

Legislative Assembly of Alberta

Title: **Monday, March 24, 2003** **1:30 p.m.**
 Date: 03/03/24
 [The Speaker in the chair]

head: **Prayers**

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

Let us pray. Our Father, we confidently ask for Your strength and encouragement in our service of You through our service of others. We ask for Your gift of wisdom to guide us in making good laws and good decisions for the present and the future of Alberta. Amen.

Now, would you please join in the singing of our national anthem. We'll be led today by Mr. Paul Lorieau, and would you please feel free to participate in the language of your choice.

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.

The Speaker: Please be seated.

head: **Introduction of Visitors**

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Municipal Affairs.

Mr. Boutilier: Well, thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure today to introduce two guests sitting in the Speaker's gallery today. His Worship Mayor Dave Bronconnier is here representing Alberta's largest city, the city of Calgary. I'd like to introduce him as well as his chief of staff, Marc Henry. I'd like to invite both to rise and receive the warm welcome of the Assembly.

head: **Introduction of Guests**

Mrs. McClellan: This morning I had the opportunity, with my colleague from Olds-Didsbury-Three Hills, to attend the investiture of lifesaving honours. It is my honour and pleasure to introduce to you and through you to members of the Assembly two young men who received that honour along with a friend of theirs who was unable to be with us in the Legislature. They were honoured for saving a friend of theirs from icy water, actually at the seventh hole of the Drumheller golf course. I told the young men that we always thought the back nine was the dangerous part. These young men joined a number of others today in being honoured for extraordinary efforts to save a life. I will first introduce the two young men and their guests in your gallery. We have Kyle Kohut and Jeff Potter. These are the young men, with their friend Ben Kirby, who saved this young man's life. They're accompanied by John Kohut, Blair Potter, and Jarred Potter in your gallery, Mr. Speaker. With your permission – the balance of their guests are in the members' gallery – in the interests of time I would ask them to stand as well: Sandra Kohut, Liz Potter, Carli Samuel, Brittney James, Karly Kohut, and Jennifer Potter. Would you please give our guests a very warm welcome.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Olds-Didsbury-Three Hills.

Mr. Marz: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm very proud today to introduce to you and through you to members of the Assembly five constituents from Olds-Didsbury-Three Hills. I'd like them to stand as I call their names. First, Bev Oliver from Three Hills. She was at the same awards this morning that the Deputy Premier spoke of, where she received her bar to the service medal for eight years of volunteer service. We have Bob and Anna Thompson. Bob is a member of the David Thompson health authority from the Trochu area. They are very proud to have with them their daughter Deanna, who also received an award this morning, the M.G. Griffiths plaque, which is the highest bravery award presented by the Royal Life Saving Society, for Deanna's work in Bali during the terrorist attacks on October 12 of last year, where she narrowly escaped the bombing but reacted very quickly in helping to save lives and treat many of the injured. They are all seated in your gallery accompanied by my lovely wife, Janis, and I would ask them all to stand and receive the very warm welcome of this Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Redwater.

Mr. Broda: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. On your behalf it's my pleasure to rise today to introduce to you and through you to the members of this Assembly 81 special guests, 67 students and 14 adults: teachers Mr. McDonald, Mrs. Chapotelle, parent helpers Mrs. Redl, Mrs. Ducharme, Miss Hill, Mrs. Gatzki, Mr. Stott, Mrs. Wahlund, Mrs. Rempel, Mrs. de Bruijn, Mrs. Steckly, Mrs. Miller, Mrs. Dubrûle, and Mrs. O'Brien. They're seated, I believe, in both galleries, and I'd ask them to please rise and receive the warm welcome of this Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Economic Development.

Mr. Norris: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It does give me a great deal of pleasure to rise on this glorious Alberta day and introduce to you and through you some few individuals from our Economic Development communications branch, a job not without its challenges. They are visiting the House today, and I'd ask them to rise as I call their names and be recognized: Chantal Beesley, Trina Dool, Rebecca Gillham, Connie Hill, and my old high school pal Ken Klatchuk. Would you please rise and receive the warm welcome of the House today.

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

Ms Blakeman: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I'm very pleased and honoured today to be able to introduce to you and through you to all members of the Assembly a very sharp group of students who attend John A. McDougall school in my riding of Edmonton-Centre. They're seated in the public gallery. I've already met with them. They're very aware of current issues like smoking and VLTs. With them today are two instructors, Ms Dhyana Roche and Miss Kym Beres, and I would ask them all to please rise and accept the warm welcome of the Assembly.

