

## Legislative Assembly of Alberta

Title: **Monday, March 10, 2003**

**1:30 p.m.**

Date: 2003/03/10

[The Speaker in the chair]

head: **Prayers**

**The Speaker:** Good afternoon and welcome. Hon. members, would you please remain standing after the prayer for the singing of our national anthem.

Let us pray. At the beginning of this week we ask You, Father, to renew and strengthen in us the awareness of our duty and privilege as members of this Legislature. We ask You also in Your divine providence to bless and protect the Assembly and bless the province we are elected to serve. Amen.

Now would you please join in the singing of our national anthem in the language of your choice. It will be led today by Mr. Paul Lorieau.

**Hon. Members:**

O Canada, our home and native land!  
True patriot love in all thy sons command.  
With glowing hearts we see thee rise,  
The True North strong and free!  
From far and wide, O Canada,  
We stand on guard for thee.  
God keep our land glorious and free!  
O Canada, we stand on guard for thee.  
O Canada, we stand on guard for thee.

Please be seated.

head: **Introduction of Visitors**

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

**Mr. Knight:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It is a pleasure for me to rise this afternoon and introduce to you and through you two fine gentlemen from the province of Nova Scotia, who, it should be noted, had one of the teams in the recent Brier finals. I would like to introduce, firstly, Mr. Jim DeWolfe, who was elected to represent the people of Pictou East in the province of Nova Scotia in March 1998. Mr. DeWolfe is the chairman of the Standing Committee on Resources as well as the vice-chair of Public Accounts. With Mr. DeWolfe is Mr. Dale Madill, a representative from Nova Scotia's Department of Energy. They are seated in your gallery. I would ask them to rise, please, and receive the warm welcome of this Assembly.

**Mr. Jonson:** Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to introduce to you and through you to members of the Assembly His Excellency Sergei Darkin, governor of Primorskii region in Russia. He is accompanied today by several members of his government and the Canadian honorary consul to Russia. Alberta has much in common with the Primorskii region, which is in the Russian far east. Many Alberta companies are already active in Russia and are interested in exploring new partnerships in a variety of areas. The governor's visit is a good opportunity to discuss areas of co-operation. I would ask that our honoured guests please rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of the Assembly.

**The Speaker:** The hon. Member for St. Albert.

**Mrs. O'Neill:** Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It's my honour today to introduce to you and through you to members of this

Assembly Professor Gerald Gall, who is a professor of law at the University of Alberta and who teaches constitutional law and civil liberties. He's the author of *The Canadian Legal System*, in its fourth edition. He is seated in your gallery with his wife, Karen. He has recently, in 2002, been appointed an officer of the Order of Canada, and he is currently the president of the John Humphrey Centre for Peace and Human Rights. I would ask Professor Gall and his wife, Karen, to please rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of this Assembly.

head: **Introduction of Guests**

**Mrs. McClellan:** Mr. Speaker, on behalf of the hon. Premier I'm pleased to introduce to you and through you to members of the Assembly nine members of the Public Affairs Bureau who are in the building today on their public service orientation tour. I'll ask them to stand as I call their names so you can all recognize these valuable employees. With us today are Cathy Ducharme, Craig Hutschal, Lisa Gano, Rob Hicks, Donna McClelland, Jim Stuart, Marlo Shinyei, Michelle Lennie, and Gwen Vanderdeen-Paschke. Would you please give them a very, very warm welcome.

**The Speaker:** The hon. Minister of Economic Development.

**Mr. Norris:** Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It's an absolute delight to rise on this beautiful Alberta day and introduce through you and to you in the House 33 of the best and brightest that Edmonton-McClung has to offer. The students of Good Shepherd school are here with their teacher, Mr. Rob Madunicky. I'd ask them to rise and please receive the very warm welcome of this House. Welcome to the Legislature.

**The Speaker:** The hon. Minister of Sustainable Resource Development.

**Mr. Cardinal:** Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I'd like to introduce to you and through you to the Members of the Legislative Assembly 27 grade 6 students from the village of Boyle in the constituency of Athabasca-Wabasca. They are accompanied by seven adults, and they're either seated in the members' gallery or the public gallery or both. I'd like them to rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of the Assembly.

**The Speaker:** The hon. Minister of Learning.

**Dr. Oberg:** Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I have two sets of introductions today. The first one: I'm very pleased to introduce to you and through you to the Legislative Assembly Dan MacLennan, president of AUPE, and union representative Steve Nimchuk. They have with them Terry Luhoway from NAIT; Jerry Nolan from Athabasca University in Athabasca; Bonnie Nahornick from Athabasca University in Calgary; Ron Whan from Lethbridge Community College; Lisa Daniels from the Alberta Vocational Centre, Lac La Biche; Nancy Ritchie from the University of Calgary; Dan Tilleman from the University of Calgary; Rod Feland from NAIT. They represent the education sector subcommittee within AUPE, and I would ask them all to rise and receive the warm welcome of the Legislative Assembly.

My second introduction, Mr. Speaker, is someone who is no stranger to many of the people in this Assembly. I'd like to introduce to you and through you to the Legislative Assembly Doug MacRae, who is the new executive director of the Alberta Association of Colleges and Technical Institutes, and I would add that he is

doing an excellent job in bringing the colleges and technical institutes together. I would ask you to rise and receive the warm welcome of the Legislative Assembly.

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

**Mr. Danyluk:** Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased to rise and introduce to you and through you to the Assembly two constituents of Lac La Biche-St. Paul. Wayne and Karon Hanson moved to Elk Point in 1980 when Wayne accepted a transfer with the Alberta Treasury Branches to open and manage the new branch. Karon was employed with Elk Point Gas, Ltd. in the administration department. Wayne worked for the Treasury Branches at locations throughout the province for 20 years. They are both happily enjoying retirement and are the proud parents of Danny, who is a researcher for the government caucus.

Wayne and Karon are visiting the Legislature for the first time today, Mr. Speaker, and are seated in the public gallery. I'd ask them to rise and receive the warm welcome of the Assembly.

1:40

**The Speaker:** The hon. Member for Edmonton-Glenora.

**Mr. Hutton:** Thank you very much Mr. Speaker. It's a great pleasure for me today to stand and introduce to you and through you to members of this Assembly two very special Edmontonians, Joan and Cam Tait. Cam Tait is a nationally renowned journalist, whom I will recognize after question period. With Cam is his lovely wife, Joan, who is a longtime resident of Edmonton and a champion of many worthy causes. This is her first visit to the Assembly, and I would ask Joan to please rise and receive the warm welcome of this Assembly.

**The Speaker:** The hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods.

**Dr. Massey:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure to introduce to you and through you to members of the Assembly 36 students from Tipaskan school in Edmonton-Mill Woods and their teachers/leaders Mrs. Norma Nay and Mrs. Gerry O'Riordan. I had the pleasure of reading to these youngsters during Read-in Week. They're excellent listeners, particularly if you scare the daylight out of them with master authors like Edgar Allan Poe. They're in the public gallery, and with your permission I'd ask them to stand and receive the traditional warm welcome of the Assembly.

head: **Oral Question Period**

### Energy Prices

**Dr. Nicol:** My first question is to the Minister of Environment. Since this government won't offer Albertans natural gas rebates, will this minister consider the Alberta Liberal plan for a revolving fund that would provide consumers with low-interest loans to make their homes more efficient as a means to reduce heating costs?

**The Speaker:** The hon. minister.

**Dr. Taylor:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. From our perspective and from my perspective it is not a government's position to be involving loans to anybody, revolving loans or not, by providing loans. In fact, I believe that would go against the Financial Administration Act. The Minister of Finance could comment on that. But I would like to say that we are working and we have funded an energy efficiency office called Energy Solutions at Climate Change Central.

They will have their own board of directors, and one of the things their board of directors will be discussing is programs that they could do like that in partnership with the private sector.

**Dr. Nicol:** My second question is to the minister of human resources. Since this government won't offer Albertans natural gas rebates, will this minister increase AISH and SFI rates in the winter months to cover the additional cost of living caused by high home heating bills?

**Mr. Dunford:** Mr. Speaker, I think that our ministry has been trying to respond as best we can to some of the issues that some Albertans are faced with. We're open, we're accountable, and we stand ready to try to do the best that we can.

**Dr. Nicol:** To the Minister of Energy: since this government won't offer Albertans natural gas rebates, will this government adopt the Alberta Liberal plan for low-cost power to ensure that power bills don't spike when home heating bills spike?

**Mr. Smith:** Mr. Speaker, this government does have in place the natural gas price protection plan, that will kick in when the average annual price reaches \$5.50 a gigajoule. That price is 5 percent lower than what it was in 2001 when rebates were issued, and in fact it was appropriate at the time, in 2001. Policy was made; a law was struck. We're obligated to stick to that law, and we are holding to the letter of the law. It is important to note that there continue to be programs available to seniors and those families in need that do need them when they do need them.

As to the question would we implement the Liberal program to spend \$3 billion to effect \$1 billion worth of savings, the mathematics would tell me no.

**The Speaker:** Second Official Opposition main question. The hon. Leader of the Official Opposition.

**Dr. Nicol:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's a billion dollars a year, for the minister's information.

My second question. Many Albertans can no longer afford to pay their skyrocketing home heating bills. Charities, schools, low-income Albertans, severely disabled Albertans, and seniors are just a few of the groups that are struggling to make ends meet when faced with high utility bills, yet the assistance offered by this government targets only a fraction of those groups. To the Premier: where can the thousands upon thousands of Albertans who cannot afford to pay their high utility bills and aren't eligible for the government's onetime assistance program get the help for high utility bills, as this government promised them in the last election?

**Mr. Klein:** Mr. Speaker, as the hon. leader of the Liberal opposition knows full well, we have a rebate program. To say that we refuse to give rebates is absolutely false. The rebate program kicks in when the average price over one year reaches \$5.50 a gigajoule. That is the rebate program. That was well publicized last August. There was a press release, there was information put on the Internet, and Albertans certainly were given the opportunity to know about the rebate program and the regulations attached to that program.

There are programs in place, as the hon. member noted, to help low-income Albertans and to help seniors. When the rebate program kicks in, or if it kicks in, then all Albertans regardless of their financial situation will be eligible for rebates.

**Dr. Nicol:** Again to the Premier: where can Edmonton's Food Bank

get the help to cover the \$3,000 increase in their February utility bill so that they don't have to cut back on the food they make available to low-income Albertans?

**Mr. Klein:** Mr. Speaker, it is tough. It is tough, indeed, and this has been an extraordinarily cold March. The demand for gas certainly throughout North America and probably worldwide is at an all-time high although not as high as it was two years ago. What I would say to the Food Bank is that when the rebate program kicks in, they will be entitled to a rebate.

I'd like to point out – and I know that misery does not enjoy company and it's hard on everyone – that the fact is that this is one of the only jurisdictions that I know of in North America with a rebate program of any kind. People living in the northern part of North America are all going through the same thing. People are paying extraordinarily high gas prices in all the provinces of Canada and in all the northern states of the United States, Mr. Speaker, and insofar as I know, this is the only jurisdiction that has put in place a rebate protection program. All the other jurisdictions have to deal with it with no hope of any rebates whatsoever.

**Dr. Nicol:** It's only good if you use it, Mr. Speaker.

Where can the tenants across the province who are facing rent increases to cover their high utility costs find the help that this government promised them in the last election?

**Mr. Klein:** Mr. Speaker, what we promised during the last election was exactly what we have delivered, and that is a sustainable rebate program based on an average price. It is not an ad hoc program; that's what we wanted to get away from. Indeed, that's what the Liberals suggested at that particular time, that we get rid of ad hocism and establish a program that would provide some certainty, and that's exactly what we did.

As I said previously, it's hard on everyone; I know. It's an extremely cold March. As I pointed out previously, this is the only jurisdiction that I know of that has any kind of a rebate program whatsoever. So food banks and charitable organizations and institutions in other jurisdictions have to deal with the problem the same as Albertans have to deal with the problem, but in those other jurisdictions there is no hope of a rebate program.

**The Speaker:** Third Official Opposition main question. The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

1:50

### Energy Marketing

**Mr. MacDonald:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. This government's cold answer to high energy prices and low temperatures is to turn down the thermostat and put on a sweater. In fact, I suspect that the next time there is an annual television address, the Premier will look quite a bit like Perry Como. My first question is to the Minister of Government Services. Are all natural gas and electricity marketers who advertise for business in Alberta required to have a licence?

**Mr. Coutts:** Yes, Mr. Speaker.

**The Speaker:** The hon. member.

**Mr. MacDonald:** Thank you. To the Minister of Energy: since Direct Energy is not listed as a registered retailer, according to the Department of Energy's web site, why is Direct Energy allowed to advertise that they are open for business when they do not have a licence?

**Mr. Smith:** Mr. Speaker, if you were to look at Direct Energy's web site, there's actually quite a humorous ad on there, and it depicts a gentleman with nose hairs torn out of his nose. In the right-hand column is a picture of a nose hair clipper, and under it it says: "Have you rushed in to make a foolish purchase? Just wait. Direct Energy is coming."

**The Speaker:** The hon. member.

**Mr. MacDonald:** Thank you. Again, my final question is to the Minister of Government Services. Why is this government allowing Direct Energy to operate outside the law when retailers' licences are designed to protect consumers? Where is the consumer protection in this?

**Mr. Coutts:** Mr. Speaker, I am very confident, our department having had discussions with Direct Energy, that they know the rules, and when the deal is done between them purchasing the retail sales of ATCO, they will definitely be licensed marketers in this province. We'll be there to make sure. But you know what? We're not going to presuppose anything here, because we have to make sure that the deal is done between ATCO and Direct. That's how responsible we act on this side of the House.

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

### Education Funding

**Dr. Pannu:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. This Thursday at 7 p.m. at the downtown campus of Grant MacEwan College the New Democrat caucus is hosting a town hall meeting on the crisis in public education. This crisis is a direct result of this government's refusal to properly fund schools. More information on our town hall meeting is available at [www.newdemocrats.ab.ca](http://www.newdemocrats.ab.ca). My questions are to the Minister of Learning. Will the minister encourage the Edmonton Tory caucus on behalf of this government to attend this meeting to hear firsthand the concerns of parents, teachers, and school boards about the funding crisis in our schools?

**The Speaker:** The hon. minister.

**Dr. Oberg:** Well, thank you very much, Mr. Speaker, and thank you very much for giving me this opportunity to speak about the tremendous job that the Edmonton caucus has done in going out to numerous panel discussions, in going out and talking to the public. I understand that the hon. Member for Edmonton-Castle Downs about two weeks ago went to the Alberta Teachers' Association convention. The hon. Member for St. Albert had a panel discussion on CBC, which I really, really commend her for. The hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Creek just yesterday went to a panel discussion. So I think that the Edmonton caucus is going above and beyond the call of duty to hear what the public is saying. I'll leave it up to them. If any of them want to attend a New Democrat meeting, it's up to them.

**The Speaker:** The hon. member.

**Dr. Pannu:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My question to the same minister: would the minister himself care to come and attend this forum and listen to the concerns of parents, teachers, and school boards about the crisis that his own policies have created in their schools?

**Dr. Oberg:** Well, Mr. Speaker, I believe that back in university the very first time that I voted I voted for the NDs. In all fairness, I saw the light after that, and since that time I have not joined the ND Party, and I will not be voting for them.

**Dr. Pannu:** My second supplementary to the Minister of Learning, Mr. Speaker: why does the minister refuse to meet face-to-face with education stakeholders in a public town hall meeting to defend his government's education funding policies? What is he afraid of?

**Dr. Oberg:** Well, Mr. Speaker, to let the hon. member know, this morning I met with the Edmonton Catholic school board, where we heard a lot of very good issues about what was going on in education. It was an excellent meeting with the Edmonton caucus of this government; it was exceptional. I meet all the time in public. I believe the last time I met in public was with Chinook's Edge school district, which was a week ago Friday. So each and every day I meet with groups of people, and I will continue to meet with groups of people, hear what their ideas are, hear what is going on in education from their point of view.

On Thursday night, Mr. Speaker, I was attending a mentoring program for the Calgary Educational Partnership Foundation, and that evening I spent probably two, two and a half hours speaking to a principal from Banff as well as a person who was in the Calgary board of education. So I am absolutely hearing what is going on out there.

**The Speaker:** The hon. Member for Calgary-Buffalo, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview.

#### Police Services

**Mr. Cenaiko:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The Solicitor General's office is responsible for adequate and appropriate policing in Alberta. Municipalities inject more than half a billion dollars a year into policing in Alberta with the Solicitor General providing approximately \$110 million for rural contract policing. The town of Coaldale and the Coaldale Police Service are presently examining the opportunity to integrate services with the Lethbridge Police Service into a regional model, which could eliminate the rural RCMP contract. The town of Sundre and other municipalities are also exploring alternative solutions. My question is to the Solicitor General. If two or three municipalities decide to amalgamate or integrate police services, like many municipalities have amalgamated in Alberta, would the Solicitor General's department transfer funding to municipalities when the rural RCMP, whom the Solicitor General presently provides funding for, would not be required?

