, I ask: where are the water management plans that were mandated under the ’95 Water Act? Those have never been forthcoming. Why don’t we use the legislation that’s in place to look at how we should be dealing with our water, how we should be dealing with the process of putting together what the speech talks about as short-, medium-, and long-term actions to deal with water? That should have been done through those water management plans. Why is it the government let those lapse and not really come into being so that there were mechanisms put in place to deal with the issues of water?

As we go through the rest of the speech, there’s a long section that talks about infrastructure. Mr. Speaker, it is a really good idea that they’re really starting to talk about the debt we’ve created in our infrastructure. We have to make sure that a process is put in place to, in effect, replenish our infrastructure and get rid of that debt that we’ve got in our infrastructure.

They talk about a capital plan that’ll include the framework for public/private partnerships. Mr. Speaker, I just want to relay a little conversation I had with a cost accountant who worked for one of the major corporations who were doing a lot of development work here in Alberta. His question to me was: “You know, Ken, why would the government ever consider P3s? Why would they ever consider these private/public partnerships? As a business we would never lease an asset unless it was a temporary, short-term type of arrangement like in a research project.” But our schools, our courthouses, our hospitals are not short-term investments in our province. Those are investments that we will be using for 15 or 20 or 30 or 40 years, well into the future, and if we buy them with our own money, we, in effect, have an option to truly make good use of those dollars as a public.

How do we deal with it if we transfer what, in effect, is a debt obligation on our books into a long-term operating obligation? Mr. Speaker, we still have to pay for those assets. If we do it with our own money as a public, we can do it at a lot less cost than we can do it through allowing someone else to finance it, allowing someone else to incorporate into it a risk premium. Those don’t have to be

put into public investments, and I really hope that the government follows through in two different places in here where they talk about these public/private partnerships that will only be used when there’s a net benefit to taxpayers. I hope that here, for all Albertans, they’re talking about a long-run net benefit, not a truncated, one-year or very short-term cash flow kind of an issue. It is part of the process of a government’s obligation to its citizens to look at, as the Minister of Infrastructure just said, a lifetime cycle of those assets. In all of the work that I’ve done in the last couple of months with accountants, with people in the business community since this debate has been quite public, none of them has been able to come up with an example that they feel comfortable with and that I would accept where, in effect, it’s cheaper for us as a public to do it through a partnership. So I challenge the government to make sure that as we look at that on this life cycle structure, we end up with it being truly in the best interests of Alberta taxpayers.

Mr. Speaker, the next section of the speech gets into looking at the new fiscal framework. I must say that I’m really pleased to see the government put in place the sustainability fund. This is something that we’ve been asking for for a long time as an opposition. The Financial Review Commission last year, in effect, developed that idea, matured it, made some changes to our suggestions, but it will deal with three out of the four components that I had in our renewed fiscal stability initiatives that I released and that I’ve been talking about since I became the Leader of the Opposition. It’s good to see that three out of the four are being adopted by the government, and let’s hope that they actually make it work in the right way. The infrastructure fund, the smoothing of natural resource revenues, and the stability or sustainability fund – we’ve got one more to go on it, and that we’ll deal with in future debates as we talk about how to deal with budget processes.

The next issue that comes up, Mr. Speaker, is the health care system. This is something that we really have to look at now critically in the context of the new initiatives being taken by the federal government. I’ve had a couple of chats with the minister of health, and it seems that there are some possibilities here now with that new recognition of the federal responsibility. It’s about time that the feds began to accept the fact that this is by agreement and by law a joint issue area and that they’re going to cough up a little bit to cover their obligation.

You know, I think we need to look at the areas of our general health care system. My extended family had a chance to use the health care system this winter, and while I was visiting in the hospital, I ran into a fellow from the U.S. who was there visiting his mother in the next room. He was talking about how he was really impressed with the health care system here and how if his mother had been in the U.S. where he was, there’s no way they could’ve afforded the care she was getting here in Alberta. He said that the kind of care she was getting and the particular regime that she was under would’ve probably only been available to a very select few in the U.S. I think, Mr. Speaker, that what that said to me was that, you know, we’ve got a system here, a public health care program that makes sure every Albertan – every Albertan – has access, has a sense of participation, and can feel that that health care system is there when they need it.