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

Dr. Pannu: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I'm delighted to introduce to you and through you to all members of this House Mrs. Hayward from Edmonton. She's very concerned about the financial crisis that our public school system faces today and has been facing for some years. Mrs. Hayward is a parent of five children and

grandparent of 11. Mrs. Hayward's grandchildren attend five different schools, and she's active with each of the schools. She's a tireless volunteer and passionate supporter of adequately funded public schools. Mrs. Hayward is seated in the members' gallery, and I will now request her to please rise and receive the warm welcome of the Assembly.

1:40

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

Dr. Taft: Thanks, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure to introduce to you a guest who's seated in the members' gallery. She's a constituent of mine, a mother of four, a passionate advocate of public education, and a member of the Windsor Park school committee. I would ask all members of the Assembly to give Melanie Shapiro a warm welcome. If you would stand, please, Melanie.

Thank you very much.

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

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased to introduce to you and through you to this Assembly one of the very active people in the New Democratic Party. Erica Bullwinkle is the first vice-president of the Alberta New Democrats. She took part on Saturday, along with 18,000 other people, in the rally that ended at this Legislature, and she's here this afternoon to listen to the parties' positions on the current situation in the Middle East. I would ask Erica Bullwinkle to please rise and receive the warm welcome of the Assembly.

head: **Ministerial Statements**

The Speaker: The hon. the Premier.

War in Iraq

Mr. Klein: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Today I rise to comment on the strong friendship that Alberta has with Canada's closest ally and neighbour, the United States. As American troops put their lives on the line across the world to defend very fundamental principles that Albertans share with the United States, I believe that it is important that our friends in the U.S. hear voices of friendship and support from abroad. Equally important is a message of support for troops from Britain and Australia, our friends in the Commonwealth. They, too, are at the front lines of this conflict, and our prayers are with them.

Mr. Speaker, Albertans have strong ties with the United States. These ties extend far beyond economic interests. The ties between Alberta and the U.S. are rooted in much common history, a tradition of interchange of ideas, and shared values. Today, as conflict rages in Iraq, the thoughts of Albertans, including me and everyone in the government caucus, are not on economic issues. Our thoughts are with the troops, their families, and the American people, who are risking so much in order to uphold what so many believe in.

Our thoughts are also with the people of Iraq, a people with a long and honourable history of contributions to civilization, the arts, and human progress. We pray that peace will come quickly to their nation and that the result of this conflict will be lasting freedom and prosperity for them.

Certainly, Mr. Speaker, war is a horrible thing. Television images that Albertans and people around the world have seen over the last few days are powerful, sobering reminders of the ugliness that is war. These images and the very idea of war are stirring passionate emotions among Albertans and people across the globe. There are

profound differences of opinion among people as to whether this conflict is necessary or justified, and I respect and I'm sure all members of this Legislature respect the views of those who disagree with that conflict. I know that people who oppose this war speak honestly and from the heart.

For me our friendship with the United States means that we must send a message of support and support for other partners of the coalition. This does not mean that I advocate the use of Canadian troops in the conflict. I don't even know if Canadian troops have been requested. There are Canadian military personnel in the region, and our thoughts today are for their safety and the well-being of their families. In regard to the Iraq conflict the deployment of the Canadian military is a matter strictly for the federal government, and I will respect their decisions on the issue.

My message, Mr. Speaker, is one of friendship. It is a message of support for our neighbours and friends in the United States. It is the hope that the conflict will end as soon as possible and that coalition troops will return home to the arms of their families safely and soon. It's the wish that the values all free peoples share, values such as freedom of expression, of belief, of opportunity, will echo in Iraq and indeed across the world as the result of this conflict.

Thank you.

Dr. Nicol: We live in a dangerous and confusing time, Mr. Speaker. With the events of September 11 our world has fundamentally changed. We have entered a new era with new challenges, challenges which arise from actions of individual leaders like Osama bin Laden and Saddam Hussein. How we respond to those challenges will determine what sort of world we leave to our children.

What this new world needs, Mr. Speaker, is leadership, but that leadership must come through the United Nations, not from one nation acting alone. We recognize that the United States is our friend and ally. Many people say you should stick by your friends during this difficult time. That is true. Through the war on terrorism we have stuck by our friends.