**The Speaker:** The hon. minister.

**Mrs. Forsyth:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Under the Alberta Police Act municipalities with 2,500 or more people are required to provide their own policing. These policing options are outlined in the Police Act, and they include establishing a municipal police service, contracting with Alberta, contracting with Canada, entering into an agreement with a council or another municipality, or establishing a regional police service. The money that may be freed up under the provincial policing agreement is reallocated to other communities served by the provincial policing agreement.

**The Speaker:** The hon. member.

**Mr. Cenaiko:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My first supplemental

question is also to the Solicitor General. Will the Solicitor General's department assist or meet with Coaldale and Lethbridge in their discussions, as the rural RCMP contracts geographically located between Coaldale and Lethbridge may not be required, and would that funding from her office be provided to those municipalities?

**Mrs. Forsyth:** Mr. Speaker, I can tell the hon. member that I and officials from my ministry have been in discussions with Coaldale and Lethbridge. Coaldale currently has its own police force, but the town is reviewing this to see whether this is the best option for them or whether another option, as I mentioned in my earlier response, would be better. At this point Coaldale has not made a decision about which option it wants to pursue. Whatever option they choose, they have the responsibility under the Police Act to ensure that adequate and effective policing is provided. I'm waiting to hear from the municipalities about what direction they choose to go.

**The Speaker:** The hon. member.

**Mr. Cenaiko:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My final supplemental question is to the Minister of Municipal Affairs. Do you and your department encourage or discourage municipalities to look at regionalized municipal services sharing infrastructure between themselves?

**The Speaker:** The hon. minister.

**Mr. Boutilier:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The short answer is an unequivocal yes. Any time we're able to take a dollar, have regional partnerships with neighbouring municipalities, and stretch it into a dollar fifty for tax value, I think that's very important. This past year in terms of restructuring and regional partnerships we spent over \$4 million helping municipalities if that was what local municipalities were looking for based on their municipal leadership. I want to say that they're coming together, that they're working together and, basically, taking a regional partnership and stretching that dollar into perhaps \$2. That's good, I think, in any municipality within Alberta.

**The Speaker:** The hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview, followed by the hon. Member for Whitecourt-Ste. Anne.

2:00

#### Asbestos in the Foothills Hospital

**Dr. Taft:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. According to government documents, about 30 Albertans die of asbestos-related diseases every year, making it the number one cause of occupation-related fatal diseases accepted by the WCB. For years there have been concerns regarding asbestos exposure at the Foothills hospital in Calgary, with no satisfactory response from this government. This is the second serious issue of asbestos contamination at a health facility in the Calgary health region to be made public in recent months. To the Minister of Human Resources and Employment: given that Alberta Environment is taking the city of Edmonton to court over the release of just a few drops of PCBs, is occupational health and safety considering charges against the Calgary health region for years of asbestos problems at the Foothills?

**Mr. Dunford:** Well, I'm not sure at this point, Mr. Speaker. I'll have to check on that. My understanding of the situation is that they've found that the Calgary health region is in compliance, that the asbestos in the particular facility that we're talking about here is in place, and as such there is no health hazard that I've been made aware of at this point.

**Dr. Taft:** Interesting response, Mr. Speaker.

Given that the Calgary health region is publicly claiming that there is no risk to staff or patients, and so is the minister, then why did his own department find it necessary to recently issue a compliance order concerning asbestos against the Calgary health region?

**Mr. Dunford:** There might be a number of issues that are related here, Mr. Speaker.

**An Hon. Member:** Or unrelated.

**Mr. Dunford:** Yes. That's true: or unrelated.

As I indicated in my first answer, I think – perhaps he wasn't listening – you know, certainly I'd get a briefing from the department, and then we can perhaps get further through this particular situation.

**Dr. Taft:** I'd have thought that he'd have been briefed since it's been all over the media.

To the same minister: why were incidents of asbestos exposure allowed to continually occur at the Foothills hospital for years and years and possibly decades without proper action?

**Mr. Dunford:** Well, I think he's done pretty well for a question today. He's managed to stretch it into, you know, three issues in an attempt to get me to respond to basically the same question, and the answer remains the same.

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

#### Food Establishment Permit Fees

**Mr. VanderBurg:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Last fall the food regulation was amended to allow regional health authorities to collect fees for food establishment permits. Since then, in Whitecourt-St. Anne the RHAs have abused this privilege, and it impacts my hotel/motel industry, retail establishments, and many other businesses. For example, my liquor store owners are being ordered by the authorities to pay a \$100 levy because they sell pop or chips at their businesses. My question is to the Minister of Health and Wellness. Why would you allow the RHAs to go ahead with this cash grab?

**Mr. Mar:** Mr. Speaker, the issue of being able to generate funds on the part of a regional health authority was actually a recommendation set out in the Premier's Advisory Council on Health. It was one of the recommendations that we did accept.

I should say that with respect to the regulation surrounding food permits, the regulation was requested by the regional health authorities in order to help generate revenue. The principle of that regulation makes perfectly good sense, and that is that there should be some ability to recover the costs associated with food safety programs, which regional health authorities are responsible for. Of course, the food industry is growing rapidly, and there needed to be some way of collecting some of the costs associated with that program.

I should say, Mr. Speaker, that one of the things that is contained in the regulations is that regional health authorities do have the ability to waive the fees in circumstances where they see that it is appropriate, so I would expect that in circumstances where it would make sense, perhaps with a not-for-profit agency, regional health authorities do have and should use in some circumstances the ability to waive those fees.

**Mr. VanderBurg:** Mr. Speaker, again to the same minister. I understand the answer, but we do have small businesses that need protecting. What will you do to protect these small businesses from paying this permit fee, and when can I expect you to act on this?

**Mr. Mar:** Well, Mr. Speaker, we have heard . . . [interjections]

**The Speaker:** The hon. minister has the floor.

**Mr. Mar:** We have heard some concerns expressed by Albertans regarding the way that the regulations are being applied by the regional health authorities, so the Department of Health and Wellness is currently conducting a review of this regulation in consultation with all stakeholders, including the regional health authorities themselves.

We are proposing some modifications, Mr. Speaker. For example, as I indicated, charitable and not-for-profit organizations, stores that are selling prepackaged food such as chips and gum will not need to pay for a permit. Licensed liquor stores and nonfood establishments that perhaps have coffee and doughnuts available for their customers likewise would not require a food permit.

Mr. Speaker, this consultation process is under way right now. My expectation is that it will be completed with a response to the consultation by this fall.

**The Speaker:** The hon. member?

**Mr. VanderBurg:** I'm satisfied. Thanks.

**The Speaker:** The hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods, followed by the hon. Member for Wainwright.

#### Legal Representation for Children in Care

**Dr. Massey:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Providing protection and legal representation for children who have been abused while in custody of the province is a requirement of Canada's national guidelines on foster care. The Alberta government often fails to meet these guidelines. My questions are to the Minister of Children's Services. Why do ministry lawyers openly admit that no one in the government will provide legal representation for children who have been abused while they're in care?

**Ms Evans:** Well, Mr. Speaker, that is not true. We have provided legal representation for children who have been abused while in care, and I'd just draw to the Assembly's attention that about a week and a half or two weeks ago the hon. member opposite made this same suggestion in his question, that there were Canadian guidelines, some Canadian standards that we were not following in Alberta. In fact, what he is citing now on the foster parents is something that we, in actual fact, do. We represent foster families. We represent children in care. I'm not sure if there's a particular detail that we can follow up on his behalf, but we, quite clearly, provide representation and safety and protection to children in care.

**The Speaker:** The hon. member.

**Dr. Massey:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. To the same minister: why has the policy allowing the Children's Advocate to investigate children's complaints of abuse while in care been abolished?

**Ms Evans:** Well, Mr. Speaker, it hasn't. As a matter of fact, again to the same hon. member I responded that we're even better than we

ever were by having CWIS adjusted technologically so that the minute there is an allegation of abuse or children are in any way in any difficulty, the advocate receives that report. The advocate follows up on that report.

Mr. Speaker, the mandate of the Children's Advocate has in fact expanded within this last year to include his work developing mentorship programs for people who could be natural advocates both in First Nations communities and in other communities. So rather than narrowing the mandate, I would suggest that we've expanded the mandate, and we have looked at his capacity to assist with administrative reviews. On special case reviews the advocate has been involved and has been absolutely beneficial to both the process and the outcomes for children.

**The Speaker:** The hon. member.

**Dr. Massey:** Thank you. To the same minister, Mr. Speaker: if the Children's Advocate can't investigate and government lawyers won't provide legal representation, where do children go for help?

**Ms Evans:** Mr. Speaker, in the first two responses I've said that we do provide legal support. I provided the answer that the advocate is involved. I think that the third question is built on an assumption that we do neither of the above, and I have said quite unequivocally that we do.

**The Speaker:** The hon. Member for Wainwright, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

#### Agricultural Subsidies

**Mr. Griffiths:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Albertan and Canadian grain producers continue to be bothered, even harassed by American trade complaints. Last week a preliminary U.S. ruling found that Canadian exports of hard red spring wheat and durum are being subsidized to the tune of 3.94 percent. My first question is to the Minister of Agriculture, Food and Rural Development. Is it true that the Alberta government ownership of railcars contributed to the subsidy rate calculated by the U.S.?

2:10

**Mrs. McClellan:** Well, Mr. Speaker, let us be very clear that of the 3.94 percent levy, if you wish, that has been suggested or actually implemented by the Department of Commerce, only .35 percent of that is railway cars, and of that .35 percent, Alberta cars make up a portion. There are also cars from the government of Saskatchewan and the government of Canada, the federal government. I'd like to make one other thing very clear. There is no subsidy associated with these cars, because the railways pay what is considered to be a reasonable rental or fee for the use of those cars.

So, Mr. Speaker, this case is far from over. Certainly, our government will be putting forward our position and making it very clear that the cars that are owned by the government of Alberta and, if you wish, leased for that use are not a subsidy. It is interesting that the U.S. government, who put out about \$190 billion in farm subsidies in their latest farm bill, would be challenging our farmers, because our subsidies are nowhere near that. They will be the first to tell you.

**The Speaker:** The hon. member.

**Mr. Griffiths:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My next question, then, is to the Minister of International and Intergovernmental Relations. What will this government do to defend Alberta's interests?

**Mr. Jonson:** Mr. Speaker, I think it's important to understand that the only specific government practice from the Alberta side that the U.S. is looking into in this investigation is the alleged subsidization of grain cars, and that is certainly an area that we will be responding to, but it's the federal government and other provincial governments who are responsible for defending many of the activities and programs that come under attack from this United States industry initiative. For example, the federal government is responsible for defending the activities of the Canadian Wheat Board. Alberta will review the U.S. Department of Commerce preliminary determination in detail, and we will be, certainly, alert to any activities or developments in that particular area.

Mr. Speaker, because the federal government is involved in this particular case, the Alberta government will continue to co-operate with the federal government and other provincial governments on the legal issues that are involved here, and we will be strongly urging the federal government to make every effort to defend Canadian farmers, Canadian wheat growers against this particular set of allegations.

**The Speaker:** The hon. member.

**Mr. Griffiths:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My final question, then, is back to the Minister of Agriculture, Food, and Rural Development. What factors have led to Canadian agricultural trade policies and practices being a continual target for U.S. trade challenges?

**Mrs. McClellan:** Well, Mr. Speaker, certainly Canada and Alberta, in particular, are proud to be the producer of some of the highest quality milling wheat there is in North America, and that means that our wheat is in very high demand in the U.S. We export a great deal, some \$98 million worth, of high-quality wheat to the U.S. However, as our Minister of International and Intergovernmental Relations has indicated, the Canadian Wheat Board practices have been under investigation. I think that nine investigations have been held, and Canada has not been found to be outside of international trade rules. We're going to continue to work with our industry, as the minister indicated, the federal government, and other departments of our government, but we're even willing to help one bit more. We're encouraging very much the federal government to make the Canadian Wheat Board a voluntary marketing option for western Canadian farmers, in particular, and perhaps get this issue off our plate.

**The Speaker:** The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands.

#### Assured Income for the Severely Handicapped

**Ms Blakeman:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Some of my constituents with disabilities are being refused AISH medical benefits simply because of the source of their income. Albertans receiving money from a private disability insurance or employment have their eligible income calculated differently and can receive AISH medical benefits, but people receiving Canada pension plan disability are subject to different terms. My questions are all to the minister of human resources. Why does this government discriminate against the recipient of CPP disability compared to a person receiving the same amount from wages or private disability insurance?

**Mr. Dunford:** Actually, Mr. Speaker, the CPP and wages and benefits that come through disability are all part of what we look at under AISH. The decision by this government for a long period of time as it relates to AISH was that the income from Canada pension

plan, being another government plan, would be deducted dollar for dollar. It's been the policy, and it's been in place for some time.

**Ms Blakeman:** Nonetheless, you're discriminating.

My next question: given that this government's discrimination against CPP disability recipients trying to access AISH can and has been overturned upon appeal, will the minister now change the policy?

**Mr. Dunford:** I think it's regretful that the opposition uses terms like "discrimination" in this particular case. There is no discrimination. All AISH members are dealt with the same way as it relates to Canada pension benefits or any of the other types of income that they might receive.

**Ms Blakeman:** To the same minister: given that the people who receive CPP disability income are also discriminated against by this government's emergency assistance for utility cutoff, why is this government leaving those Albertans in the cold?

**Mr. Dunford:** She seems to want to persist in the use of the term. I think we deal with everyone the same way under the AISH program.

**The Speaker:** The hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands, followed by the hon. Member for Calgary-East.

### Education Funding

*(continued)*

**Mr. Mason:** Thanks very much, Mr. Speaker. In addition to the funding shortfalls in our schools, which are caused by the government's decision to unilaterally reduce operation maintenance grants, to cap grade 10 credits, then the arbitration settlements, now skyrocketing utility bills have combined to give school board budgets more holes than a field in a gopher farm. School utilities this winter could easily be double what they were last winter. My question is to the Minister of Learning. Does the government acknowledge that school board budgets are already overstretched, and if so, does the government acknowledge that they will then require top-up funding to cover skyrocketing utility bills?

**The Speaker:** The hon. minister.

**Dr. Oberg:** Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Well, I will transfer the question to the minister responsible for operations and maintenance, which is the hon. Minister of Infrastructure.

Just prior to that what I will say is that in Alberta we spend more per capita, by at least 16 percent, than any other jurisdiction in the country. Over the past three or four years we have increased the amount dramatically. Since 1995 it has increased 46 percent, over which time we've seen a 6 percent enrollment. So it has gone up.

But in direct response to the energy issue, I'll ask the hon. Minister of Infrastructure to respond to that.

**The Speaker:** The hon. minister.

**Mr. Lund:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Yes, we recognize that some school boards are having some difficulty making ends meet relative to the utilities, but I also know that pretty well all of them did have a term contract as far as the electricity is concerned, and that's at a fixed rate, so it is just on the gas side that there is some problem. We are conscious of it. We are monitoring it and meeting with school boards to get a feel for just how serious this whole situation is.

**The Speaker:** The hon. member.

**Mr. Mason:** Thanks very much, Mr. Speaker. Given that the minister once had some common sense when he was in his youth, as he told us today, when he voted for the New Democrats, I have some hope that he will actually answer the question, which is: what exactly are school boards supposed to cut by way of programs or staff or maintenance in order to meet the increased obligations due to skyrocketing utility bills?

2:20

**Dr. Oberg:** Again, Mr. Speaker, we are one of the few jurisdictions in Canada that has the obvious opportunity of increasing the amount of funding that school boards receive. In the province to the west of us they have had a zero percent increase and will continue to have a zero percent increase for the next two years. The amount of dollars that we have put into education makes every other province in Canada pale by comparison. There is a tremendous amount of money that is going into education.

Again I will ask the hon. Minister of Infrastructure, whose responsibility it is, to respond to this issue.

**The Speaker:** It would have been really helpful to have the hon. minister respond originally. We still have four additional members who would like to participate. Let's move on.

**Mr. Mason:** Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Well, I would like to ask the Minister of Learning, who is responsible overall for school programs: what exactly are schools supposed to cut by way of programs, which he is responsible for, in order to pay for this increase in utility costs, that is unbudgeted?

**The Speaker:** Hon. Minister of Infrastructure, if you wish.

**Mr. Lund:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I really appreciate the opportunity to comment on this particular question because, in fact, the hon. member is talking about the operation and maintenance of schools. This year we transferred some \$323 million to school jurisdictions within the province for operating and maintenance. While I know that some are tight – and we are monitoring them – when you take it in the whole scheme of things, the increase in three months out of a total year, we hope that they'll be able to handle that kind of increase.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

**The Speaker:** The hon. Member for Calgary-East, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Glenarry.

### Minimum Wage

**Mr. Amery:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The average rent of a one-bedroom apartment in Edmonton is about \$650 and about \$750 in Calgary and about \$1,200 in Fort McMurray; that is, if you can find a place. The cost of heating and lighting a house is skyrocketing. That is in addition to other expenses like driving a car or taking the public transportation system. All expenses have gone up over the last few years. The only thing that hasn't moved is the minimum wage of this province. My question is to the hon. Minister of Human Resources and Employment. How does the minister expect those people earning minimum wage to make ends meet?