8:30

One of the things that we really have to start watching for, Mr. Speaker, is that as we start making changes, as we start reviewing and reformatting the health care system, let’s not jeopardize that young man’s sense that his mother was getting awfully good health care here in Canada, health care that she couldn’t have obtained had she been sick with exactly the same ailment in the United States. As

a family even the comprehensive insurance that he carried – and he was employed by a significant U.S. firm – he said wouldn't have been able to give that kind of care. So, you know, this is the kind of thing that we have to be proud of as Albertans and Canadians, and we have to make sure that we really strive to sustain that universality and that access to our health care system.

I think the government's initiative to develop some priorities on healthy behaviour is a good idea. You know, we need to build that into both our education system and our health awareness systems, but we have to look at it from the point of view of: let's make it work. A year ago in the Mazankowski report we had all of these great recommendations about increasing the tax on cigarettes and putting that money into a health prevention fund. It's good to see now that there are some initiatives being made in the health prevention area. Let's see a correlation between the dollars that were coming in from that increase in the tobacco tax and the dollars that are actually spent on these prevention programs because we've got to make sure that we do promote responsibility and responsible use of our health care system and responsible expectations in our health care system.

Just a few more comments, Mr. Speaker, then I'll cede the floor to someone else.

The other concern I've got in the health section of this speech is that they're going to start to improve and implement electronic health records. Please consult with the Privacy Commissioner. We've got to make sure that this is done in a way that Albertans can feel comfortable, can feel that, yes, this system is safe and isn't going to release personal information in an uncontrolled way.

Another area in health that I have just a comment on or a question as much as anything. I think it's really important that we do look at a rural health action plan. The idea of ambulance services: I guess the caution that I would raise there when they start talking about ambulance services is that a lot of communities in Alberta have developed a really strong relationship between their protection services in the community, especially fire services, and their ambulance services. When those things are working really well, we've got to make sure that can be kept up because there are some really good working partnerships there, and we've got to make sure that those kinds of things are not disrupted but that ambulance and standard of ambulance service is available for all Albertans.

The other thing is that when we start looking at that, if we're going to rely more and more on the ambulance services to transport people to, need I call them, distant contact points for the health care system, should we be looking at some kind of different concept of, you know, what is fair costing on it? Should it be the user pay, or should it be the system pay? That's a debate that we need to have. I'm not going to make judgments on it right now or make recommendations on it, but I just think that it's a debate that really needs to come out, and I hope the committee that's dealing with the ambulance review is really looking at that kind of thing as they come forward with their recommendations.

Mr. Speaker, the last section goes on and deals with safe communities. I guess the question comes up especially in the second paragraph, where they're going to "improve the province's corrections system by creating a zero tolerance level for illegal drug use, violence, and gang-related activities." Great. How? You know, this is the kind of thing that supposedly is limited and controlled in our current prison systems. If we come up with a system to make that work in Alberta, we should bottle it and put it on the market. We've probably got a worldwide market that we can sell that in because it'll sure, you know, be something that I think a lot of institutions and governments would be interested in. It seems to be something that we should look at in the context of a lower tolerance for that kind of

thing, but zero tolerance – you know, how do you deal with it?

The only other question I have, Mr. Speaker, and then I'll conclude with a couple of general comments. When we look at the new family law act, one of the things that Albertans have addressed with me on a number of occasions with respect to the idea of family law is the burden of cost that it comes with, especially, you know, in family court when there's a separation. It seems that whichever of the family members has access to the largest cash pool, in effect, gets to direct the process a little more, and what we need to do is look at seeing if there isn't some way in this context of the new family law act where some of that financial burden can be removed a little bit. If we could do that, I think it would make a lot of people feel that their legal system really does work much better for them. It probably will help.