The Official Opposition believes that leadership in the new age must be found in the rule of law. At the international level the United Nations is the organization that the world has chosen to embody and apply that rule of law. If we espouse our love for freedom and democracy, then we must respect the fundamental principles on which democracy is based. Provincial and federal politicians in Canada know the importance of the rule of law. We practise it every day. Canada is governed by the Constitution, that sets out the powers of the federal and provincial governments. Just as it would be wrong for the federal government to intrude into matters of provincial jurisdiction, so too it is wrong for the provincial government to intrude into matters of federal jurisdiction. Provincial leaders should address their concerns of federal jurisdiction to the government of Canada, not to representatives of foreign governments.

Mr. Speaker, the democracies of the world are expected to provide leadership and guidance to a postwar Iraq. How can we provide that guidance if we don't respect the rule of law at home or abroad?

In closing, Mr. Speaker, the Official Opposition sends their thoughts and prayers to the men and women serving with the U.S., British, and Australian forces, to their families, to the families of the people of Iraq who suffer from this action, and to our own men and women in the Canadian armed forces, who continue the fight on terrorism.

When we speak of friendship, we should not forget the important ties that many Muslim communities in Alberta and Canada feel to the people of Iraq. War will bring a great deal of suffering and strife to that troubled region. It is important that Canada be there through

the United Nations to help with the reconstruction of Iraqi communities. This action would be consistent with Canada's long-term commitment to peacekeeping and peace building through the United Nations.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Mason: Mr. Speaker, I would request unanimous consent from the Assembly so that the leader of the New Democrat opposition can reply to the Premier's statement.

[Unanimous consent granted]

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

Dr. Pannu: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I thank the House and you for this opportunity for me to make a statement on this very important issue of historic importance to all of us. I'm pleased that the Premier has chosen to retreat from some of his more inflammatory statements last week in support of the war against Iraq and his statements opposing the federal government's decision to not participate in what is an illegal and unnecessary war.

Last Saturday tens of thousands of Albertans marched peacefully against the decision of the Bush and Blair administrations to launch this war of invasion and occupation. This included 18,000 Edmontonians in the largest-ever rally in the history of this province. These Albertans marched in solidarity with millions of U.S. and British citizens who disagree with their governments on this war. These citizens realize that this war of aggression violates the UN charter and will only make the world less secure and less stable.

My New Democrat colleague and I, Mr. Speaker, maintain that the Premier should not have sent a letter to the U.S. ambassador purporting to speak on behalf of Albertans in expressing support for the Bush administration's decision to launch the Iraq war. This was clearly inappropriate for a provincial Premier, who is normally very sensitive about federal intrusions into Alberta's jurisdiction. I therefore urge the Premier to send a follow-up letter to the U.S. ambassador clarifying that he respects the decision and the jurisdiction of the Canadian government to not participate in the war against Iraq.

Like the Premier I, too, wish for a speedy end to this conflict, but surely the best way for this to happen is for the U.S. government and its allies to stop the war and withdraw from the territory of Iraq. An immediate end to this unjust, unnecessary, and unacceptable war of aggression is imperative, Mr. Speaker.

Thank you very much.

head: 1:50

Oral Question Period

Time Allocation

Dr. Nicol: Mr. Speaker, democratic government means that the people send members of all parties to the Legislature to debate matters of great public importance. Here in Alberta, however, this freedom is threatened by a government limiting debate on three bills affecting many citizens and arrogantly dismissing anyone who dares to oppose them. My question to the Premier: what's your government policy on when time allotment should be used?

Mr. Klein: Time allotment should be used, Mr. Speaker, when we have clear indication from the Liberal opposition that they're going to filibuster and hold up the business of the people of this province. Relative to one bill – I'm not sure which one it was; I think it was Bill 3 – I think they've already had seven hours of debate. Now, there are only seven of them. You know, that's an average of one

hour each. I can't imagine what they can possibly say in seven times one hour that hasn't been said before.

His Worship, the mayor of the city of Calgary, is in the gallery today. I don't know if the rules have changed, but I recall that at city hall debate was limited to five minutes per person. You know, if you can't say what you need to say in five minutes, then there's no use saying it at all. They've had seven hours already.