**Mr. Dunford:** Mr. Speaker, if there was a substantial number of Albertans that were working at the minimum wage, then I think there would be cause for great concern. However, the information that I

have is that 1.2 percent of the working force is actually at the minimum wage, and it's my understanding that three-quarters or something of that number are actually students working in jobs where tips are also available. So it's a situation that we continue to monitor, and whether or not we will have to increase that in the near future I think is a question that's really debatable at this particular point.

**The Speaker:** The hon. member.

**Mr. Amery:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Since we live in the most prosperous province in the country and we have the lowest minimum wage in the country, would the minister consider looking into this very important matter immediately?

**Mr. Dunford:** Actually, the interesting thing and what makes debates around minimum wage so incredible is whether or not the minimum wage has any impact on anything. Really, what tends to drive the wages that an employee . . .

**Mr. Mason:** Not here. Most kids get more from an allowance than you pay them.

**The Speaker:** The hon. minister, please.

**Mr. Dunford:** You know, in a socialist situation, of course, you have to put these things in place, but in Alberta what you've got is a market that's operating. There's a huge demand for labour, and like anything else, when the demand is high and the supply is low, then of course wages in this particular case will tend to rise. So there are very, very few people that are actually working at minimum wage in this province.

The one thing that I think we must keep in mind is that the overriding concern that we as a government should have is that people are able to get into the workplace, because when they get into the workplace, they start gaining experience, they start learning new skills or enhancing skills that they already have, and of course they start advancing within a wage and salary administration plan and start to gain seniority. So I think we should be concerned more about the number of people that are getting into the workforce rather than concerning ourselves particularly with a socialist technique such as a minimum wage.

#### Allegations of Fraud in the WCB

**Mr. Bonner:** Mr. Speaker, on March 5, 2003, the Solicitor General in response to my questions regarding the WCB said, "If there are [any] accusations about bribery, we will forward that letter and have the police investigate." But on the same day I tabled documents showing that the Solicitor General's office didn't forward the letter to the police but, instead, forwarded it to the accused organization, the WCB, requesting that the WCB tell the Solicitor General's office what to tell the injured worker. To the Solicitor General: given that the Solicitor General's policy is to forward allegations to the police, why was the issue not forwarded to the police but to the WCB?

**The Speaker:** The hon. minister.

**Mrs. Forsyth:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My understanding is that when the matter was forwarded to WCB, it was about a clarification; it wasn't about the bribery issue. WCB had responded and said that there was information that they could not provide to our department. We since then, if I may be so bold, have written the particular

individual that he's referring to two letters, one that was addressed on January 14 and another letter on February 27, thanking him for his letter of February 7, in which I wanted to clarify regarding his concerns to the WCB, and I appreciate the information that he's forwarded to me.

Concerns involving the WCB do not fall within my mandate, and I said, as I outlined in my previous conversations, "I understand that you are forwarding your allegation of fraud within the [WCB] to the Calgary Police Service," and I again reiterate that "the Calgary Police Service has the authority to investigate such issues." I also noted in my letter to him on the date of the 27th of February that I have forwarded his concerns to the Minister of Human Resources and Employment.

**Mr. Bonner:** To the same minister: was the suggested response from the WCB the same response that the minister forwarded to the injured worker?

**Mrs. Forsyth:** Mr. Speaker, again I want to reiterate that the fact is that the person that is alleging allegations in regard to bribery to the WCB has a process in place. That process that's in place is to contact the Calgary Police Service if he's got allegations of bribery. If after he has forwarded it to the Calgary Police Service he does not like the answer that the chief of police gives him, he has the ability to forward his concern and appeal to the Law Enforcement Review Board. The process is in place for this poor, injured worker, and all he has to do is follow it.

**The Speaker:** The hon. member.

**Mr. Bonner:** Yes, Mr. Speaker. To the minister of human resources: given your intervention on Thursday, when did your ministry become responsible for fraud and bribery in this province?

**Mr. Dunford:** That is so typical of this member in this particular file. If we want to see how low anybody can go, we just have to use him as a perfect example. We'll just let the *Hansard* record—people can read, and they can read where he's coming from.

**The Speaker:** The hon. Member for Edmonton-Castle Downs, followed by the hon. Member for Red Deer-North.

2:30

#### Education Funding

(continued)

**Mr. Lukaszuk:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. This morning the capital region caucus met with the Edmonton Catholic school board. Some of the issues raised, which are not different from issues raised with me by some of the parents in Edmonton-Castle Downs, included unpredictable funding to children who receive PUF grants and later enter grade 1 and unpredictable funding for infrastructure to the school boards. My first question is to the Minister of Learning. What support is available to students who have been in receipt of program unit funding, PUF funding, who enter grade 1?

**The Speaker:** The hon. minister.

**Dr. Oberg:** Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Well, first of all, I'll outline to the Legislative Assembly that PUF funding is funding that we use for early intervention. It's the moneys that are out there for any child over two and a half up until six years of age that allow them to get prepared for school. We feel in this government that it is extremely important to prepare students for school, especially



those with severe special needs. As soon as these students get into the school system, they also receive the severe special-needs funding, and that is transferred to the school board.

Just to give you context of how many dollars are spent, presently in the grade 1 to grade 12 system there is \$336 million per year spent on special-needs funding. But I will say one other thing, and that is that in our business plan we monitor the parent satisfaction of those children with severe special needs, and 84 percent of the parents who have severe special-needs kids are satisfied.

**An Hon. Member:** How many? How much?

**Dr. Oberg:** Eight-four percent, Mr. Speaker.

We fully recognize that the special-needs students need funding. We have increased the rates around 10 percent per year over the past several years. We have increased it quite dramatically. So in response to the hon. member's question, when they get PUF funding, they can move right into the severe special-needs funding if they qualify for it.

**Mr. Lukaszuk:** Mr. Speaker, my only supplemental. To the Minister of Infrastructure: what is the ministry doing right now to provide the school boards throughout Alberta and particularly the school boards in Edmonton with more predictable funding for their infrastructure and ongoing expenses?

**The Speaker:** The hon. minister.

**Mr. Lund:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The financial management review committee made a number of recommendations, and we of course as government accepted those recommendations. As a consequence there is going to be a stabilization fund established. Also, as the Premier announced some time back, we are going to establish a capital fund, and I believe that between the capital fund and the stabilization fund and the opportunity to use alternate ways of financing, we will be able to accomplish a great deal as far as sustainability in the whole capital field in schools, hospitals, postsecondary institutions. Also, I would plan that we will not get into a situation where we start projects and then have to pull them back because of lack of funding. We are looking at a five-year business plan where we would see the finances being there to continue with our construction over a longer period of time.

**The Speaker:** Hon. members, thank you very much. Because of the brevity associated with questions and answers, for the most part, we had 14 sets of questions accommodated today. That's appreciated. Only one member is still on the list.

Might we revert briefly to Introduction of Guests?

[Unanimous consent granted]

head: **Introduction of Guests**

*(reversion)*

**The Speaker:** The hon. Member for Calgary-Currie.

**Mr. Lord:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure to rise today to introduce to you and through you to all members of this Assembly eight representatives from the Alberta Restaurant & Foodservices Association who are here today to celebrate an important milestone for their industry, which I will be talking about a little later. I hope they're all here. I'll introduce them anyway. I would ask our guests, who are seated in the public gallery, to rise and remain standing as

I read their names. We have with us today Lindy Rollingson, CPM, CAE, president and CEO of the Alberta Restaurant & Foodservices Association; Mark Medland, treasurer and chair, government services committee, vice-president of Maclab Hotels & Resorts organization; Carmelo Rago, representing the very popular and very successful Sorrentinos restaurant chain, which is now expanding across the province; Paul Tsang, an old friend of 27 years, responsible for a number of Edmonton's finest restaurants including the huge, new, private-function restaurant and nightclub facility called Dante's; Lyle Beaugard of the very popular Blue Iguana; I'd ask him to rise along with Normand Campbell, owner and proprietor of Normand's restaurant; from the Sheraton Grande Hotel we also have Grant McCurdy; and, finally, Simon Smotkowicz, executive chef of the Shaw Conference Centre and president of ICE 2005.

Mr. Speaker, these people have made a career of quality service to others, and I ask that they now receive the warm traditional welcome of the Assembly.

head: **Recognitions**

### **Restaurant and Food Services Industry**

**Mr. Lord:** Mr. Speaker, I'm delighted to rise again today in recognition of this important milestone for the restaurant and food services industry across Canada. We have verification that the industry now employs 1 million Canadians from coast to coast, including 116,400 just in this province. This makes the food services industry across Canada one of our very largest employers, employing directly or indirectly more Canadians than the entire agricultural, banking, forestry, pulp and paper, petroleum production, motor vehicles and parts manufacturing industries combined and contributing \$42 billion annually to our GDP. It is the largest single employer of young people in our nation.

In fact, I myself began in this industry, Mr. Speaker, first as a dishwasher, then as a French service waiter, chef, bartender, and owner as well, and I am very proud of my time there. The skills that I acquired later proved invaluable to me, as I am sure they have for many. Congratulations to the restaurant and food services industry.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

### **Randy Ferby, Dave Nedohin Scott Pfeifer, Marcel Rocque Nokia Brier Champions**

**Mr. McClelland:** "Hi, Mom. Kids, I'll be at home at 2 tomorrow." With the Nokia Brier tankard stretched high over his head, Alberta's Randy Ferbey signaled to everyone his success as a person and as the skip of an incredible rink. And what a rink it is. The steady, dependable first rocks of the pride of St. Paul, Marcel Rocque, were followed by the confident play of second, Scott Pfeifer. You just knew he would make his shots. By now the house was full of rocks. Skip Randy Ferbey was called upon to make both the right strategic decision and to make the difficult shots again and again. Finally, Dave Nedohin time and again making incredible shots, that had to break the hearts of Nova Scotia's hometown rink and crowd, to win a record-setting third consecutive Brier, an incredible accomplishment of this wonderful team, including their coach and alternate, curling out of the Avonair Curling Club in Edmonton, the pride of St. Paul, Sherwood Park, and of all Alberta.

Congratulations to the Ferbey rink; Nokia, prime sponsor of the Brier; the organizing committee; the fans and citizens of Halifax; and especially all the competing rinks, who make this uniquely Canadian event such a memorable success. Well done, all.

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

### Mill Woods Community Patrol

**Ms Carlson:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods and I would like to recognize the Mill Woods Community Patrol. This patrol is a community-based volunteer initiative in co-operation with the Edmonton Police Service, which trains its volunteers to patrol Mill Woods area streets to observe what goes on in their community and report any suspicious activity to the police.

The patrol existed in prior times but was disbanded a number of years ago. The idea to re-form this group became a focus due to the number of serious and high profile events that occurred in Mill Woods. The Mill Woods President's Council made inquiries with the EPS, as did the EPS with them, to see what could be done to help create a safer and stronger relationship with the police and within the communities themselves.

The Edmonton Police Foundation was approached to assist with start-up costs such as radios and airtime. They agreed with the initiative and thereby donated the money required to purchase the radios and up to two years of airtime. To date the Edmonton Police Foundation has donated \$12,000. With this the community patrol was reborn in the summer of 2001 with the first patrols taking place in November 2001 after initial training.

Good work.

**The Speaker:** The hon. Member for Edmonton-Castle Downs.

### 2:40 University of Alberta Pandas Hockey Team

**Mr. Lukaszuk:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I am very pleased to rise today to recognize the University of Alberta Pandas hockey team. The Pandas captured a second straight national title by defeating the University of Toronto Varsity Blues in a dramatic 4-3 overtime win. This accomplishment was made all the more exceptional by the fact that the Pandas entered the championship game with an astonishing record of 33 wins and – guess what? – zero losses and only one tie.

It takes a great deal of skill and dedication to win a championship banner, and the Pandas hockey team is to be congratulated for continuing a rich tradition of athletic excellence at the U of A. This latest achievement builds on the university's reputation for good sportsmanship and excellence in athletics. Another exciting and successful year for the U of A varsity sports team. I know all members of this Assembly join me in extending their best wishes and congratulations to the head coach, Howie Draper, and all members of the University of Alberta Pandas hockey team.

**The Speaker:** The hon. Member for St. Albert.

### Professor Gerald Gall

**Mrs. O'Neill:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Earlier today I introduced to this Assembly Professor Gerald Gall, who was appointed as an officer of the Order of Canada in late 2002. At the ceremony in Halifax in which Professor Gall received his medal from Her Excellency, Governor General Adrienne Clarkson, the following citation was read:

[Gerald Gall] is a defender and a promoter of freedom and justice. An authority on Human Rights and Professor of Law at the University of Alberta, he is a founding member of the Board of Directors and now President of the John Humphrey Centre for Peace and Human Rights. He has provided leadership to countless professional, social action and religious organizations, as well as to governments at the provincial, federal and international levels. One of the key organizers of the 1998 International Conference on Universal Rights and Human Values, he is recognized and respected

as a man of action who champions with great passion these issues of world concern.

I would ask everybody in this Assembly to join me in congratulating this wonderful St. Albertan.

Thank you.

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

### Monica Hughes

**Dr. Taft:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise in the Legislature today to recognize and celebrate the life and work of Monica Hughes. Monica, who died last week in Edmonton after living most of her life here, was a wonderfully successful author of books for children and young teenagers. Her work won many awards, including two Governor General's awards and the Order of Canada. She won the Canada Council children's literature prize for a story about a boy with leukemia and the Phoenix award for her famous Isis science fiction trilogy.

One of her greatest accomplishments was getting so many children excited about reading, an accomplishment that will live on for years. I've spoken to teacher/librarians who marvel at how children love to read her stories. Many of these stories are set in Alberta, including one at the Provincial Museum, so children relate them to their own lives, and teachers can use them as part of the curriculum. My own children have read her books, and I remember how excited we were when we learned that such a famous author lived right here in Edmonton. She proved it was possible for internationally acclaimed writers to stay in and write about our province.

Monica Hughes was a modest, compassionate woman with a clear sense of social justice who always wanted to leave children with a sense of hope. I think the best tribute to her simply might be this: she made the world a better place.

**The Speaker:** The hon. Member for Edmonton-Glenora.

### Cam Tait

**Mr. Hutton:** Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Today I recognize Cam Tait, a renowned public speaker and writer and a true champion of the disabled community, including my nephew who has muscular dystrophy. Cam is one of his heroes.

Cam is a journalist with the *Edmonton Journal* and has done general news reporting and children's columns and feature writing. Cam now writes three columns a week, two columns on community investment and one on volunteers. He is also a columnist for the web site *charityvillage.com*. Cam was also a winner of Yuk Yuk's search for Canada's funniest new comic in Toronto in 1995. In 1996 Cam became a Paul Harris Fellow with the Edmonton downtown Rotary Club. Cam was given the honorary diploma of communications technology at NAIT. Most recently Cam received the Queen's Golden Jubilee Citizenship Medal for outstanding service as a volunteer in Canada.

The most important thing to Cam is his family: his wife, Joan, stepson Darren, and his parents. It gives me great pleasure to recognize my friend Cam Tait.

**The Speaker:** Hon. members, Mr. Tait is also a very mean putter at many celebrity fund-raising golf tournaments, where he raises money on behalf of many worthy causes in this province.

### head: Presenting Petitions

**The Speaker:** The hon. Member for Little Bow on behalf of the hon. Member for Calgary-Lougheed.

**Mr. McFarland:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. On behalf of the chair of the Standing Committee on Private Bills I beg leave to present the following petitions that have been received for private bills under Standing Order 93(2):

- (1) the petition of Sister Theresa Carmel Slavik for the Sisters of St. Joseph of the Province of Alberta Statutes Repeal Act, and
- (2) the petition of Reverend Thanh K. Nguyen for the Forest Lawn Bible College Act.

**Mr. Mason:** Mr. Speaker, I am presenting on behalf of the working poor in Alberta a petition signed by 65 individuals from Fort McMurray. These Albertans are petitioning the Legislative Assembly to urge the government to immediately raise the minimum wage to \$8.50 per hour and index it to the cost of living, much as MLA salaries are.

Thank you.

#### head: **Tabling Returns and Reports**

**Mr. Friedel:** Mr. Speaker, it's my pleasure to table the requisite number of copies of the 2001-02 annual report of the Northern Alberta Development Council.

**The Speaker:** The hon. Member for St. Albert.

**Mrs. O'Neill:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my honour to table the appropriate number of copies of a letter signed by the residents and their families of Chateau Mission Court in St. Albert requesting that the Alberta government realistically fund and financially support the seniors' housing industry.

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

**Ms Carlson:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Today I have two tablings. The first is a tabling requested last Thursday, information put out by the Member for Edmonton-Mill Creek, where there was some debate whether or not promises made were, in fact, promises kept.

The second set of tablings is the appropriate number of copies of the program from the first annual Spring Wilderness Celebration, held here in Alberta, of the Alberta Wilderness Association, where they collected money and funds enabling them to support their development of causes in northern Alberta, particularly in outreach work and wilderness protection.

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

**Dr. Taft:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'd like to table five copies of excerpts from *Occupational Health & Safety Magazine*, a publication of Alberta Human Resources and Employment. These excerpts are taken from four different issues of the magazine, and they show that from November 2000 to January 2002, a 14-month period, 32 fatalities resulting from asbestos exposure were accepted for compensation by the WCB.