The concern that I want to just kind of end with is some of the things that I didn't really see in the Speech from the Throne which in some ways I would've liked to have seen something about. There's only one place in the speech where the relationship of Albertans to the senior citizens of this province was mentioned, and that was in connection with "seniors who live in lodges and" – and I stress the "and" – "receive the Alberta seniors' benefit."

8:40

You know, there are a lot of areas where change in government policy has really created hardship for seniors in our province. A number of them retired expecting some kind of a safety net or a support structure being there from the public because it was available at the time they retired. If we wanted to change those programs, especially for seniors with low income, without a lot of flexibility, we should have thought of, in effect, grandfathering or grandmothering them into it. This is the kind of thing where we've really created some hardships.

I guess that when you look at that statement in the Speech from the Throne that talks about dealing with a review of supports for "low-income seniors who live in lodges and receive the Alberta seniors' benefit," I stress the "and" again. Mr. Speaker, I have a number of seniors in my community who are just as financially strapped living in rental properties or in their own homes, and the equity in their homes is in many cases used up. Why are we limiting it in this context to an "and" situation? You have to be on the seniors' benefit and in a lodge. If we truly wanted that seniors' benefit program to be able to earmark support for seniors who are having financial difficulties, we shouldn't be tying it to a residence because all of the conditions that allow them to qualify in effect stipulate that they are in financial difficulty, and that should be the criteria in the context of how you're looking at it in this paragraph as we deal with this review. So I would hope that as the government gets to implementing that review of those payments, they look more flexibly at the conditions that they imply in that statement.

The other area that I've had an awful lot of questions about almost the whole 10 years that I've been serving the people of my community in this Legislature has been: what about the fixed income individuals, the AISH, the SFI? No indication here that they're going to be brought into any kind of a reasonable review of level either on an absolute basis or a geographic basis. I think we need to see some kind of a commitment. All the review that's talked about in there does, if you listen to people in the community, is scare them with the potential rather than encourage them to expect any kind of real, true support. So, you know, those are areas that we need to really look at in the context of something beyond what was written into the Speech from the Throne.

Mr. Speaker, we've got a lot of time during the rest of the session to debate some of the specific issues, whether it gets into budget

debate or whether it gets into some of the specific legislation that we're already aware will be coming. So not to belabour my points on this, I think that we really need to focus on the fact that the main theme of the Speech from the Throne really should have been one of: how do we incorporate into everything we're doing a little bit of compassion? How do we deal with fairness? Yet we tried to focus in a very unique way, a way that I find really hard to comprehend as an elected official, some kind of a realization that children in this province are important. I would have thought that that would have been just fundamental to everything we do. If we can't act on behalf of our children, who are we as parents, whether that's as individuals or as a government? You know, who are we as a government if we can't be true to the children of this province?

So thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I appreciated the chance to comment on the Speech from the Throne.

The Deputy Speaker: Hon. members, under Standing Order 29(2)(a) we've received indications from three hon. members – the hon. Member for Edmonton-Rutherford, the hon. Minister of Environment, and the hon. Member for Lac La Biche-St. Paul – of a desire to ask the hon. Leader of the Opposition questions relative to the speech. Edmonton-Rutherford.

Mr. McClelland: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I listened attentively to the comments by the hon. the Leader of the Opposition, and the member's obvious, genuine interest in children was paramount in his comments, and I'd like to explore that a little further, if I may.

In Bill 1 under Alberta's Promise, the premise of Alberta's promise is "an initiative to encourage organizations, corporations and individuals to enhance community resources in order to further the well-being of children." In the hon. member's comments the point was made that Alberta already through the government has a number of ministries charged with the responsibility for children. In my opinion, Mr. Speaker, the key to this initiative, Alberta's Promise, is that it doesn't rely on government agencies. It relies more on the community. As a province and as a society, as a country, perhaps we've got over the years further from the notion that it's the family and community as a first resort of assistance. Why would it not be in the child's interest to pursue the notion of involvement of family, community, and organizations, nongovernmental, in the well-being of children?