Dr. Nicol: To the Premier: how can you shut off the debate when you haven't yet heard or seen all the amendments we're proposing on those bills?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, they had lots of time to bring their amendments. You know, some amendments are rational, but amendments are simply another tool of filibuster. Nuisance and frivolous amendments are another rule of filibuster so they can talk again another seven hours on each and every amendment. When they keep bringing amendments forward and opportunity to speak and speak and speak again, that to me is a filibuster.

Dr. Nicol: To the Premier: if Bill 27 was so time sensitive, why wasn't that bill on health labour relations introduced at the start of the session instead of later?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, there is an Order Paper, and the Liberal opposition is privy to the Order Paper each and every day. We try to bring these bills forward as quickly as we can, but there is a process. There is a process in terms of getting a bill ready. Now, there are 47, I believe, pieces of legislation on this spring's Order Paper. Each of those pieces of legislation, since they are government bills and private members' bills – there are, well, 47 government bills, and I don't know how many private members' bills; many, many. But here is the process – and they will never know what the process is because they'll never be in government . . .

Mr. MacDonald: Don't be too arrogant.

Mr. Klein: No, I'm not being arrogant. Lookit; you went down from 32 to 17, and now you're down to seven. Next time around you'll be down to none.

Mr. Mason: We've got nowhere to go but up, Ralph, so watch out for us.

Mr. Klein: Just wait and see.

Education Funding

Dr. Nicol: When it comes to funding for education, this government has broken more promises than it has kept. According to the Minister of Learning's press release of April 25, 2001, in addition to funding for teachers' salaries, school boards were promised increased funding for local priorities such as enhanced literacy, class sizes, and increasing costs in noninstructional areas such as transportation and operations and maintenance. The school boards dedicated the grant increase of 3 and a half percent to the classroom, following exactly the minister's directions. To the Minister of Learning: given that school boards spent this money on the classroom, as directed, where does the minister think the school boards will get the money for the teachers' salaries?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Dr. Oberg: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I do not have the press release from two years ago in front of me, but I do believe it says that after consultation with the ATA and with school boards there would be money available potentially for the classroom. I will attempt to get a copy of the actual press release and be able to read it and elucidate the Assembly as to what it actually said.

Dr. Nicol: Again to the Minister of Learning: is the minister accusing the school boards of not being open about their finances when they say that there's no money left to fund the arbitrated settlement with teachers?

Dr. Oberg: Mr. Speaker, I think the hon. Leader of the Opposition is referring to what we have done in Edmonton, and I think he will be pleasantly or unpleasantly surprised when the audit comes back. We have some schools, for example, that are showing utilization rates of anywhere from 24 to 25 percent. We've got to take a very serious look at some of these things. We have school programs in schools that have 35 students in them. Even in rural Alberta that program would not have continued.

Mr. Speaker, I would just ask that the hon. Leader of the Opposition wait until we have the audit. I'm hoping that the audit will be in by the end of next week. My people are now telling me that the actual audit itself will be approximately 200 pages, so I don't know if we will have it by the end of this week.

Dr. Nicol: Again to the Minister of Learning: will the minister prevent the teacher layoffs and cutbacks planned in schools across Alberta and finally fund the arbitrated salary agreement?

Dr. Oberg: Mr. Speaker, there are two parts to that question that I'd like to respond to. First of all, the part about funding the actual settlement: there was \$298 million given for a settlement of \$260 million, and I've said that numerous times in this Assembly.

There is one other point that I hope the hon. Leader of the Opposition will find interesting, and that is that there have been, apparently, layoff notices, or there have been teachers that have been singled out to be laid off in Edmonton. A very interesting fact is that Edmonton public does not know how many teachers will be retiring until the end of May, so it seems a little bit premature to be putting in layoff notices when they don't know – they don't know – what number will be retiring due to attrition.

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

Energy Deregulation

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Energy deregulation is the most spectacular policy failure of this Progressive Conservative government. Business owners are so upset. They say: "The bills are so big; I don't like to open them up until they're due. Why stress myself out?" My first question is to the Premier. Given that an owner of a furniture store had an electricity bill of \$7,000 in 2001, \$12,500 in 2002, and if the current prices continue will have a \$24,000 bill at the end of this year, how can the Premier continue to claim that energy deregulation has reduced the cost of electricity for this and other small business owners across this province?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, I noted that the hon. member used "if," but he doesn't mention if prices go down what will happen. If prices go down, then, you know what? They will go on to another issue. You just watch and see. You see, they watch the political winds, and

whatever way the political winds blow, then they make a lot of noise, but as soon as the situation quiets down – so if the price goes down, so will the rhetoric.