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

**Mr. MacDonald:** Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I have three tablings for the information of the Assembly this afternoon. The first is the scandalous price of electricity on March 9, 2003. The price in the Power Pool bounced around from as little as much less than 2 cents to over 66 cents a kilowatt at 8 o'clock last night.

Now, the second tabling is a presentation that was made in December to the Alberta Electoral Boundaries Commission by John

Patrick Day, a well-known Edmontonian and resident of Edmonton-Norwood.

The third tabling I have this afternoon is more of the petitions from Albertans urging the government "to reinstate natural-gas rebates immediately." There are 310 names on this petition. They're from Holden, Banff, Raymond, Lethbridge, Coleman, and Calgary, just to name a few of the many centres expressing outrage at natural gas prices.

Thank you.

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

**Dr. Pannu:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise to table five copies of a letter signed by a parent whose children go to McKernan elementary and junior high school, a school that's the pride of the communities surrounding it, communities such as Belgravia, McKernan, Windsor Park. My own daughter went to that school a few years ago. The writer of the letter expresses deep concern about the shortfall in funding which may lead to this school losing as many as three teachers, about 10 percent of the staff. Forty other parents have signed a similar letter, and these letters have gone to the Premier of the province.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

2:50

**The Speaker:** Hon. members, earlier today I had placed on your desks a message from Her Majesty the Queen, head of the Commonwealth, for Commonwealth Day.

I'm going to table in the House this afternoon copies of a new pamphlet from the Legislative Assembly entitled Alberta's Famous 5. Because of the efforts of Alberta's Famous Five—Emily Murphy, Nellie McClung, Henrietta Muir Edwards, Irene Parlby, and Louise McKinney—women are recognized as persons in Canadian law. This pamphlet will enhance the Legislature tour of the Famous Five portraits.

#### head: **Orders of the Day**

#### head: **Written Questions**

**The Speaker:** The hon. Deputy Government House Leader.

**Mr. Zwozdesky:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Proper notice having been given on Thursday, March 6, it is now my pleasure to move that written questions appearing on today's Order Paper do stand and retain their places with the exception of written questions 1, 2, 4, and 7.

[Motion carried]

#### **Human Resources and Employment Underexpenditures**

Q1. Mr. MacDonald moved that the following question be accepted.

How much of the \$25.5 million underexpenditure from income support to individuals and families, \$621,000 underexpenditure from the widows' pension program, and \$8.8 million underexpenditure from the assured income for the severely handicapped program outlined in the 2001-02 Alberta Human Resources and Employment annual report was spent on homeless shelters, additional system development costs, and salary increases respectively?

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

**Mr. MacDonald:** Yes. Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I'll be brief, but I would express my disappointment. I feel that this information would be of great interest not only to the taxpayers but certainly to individuals who are receiving AISH and the individuals receiving family and social services, and I at this time would like to see this information forthwith.

Thank you.

**The Speaker:** The hon. Deputy Government House Leader.

**Mr. Zwozdesky:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased to respond on behalf of the hon. Minister of Human Resources and Employment, who has indicated his willingness to accept Written Question 1 as phrased.

**The Speaker:** The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar to close the debate?

[Written Question 1 carried]

#### Untendered Contracts

Q2. Mr. Bonner moved that the following question be accepted. What is the total amount of money the Department of Infrastructure has spent on untendered contracts between January 1, 2001, and December 31, 2002, what are the names of the individuals and companies who have received these untendered contracts, and what is the amount they each received as part of their contract?

**The Speaker:** The hon. Minister of Infrastructure.

**Mr. Lund:** Thanks, Mr. Speaker. I would recommend that the Assembly reject this question because of the huge costs. It's a total waste of taxpayers' dollars to go through and find all of these contracts and to list them. When you look at our normal business in Alberta Infrastructure, we have contracts for consulting services, for property management, for facility lease, and many others, and many of these are extremely small. If the hon. member has, really, something that he wants to find, I wish he would be more specific so that we could in fact accept this. But this would be a total waste of taxpayers' dollars to ever spend those many hours by staff going through to find those, so I would urge the Assembly to reject this one.

**The Speaker:** The hon. Member for Edmonton-Glengarry to close the debate.

**Mr. Bonner:** Thank you very much for this opportunity, Mr. Speaker. I would have to disagree with the minister. One of the complaints that we see year in and year out in the Auditor General's report is the fact that there is not enough accountability in regard to these untendered contracts. Certainly, this is one issue, where literally hundreds of millions of Alberta taxpayers' dollars are spent in the Department of Infrastructure, and there is a considerable amount that is spent on untendered contracts. Certainly, Albertans have every right to know where their tax dollars are being spent, what they are being used for, and which contractors are getting this work.

So I think it is a very valid question, Mr. Speaker, and I would urge all members in the Assembly for open and accountable government to support this question. Thank you.

[Written Question 2 lost]

#### Federal/Provincial Affordable Housing Agreement

Q4. Mr. Bonner moved on behalf of Ms Blakeman that the following question be accepted.

What is the breakdown of the money that will be used by the government to match the federal government's \$67 million contribution to the affordable housing agreement signed in June 2002?

**The Speaker:** The hon. Deputy Government House Leader.

**Mr. Zwozdesky:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased to advise the House on behalf of the hon. Minister of Seniors that he is willing to accept Written Question 4 as phrased.

**The Speaker:** The hon. Member for Edmonton-Glengarry to close the debate.

**Mr. Bonner:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Yes, particularly in light of the fact of housing for the homeless and the fact that it was almost one year ago that the federal government put forward \$67 million as a matching sum by the province for the construction of affordable housing, I welcome and thank the hon. minister for accepting this particular question.

Thank you.

[Written Question 4 carried]

#### Maintenance Enforcement Computer Systems

Q7. Mr. Bonner moved on behalf of Ms Blakeman that the following question be accepted.

What is the current status of all integration of the maintenance enforcement case officers' computer systems, and what is the plan for completing the integration?

**The Speaker:** The hon. Deputy Government House Leader.

**Mr. Zwozdesky:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. On behalf of the hon. Minister of Justice I'm pleased to indicate that he is willing to accept this question as phrased.

**The Speaker:** The hon. Member for Edmonton-Glengarry to close the debate.

**Mr. Bonner:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. On behalf of the Member for Edmonton-Centre I thank the minister for taking these considerations.

[Written Question 7 carried]

head: **Motions for Returns**

**The Speaker:** The hon. Deputy Government House Leader.

**Mr. Zwozdesky:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Proper notice having been given on Thursday, March 6, it is my pleasure to move that motions for returns appearing on today's Order Paper stand and retain their places with the exception of motions for returns 1, 4, 5, 9, and 11.

[Motion carried]

#### Driver Licensing System

M1. Dr. Massey moved on behalf of Mr. MacDonald that an order of the Assembly do issue for a return showing copies of all

studies and reports prepared by or for the Ministry of Government Services between September 12, 2001, and January 14, 2003, regarding the establishment of a new system for issuing drivers' licences in Alberta.

**The Speaker:** The hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods on behalf of the hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

**Dr. Massey:** Yes. Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I think it's fairly self-explanatory.

3:00

**The Speaker:** The hon. Minister of Government Services.

**Mr. Coutts:** Thank you Mr. Speaker. Drivers' licences are the most acceptable form of identification by law enforcement agencies as well as retailers and financial institutions. Airlines are included in that and employers and many other entities in both the private and public sectors. The importance of this security document creates a need to make sure that the security of the card and the issuance process and the card design are of the highest quality possible. So releasing any studies or any reports regarding this system would breach the security of that system, and for these reasons I would like to move that we reject this Motion for a Return 1.

**The Speaker:** The hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods to close the debate.

**Dr. Massey:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Well, I certainly don't accept the argument. We haven't asked for privacy to be breached. We've asked for the reports, and the practice has been that those reports are provided. The privacy act is respected with respect to individuals, and I fail to see why the reports that are asked for cannot be so modified to provide the essence of what the reports are about without breaching anyone's privacy or in any way compromising the system.

[Motion for a Return 1 lost]

#### Correctional Services MLA Review Committee Report

M4. Mr. Bonner moved on behalf of Ms Blakeman that an order of the Assembly do issue for a return showing a copy of the final report from the Correctional Services MLA Review Committee to the Solicitor General.

**The Speaker:** The hon. Solicitor General.

**Mrs. Forsyth:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. We are rejecting this motion for a return. I received the report in December 2002, and officials from my department and I are taking some time to go over it very carefully. As well, the recommendations in the report will need to be carefully considered by the government before the report will be made public, and it would be inappropriate to release the report before a thorough assessment has been completed. I move that Motion for a Return 4 be rejected.

**The Speaker:** The hon. Member for Edmonton-Glengarry to close the debate.

**Mr. Bonner:** Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Again I would urge all members of the House to not reject Motion for a Return 4. As the minister has indicated, this work was completed last fall. The report has been in their hands since December. We feel that it is especially important for members of the opposition to have a copy

of this report because there is legislation forthcoming on material in this report, and if we are to have a full and open and responsible debate on this piece of legislation and, certainly, the opportunity to provide Albertans with the best possible legislation, then we feel that it is vital that this report be released.

Thank you.

[Motion for a Return 4 lost]

#### Calling Lake Fish Populations

M5. Dr. Massey moved on behalf of Ms Carlson that an order of the Assembly do issue for a return showing all reports respecting the fish populations, including the populations of walleye and pike, and the general environmental health of Calling Lake prior to and after the April 1, 2002, start of the pilot project which allows approximately two-thirds of Calling Lake to be opened for the harvest of walleye and pike.

**The Speaker:** The hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods.

**Dr. Massey:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Again the motion is fairly clear, and as much as we respect the minister and his long experience in the area and his expertise as a fisher, we do have the odd doubt and would like his wisdom balanced by the work of some of the members of his department.

**The Speaker:** The hon. Minister of Sustainable Resource Development.

**Mr. Cardinal:** Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I move that Motion for a Return 5 be accepted.

**The Speaker:** The hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods to conclude the debate.

**Dr. Massey:** We thank the minister for his wisdom, Mr. Speaker.

[Motion for a Return 5 carried]

#### Infrastructure Contract Management Process

M9. Mr. Bonner moved that an order of the Assembly do issue for a return showing a copy of the Department of Infrastructure policy on its contract management process.

**Mr. Lund:** Mr. Speaker, this particular motion for a return asks for a copy of the Department of Infrastructure's policy on its contract management process. I would be only too happy to file with the Assembly key documents that detail the contract approval process within the ministry.

In response to recommendations made by the Auditor General in his last annual report, the ministry has commenced an extensive review of its processes and documents that detail our contract management process. The first document is the interim mandate of the recently restructured Contracts Review Committee in response to the Auditor General's recommendations, where we really find the mandate of this committee such that the members play a more active role in the evaluation of all contracts and tenders. Previously this committee provided support for both infrastructure and transportation contracts, and the first phase of our initiative was to split the committee so that it can now focus on contracts under the mandate of Alberta Infrastructure. The second phase of our review will include a more detailed review of the approval levels within the organization.

In addition, we have developed a consultation and selection policy, which is currently in draft. We have consulted stakeholder organizations and private industry, such as the architecture and engineering professions, to ensure that our proposed changes respect a fair, equitable, transparent, and appropriate way of doing business with their member firms and have developed a policy that will clearly communicate the department's process for consultant selection and contract awards.

Mr. Speaker, I feel that these documents will provide this Assembly with the information on the importance of Alberta Infrastructure ensuring a fair and open contract management process. So we will be accepting this motion and be only too happy to table those documents.

**The Speaker:** The hon. Member for Edmonton-Glengarry to close the debate.

**Mr. Bonner:** Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I want to thank the minister for his commitment to table those documents in the House and also for the brief explanation on the processes and procedures that they have instituted to try and deal with this situation. So thank you, Mr. Minister.

[Motion for a Return 9 carried]

#### Transportation Contract Management Process

M11. Mr. Bonner moved that an order of the Assembly do issue for a return showing a copy of the Department of Transportation policy on its contract management process.

**The Speaker:** The hon. Deputy Government House Leader.

**Mr. Zwozdesky:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I am pleased to undertake this motion and accept it on behalf of the hon. Minister of Transportation.

**The Speaker:** The hon. Member for Edmonton-Glengarry to conclude debate.

**Mr. Bonner:** I'd like to take this opportunity to thank the minister for accepting this motion for a return.

[Motion for a Return 11 carried]

#### 3:10head: Government Bills and Orders head: Committee of the Whole

[Mr. Shariff in the chair]

**The Deputy Chair:** We'll call the committee to order.

#### Bill 201 Emblems of Alberta (Grass Emblem) Amendment Act, 2003

**The Deputy Chair:** Are there any comments, questions, or amendments to be offered with respect to this bill? The hon. Member for Highwood.

**Mr. Tannas:** Thank you, Mr. Chairman. At committee stage I have no amendments to offer, but I would like to answer some questions which were asked in second reading. Now, when I was reviewing *Hansard*, I only determined that one member, the hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar, had a few questions on June grass, respecting

its distribution, selection, and the balloting process. I'll perhaps spare everyone too much of the reading of the questions, but it just said that perhaps the June grass was overlooked by the electorate in this case and wanted to know who introduced the legislation and the committee update on the balloting and that kind of thing. I'll endeavour to do that.

Just as a reminder, rough fescue is also found in Peace River and Grande Prairie, because there was a comment that it only went as far as Grassland.

Now, to try to explain why the Prairie Conservation Forum balloting process arrived at rough fescue, which is found in approximately two-thirds of Alberta, and, as the hon. Member for Edmonton Gold-Bar observed, the June grass is found throughout Alberta. So if one first looks at the process for choosing the five grasses that were on the ballot – and all the members are familiar with that ballot. It was distributed here in the House when we had second reading and also was distributed to many members several years ago when it was distributed to the MLAs. A list of grasses was compiled, which in Alberta is well over a hundred species, approximately 138 species, and an evaluation matrix was developed by the Prairie Conservation Forum. Seven members of the Prairie Conservation Forum's provincial grass committee, including Cheryl Bradley, Tom Cameron, Cheryl Dash, Reg Ernst, Vern McNeely, Ed Nelson, and Liz Saunders, everything from grass specialists to ranchers and so on, drew up a list of 41 grasses which are relatively common and widespread in Alberta. That is to say that those species were reasonably well known and their range covered at least 25 percent or more of the province.

In May this list of 41 grass species was sent to all members of the Prairie Conservation Forum asking them to select the five grasses that they felt should be on a shortlist. From that shortlist they came up with a shortlist of 41 out of approximately 140. They came up with the following: western wheat grass and northern wheat grass were deemed to be almost the same, but between the two of them there were 21 choices; blue grama grass, 14; rough fescue, 28. So it had most of all of the 41. June grass was 16, and needle and thread grass was 18. So that information for the hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Then comments were made on this process as to why they made their choice or why they didn't make a choice. Just a few of them are:

- Choose a grass representative of the Fescue Grassland as Saskatchewan's emblem represents the Mixed Grass Prairie and Manitoba may well choose one representative of the Tall Grass Prairie.

So that was advice from one of the members of the Prairie Conservation Forum.

- Needle and Thread is probably the most common in Alberta and has a neat sounding name. Rough fescue may be found in a larger geographical area in Alberta. Sweet Grass sounds neat and is used by native people.
- Only choice is Rough Fescue. The crème de la crème.

Another one said:

- I am honoured that a "dirt" person is allowed to have a vote on such matters!

I presume that's one of the agricultural fellows. Finally, there's another comment.

- There is only one candidate and that is Rough Fescue. It is widespread, unique, and vital to the future of both the cattlemen and wildlife. Put [myself] down five times [for that].

So those are just some of the comments in that process.

Again, rough fescue was the first choice, and then on the basis of that, they were able to pick the five grasses that you saw on the ballot. This was sent to several thousand interested Albertans but

not only just sent out to them. Advertising was placed in many newspapers and magazines and on the Net and other means, then, for Albertans to vote on this issue of a provincial grass emblem or symbol for Alberta, and there were some rural schools that participated in it. The balloting resulted in 2,021 ballots, with rough fescue receiving 738 and therefore being the largest, with a majority of 36 percent. June grass was 556, blue grass was 305, western wheat grass was 226, and green needle was 196. So they ranged, then, from 36 percent down to 10 percent.

I'd like to add to this by referring to *A Guide to Using Native Plants on Disturbed Lands*, and we could go through that and spend the next hour looking at all of the ones, but if you look at the various types of grasslands like submesic grassland, upper slope positions, Parry oat grass is the largest, and rough fescue is in there as well at 15 percent of the canopy cover. Go to mesic grassland, lower slope locations: rough fescue is 32 percent, and the others all fall below that as a species with the canopy cover. It goes on through grassy upland sites. Again, plains rough fescue is the largest, and it goes on from there.