Dr. Nicol: Mr. Speaker, I explained that. We had the commission for family and children that was a community-based initiative. I guess the question comes up in terms of: as a public, if we're going to make commitments to children, should we be doing it through selectively controlled nonprofits, or should we be doing it through a public agenda that truly has a public initiative and a public interest on behalf of those children?

You know, the member brought up Bill 1: "Alberta's Promise is an initiative"? Give me a break here. Promises have a standard associated with them. Promises are not initiatives. Promises are a commitment to a level of commitment. There's nothing in Bill 1 about a level of commitment. What can children expect from this province? Only what this group of appointed people decides is in those children's interest. I'm sorry, Mr. Speaker. I'm not buying into that.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Minister of the Environment.

Dr. Taylor: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I've been listening to the opposition response to the throne speech all day, so if my question expresses perhaps a polite sense of frustration, I'd ask for your

tolerance. My question deals with what I perceive to be misrepresentation of the facts around education. I don't have the Blues in front of me, but I think I heard the member say that Alberta students do well, you know, in the international light. We're one and two in science and math and so on because of the fact that the tests are set by the department of education. Now, if that's the opposition leader's understanding of it, then I certainly would excuse his ignorance, but if he actually knows the truth, that the tests are international standardized tests that are not set by the department of education, then I believe he should get up and apologize to Alberta students, Alberta teachers, and, more importantly, to the Minister of Learning.

Dr. Nicol: Mr. Speaker, I challenge him to read the Blues. I never made reference to the international exams. I made reference to the exams that are established by the ministry through a process within the ministry. Those were the exams I was talking about. Albertans do well on the international exams because not all of our students take them.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Lac La Biche-St. Paul.

Mr. Danyluk: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Agriculture is a continuously changing environment, and crop insurance is addressing those changes with the input of actual producers. The hon. Leader of the Opposition has major criticisms about the program, which had multiple stakeholder involvement. My question is: what would he do to provide a stable safety net for agriculture?

8:50

Dr. Nicol: Mr. Speaker, how much time have we got? This is one of the things that I've been talking about for years. What we need to do is collapse all of our safety net programs into a true program which is risk management driven by the farmers and which provides for an insurance that gives them cost recovery protection. It takes out all the other risks, and it becomes a true risk management situation.

The Deputy Speaker: Thank you.

Hon. members would agree that you've had an opportunity to ask the previous speaker to answer questions, and hopefully you also realize that as brief as his answers were, some of our questions were not quite as brief, so not as many members were able to participate.

The hon. Member for Grande Prairie-Smoky.

Mr. Knight: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My question to the hon. Leader of the Opposition with respect to the situation that I believe I heard him say where there was . . .

Speaker's Ruling Question and Comment Period

The Deputy Speaker: Hon. member, I'm sorry. I didn't make myself clear enough. The five minutes that's allowed under Standing Order 29 has gone. If you're rising to speak to the Speech from the Throne, well and good. Away you go. But if you're wanting to ask another question, we'd have to have unanimous consent to waive the Standing Orders and make an extension, and I would suggest that the likelihood of that is remote. So if you wish to speak, please do so.

Mr. Knight: Mr. Speaker, I wasn't watching the clock. I didn't realize the five minutes was up. Excuse me, and thank you very much.

The Deputy Speaker: You're probably suffering from the same problem that I have. I can't hear the machine either, but it did ring, and I have it on reasonable authority that the five minutes are well up.

The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Debate Continued

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It's with interest that I rise this evening to participate in the Speech from the Throne by Her Honour the Lieutenant Governor, Lois E. Hole. I've listened to the remarks not only from the hon. Member for Lethbridge-East but certainly from earlier this afternoon in the Assembly. When one thinks back to yesterday, when the Assembly was full of guests and everyone was on their best behaviour, it was a reflection of this province's current fortunate prosperity. There certainly are some initiatives that were discussed in the throne speech that I would not only applaud this government on but encourage them to go further.