So I say to that business owner: you look at things overall. You look at a very low taxation regime. You look at a government that plays fair, that gets out of the way of business to let them conduct business. You look at the very, very high productivity rate that we have in this province. You look at numerous other things that make up the Alberta advantage – no payroll tax, no sales tax, very low corporate tax, no capital tax, all of these things that Liberal and ND socialist governments have in other jurisdictions – and then you sort of figure out, which they haven't been able to do yet, why thousands of businesses are moving to this province.

2:00

Mr. MacDonald: It's been a mistake, and you know it.

Again to the Premier: given that in 2003 the year-to-date wholesale price for electricity is 8.9 cents a kilowatt – and that is 3 cents a kilowatt higher than it was last year – when can small business owners in Edmonton expect this mythical price of yours to come into effect? When are prices going to go down instead of up?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, prices will go down when the price of gas comes down, when the cost of generating electricity comes down, as more competition comes onstream. It will come down. I would remind the hon. member that it was the business community that supported strongly the notion of deregulation. Absolutely. When it was first introduced in 1995, we had strong support from the chambers of commerce in this province and from the private sector generally. You know, it's so typical of the Liberals to focus on the negative impacts of anything, because that's where their minds are. Their minds are in a negative mode.

To speak about the positives in this province, I'll call on the Minister of Economic Development.

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Norris: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. As the Premier indicated, there are a lot of facts that I would like to put on the table because the fiction that seems to emanate over there is confusing, muddying the water.

I would like to just point out as a small business owner why people set up in Alberta. It's a great place to do business. In Alberta unemployment in the last two years has risen to the highest, Mr. Speaker, anywhere in Canada.* The number of new jobs is the highest of anywhere in Canada. This should very much interest the hon. member opposite. [interjections] Hey, hey, hey, fellows. The largest increase . . .

The Speaker: That's my job to say hey, hey, hey.

Hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar, your last question.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. This to the Minister of Economic Development. How can this minister state that entrepreneurs must accept more responsibility for high energy prices when this Progressive Conservative government's energy deregulation policy is to blame?

Mr. Norris: Well, now I'm back up, sir. I'll give you the bottom line. Mr. Speaker, I would like to preface this because this is very important for everybody to understand, including the Liberals. There are concerns in the small and medium and large business communities. There's no doubt about that. We are not going to

*See p. 668, right col., para. 1

deny that. But the bottom line is that all the economic indicators that everybody looks for in Canada are the best in Alberta.

I want to talk about the one that the hon. member was referring to, saying that businesses are in turmoil, that they're having trouble. The largest number of increases in small business in all of Canada, Mr. Speaker, took place – guess where? – in Alberta. So I would ask the hon. members opposite: instead of focusing on one piece of the puzzle, which is an important one, why don't you look at the whole package that this government I think quite brilliantly has put together that makes it the best business environment in the country, no ifs, ands, or buts about it?

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Rutherford.

Education Funding

(continued)

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. For the last few months school boards, parents, community groups have all been trying to warn this government that if funding for education doesn't increase beyond the planned 2 percent, massive service cuts will occur in our schools. Another example of how this government is letting Edmonton down: Edmonton Tory MLAs are telling trustees to not expect anything beyond a 2 percent increase for the next budget year. With inflation over 7 percent, an arbitrated teachers' settlement of 14 percent, skyrocketing utility costs, and a host of other factors driving up costs, this would represent a slap in the face of Edmontonians who believed that they were getting a seat at the table when they voted Tory. My questions are to the Minister of Learning. How can the minister defend a 2 percent increase for Edmonton public when he knows this will mean ballooning class sizes in Edmonton schools?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Dr. Oberg: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I will not be commenting on the budget, as the budget is going to be laid down in this Assembly on April 8. What I will do, though, is, if I can, read a press release from budget 2001.

"I look to the school boards and the Alberta Teachers Association to ensure these significant resources are maximized – giving a fair [settlement] to teachers and addressing classroom needs."