Before I conclude, I would add a few more thoughts on the appropriateness of rough fescue even though it doesn't grow throughout the province. Some of the reasons are that if we look at Alberta's emblems, like the wild rose and the great horned owl, those are pretty widespread throughout the province, but the bighorn sheep is found primarily in the Rocky Mountains on our western border. The lodgepole pine is widespread in western Alberta but not found very far east of the Rocky Mountains. Bull trout is found in Alberta's glacial waters. So the fact that rough fescue is only found in two-thirds of the province of Alberta as opposed to a hundred percent of Alberta is, perhaps, not as crucial as the hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar might have thought. The current roster of emblems reflects different cultural, historical, and ecological aspects of Alberta's diversity. There is, however, no emblem which signifies Alberta's prairie heritage, and that's one of the selling points of rough fescue.

The Provincial Museum of Alberta has made some comments that I think are worthy to note. They have written:

The Prairie Conservation Forum (PCF) appears to have done an excellent job in selecting rough fescue as the candidate grass species for inclusion in the Emblems of Alberta Act as the official grass of Alberta. It is clear that the PCF devoted considerable effort into making the selection of this grass a democratic, scientific and educational process.

Educating the public about the ecological qualities of a focus group of critical grass species and then allowing them to vote on their preferred species was an act of informed empowerment.

They go on to say:

Ecologically, it would be hard to argue for a better grass to represent the Province of Alberta. This grass is symbolic of natural and human based systems on a number of fronts and presents a diversity of contrasting elements that do indeed reflect the diversity of the Province.

The Provincial Museum of Alberta said:

In summary, The PCF has done an excellent job selecting rough fescue as the candidate grass for Alberta's official emblem. They have involved the public in the selection process, they provided educational material to promote awareness of all grass species, and they worked with a wide range of stakeholders. The final selection was based on sound ecological principles.

In concluding my remarks at this point in the committee stage, Mr. Chairman, I would like to say that I look forward to any further comments or questions that anyone may offer.

3:20

**The Deputy Chair:** The hon. Minister of Community Development.

**Mr. Zwozdesky:** Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and thank you to our Member for Highwood for bringing this important bill forward for debate at this time. I just want to rise briefly and indicate my support for this both as an individual and as minister responsible for parks and protected areas. I think it reflects well on some of the values that we as Albertans hold with respect to our environment in general.

Through our protected areas program, Mr. Chair, we try to ensure that our natural heritage remains vibrant, strong, and protected for today and available for the future. The intent of the designation of a provincial grass emblem, I believe, is to select an official symbol that reflects that our grassland areas and our prairie heritage are equally important.

I know that the fescue grass emblem will join numerous other natural provincial emblems, which have been alluded to: the wild rose, the lodgepole pine, the petrified wood, the great horned owl, the Rocky Mountain bighorn sheep, the bull trout, and so on. These emblems are all important to our history in one way or another, and they represent the basic elements of Alberta that are so important to all of us because they are symbolic of the wild, the natural, and the bountiful aspects of our province, of which we are so proud. It was some of these very first elements, of course, that were very appealing to our aboriginal people and that, in turn, helped attract the first European settlers to western Canada.

Fescue grasslands, in particular, are symbolic of natural and human-based systems, and they do host a very rich range of contrasting elements, which I'm sure many members here are aware of, and as such they do reflect the broad diversity of our province. So from a natural history point of view, Alberta is the only place in North America that actually contains all three of these species of rough fescue, which perhaps other members have referenced. This particular grass is fairly widespread in our province, Mr. Chair, and it is in fact found in four of the six natural regions, those being the grassland, parkland, foothills, and Rocky Mountains.

The rough fescue ecosystems that are the subject of debate today are also important in that they provide a critical food source group for the winter, in particular for wildlife, including many of our big game species of the prairies and of the foothills. But from a human history perspective it's difficult to understand how the parkland, grassland, and foothills regions of the province would have been properly sustained from an agricultural point of view without the rough fescue presence. I'm told and I've read some stories where rough fescue indeed provided critical winter feed for livestock and helped sustain pioneering efforts on the prairies in the early days. So extensive cover of rough fescue is an important indicator of a well-managed rangeland.

I think that in identifying rough fescue as Alberta's official grass emblem, we will contribute significantly to the conservation of our natural grasslands and help focus attention on the human history and the ecological history of our province. Albertans, I know, are very proud of not only our province but also of what we are doing to help protect the natural diversity of the tremendous charms that our province has to offer. Obviously, Mr. Chair, that is evidenced by the success of our special places program, in which Albertans were involved extensively in the process of nominating, identifying, and establishing new parks and protected areas across our province, and that extensive network has been the recipient of many accolades over the past year and a half or so.

Mr. Chair, as I begin to wrap up here, I just want to address a few areas of the province that are very specifically involved in one form or another and/or that touch on this important bill. Some of the areas that we have protected through our special program alluded to earlier, where different types of natural prairie grass could be found,

would include the Rumsey heritage rangeland, which is adjacent to the Rumsey ecological reserve, and it protects the largest remaining tract of aspen parkland in Canada, spanning the transition from the northern fescue grassland to the central parkland. Another area is the Milk River natural area, which contains some of the most diverse and least disturbed grasslands in the country. Another area is the Hand Hills ecological reserve, which is part of the largest remaining fescue grassland in the world. The Tolman Badlands heritage rangeland preserves the northern fescue grasslands north of Drumheller. Finally, the Kleskun Hill natural area protects some of the largest remnant pieces of native grassland in the Grande Prairie area.

These successes, Mr. Chair, are indeed a result of very special partnerships that our government has with businesses and with Alberta communities provincewide. Volunteer efforts need to be recognized in this respect because they, too, are a very important component of building on our success. Over 240 individual stewards and 71 steward organizations are currently involved in the parks and protected areas volunteer steward program. As an example, the Peace Parkland Naturalists assist parks and protected areas in Grande Prairie with the promotion and management of the Kleskun Hill natural area. Of equal importance are the conservation efforts of private landowners, which complement the provincial protected areas and contribute to the overall conservation of the grassland and the parkland natural regions in Alberta.

So this is a very timely bill, it's a very important bill, and credit for it obviously goes to the member bringing it forward, but credit must also go to other initiatives such as Operation Grassland Community, which is a stewardship, education, and partnership program that works directly with landowners, youth, and the general public toward conservation of native prairie habitat.

Mr. Chair, in closing, the Prairie Conservation Forum has done an excellent job in helping select rough fescue as the candidate grass for Alberta's official emblem status. They have worked hard to involve the public in this selection process, they've provided educational material to promote awareness of all grass species, and they've worked with a wide range of stakeholders in bringing this recommendation forward.

I want to quickly acknowledge the contribution of our Alberta Sport, Recreation, Parks & Wildlife Foundation and, as the Member for Highwood indicated, the Provincial Museum of Alberta and its staff, who are within my ministry, for their sincere efforts as members of the Prairie Conservation Forum, who also assisted in the selection of rough fescue as the official grass and for their support in this recommendation.

Mr. Chair, my final sentence is simply to recognize that many Albertans and the Prairie Conservation Forum need to be sincerely thanked for their very hard work and their exceptional recommendation. One way we can do that is by approving rough fescue for designation as the official provincial grass emblem.

Thank you.

**The Deputy Chair:** The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

**Mr. MacDonald:** Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. It's a pleasure to rise in debate this afternoon and participate in the discussion on Bill 201, Emblems of Alberta (Grass Emblem) Amendment Act, 2003. I appreciate the hon. Member for Highwood's answers to some of the questions that I had and certainly from the previous speaker, the hon. Minister of Community Development. In that case, one could only say that, well, perhaps the grass is greener on that side of the fence for a change.

When I look at this bill and I hear all hon. members of the

Assembly speak in favour of it, I certainly see no harm in adopting this. I'm surprised at the attention it's getting. When I'm listening to the arguments as they're presented, it astonishes me to look around this Assembly and see so many members interested in participating in this debate, yet we only, Mr. Chairman, have one plant in the entire Assembly, on the Clerk's table. I've had the honour and the pleasure of visiting a few Legislative Assemblies in Canada, and certainly some of them have a lot more vegetation than just that.

3:30

I would encourage, in light of the overwhelming support this bill is getting from government members, that perhaps it's time that – and this could be done in conjunction with the centennial year. It could be a modest, inexpensive recognition of our centennial year. I don't want centennial years to be getting out of hand, Mr. Chairman, with a lot of monuments and stuff being built. I would rather schools and hospitals be constructed, but what we could do perhaps is at some point for visiting schoolchildren whenever they come to the Assembly – it doesn't necessarily have to be in here – we could have an aquarium with a few bull trout in it so that the children could see firsthand, up close our provincial fish.

Now, we could also do something similar with a little patch of this rough fescue grass. I'm not saying that it should be in front of the Mace or anything like this, but certainly there could be a place. Or perhaps we should make a couple of square metres of rough fescue sod or grass in the vicinity of one of the entrances to this Assembly so that Albertans could see for themselves our grass emblem, so to speak.

I'll be brief, Mr. Chairman. In conclusion, I would urge that perhaps we should look at a few more plants in this Assembly. We've got one, and I think we could have a lot more. There's certainly room for them. Perhaps it would make the Assembly that much more of a pleasant place, and with that I would conclude my remarks.

It would be a good, symbolic way to mark our first 100 years as a province to perhaps have a few representations. I'm not saying to have, for instance, a stuffed owl in this Assembly or anything of that nature; don't get me wrong. The public is apt to come in and get confused and have a great deal distinguishing which constituency that stuffed owl would be representing. It certainly wouldn't be an opposition constituency.

Those are some of the things that I think we should do that would be modest and inexpensive, and we could recognize not only this rough fescue grass but other emblems in this province. Thank you.

**The Deputy Chair:** The hon. Member for Highwood.

**Mr. Tannas:** Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and thanks to the hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar for the good suggestions. Actually, some of them were anticipated, and there are now some examples of rough fescue growing in the gardens of the Legislature, and about 20 feet from where my car is on warmer occasions parked there is a rough fescue plant. Now it's well buried by the snow.

There are suggestions, as well, that maybe we might have, in addition to that plant, some of the native plants. Of course, one of the problems with native plants is that they have as part of the cycle that there has to be a dormant period and a cold period as well as a warm period, but the Native Plant Council is going to follow up on those suggestions.

Thank you.

[The clauses of Bill 201 agreed to]



[Title and preamble agreed to]

**The Deputy Chair:** Shall the bill be reported? Are you agreed?

**Hon. Members:** Agreed.

**The Deputy Chair:** Opposed? Carried.  
The hon. Deputy Government House Leader.

**Mr. Zwozdesky:** Thank you, Mr. Chair. I would move that we now rise and report.

[Motion carried]

[Mr. Shariff in the chair]

**Mr. Tannas:** Mr. Speaker, the Committee of the Whole has had under consideration and reports Bill 201.

**The Acting Speaker:** Does the Assembly concur in the report?

**Hon. Members:** Agreed.

**The Acting Speaker:** Opposed? So ordered.

head: **Public Bills and Orders Other than  
Government Bills and Orders**  
head: **Second Reading**

**Bill 203  
School (Compulsory Attendance) Amendment Act, 2003**

[Adjourned debate March 3: Mr. McFarland]

**The Acting Speaker:** The hon. Member for Little Bow.

**Mr. McFarland:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. When I began debate on March 3, I indicated that the principles of Bill 203 were to raise the legal leaving age from school from 16 to 17, universally and consistently, and at the same time Bill 203 would eliminate the use of attendance boards. If I could carry on from that point, Mr. Speaker, I also wanted to reiterate that I think it should be the goal of every parent or guardian to see that their child graduates from high school and, hopefully, pursues some type of postsecondary training. There is no denying the fact that staying in school increases a young person's opportunities in this world far beyond those of a high school dropout.

Let me start by addressing the first point: raising the mandatory school age from 16 to 17 years old. Opponents to this bill will argue that children who do not want to be in school should not be forced to attend school. Let me ask you this, Mr. Speaker: how many 16 year olds are mature enough at that age to fully realize the consequences of leaving school early? The notion that a child who is 16 years old who does not desire to be in the classroom will be mature and responsible enough to be a productive member of the workforce is a little bit far-reaching in its assumption.

Another small stretch of the imagination, Mr. Speaker, is to assume that all children who drop out before graduating will eventually see the error of their ways or the decision that they've made and return to school to earn their graduate equivalency diploma or even to attend a vocational institution. These students were not interested in attending when the tuition was being paid for. How could we really believe that they'll suddenly be interested in educating themselves when the tuition is coming directly out of their

back pocket? In the meantime, they're destined for a life of minimum wage positions and near poverty.

Bill 203 is a move in the right direction, Mr. Speaker, and passing it into legislation is the right thing to do. It also ties in with the goals of this government, the future welfare of our children, and our children's promise act, that was introduced this year.

Mr. Speaker, dropout and graduation rates have long been used as indicators of success in preparing students for their future careers or postsecondary education. These rates have a long-term impact on such conditions as unemployment, earning power, average income, and quality of life. I believe it's important to point out that even young people who are only interested in agricultural pursuits require some type of formal education. Having some experience in the business of farming myself and recognizing how technology and information is changing, I can speak to the need for training in this industry.

For those young people interested in expanding their knowledge and background in agriculture, Olds College, for instance, offers a two-year agricultural production and management diploma. In this program at Olds College the requirement is, at very minimum, Mr. Speaker, a high school diploma, 55 percent in math 20 or 23, 55 percent or better in science 30. This immediately excludes the individual who thought they were so smart and had to quit school when they were 16.

Another example, one that may not be as rural but certainly applies to many of the younger people from urban Alberta, would be those who want to work with children who may have experienced difficulties in their lives. Lethbridge Community College, as another example, offers an excellent program in child and youth care. Applicants to this program are required to have an Alberta high school diploma or an equivalent including a minimum of 60 percent in each of social studies 30, English 30, and one other 30-level subject. A young person with these honourable goals of working with underprivileged children will immediately feel the impact of the decision they made to quit school at the age of 16. They simply won't be accepted.

3:40

Recent studies by the National Centre for Education Statistics reported that high school dropouts were three times more likely to receive public assistance than high school graduates who did not go to college. Three times more likely, Mr. Speaker, to receive public assistance. This is a very telling tale. It speaks not only to the lost economic activity to the province as well as to a lifetime of minimum wage, public assistance but also to the increased cost to individual taxpayers. Producing a well-educated, diverse workforce is integral to Alberta's economic success. Keeping children in school until at least 17 years old and increasing graduation rates will help add to Alberta's comparative economic advantage.

The response from the Department of Learning paints such a different picture in terms of costs. While Stats Canada figures point to lost productivity, the Learning department has focused their arguments on a small increase in administrative costs. According to their data, historically the proportion of 16-year-old students who stay in school for the next school year is between 75 and 80 percent. Given this enrollment trend for 17-year-old students, the introduction of a mandatory age requirement of 17 years would create an overall basic learning cost pressure of approximately \$43 million for basic instructional grant funding and system administration. How can one even begin to put a price tag on the value of an education? It is the cost of, and I'll quote, not, unquote, providing a high level of education for our children that's truly more measurable.

New Brunswick is the only province in Canada, Mr. Speaker, for

those interested, who has raised the minimum mandatory school age above 16. On July 1, 1999, New Brunswick through their Education Act required children to stay in school until they graduate or turn 18 years old, and the results have been very encouraging. In 2000-2001 their dropout rate had fallen by 25 percent since 1993, when it stood at 3.8 percent. This indicates that this type of legislation will keep children in school. Studies have continually shown that keeping children in school for longer periods increases their likelihood of continuing to a postsecondary institution.

I'd like now to turn my attention to addressing the second point of Bill 203: applying the age requirement universally and consistently. Section 13(5) of the School Act prescribes who can be excused from mandatory attendance and for what reasons. Bill 203 proposes to strike section 13(5) from the School Act. Under Bill 203 reasonable exceptions to attendance rules will remain unchanged. These exceptions include absences for sickness, recognized holidays, suspensions, expulsion, even those students who've graduated from school prior to the age of 17, those students who some call gifted.

The third issue I'd like to address regarding Bill 203 involves the elimination of the attendance boards. Currently under 15(1) of the School Act attendance boards represent the ultimate authority in resolving truancy issues. Attendance boards were established to provide an alternative to the immediate use of the courts for enforcement of the compulsory attendance.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I encourage your support.

**The Acting Speaker:** The hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods.

**Dr. Massey:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased to have an opportunity to speak in support of Bill 203, the School (Compulsory Attendance) Amendment Act, 2003. If we go back and look at the history of compulsory attendance laws in our country and across the continent, the purpose has been pretty clear, and that's to prepare youth to be productive members of our society and, more importantly, maybe in some instances, to create an informed citizenry, a citizenry that can take part and can guide our democracy. So those two goals, to make them productive members and to create an informed citizenry, I think have been valid goals in the past, and they're certainly valid goals for this bill.

I think for me the important thing about the bill is that it helps to establish the social norm that you finish high school, and there's been some research that would support the notion that the context within which a law like this operates is very important, and the message that it gives youth in our province is that high school graduation is a minimum requirement. We'll hear the arguments, I'm sure, opposing this bill, Mr. Speaker, that talk about the difficulties of keeping youngsters who don't want to be in school there, but I think that that's a whole different argument and needs to be addressed by itself, apart from the compulsory attendance law. I think that it is really important that we pass this law, but even more important is what is done in schools based on the knowledge we already have to prevent the problem from occurring in the first place. What can we do in schools so that the times that the compulsory attendance law has to be invoked are minimized?