I was pleased to hear in my role as Energy critic that the government will focus on adopting a regulatory regime and investing in energy research and technology to perhaps bring onstream amounts of coal bed methane. This is a pleasant development, and I can take from this that the government is waking up to the reality that our resources are slowly diminishing. Conventional crude oil production levels have been in decline for 30 years but now with natural gas as well. So that's a sound idea. It's certainly going to take some planning. There are issues surrounding the production of coal bed methane, and that's that the disposal of the water that is pulled off before production starts has to be addressed. That's certainly something I would like to encourage the government to go further on in developing.

I have some ideas on this, some very good, sound ideas on this, and if they would like to adapt those ideas, then for the betterment of the province I would say: go right ahead, the same way you took the sustainability fund from the Official Opposition. Dr. Nicol, the Member for Lethbridge-East, has been encouraging you to do this for some time, and finally we're seeing some form of it. Certainly, the same would apply also for infrastructure enhancement.

Now, one thing I did not notice in here are – and this is getting back to natural gas – the huge volumes of natural gas that are consumed in the production of synthetic crude oil. Natural gas is a source of hydrogen; it's certainly a fuel gas for the heaters that are there. We need to ensure that that industry, if it is going to prosper and expand, also has a reliable and affordable supply of natural gas.

Now, when we turn the pages in this speech and we look at our health care system, I can't help but think of how we can improve our public health care system. Certainly, there has to be a dialogue and there has to be a partnership developed with the federal government. Many members of this Assembly may not agree with this, but health care is a provincial government responsibility, but it is also a federal government responsibility. The enforcement of the Canada Health Act's principles of accessibility, comprehensiveness, portability, public administration, and universality is determined, of course, by the federal government. Public health care in that way is a joint federal/provincial responsibility.

I was astonished to hear: oh, we're going to have \$250 million coming to Alberta, and while perhaps the health minister will not use it, the education minister will solve the many problems that are in the Department of Learning. That is why not only this hon. member but many of the constituents that I'm proud and honoured to represent in this Assembly express concern about the idea of the federal government giving this province in particular money with no

strings attached. The constituents of Edmonton-Gold Bar are of the opinion that not only should strings be attached to this money, but the strings should be pulled tight.

Now, after the newspaper articles concerning the hon. Minister of Learning and the fact that, oh, well, maybe this is a convenient pool of cash for the problems that were expressed earlier today in this House during question period in regard to public education, I have to caution all members of this Assembly and remind each and every hon. member, Mr. Speaker, that when the current regime – I shall use that word – came to power 10 years ago until Bill 11 was passed in this Legislature, it has been alleged that Alberta violated the Canada Health Act six times. No action was taken publicly by the federal government with the exception of the former minister Diane Marleau, who in November of 1995 imposed fines because this province failed to ban user fees. So that is reason enough that not only should strings be attached, but they should be pulled tight if we are to have a better public health care system in this province, and that is the one word, Mr. Speaker, that's missing in this speech in the part that is describing and discussing health systems. It's the word "public." We have to ensure that we have a good public health care system that helps all Albertans. I can't emphasize that enough, because as we drift down this road to privatization, we only have to look at what happened with electricity deregulation and the frustration and the confusion that's expressed by consumers across this province, and hopefully we will not continue to apply the same logic to public health care as we have to electricity deregulation schemes. Where are the cost-benefit analyses that either scheme will work? There are none.

9:00

Now, whenever we talk in this province about P3s, what we should be talking about is a commitment to public health care, a commitment to public education, and a commitment to a public service that works for each and every Albertan in an efficient use of the taxpayers' dollars. I cannot for the life of me see how these P3s are going to work. Perhaps in time I will be proven wrong, and if I'm wrong, I will certainly stand to be corrected.