The bottom line is that the budget is on April 8, and I would ask that the hon. member wait to ask questions on the budget until it's actually tabled.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Maybe the minister can tell the House if he will be advocating in cabinet for a funding increase of more than 2 percent for Edmonton schools.

Dr. Oberg: Mr. Speaker, one of the things that occurs in government is a thing called cabinet . . .

An Hon. Member: Secrecy.

Dr. Oberg: Well, basically, the things that are said in cabinet must stay in cabinet, and that's something that the hon. member will probably never see in Alberta. What is said in cabinet remains in cabinet. What is said in Treasury Board remains in Treasury Board.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. To the minister again: can the minister confirm that if in the last few days or weeks he or any Edmonton MLA considered the question of firing the Edmonton public school trustees for making public the deficit the board faces and the effect that that would have on our schools?

Dr. Oberg: Mr. Speaker, I believe there are about two or three questions there. The first question, I do not respond to innuendo that has been written in the newspaper. The second question is about a potential deficit, and I've said numerous times in this Assembly that there will be an audit that will be done by, again, probably not the end of this week because it is lengthier than we thought, but there will be the deficit that will be looked at at that time if indeed there is a deficit, and how that will be dealt with will be decided at that time. So that is coming soon, and hopefully I'll be able to give the hon. member a better answer at that time.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Rutherford, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview.

Municipal Infrastructure

Mr. McClelland: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My question is to the Minister of Municipal Affairs. Municipalities, particularly Alberta's major cities, have persistent and increasing demands to provide infrastructure and other services due to the enormous growth pressures of our buoyant economy. My question: does the minister recognize these problems, and what's being done to address them?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Boutilier: Yes. Well, to follow up on some of the earlier comments by the Minister of Economic Development, over the last nine years Alberta has been the fastest growing province in Canada, and of course the 360 municipalities that fall under municipal government are in fact growing each and every day and very rapidly. In fact, just this morning His Worship the mayor of Calgary as well as the mayor of Edmonton as well as the president of the AUMA, representing over 200 municipalities, as well as the president of the AAMD and C for municipal districts and counties – we met with them in partnership with developers, with the UDI group, the Urban Development Institute, and many others relative to: how do we grow the pie? As you know, Mr. Speaker, when people come to Alberta, the fastest growing province in our country, they don't bring their municipal infrastructure with them. What we were doing today in our workshop was looking at potential enabling legislation, in partnership with those developers, to grow the pie to deal with the kinds of municipal infrastructure pressures that cities such as Calgary and Edmonton are facing.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. McClelland: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My final supplementary question is to the same minister. Does the minister have a road map or a blueprint by which achievement to meet these ends will be and can be measured?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

2:10

Mr. Boutilier: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. In measuring our progress, I'd like to say that our roles, responsibility, and resources committee, the first of its kind in Canada – the Member for Calgary-Mountain View, the Member for Edmonton-Rutherford, the Member for

Whitecourt-St. Anne sit on that committee as well as the Alberta Economic Development Authority. What we're endeavoring to do: as we go forward in the rapidly growing economy that we're facing, we want to be able to measure that progress by working in partnership with municipalities, and we're doing that. With today's three-hour workshop we had some very good feedback from home builders, from the Urban Development Institute. What we want to do before anything enters this House is consult with our stakeholders so we can measure to deal with the pressures that municipalities are facing. I think we're doing that, and I think that in the short term you're going to see some very enabling legislation coming forward to hear the feedback that we heard this morning from those stakeholders.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Calder.

Education Funding (continued)

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The Minister of Learning says that parents should not use the proceeds of gambling to pay for the basics of school education, yet in some schools in my constituency budgets have fallen to the point where parent fund-raising from casinos now exceeds the schools' total budgets for nonsalary operating expenses. Parents resent having to work casinos to pay for basics like computers, books, and supplies. To the Premier: given that many parents like those at Windsor Park and virtually every school council I've spoken with think it is wrong to use the proceeds of gambling for school education, will he explain why his government is not fully funding the curriculum that Alberta Learning mandates?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, I think that the hon. Minister of Learning has explained the policy time and time and time again, and why the Liberal opposition fails to comprehend the answer is beyond me. The answer is a simple one, but knowing the mentality of the Liberals, I will have the hon. Minister of Learning explain it one more time.