I think that if you look at some of the research on, for instance, who stays in school, there's some good evidence that dropout rates in small schools are lower than those in large schools. If you attend a small high school, there's a pressure on you to be part of the culture of that small school. You're forced to take part in the photography club and be on the schoolbook council, a number of activities – you have to be on the basketball team; you have to be on the football team – if those settings are going to work in a high school. So there's great pressure on students in small high schools

to take part in school life, and it's that engagement that we know is one of the factors, a contributing factor, in keeping youngsters in school and having them complete high school. We have to work to try to get that balance so that the pressure to leave school is balanced overwhelmingly in favour of the pressures to stay in school, and I think that that's an important aspect of the whole problem.

We know that it's informed parents whose youngsters are more likely to stay in school. By informed parents I mean parents who are engaged with the school, the purposes of the school, who work at home to affect their youngster's attitude towards school and school performance, and it doesn't mean that they have to sit down and do the math 30 homework for youngsters. All they have to do as a minimum is to ask what's going on, to question youngsters about what's happening in school. "How's your progress in this area? What kinds of things are you engaged in?" It's that kind of activity that leads to youngsters staying in school along with the kind of emotional support that parents can provide.

We know that parental educational attainment has something to do with whether youngsters stay in school. If your parents completed to 10th grade, then the chances are there won't be as much pressure on you to complete high school as children in families where parents are high school graduates. An important aspect of this bill is that it does make it, as I said before, the norm that you complete high school.

Youngsters that are positively engaged in extracurricular activities are more likely to stay in school than those who aren't. You know, if we're really serious about the problem of dropouts, then we have to look at what's happening in schools and what kinds of opportunities are there provided for extracurricular activities and to make sure that when there are pressures on school funding those extracurricular programs are not sacrificed in the name of saving money. They have an important role in helping youngsters avoid being at risk for dropping out. Those activities create a network that draws youngsters in and helps to keep them in school. We know that youngsters living with both biological parents are more likely to complete high school. If you have a higher family income, you're more likely to stay in school. If your parents are employed, you're more likely to stay in school. So there are a number of family factors where I think schools, by the programs that they have in place, can help youngsters stay in school.

3:50

We know that social bonding, educational engagement, achievement that pays off eventually in employment are important factors for youngsters that stay in schools, and we also know that schools that provide a haven for youngsters from home problems and a place for vocational training programs, opportunities to build relationships – those are the youngsters that stay in school.

So we have some pretty good notions of the characteristics of youngsters that do stay in school, and it's those characteristics that I think we have to build on. This law will cause schools to look maybe more seriously at those programs. Those characteristics I think are important in building programs that will help youngsters stay in school and again, as I said, build that very important norm, that the minimum in our province is staying for the completion of high school.

We can start things very, very early, Mr. Speaker. We know, for example, that you can predict even as early as kindergarten who's going to drop out. We know that youngsters that are engaged in disruptive behaviour is one indicator that youngsters might possibly drop out of school. Youngsters who exhibit aggressive behaviour that goes unrestrained in the early years of school is another possible predictor of someone who may want to leave school before they

complete high school, and we get caught up in condemning social promotion as being something very bad, but it's also one of the surest predictors that someone will drop out of school if they have been retained by at least one grade. So by holding youngsters back, we make the probability of them dropping out of high school higher. There's the whole notion of poor attitudes to school, whether that comes from the home or it's allowed to be fostered with the school itself. That leads to youngsters opting to leave school earlier or trying to.

There are a number of youngsters who are not mature enough to make the connection between high school completion, finishing school, and better economic opportunities down the road. The previous speaker mentioned some of the costs that we all pay for those youngsters not being able to make that connection, and I think it's good to question the ability of 16 year olds to make that connection.

Thanks, Mr. Speaker.

**The Acting Speaker:** The hon. Member for Highwood.

**Mr. Tannas:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure today to rise and speak at second reading to Bill 203, School (Compulsory Attendance) Amendment Act, 2003, which is an act to amend the School Act and is sponsored by the hon. Member for Little Bow.

Mr. Speaker, education is an absolute necessity in this part of the 21st century. It's very difficult for children in today's world to get employment and, better yet, to be able to remain employed without at the very least a high school diploma. This being the case, there are still far too many children in Alberta who are not completing their high school education. I wonder whether this is due in part to the fact that our laws are, I guess you could say, lenient on those who wish to drop out of school. Currently any child in Alberta who is of the age of 16 is able to drop out of school uncontested by the truancy officials that we may have here, and I think that's probably in today's world quite unacceptable.

Worse than that though, Mr. Speaker and hon. members, is the fact that many are able to leave school on their 15th birthday. It takes two or three months, if we are considering it, following the 15th birthday when they don't show up to school before they appear on the truancy list. By the time the truancy officer gives the parents proper registered letter notice, authorized notice, if the proper address can be located, to present their child at the school that he or she is supposed to be in, two, three, four months can pass, and finally the truancy officer sees that this is not bearing any fruit and takes the case to court. That may take two or three or more months to get a date for the court. By the time the case comes to court, in this circumstance the child may be well past their 16th birthday, in which case the matter has to be dropped. But let us say, by chance, that if the case gets to the court before the 16th birthday, the court may rule that there are only six weeks, five weeks, four weeks, seven weeks left and it's not worth while for that child, who has missed all of the school since their 15th birthday. If there's only this limited period of time in the school year, it's not worth while issuing a court order to force that child to return to the classroom. Having been in the education system for 27 years and being a school administrator for a considerable period of that time, I know that truancy officers for those kinds of individuals that I've just described are loath to try and do anything about it, because by the time it gets to court, it's not worth their while.

So, Mr. Speaker, as dropout rates continue to be high in our learning system in Alberta, we must look for ways to encourage children from even considering the option to drop out. Bill 203 is a small step in fighting the dropout battle. Its main value is that it

will raise the legal dropout age from 16 to 17 and the de facto rate to 16 from 15. I'm not sure that this bill really goes far enough, as I personally would support 18 years, but it's a small step in the right direction. I don't think that a 17 year old is all that much further along in the maturity scale to make the decision to stay or not stay in school than a 16 year old, but there are some statistics to say that this age is a better choice than 16.

The most important thing that we must realize is that a student who is 17 is one year closer to graduation than a student who might be 16, and this could go an extremely long way in a teenager's decision-making process. If they are thinking about dropping out, they may ultimately decide against it if they feel they are too close to graduating to quit. They may only have six or eight months left until graduation when they turn 17, so they continue on. Or as the hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods suggested, the sports programs often keep people in for a considerable period of time, and that is a bonus.

As we debate the merits of the bill, I'd like to turn to some success stories in other provinces and states that have had a higher legal dropout age. Granted we will not be able to keep every single child in school, but if our legislation keeps one more child in high school until they have completed, then that will have served some purpose.

4:00

In Canada, Mr. Speaker, there's only one province – it's been mentioned by the hon. Member for Little Bow – that has a legal dropout age that is higher than 16, that being, of course, New Brunswick. The province of New Brunswick has a record of a steady decline in dropout rates since 1993 and even more so since their legislation, a dropout rate that is somewhere around 2.8 percent for Anglophone students and 3.1 percent for Francophone. This is a remarkably small number of students dropping out when trying to find Alberta's dropout rate to compare the two.

I found many different and conflicting numbers for our province. Some pegged the rate at 18 percent, some pegged it a little lower at 8 percent, and the general statistic that is found is that the dropout rate is around 13 percent. Whatever rate, it's much higher than New Brunswick's, and I find that embarrassing, and it must be embarrassing for the other eight provinces as well. We must ask ourselves, then: is our average rate higher because the legal dropout age is lower? If this is the case, then we would be seriously considering the importance and the implications of this bill, Bill 203, the School (Compulsory Attendance) Amendment Act, 2003.

Another state is Kansas. A child can leave high school before they graduate and before they turn 18 if and only if they are at least 16 years of age and have written consent from their parents, guardian, or the court for their withdrawal, and that has proven to close the dropout rate down to less than 3 percent. Apparently in the last year for which we have statistics, it's fallen to 2 percent in Kansas, and that, of course, is an incredibly low figure, Mr. Speaker.

The state of Maine has a very low dropout rate. In fact, it has stayed below the 5 percent mark since 1985 in both the public and the private systems, and in 2001 the dropout rate was 3.07 percent, a far cry, then, from that found in most provinces now in Canada, including, of course, Alberta.

So I think, Mr. Speaker, statistics show that the higher the mandatory school age for children, the more likely they will stay in school and complete their diplomas, and this, I would suggest, should be our goal. It may seem trivial to switch the legal dropout age from 16 to 17, but I believe the positives far outweigh any negatives that might be offered. As I mentioned, I would support the age of 18 were that to be proposed.

If we pass Bill 203 – and I feel we should – I think we would see

the benefits within the next five years. I imagine a province where our dropout rate is lower than 5 percent and students choose to stay in school because they know they want to and, of course, are required to do so. Bill 203 will help keep students in school until they are close enough to graduation, and therefore if they have any thoughts of dropping out, they may well change their minds and refuse to quit school because they are so close to the end. That is the difference between a 16 year old and a 17 year old: the latter is so much closer to finishing. I know that most children will make the proper decision if given the chance and the direction.

I fully endorse Bill 203 and ask all of my colleagues to vote in favour of this important bill. Thank you.

**The Acting Speaker:** The hon. Member for Edmonton-Glengarry.

**Mr. Bonner:** Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It is indeed a pleasure to rise this afternoon to speak to Bill 203, the School (Compulsory Attendance) Amendment Act, 2003, and I would like to compliment the Member for Little Bow for bringing this forward. It is a bill that I think is long overdue, and it is a bill that many people in this province welcome, particularly those parents in the province who happen to have those children who at the age of 15 or 16 have certainly lost interest in school. It's very difficult for those parents – and in a number of cases it can be single parents – to get these children motivated to go to school. So I think that from that very standpoint, if we as a province make this a priority that we want children in school for that extra year, certainly we will see the effects of this type of legislation over time.

[The Deputy Speaker in the chair]

Most of it, Mr. Speaker, is certainly just a change in attitude. We have seen a number of bills in this Legislature that have been passed where initially we did not see the effect. I think of bills, whether they be the wearing of seat belts in automobiles, where at one time we did not have many that wore their seat belts to a point now where we have quite a few people that wear seat belts and, I think, probably in ever increasing numbers that do. Just recently, we passed legislation in this House which would require young people under the age of 18 to wear bike helmets and, of course, without doing a scientific study, I would have to say that when I drive the streets in the summer, I certainly see a greater percentage of young people wearing helmets. So I think that through legislation this is a start. This is a start. I don't think that students will stay in school just because we have legislation, but they do have to. Legislation will give us a tool from which to start.

A place to start, first of all, is to look at why students drop out of school. When we look at students dropping out of school, truancy is usually the first step towards a lifetime of problems, and this is certainly backed up by a study that was done at Florida State University. They have identified many, many factors associated with dropouts. The other findings that the study has found: the average annual income of dropouts was less than one-half of high school graduates and half of welfare families were headed by dropouts and half of the prison population were from these families. So, certainly, we look at dropout rates in high school. We compare those to the rates of unemployment. We also look at the low status and low-paying jobs that these types of people end up with, and, Mr. Speaker, this would lead to the disenfranchisement from society of these people, and that is a key, key factor when we look at why students don't want to stay in school.

When we look at studies that are done even in this province, Mr. Speaker, I look at a study called *Shaping Young People into Good*

*Citizens*. It is a study conducted in 2001 by the Alberta School Boards Association, and what they did for this particular study was they toured the province and they interviewed many, many people and they had many other people who certainly provided feedback. They had used any number of vehicles to gather feedback, including an on-line survey, an Ipsos-Reid omnibus poll, direct contact with elected officials and provincial associations, and local consultation at the school and school system level. One of the things that they found out was that Albertans agree on the skills students need in order to become good citizens. There were skills such as thinking skills, problem-solving skills, social skills, and leadership skills that were identified as critical for young people to have if they are to become good citizens. Again, to become good citizens, I think one of the things we have to do is start that involvement with the community at a very early age.

Now, as well, we have programs in this province, early-start programs, which deal with high-risk students. We look, for example, at the recent studies and recent activities at North Edmonton school. We see that in programs that identify students who are going to have difficulty along the way, programs that are initiated at the primary level in elementary education, these students have improved immensely over previous classes in the school. So, certainly, by giving these students success at an early age, we raise their self-image. We raise the level of confidence in those young individuals and with the success the probability that those students will remain in school increases.

4:10

As well, we look at other areas where we can help students, and this is certainly in a variety of ways. One of those in the school setting is that we offer academic achievement classes. We certainly have the means and the tests now so that we can identify students who are having difficulty and in what areas they are having difficulty. If we can provide those programs in a timely manner at the first possible opportunity, then the chances of those students not slipping through the cracks and not being left behind are much, much greater.

Now, then, we also have heard it said many, many times that it takes a community to raise a child. I think it is also critical, Mr. Speaker, when we are looking at keeping children in school, that, you know, we have those opportunities and those activities in the community that give students the opportunity to take part. It gives them the opportunity to feel wanted, and it certainly provides a safe environment, which I think is something that we want to ensure in our schools.

We've been relatively lucky, I think, in Canada with the safe environment that most of our students do experience when they attend school, and I think this is critical. I look at the city of Edmonton, where they have just brought in legislation on bullying because this is certainly something that they want to eliminate. It is something that they've identified as a potential problem, and it is a problem in some areas, and they want to make a safe environment for students. I think that if we do provide a safe environment for students in school, then their desire to stay in school, their desire to achieve in school certainly grows. Without a doubt, Mr. Speaker, the biggest payoff that we get for our investments in this province is with our students. Students that stay in school, students that learn, students that see learning as a lifelong goal and something that's to be enjoyed, not to be endured, are commendable. It is certainly an investment that will pay the greatest dividends down the road.

Now, then, in this same study that I mentioned earlier from Florida State University, they found that there is no single approach that works for everyone. [Mr. Bonner's speaking time expired]

I thank the Legislature very much for this opportunity, Mr. Speaker, and I would hope that everybody in this Legislature would support this bill. Thank you.

**The Deputy Speaker:** The hon. Member for Wainwright.

**Mr. Griffiths:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It is an honour and a pleasure to rise today in support of Bill 203, the School (Compulsory Attendance) Amendment Act, 2003, sponsored by the very honourable Member for Little Bow.

Mr. Speaker, as we all know, the purpose of Bill 203 is to increase the mandatory school attendance age from 16 to 17 years old, and I'd like to point out that regardless of some members' opinions, this bill will not apply to me as I am of voting age.

**Mr. Horner:** You won't have to resign?

**Mr. Griffiths:** No. I won't have to resign.

I'd like to stress to this Assembly that I firmly believe that Bill 203 is a step in the right direction, and I encourage this Assembly to view Bill 203 as a step towards a bright and successful future, Mr. Speaker. The point as I see it is to ensure that Alberta's children are provided with the necessary options and opportunities to be successful. Bill 203 is about the success of Albertans, their children and grandchildren, and the success of this province.

The commitment to children is clearly evident in this province. For instance, Alberta's Promise is directed to creating an environment that will allow children, youth, and students to succeed. Mr. Speaker, the commitment that has been made includes concern for the health and safety of Alberta's children and youth at home and in the community. Our commitment also includes the promise that every child receives an education and has support, care, and guidance from at least one caring adult as well as open doors so that they can make a difference and serve others. This overall commitment is expressed partly through our education system. I believe that Bill 203, like other policies, is directed towards the success of our children and the students of this province. They are our most precious resource, and it is our responsibility to help in developing that resource to its fullest potential.

One of the government's highest priorities is to secure a bright and successful future for all children and youth. Success can be viewed in many different ways, and I'm certain that if you were to ask each and every member in this Assembly today what success meant to them, you would not get the same answer twice. I'm willing to guarantee that more often than not the root of any one person's definition of success is: self-development, self-improvement, knowledge, and education.

If I may, I'd like to share with the Assembly a passage that I once read: that man is a success who thinks his own thoughts, who sets his own course, who lives by his own standards and creates his own destiny. I firmly believe in what I just read, Mr. Speaker. However, I also firmly believe that society, government, and, most importantly, family play a large role in preparing children, youth, and students for the roads they will travel. It is the responsibility of mentors, teachers, and family to prepare today's youth for what lies ahead, guiding them in making good life choices and decisions. By doing this, we ensure that they will succeed on their own, being their own person, thinking their own thoughts, and creating their own destiny.

Mr. Speaker, Alberta's learning system is outstanding. Our teachers are caring and kind. Our students have excelled at national and international levels. Our curriculum is one of a kind and improving every day. Our education system should not be taken for granted. We have a responsibility to ensure that students don't

lightly defer the opportunities and options that are provided for them by our education system. In 1981 only 60 percent of all 19 year olds in Alberta completed high school, which is compared to 65 percent of all 19 year olds across Canada. Five years later, in 1986, Alberta's high school completion rate for 19 year olds had risen to 64 percent but Canada's average for the same group was 68 percent. Ten years later, in 1996, 68 percent of Albertans aged 19 years had completed high school while Canada's average of 72 percent for the same age group was again higher.