There is another group of citizens who have long been left out by this government. There have been many promises made to them by this government, but nothing has happened. Those are the Albertans who are clients of SFI and AISH. Where's their money? Now, we look at the increase in natural gas prices and what it has done to heating costs. We look at the increase in electricity prices. We see the combination of both those increases and the effect that they have had on the cost of living in this province. There has been reported an inflation rate greater than 8 percent. These citizens have not received a dime in increase.

I just thought I would go through my files and find the Speech from the Throne from after the March election of 2001, and after I go through this, Mr. Speaker, I can't put very much faith in this document. It's a public relations exercise, and it's worth emphasizing at this time that since this regime has come to power, this Public Affairs Bureau has grown into a \$10 million, 300-person outfit, just to spin the message. Two years ago this was the message, and this is what's been left out from Albertans as we hear and discuss another throne speech. This is from roughly two years ago.

Legislation will be introduced this session to put into law a commitment to help protect Albertans from high natural gas prices.

This bill will ensure that Alberta consumers have a competitive natural gas service that maintains the Alberta advantage.

Where's the Alberta advantage now when people have to decide between heat and meat? Where is the Alberta advantage for those citizens who are forced to have a disconnection notice? They can't

afford to pay their natural gas bills let alone get the \$45 for the reconnection fee. There was a commitment made. We can have this money tree during an election year, but two years after the election we're really tight with the people's money. Now, I can't understand how a government could make such a promise and then break it.

Now, it also states in this throne speech from two years ago that the government will work to reduce and stabilize electricity prices by streamlining the approval process to bring new generation projects onstream. The government will continue to address electricity price concerns and other consumer issues with the advice of the newly created government Advisory Council on Electricity.

How many government advisory councils on electricity have we gone through in two years and at what cost? The government is going to work, it states here, "to reduce and stabilize electricity prices." Electricity prices spike all the time.

I was encouraging the Premier this afternoon to go on the Alberta Liberal web site, altaliberals.ab.ca, and see what savings he could have from our plan. Mr. Speaker, electricity was at 14 cents a kilowatt-hour, 1 o'clock, 1:30 in the afternoon today – 14 cents – not 4 cents, this mythical spot in Alberta where you can get electricity, according to the Premier, for 4 cents. It's 14 cents. It goes anywhere from 99 cents to 2 cents. How can businesses plan their monthly budgets when they do not know what the costs are going to be? This is from two years ago. We still have the same problems. [Mr. MacDonald's speaking time expired] Oh, I'm sorry. Thank you.

The Deputy Speaker: Any questions? No? We're ready for the next speaker?

The hon. Government House Leader.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I just want to take a few minutes because I thought the Speech from the Throne that we heard from Her Honour the Lieutenant Governor yesterday was exciting. The speech that I heard was one of hope, one of future, one of caring for children and building on a system which will allow each of our children in this province to develop to the best of their potential, and that is more exciting than anything I've heard tonight.

Mr. Speaker, yesterday Her Honour the Lieutenant Governor graced us with her charm and her presence and, I might say, reminded us of the job that she's been doing for all Albertans in breathing life into the office that she serves and bringing to all of Alberta a real appreciation of not only that office but of the role of government itself. So when she spoke the words of the Speech from the Throne and talked about a bright future for our children, it was a message, I think, that all Albertans can take to heart.

Although members of the opposition decry a lack of detail in the Speech from the Throne, it would be normal not to have a great deal of detail in the Speech from the Throne because the throne does speak in concepts and in directions, and the concepts and the directions that are set out here are very strong. It talks about how you provide for the future of our children by having a strong economy, by making sure that people have jobs and have an opportunity to earn an income so they can take care of their children and where the government can be in place to help provide an opportunity for education so that our children can be ready to compete in a knowledge-based economy and can be ready to compete in a global economy and can enjoy those issues of quality of life around the arts and other aspects of life that are so important. So, again, the Speech from the Throne was very uplifting from that perspective.