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Dr. Oberg: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. The hon. member raised specifically Windsor Park school. Windsor Park has approximately 179 students and a utilization of 82 percent. They employ 8.7 teachers. For another one that was raised in this Assembly, McCauley school, the utilization is 35 percent. It has approximately 210 students. I've talked about numerous other ones. The bottom line on the question is that all the resources for the curriculum are provided to Edmonton public.

I believe that approximately a year ago certainly the superintendent for Edmonton Catholic put out a statement that there would be and that there was no fund-raising for the basic resources such as textbooks, things like that. Mr. Speaker, the superintendent of Edmonton public put out a mandate to his principals for the same thing. If the hon. member would give to me that these schools are indeed fund-raising for some of the necessities, I will certainly take a look at it. With site-based decision-making it is up to the schools how they spend those dollars. I would be more than happy to look into it if it is provided to me.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Dr. Taft: Thanks, Mr. Speaker. Well, the minister refers to Edmonton Catholic schools, so what does the minister say to Catholics who are forced to choose between breaking faith with their bishop who advises them not to work casinos for school funding or, on the other hand, their schools who depend on casino revenues for supplies and equipment?

Dr. Oberg: Mr. Speaker, I would strongly suggest them to keep the faith. If they don't want to work casinos, then they don't need to work casinos.

Dr. Taft: To the Premier: does government policy recognize any moral issues with using the proceeds of gambling to fund education?

Mr. Klein: The question: does the government defend, I believe, any moral issues . . .

Dr. Taft: No. I'll repeat it. Does government policy recognize any moral issues with using the proceeds of gambling to fund education?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, the hon. Minister of Learning has already pointed out that adequate funding is available to provide for school essentials. Fund-raising, whether it's through lotteries or bingos or other forms, bake sales and cookie sales and so on, is used to purchase items such as field trips and band equipment and other items that the school council feels to be extra to the vital and essential needs of the schools. For years and years raffles and various forms of gambling have been recognized as a legitimate form of method to raise money for these extras.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Calder, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Glengarry.

Constitutional Reform

Mr. Rathgeber: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The Kyoto protocol, a billion-dollar gun registry, and the Canadian Wheat Board Act are but a few examples of federal legislation that is bad for and disliked by many Albertans. Yet each of these pieces of legislation could have been modified, if not defeated, if there was an effective set of checks and balances vis-à-vis the federal House of Commons. My questions are for the minister of intergovernmental relations. When is the government of Alberta going to table a constitutional resolution to reopen a constitutional debate on Senate reform?

Mr. Jonson: Mr. Speaker, the government of Alberta has long been the leading advocate in Canada with respect to Senate reform. We've been an advocate for centuries actually. Alberta has held the only two Senate elections in Canadian history, has long lobbied other Canadian governments in support of Senate reform, and continues to raise the issue with the Prime Minister at every opportunity.

In November, as members of the Assembly will recall, the Alberta Legislature again reaffirmed its support for a triple E Senate by passing a resolution calling on the Prime Minister to respect democracy and appoint one of the province's elected Senate nominees. Following that, the Premier wrote the Prime Minister again asking that he do the right thing and appoint one of Alberta's nominees to fill a vacancy in the upper House. The Alberta government will continue to pursue Senate reform and will do its part to make sure that this is on the national agenda at every opportunity.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Rathgeber: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My only supplemental is to the same minister. When is the government going to become more proactive in redefining Alberta's place in Confederation rather than reactive by filing unsuccessful court challenges?

Mr. Jonson: Mr. Speaker, actually the government has been quite active with respect to issues that bear upon the question raised by the hon. member. Recently there have been a whole series of high-profile issues where Alberta has found itself in fundamental disagreement with the federal government, including the Kyoto accord and health reform. I could just report to this Assembly, if they have not heard this before, that these disagreements have triggered a public concern that Alberta is neither getting its due nor receiving the respect it deserves from the federal government.

What I think sometimes gets lost in these tensions is the fact that Alberta has been a leader in the whole area of federal/provincial relations. Alberta has a well-deserved reputation for facing problems, developing workable solutions, and above all defending the interests of Albertans. In fact, we continue to be a leader at the negotiating table and have achieved some significant victories over the past year. We secured significant concessions from Ottawa on the Kyoto protocol related to emissions and capping the costs of implementation for the energy sector. In health care, Mr. Speaker, Alberta was instrumental in designing a health council that will report through health ministers and not be an independent oversight body, as recommended by the federal government. Alberta also led in the development of a dispute resolution mechanism in relation to the interpretation of the Canada Health Act.