Alberta is the financial envy of our country. Our balanced budget and debt-free future is something we are all proud of and can pass on to our children. It is time to strive for excellence in other areas as well. I commend Alberta Learning's 2002-2005 business plan, which has set a target for improving high school completion rates for 19 year olds from 72 percent to 75 percent. I'd also like to recognize the efforts that have been made in providing opportunities for mature students who may have left school before they obtained a diploma or want to upgrade their classes to enter a postsecondary institution. For whatever reason, I commend the work that they have done to ensure that all Albertans have access to the education they deserve.

Mr. Speaker, times are changing. The technology advancements that have occurred in the past 20 years are amazing, to say the least. These advancements have also drastically changed the world in which we live. Thirty years ago things were a lot simpler. Your father taught you how to farm, just as his father had taught him. You could fix your own car from what you'd learned in shop class or from working on your dad's car, though lots of us got in trouble for it.

I believe that the success of any person is dependent on their knowledge, and when it comes to knowledge, the more you have, the better off you will be. Alberta's market is competitive on a global scale, and if this province is going to succeed, Albertans have to succeed. A high school education will give today's youth the option to continue their studies at a postsecondary institution. They may not decide to follow that path right away after graduation, but they will have that option. To be competitive in a global marketplace, the products that Alberta produces need to be of the highest quality. Those high-quality products come from research and passing that information on to producers, whether it's a mechanic, a farmer, a construction worker, a nurse, a doctor, an engineer, or any other trade or occupation. The market is continually changing, and to stay competitive, we have to change with it, which means learning the most you can of the newest material you can all the time.

Mr. Speaker, we live in a time when the phrase "lifelong learners" is common. As a teacher I heard that quite often. We don't just teach our students about facts and figures and numbers; we teach our students how to learn and that they must continually learn to evolve to keep pace with today's society.

Bill 203 ensures that Alberta's youth will have the option to stay competitive. The statistics show that the longer a student stays in school, the more likely they are to complete high school and the more likely they are to appreciate learning throughout their lives. Let Bill 203 be the first step in providing the opportunity of success for all Alberta students.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

4:20

**The Deputy Speaker:** The hon. Member for Edmonton-Castle Downs.

**Mr. Lukaszuk:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's an honour to join the debate in support of Bill 203, the School (Compulsory Attendance) Amendment Act, 2003, sponsored by the hon. Member for Little

Bow. I cannot think of any reason why a teenager should not be in school. The fact is that some high school students think mandatory attendance isn't such a big deal. Bill 203 makes it a big deal by amending the School Act to make it harder to avoid penalty for deliberately leaving school early.

I understand that there are various social and economic pressures on teenagers and that there have always been instances where students have had to leave school before graduation to attend to other matters. Whatever the reason, it is an undeniable fact that the best place for young people is in the classroom. I don't think young people are aware of the lifelong negative consequences of terminating their education early. Mr. Speaker, I struggled with this temptation when I was in school, but I chose to stay in high school and completed a degree in education.

As an educator I have seen the dramatic consequences when students failed to complete their basic education. My experience as a teacher and the studies done on the undereducated have revealed two unmistakable facts. First, there are clear connections between low education and low income, and there are also connections between low education and poor overall health. Alberta's teachers, school administrators, trustees, and the Alberta government have worked very hard to build one of the most successful and dynamic education systems in the world. All of the hard work, careful planning, and dedication means nothing if students aren't in the classroom.

[Mr. Shariff in the chair]

Mr. Speaker, Bill 203 may be viewed by some as simply sweating the small stuff. After all, forcing teenagers to stay in school does not guarantee that they will actually embrace their education opportunities. But raising the mandatory attendance age to 17 sends a clear message, urging students to stay within their studies. Students who ignore mandatory attendance and any parent that allows this to happen must realize that there are dozens of learning opportunities in the Alberta education system. As we all know, students have always been able to choose from a variety of options in addition to their required courses. Optional courses are designed to provide opportunities for students to explore other areas of interest and possible career opportunities. The range of optional courses offered in Alberta varies from school to school, depending on such factors as student and parent preferences, appropriate facilities, and adequate staffing. For example, Alberta provides 22 career and technology studies programs, ranging from agriculture and forestry to community health or legal studies. The fine art programs, comprised of art, drama, and music, encourage and develop personal expression through artistic activities. Students have the opportunity to explore visual expression and establish the groundwork for artistic skills.

Aboriginal courses provide students with a framework to understand diverse aboriginal cultures within their region, their country, and the world. Amiskwaciy Academy is the best example of the Alberta government's commitment to educating aboriginal youth. The academy is open to any student with an interest in understanding the values and traditions of aboriginal culture. The unique mix of programming options and activities and events and personal guidance is designed to give students an opportunity to understand and appreciate Alberta's rich aboriginal history while preparing them for the challenges in the future.

The registered apprenticeship program, Mr. Speaker, sends students into the world of work, where students spend part of their time in school and part of their time in industry as registered apprentices in one of Alberta's 50 designated trades. The RAP

program continues to be an incredible success in Alberta because students apply concepts learned in school to their career as an apprentice.

The green certificate, Mr. Speaker, for senior high school students allows students in grades 10, 11, and 12 to participate in agriculture-related apprenticeships, earn credits, and complete a technical level of a green certificate in any of the seven specializations. Alberta Agriculture, Food and Rural Development and Alberta Learning jointly administer the green certificate program. Many senior high schools organize special career development activities such as mentoring, job shadowing portfolios, and other career fairs.

Mr. Speaker, I could spend all afternoon listing possible education options for Alberta's high school students, but for the sake of time and patience of my colleagues I would like to briefly touch on the most important reason that young people should stay in school: the integration of technology. Children are learning to use many forms of technology from a very early age. By the time a student reaches high school, they are expected to perform complex research and explain the advantages and disadvantages of using different forms of information accessed through various forms of electronic media. High school students learn to assess the authority, reliability, and validity of electronically accessed information. As Albertans become more dependent on technology, young people must have the critical thinking skills necessary to sort through information in order to make proper decisions. I would also like to remind this Assembly that the Alberta Supernet will soon be operational in all provincial buildings. Supernet will open its doors for education that is simply not possible to do anywhere else in Canada.

Mr. Speaker, technology is here to stay. In fact, it will continue to play a much larger role in the future. Students learn the basics in high school, and without a basic understanding of technology young people will be lost. Thankfully, Alberta Learning has designed a curriculum that helps students to part the waters of the sea of information. But all of the work teachers put into lesson plans becomes meaningless if students aren't encouraged to stay in school. Alberta's teachers are hardworking, passionate, and dedicated men and women committed to the best interests of their students, but teachers can only do so much. I believe that parents must also share this commitment to youth. Changing the legal age of mandatory attendance from 16 to 17 may not seem like a significant adjustment at first; however, raising the age of mandatory attendance and raising the expectations of local boards should also raise the expectations of parents to encourage their children to stay in school. Schools are not meant to be holding areas for young people until they reach the age. Albertans must realize that people need to achieve the highest level of education possible. Failing to do so results in an underskilled workforce and an underachieving province.

I would like to thank the hon. Member for Little Bow for bringing Bill 203 forward. I realize that raising the mandatory attendance age from 16 to 17 will not guarantee a hundred percent high school completion rate in Alberta, but this bill does not operate in isolation. There are many learning options for students that accompany the scores of classes. Keeping students in school for one more year will help the overall goal of developing well-prepared learners for lifelong learning, the world of work, and citizenship.

Finally, Mr. Speaker, I believe that every opportunity must be made to ensure that young adults reach their full potential. Bill 203 amends the School Act and sends a clear message that Alberta needs young people to succeed in school. Alberta's future begins in the classroom. I think that every reasonable attempt must be made to ensure that young people realize their full potential. I urge all colleagues in this Assembly to vote in support of this bill.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

4:30

**The Acting Speaker:** The hon. Member for Calgary-Fort.

**Mr. Cao:** Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It is with great pleasure that I rise today and speak in support of Bill 203, the School (Compulsory Attendance) Amendment Act, 2003. I would like to commend the MLA for Little Bow for bringing this legislation forward for discussion and debate. It is an important topic that affects not only Alberta's youth, but it has far-reaching consequences that encompass the rest of our province.

With the passage of this bill the mandatory attendance age would increase from 16 to 17 years old. This policy would extend its application across the province, enforcing attendance requirements with limited provisions for exceptions. This bill would also abolish the use of attendance boards, placing the authority and jurisdiction with the local school board to ensure student attendance. The overall goal of the bill is to raise the number of Alberta youth who complete secondary education.

Mr. Speaker, let me put some strategic thinking on the matter. Indeed, we are living in a global, competitive economy. Our quality of living depends on our abilities and competitiveness. As Canadians and Albertans we have been enjoying an advantage of being ahead. However, others are catching up. The gap is reducing fast. Our muscles cannot compete with the low costs of the multitudes in other parts of the world. We need to push ahead, literally, with our heads. It has become evident that the individuals who do not complete high school have a harder time securing decent-paying jobs. The gap in opportunities between students who drop out and those who graduate is widening, and we are finding that more entry-level, trade-specific jobs require a minimum of high school graduation.

We are living in an increasingly knowledge-based economy in our society. The skills required to work and live are changing rapidly. These alterations and modifications have extensive implications on equitable participation and social cohesion. As a society we are experiencing a shift in the skill structure and employment requirements taking place across our province, throughout the country, and even around the world.

Mr. Speaker, in addition to frequent unemployment or low-level employment, students who do not complete high school are at risk to experience a plethora of personal and social problems. It is apparent that young people who do not complete high school face many more problems later in life than those who graduate. Moreover, in many instances students that drop out of high school ultimately end up causing the community many longer term problems. Numerous studies and research establish that the earlier the grade from which a student drops out from high school, the less likely the student will ever graduate. The closer the student is to completion, the greater the chance of receiving that diploma. Students that go back to complete secondary school often discover that it's more difficult and usually more costly. Students find it tougher to get back into the routine of school once they have been away from the education environment. In turn, individuals that go back usually attend colleges which are for high school courses for students to upgrade and attain the diploma. However, these courses are offered for a considerable fee. Bill 203 aims to keep more students in school, thus increasing the chances of successful secondary graduation.

Mr. Speaker, youths dropping out of school are not basing their decisions primarily on grades. Granted, some students leaving secondary education have poor or failing marks, but this only makes up 10 percent of those dropping out. Many students have excellent and superior grades. Thirty percent of high school dropouts in

Alberta hold A or B averages. Therefore, it is apparent that the individuals leaving school are not doing so because they are struggling with their marks.

Students may decide to drop out of school for any number of reasons. These reasons may include helping their families or starting families of their own, which usually appears to make sense at the time. Decisions are also supported by the people closest to them. Therefore, individuals feel that leaving school is a favourable choice. However, the consequences of not graduating are vast and can be severe. More often than not most 15 and 16 year olds do not realize or comprehend the outcomes stemming from their actions. These individuals truly believe they know what is best for them. Adolescents need guidance. They do not have the grasp of what lies ahead. Our youth need to be prepared as best as possible in an ever changing economy with no guarantees.

Mr. Speaker, the gap between dropouts and more educated individuals is expanding as opportunities increase for higher skilled workers, thus disappearing for the less skilled. The labour market appears dismal for young people that do not complete secondary education. According to a study by Human Resources Development Canada, dropouts, when compared to graduates, encounter unemployment, low incomes, increased dependencies on unemployment insurance, social insurance, and family allowances. Without a high school diploma most dropouts will end up in either dead-end jobs or relying on public supports. Once the individual makes the choice of leaving school, it may be difficult to escape from the economic and educational circumstances. Dropouts are restricted in their choices of job opportunities; thus, it becomes imperative for students to graduate. Increasing the mandatory attendance age would raise the likelihood of more students obtaining their diploma.

One issue that needs to be addressed when looking at Alberta's young people and secondary education is the noncompletion rate or, inversely, the number of individuals graduating from high school in Alberta. The noncompletion rate is 25 percent. Nationally 18 percent of young adults are leaving high school without graduating. These are not numbers that our province or our country should be proud of. Noncompletion rates have been decreasing across the province and the country; however, these numbers are still too high.

Several jurisdictions in the United States have increased their mandatory age requirements to 17 and 18 years old to augment the completion success of secondary education. New Brunswick remains the only province with a mandatory attendance of over 16 years. Students are required to attend until they graduate or until they turn 18. These initiatives have proven effective in the New Brunswick education system. The province has experienced a decline in dropout rates and an increase in student graduation rates.

Mr. Speaker, Alberta's education system ranks over other provinces as having the best performers. Charts of national test results and aptitude scores place Alberta above the other provinces. However, we need to address the issue of our province's high school noncompletion rate. Alberta has one of the highest dropout rates when compared to other provinces in the country. It will not matter that our education system is the best in the world if one-quarter of our youth are not able to reap the reward from it.

I encourage my colleagues to vote for the bill. Thank you.

4:40

**The Acting Speaker:** The hon. Member for Edmonton-Rutherford.

**Mr. McClelland:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Our colleague from Little Bow, when he brought this bill to the Legislature, I think, touched on a very important nerve, and that is the importance of education to the citizens of Alberta and in a larger sense the

importance of education to the citizens of Canada. Particularly, it gave those of us in the government an opportunity to speak to the notion of education in general and of our commitment to education and of the acknowledgment of the importance of education in a civil society. So Bill 203 is in my estimation a very important piece of legislation that goes far beyond the notion of merely keeping youngsters in school one additional year, although that one additional year is very, very important and does reflect the difference that a year makes over perhaps 40 years as our economy and as our culture has evolved, particularly in recent times.

Now, we often speak anecdotally about Alberta or the future being a knowledge-based economy and of the importance of investment in a knowledge-based economy for the future of our province. We're going to have to make the investment in a knowledge-based economy if we're to profit from it, and that investment is going to have to be at two levels. One is the investment at an educational infrastructure level and an investment in the dollars that go to fund education, both students and teachers, and the other is the investment in the idea that knowledge is a driver of the economy. In Alberta in the next generation we're going to be coming to grips with the fact that our economy has evolved from a resource-based economy to a knowledge-based economy, and it will be the application of knowledge in a knowledge-based economy which will be the driver of the economy in the next generation.

I see members opposite waving in encouragement and saying: right on; glad you finally touched that nerve. This is where we need to have this debate in our province. Are we going to make the investment in postsecondary education so as to be able to benefit down the road from the innovation and eureka science that comes out of the investment in education, and where is that going to come from?

Well, Mr. Speaker, we in Canada are a branch plant economy. There are very few head offices in our country as compared to any other country in the world. Alberta relative to the rest of Canada has a very few head offices. Investment in research, particularly at a postsecondary education level, does not come from corporations, by and large, in Canada and specifically not in Alberta. So there is only one place for that investment to come from, and that's from the public purse. That's why we must as a government and as a people make an investment in postsecondary and education as a whole.

Now, this specific piece of legislation says that we are going to encourage youngsters to stay in school, and previous speakers from both sides of the House have very clearly made the economic argument about how important it is for youngsters to stay in school. Members opposite and members on the same side of the House have quoted statistics that have clearly indicated that with every year of school achieved, the increase in income rises exponentially. It's incredible to see statistics that tell us that every year in school will raise the income opportunity of an individual by something in the order of 8 percent. What better investment can be made?

Now, we know that staying in school, particularly for some families and some individuals, is difficult. As was the case made by members on the other side of the aisle, economic opportunity and economic advantage has some statistical evidence to do with whether or not youngsters will stay in school. The best indicator of whether or not a child will go to university or will graduate from university is not the amount of money that's available in terms of student loans or the tuition that's required; the best indicator of whether or not a child will go to university is whether or not their parents have gone to university. That's the kind of world we live in. We're a mentoring society.

This legislation, then, says that we as a society place value, economic and human value, on the notion that our young people

should stay in school and be prepared for a life based on a knowledge-based economy. We also see in this the notion that not everyone is going to go or should necessarily go to university. Our society needs people that bring a diverse host of talents to the table, so we should not, in my opinion, feel that those who don't go to university are somehow failing either themselves or their family. There are all kinds of education opportunities that don't require university but do require application, and that's what this bill is all about. It's to say: look; if you find yourself in a difficult situation either in your economic circumstance or in your home life and the circumstance that you find yourself in is perhaps knocking around without the parental support that many children are able to take for granted, then the benefit of staying in school, no matter how it's achieved and no matter what struggle a youngster has to make to achieve it, is going to pay dividends in the long run. We all know how difficult it is for someone 16 or 17 years of age to understand and see beyond the horizon that, gosh, it's a worthwhile investment to stay in school, to complete it, to complete that grade, especially when their friends or contemporaries are perhaps no longer in school or pursuing other interests and the peer pressure is very strong to leave, or perhaps the parental guidance is not there and there isn't a mentor and there isn't someone to say: stay in school; it's worth it.

Friends opposite are indicating that they have experienced that very thing in their homes with their children, trying to keep their children in school. Haven't we all? What parent has not had their child come home and say: "I've had it. I want to quit. I want to move on"? But those children who benefit from the mentoring and the guidance of parents or loved ones that will see them through will benefit tremendously down the road. The question is: how do we reach the people? As was indicated by others who have spoken to this very important bill, how do we reach them to ensure that they understand the importance of graduation and of pursuing their educational foundation?