Mr. Speaker, the Speech from the Throne talked about the Commission on Learning and the role of learning in our society. It

talked about the important role that teachers play as mentors and role models for our children in helping our children succeed. It talked about the steps that we need to take to strengthen the postsecondary education system in promoting lifelong learning. These are all essential underpinnings of a strong and prosperous future for our province and for our children, so again I have to say that for me the Speech from the Throne talked very positively about a strong future for our province.

9:10

I don't want to dwell at length. There are a couple of things that I think are very important that were mentioned in the Speech from the Throne. An acknowledgment that we are moving from a commodity-based economy to a knowledge-based economy, not expressed in that language but expressed in the context of the Speech from the Throne. We have to be prepared. We've enjoyed a great history based on a resource-based economy, and we will have a considerable future on that resource-based economy, but we have to build that future based on value-added, on improving the development of those resources rather than exporting them in raw form, on improving our technologies, on delving into the life sciences, on moving into the knowledge-based economy in a very strong way. So talking about our children and their future, talking about education is very important to that structure.

Essential as well is how we move to a knowledge-based economy and how we get the research that underpins that economy into the market and build the base. So we need to spend time over the course of this session, I believe, Mr. Speaker, and certainly as we move forward as a government, talking about how we invest in a knowledge-based economy, not we as government but we as people in the province. How do we get the capital that's necessary to develop that economy, and what role can government play as a leader in that area?

Focusing on people obviously means focusing on health, and we have some strong issues ahead of us in that area as we move to reform the health care system. We need to look particularly at the primary care system, and we need to focus on some of the issues that came out of the Mazankowski report. Health as an economic engine and the research and development side, being very conscious of how we not only deal with the acute care side but how we take care of ourselves so that we live healthy so that the system doesn't have to cost as much as it does in the future. Reforming primary care. Making sure that we have all health care professionals able to act to the level of their training and expertise and that we do not restrict them from acting in that capacity, that we use the full range of their abilities in our system.

But I think the most important thing that I read in the Speech from the Throne, Mr. Speaker, was at the conclusion, where it talked about the promise meaning unleashing innovation, leading in learning, competing in a global marketplace, and making Alberta the best place in the world to live, work, and raise a family. Those are very important directions that speak directly to the mission and vision that this government has had. Since this government was elected 10 years ago, there's been a strong focus on the fiscal agenda, a strong focus on getting the fiscal house in order, balancing the budget, and paying down the debt. Those were very, very important strategic objectives, but those strategic objectives were only accomplished for one purpose, and that was to achieve the true vision of this province, which is stated in our government business plan, "a vibrant and prosperous province where Albertans enjoy a superior quality of life and are confident about the future for themselves and their children." That is the vision of government, but it's the vision that the people of this province have told government

that they want us to try and work with them to achieve, to develop the human potential of all of our citizens, putting in place opportunities for each of our children to succeed to the best of their potential. I think the Speech from the Throne develops that in a very exciting way, and I'm looking forward to working with this government to achieve that vision as outlined in the Speech from the Throne.

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

[Motion to adjourn debate carried]

head: **Government Motions**

4. Mr. Hancock moved:

Be it resolved that the Assembly resolve itself into Committee of the Whole, when called, to consider certain bills on the Order Paper.

The Deputy Speaker: This is a nondebatable motion.

[Government Motion 4 carried]

Adjournment of Session

5. Mr. Hancock moved:

Be it resolved that when the Assembly adjourns to recess the spring sitting of the Third Session of the 25th Legislature, it shall stand adjourned until a time and date as determined by the Speaker after consultation with the Lieutenant Governor in Council.

[Government Motion 5 carried]

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Government House Leader.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'd move that we adjourn until 1:30 p.m. tomorrow.

[Motion carried; at 9:17 p.m. the Assembly adjourned to Thursday at 1:30 p.m.]