4:50

So this bill has as its core at least two distinct and separate and worthwhile objectives. The first is the human objective of the potential to realize the best that each of us as human beings can bring to the table, to realize our full potential, and there may be many young people who will need our collective help to achieve it. Then the other dimension is the economic benefit that we as a society gain from having a high mean, average, level of education. As others have said, there is a direct relation between achievement, economic and social, and education.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

**The Acting Speaker:** The hon. Member for Calgary-Currie.

**Mr. Lord:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It is an honour and a pleasure to rise today to support Bill 203, the School (Compulsory Attendance) Amendment Act, 2003, sponsored by the hon. Member for Little Bow. As we all know, the purpose of Bill 203 is to increase the mandatory school attendance age from 16 to 17 years old.

I would like to stress to the Assembly that I firmly believe that Bill 203 is a step – and I encourage this Assembly to view Bill 203 merely as a step – a step towards a bright and successful future for our children. There are other steps that will also need to be taken before we can succeed, but a journey of a thousand miles always begins with a single step, and maybe this is it. The point, as I see it, is to ensure that Alberta's children are provided with the necessary options and opportunities and the desire and ambition to succeed in life. Bill 203 is about the success of Albertans, their children and grandchildren and, therefore, the very success of this province.



Mr. Speaker, students leave school early for numerous reasons: the perception that education is irrelevant or for other mental, physical, or social reasons. More often than not the student that leaves school early is dealing with one or more of the many problems that adolescents face these days. The issues that Alberta students face are real problems, and they deserve to be taken seriously, but allowing our children to leave school, to leave the process that will supply them with the skills and knowledge to be successful in life is not the answer. By allowing students to leave school early, we are telling our children that it is acceptable to quit, acceptable to run away from their problems rather than tough it out and solve them. We should be teaching our young people how to cope with their difficulties and excel in spite of them and to learn that success in life depends on perseverance and facing up to the issues. After all, nothing comes without effort. You do not get large trophies for a nickel's worth of effort, and we want our kids to win large trophies in whatever endeavour in life they choose.

The commitment to children is clearly evident in this province. For instance, Alberta's Promise is directed at creating an environment that will allow children, youth, and students to succeed. The commitment that has been made includes concern for the health and safety of Alberta's children and youth at home and in the community. Our commitment also includes the promise that every child receives an education and has the support, care, and guidance from at least one caring adult as well as opening doors so that they can make a difference and serve others. Mr. Speaker, this overall commitment is expressed partly through our education system.

Mr. Speaker, I believe that Bill 203 like other policies is directed towards the success of our children and students in this province. It is our responsibility to help in developing that resource to its fullest potential. One of the government's highest priorities, in fact, is to secure a bright and successful future for all children and youth. I firmly believe that. Successes can be viewed in many different ways. I am certain that if you were to ask each and every member of this Assembly what success means to them, you would not get the same answer twice, but I am willing to guarantee that more often than not the root of any one person's definition of success is grounded in self-development, self-improvement, knowledge and education, and continuing that throughout life.

Mr. Speaker, if I may, I'd like to share with the Assembly a passage I once read: that man is a success who thinks his own thoughts, who sets his own course, who lives by his own standards and creates his own destiny. Of course, that applies to both men and women. I firmly believe what I just read, Mr. Speaker. However, I also firmly believe that society, government, and, most importantly, family play a large role in preparing children, youth, and students for the roads that they will travel in their lives. It is the responsibility of mentors, teachers, and family to prepare today's youth for what lies ahead, guiding them in making good life choices and decisions. By doing this, we will ensure that they can and will succeed on their own and be their own person, thinking their own thoughts and creating their own destinies.

Mr. Speaker, Alberta's learning system is outstanding. Our teachers are caring and kind. Our students have excelled at national and international levels. Our curriculum is one of a kind and improving every day. Our education system should not be taken for granted. We have a responsibility to ensure that students don't lightly refuse the opportunities and the options that we are able to provide for them and which so many in the world do not have.

Mr. Speaker, in 1981 only 60 percent of all 19 year olds in Alberta completed high school, which compared to 65 percent of all 19 year olds across Canada. We were quite a bit lower than across Canada. Five years later, in 1986, Alberta's high school completion rate for

19 year olds had risen to 64 percent. Canada's average for the same age group was 68 percent. Ten years later, in 1996, 68 percent of Albertans aged 19 years had completed high school, but Canada's average was 72 percent for the same age group, and it's still the same degree higher.

Mr. Speaker, Alberta is the financial envy of the country. Our balanced budget and debt-free future is something I'm sure we are all very proud of. It is time to strive for excellence in all other areas as well. I commend Alberta Learning's 2002 to 2005 business plan, which has set a target for improving high school completion by 19 year olds from 72 percent to 75 percent. I would also like to recognize the efforts they have made in providing opportunities for mature students who may have left school before they had obtained a diploma or want to upgrade their classes or enter a postsecondary institution. Whatever the reason I commend the work that they have done to ensure that all Albertans have access to the education they deserve.

Times are changing. The technology advancements that have occurred in the past 20 years are truly amazing. These advancements have also drastically changed the world in which we live. Thirty years ago things were a lot simpler. Your father taught you how to farm, just as his father had taught him. You could fix your own car from what you had learned in shop class or just from messing around at home.

Mr. Speaker, I believe that the success of any person is dependent on their knowledge, and when it comes to knowledge, the more the better without limit. Alberta's market is competitive on a global scale, but if this province is going to succeed, Albertans have to succeed in the new world. A high school education will give today's youth the option to continue their studies at a postsecondary institution. They may not decide to follow that path immediately after graduation, but at least we should have that option available to them.

To be competitive in the global marketplace, the products that Alberta produces, what we manufacture here, need to be of the highest quality. Those high-quality products, the goods and services, come from research and passing that information on to producers who will ultimately manufacture it. Whether it's a mechanic, a farmer, a nurse, a doctor, an engineer, or any other trade or occupation, the market is continuously changing, and we must stay competitive and have lifelong learning if we're going to change with it.

Mr. Speaker, Bill 203 ensures that Alberta's youth will have the option to stay competitive. The statistics show that the longer a student stays in school, the more likely they are to complete high school. Let Bill 203 be the first step, the first of many necessary steps in providing the opportunity of success for all Alberta students. I call on members of the Assembly to support this bill.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

**The Acting Speaker:** The hon. Member for Vermilion-Lloydminster.

**Mr. Snelgrove:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Well, it's indeed an interesting discussion we've had today on Bill 203, and I certainly understand and applaud the hon. Member for Little Bow's initiative in bringing this bill forward. However, I can't support it because I think it takes a very simplistic view of what might be wrong with the education system.

I think the question we need to ask ourselves when we're dealing with an issue like this is: why aren't the kids staying in school? I guess maybe I'm from the old school. I think you can lead a horse to water, but you can't make him drink. I really don't know what

will be accomplished by legislating someone who doesn't want to be in school, who shows very little interest, who contributes nothing to the classroom or to his own education. I fail to see how passing legislation that requires them to be there moves the education system along our lofty goals. I think we have to look at it from the point of view of: why would someone who is 17 not want to be in school? Either it is because he's got more serious troubles in his life than we possibly know or the school program isn't teaching him something that attracts his interest or provides him with any type of challenge.

5:00

**Mr. Lund:** How about her?

**Mr. Snelgrove:** Or her. You bet.

So I think we have to look at what we are doing with our high school education now that forces some of the kids to make a choice at that stage of life and say: there's nothing there for me; it's better out there. I think it brings around the whole discussion about the development of career training and of trades and stuff taught in co-operation or in conjunction with high school curriculum. Maybe we have to rethink the thought that a successful high school graduate has five or six of the 30 subjects or whatever Alberta Learning has at this point. It was five 30 subjects when I graduated, but that's a little while ago.

I think that for a high school graduate now, if he were to have his second year of mechanics or his second year of electrical with a base knowledge of fundamental learning in math and the other appropriate sciences, maybe from the point of view of some students that's more appropriate, and I would think it is. I know many of the people that started school with me that left early and entered the trades, particularly at that time mechanics, or people that may have left and joined the oil patch. Right now many of these are extremely successful people with very good, solid families and actually have become pillars of their community without the grade 12 diploma.

So I have to really wonder about legislating someone to stay in school longer without looking at the root cause of why they're not wanting to stay there. I don't disagree with any of the hon. members who have said how critical an education is, and I don't think that is connected to a bill legislating people to stay in school longer. If, in fact, it were the case and it were better, why wouldn't we have it legislated right till 18? You know, is grade 10 that much better off than grade 9? I don't know. I mean, if education is something that you can legislate people to attend and do well in or at least learn something, then why are we quitting one grade higher and not two? Pretty well all the kids in my children's grades are going to be at least 18 or 19 before they complete grade 12, so I'm not sure why we would say: well, let's just go one more year.

**Mr. VanderBurg:** Because I was married when I was 18. That's why.

**Mr. Snelgrove:** Well, we do make mistakes, George, that we have to live with.

I think there are other incentives you can throw at the system. With a child who's not attending school, I don't believe the family should be eligible for family allowance. I don't think he should be eligible for the tax deduction. I think that if you're not in school, then you should be working. I think that that in itself is more of a way for the family to stay in touch with a child or at least recognize, you know, that we do pay in this world for successes and not attendance. I mean, if you want to work on them, let's work on the low-income assistance withdrawal or the loss of your dependent tax

deduction or through some form where there's a direct relationship to the dollars involved instead of simply stating: well, we're going to make him stay in school. He can be a little troublemaker for another year and cost the taxpayers another \$4,000 or \$5,000, but we'll feel better because he made 17 before he dropped out. I just don't think that's what we need to do.

I think we need to relook at what schools provide students. I think we need to get current. I mean, they say now that you may trade your occupation two or three times in a lifetime, so coming out of school may prepare you for what university skills are now, but is that preparing our next generation for what's needed next? I don't know. I think that the thing it tells us is that some kids aren't getting what they need in school, and I don't think legislating them to stay there does one bit of good.

With that compelling argument in front of you now, Mr. Speaker, I would take this opportunity to ask the question of the House as to whether I've convinced all the clear thinkers or not.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

**The Acting Speaker:** The hon. Member for Little Bow to close debate.

**Mr. McFarland:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I know that everyone wants to vote on the matter. I just want to take a few minutes to thank each and every one of you who contributed to the debate.

I have, maybe, one point that I'd like to bring to everyone's attention. With the exception of the Member for Wainwright, most all of us that are currently here today probably were considered pretty fortunate if we got through grade 12 and took some sort of postsecondary. The youngest of the MLAs here is also a university graduate and understands the importance, as all of us do, of education. But when thinking about this bill, I thought back to 1969.

**Mr. Norris:** That was a good year.

**Mr. McFarland:** Yeah, it was. And you liked the roadrunner and lots of other things. That would be the Minister of Economic Development.

Anyway, back in 1969 Dr. Christiaan Barnard was experimenting with putting a heart into a monkey, and it wasn't too long after that that we put a man on the moon. All through these years the legal age to leave school, Mr. Speaker, never changed at all. We're now in the 21st century. They say that education and knowledge is doubling every 17 to 36 months, depending on who you talk to. I think it is of utmost importance for any student anywhere, regardless of cultural, religious, societal, economic, financial considerations, to realize that it is so important to be in the 21st century, to take the opportunity to avail yourself of as much education as possible, and that instead of looking at 16 or 17 as the year that you quit learning more, you look at your lifetime as being a total learning experience.

Thanks to everyone for their participation in the debate, and I would call the question. Thank you.

[Motion carried; Bill 203 read a second time]

#### Bill 204

#### Insurance (Accident Insurance Benefits) Amendment Act, 2003

**Rev. Abbott:** Mr. Speaker, it gives me great pleasure to introduce Bill 204, the Insurance (Accident Insurance Benefits) Amendment Act, 2003, to the Assembly this afternoon. There has been over the

last while quite a bit of debate over the workings of the insurance industry as well as litigation surrounding insurance claims. It is my hope that this bill can once and for all protect the granting of section B benefits from the often contentious battles that insurance companies and injury lawyers get into over benefits that a client ought to receive.

Mr. Speaker, before I get into the nuts and bolts of my remarks, I'd like to outline my points briefly. First, I'll explain Bill 204 and what it would do to the Insurance Act as well as the effect it would have on the ground. Second, I'll make the claim that Bill 204, most importantly, puts claimants back at the centre of insurance disputes. It says clearly that claimants who pay for the insurance matter most, not their lawyers and not their insurance companies. Finally, I'll make a few remarks about the importance of independent medical examinations. I'll argue forcefully that it's time we made sure that the insurance world treats claimants fairly instead of as pawns to be moved about a chessboard by injury lawyers and insurance companies.

On my first point, the purpose of Bill 204 is to amend the Insurance Act to increase the limit on section B medical benefits delivered to those who have been in an automobile accident to \$25,000 over four years from the current level of \$10,000 over two years. Bill 204 also includes provisions for a dispute arbitration mechanism between insurance companies and claimants receiving section B medical benefits. Mr. Speaker, section B benefits are medical benefits that must be delivered by insurance companies to any person who has been in an automobile accident. It does not matter if the person is responsible for the accident; these benefits must be delivered. Currently the Insurance Act requires insurance companies to pay up to \$10,000 in medical costs and \$500 in chiropractic costs over a two-year period to any person who accesses his or her section B benefits. Only the Yukon, which requires insurance companies to pay \$10,000 and zero in chiropractic services, ranks lower than Alberta in delivering these medical benefits.

5:10

**An Hon. Member:** How can that be?

**Rev. Abbott:** I know. It's a shame.

Five provinces and territories – Newfoundland, Nunavut, Northwest Territories, Nova Scotia, and PEI – require insurance companies to pay up to \$25,000 in medical costs over a four-year period. All other jurisdictions are higher, ranging from \$50,000 over four years to unlimited benefits over an unlimited time period. The provinces with the higher limits are all running no-fault insurance systems or systems that are closer to no-fault, whereas Alberta is, of course, closer to the tort system, Mr. Speaker.

Given that Alberta's system retains elements of a tort system for settling insurance disputes, it's time that Alberta joined at least the minimum set of provinces and introduced section B benefits like those asked for in Bill 204. This is only fair, Mr. Speaker, and it leads to my second point.

Bill 204 seeks to start a process that would put consumers at the centre of the insurance industry once again. Mr. Speaker, this bill speaks to the nature of a contract. From the point of view of an insurance consumer you are buying insurance to make sure that if you are injured, you are taken care of medically, and if you cause an injury to another person, the company will pay for it. What sort of message does it send for an insurance company to not pay for medical expenses, especially considering that section B benefits are mandatory and must be bought by consumers? Now, this is not to

suggest that insurance companies should be left wide open to anybody who can fake an injury. It is, however, to suggest that when a legitimate claim for medical expenses is presented, insurance companies should be there for their consumers to provide them with the adequate services needed to have their medical problems solved. We do not want this to fall back onto the taxpayers of Alberta or onto the individual clients having to pay out of pocket once they have purchased insurance to do that for them. This was the logic behind raising section B rates from \$5,000 to \$10,000 only five years ago, and it's also the logic behind this bill today.

Now, Mr. Speaker, an objection that may be raised here is that the average section B payout is something like \$3,700. Given this, members might be tempted to ask why we should be raising section B benefits to \$25,000. Well, I'll respond by saying that the \$3,700 is an average, and we all know what can happen with averages: most people end up low while others end up high, and taken together, we get that average.

Well, to take an extreme example, when I got in an automobile accident, I went to a couple of physiotherapy sessions. I soon figured out that I had no need to be there, and I stopped going. I then sent in a very, very small section B claim to my insurance company – I think it was about \$80, Mr. Speaker – and I was done with the process. On the other hand, someone could get into an accident, really crank their neck or break some limbs or ligaments and have to send in a massive claim, well over the \$10,000 limit. So, yes, the average claim does come out to something like \$3,700 in those cases, but that disregards the massive claims of some consumers like the example I just suggested. So we see that this raise is designed primarily for those people who are really injured and cannot pay.

Mr. Speaker, this brings me to my third point. Regarding independent medical examiners, it is this section of Bill 204 that I believe really puts consumers back at the heart of insurance concerns. As it stands currently, any insurance company wishing to stop paying medical benefits to claimants can send claimants to a doctor of the company's choice . . .

**The Acting Speaker:** I hesitate to interrupt the hon. Member for Drayton Valley-Calmar, but under Standing Order 19(1)(c) I must now put the question on the following motion for consideration of Her Honour the Lieutenant Governor's speech.

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: Ms Haley]

[Motion carried]

head: **Government Motions**

**Address in Reply to Speech from the Throne**

- Mr. Zwozdesky on behalf of Mr. Klein moved:  
Be it resolved that the address in reply to the Speech from the

Throne be engrossed and presented to her Honour the Honourable the Lieutenant Governor by such members of the Assembly as are members of the Executive Council.

[Motion carried]

**The Acting Speaker:** The hon. Deputy Government House Leader.

**Mr. Zwozdesky:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I would move that we now call it 5:30 and adjourn until 8 this evening.

[Motion carried; the Assembly adjourned at 5:15 p.m.]