Overall, Mr. Speaker, we have been very active in defending the rights of our provincial citizens.

Municipal Governance

Mr. Bonner: Mr. Speaker, last Thursday the Minister of Municipal Affairs mentioned the creation of six municipal authority pods in Alberta. To the Minister of Municipal Affairs: what would the role of these be in municipal governance in Alberta?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Boutilier: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Actually, what I did say last Thursday was this. As we near our hundredth anniversary in this province, if we were creating Alberta again a hundred years later, would we create it with 360 municipalities? I think we all know today that the answer would probably be less because of the fact that what citizens of Alberta are telling us is they want more money on the front line and less in governance. But having said that, I also would like to say this to the hon. member. I indicated that I would not force under my watch as Minister of Municipal Affairs any amalgamations in this province, and I continue to remain by that commitment.

The Speaker: The hon. member?

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

2:20

Electricity Billing

Mrs. O'Neill: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Over the past couple of weeks I've been informed by a number of small businesses in my constituency that they have a new billing line charge on their Enmax bill, a line charge that has not been on the bill since signing a contract with Enmax in the spring of 2002. It reads, "Aquila RRO Rider," and the amounts are huge. I'm outraged because my

constituents did not anticipate this. They're appalled at the high amount, and I'm appalled that a company can leave this charge off for six months, misleading their customers through negligence. So my question to the Minister of Government Services: where is the consumer protection?

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Government Services.

Mr. Coutts: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. In terms of consumer protection when it turns out that utility bills and bills have been added to or taken away from, one of the things that we found in the billing process, with many companies involved, was that there can be some inaccuracies and there can be some problems along the way. What we do in government is try to minimize those. As a result, last summer we had a billing task force, that was co-chaired by myself and the Minister of Energy. We looked at billing inaccuracies, and we got a commitment from all of the companies involved as well as Government Services and, as well, the Energy and Utilities Board to make sure that a process was put in place so that those inaccuracies could be checked upon and made proper.

The EUB has approved those rate riders that the hon. member is referring to, and a process is in place for anyone who has a cancellation or a collection. They should be advised that the EUB's consumer complaint line is the place to go for those rate riders, and that particular phone number is 1-866-215-1181, so you can let your constituents know that that's where to go.

Now, Mr. Speaker, in terms of marketing, if there are marketers out there in her constituency that do not show a licence, do not abide by the 17-point code of conduct, do not present a contract in front of a prospective customer that has cancellation rights, then the Fair Trading Act takes over. Under that act if we find that people have violated that act, then \$100,000 or two years in jail is the penalty for not abiding by that. If anybody wants to report that, they can call 1-877-427-4088, and we'll investigate.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mrs. O'Neill: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. While I'm on the topic of power bills, would the Minister of Energy please correct the unconscionable fear mongering and misleading statements made by the Member for Edmonton-Highlands, who told my local paper that ATCO power bills will increase by 70 percent and that EPCOR and Enmax will be forced to charge the market rate instead of a regulated one.

Mr. Smith: Well, Mr. Speaker, in fact, the Member for Edmonton-Highlands is probably doing more to encourage competition, doing more to encourage rate setting contracts out there because he does mislead the public with statements here in question period, with comments made in the paper. In fact, it's a competitive marketplace where people can make contracts, can make decisions about how much they're going to pay each month, and they can determine who their provider is. They can determine how they would like their bill to be structured. There are reputable marketers out there. There will continue to be reputable marketers entering the industry. And you know what? All it takes is for an ND politician to screw it up with bad information.

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

Education Funding

(continued)

Dr. Massey: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The 30 school boards in zone

23 are having difficulty understanding how they are to pay for the government-ordered arbitrated teachers' settlement. The minister's retroactive accounting is not helping them. My first question is to the Minister of Learning. How else, other than by holding back funds, could boards have covered the arbitrated settlement?

Dr. Oberg: Mr. Speaker, first of all, it is zones 2 and 3, and I understand that the hon. member had a meeting with zones 2 and 3 last Friday, I believe it was, with many of our MLAs that were there as well.

Mr. Speaker, the question that was asked is whether or not the 3 and a half percent and 3 percent should have been held back. I go back to the press release of 2001 and that it was up to the ATA and the school boards to decide where those dollars were put. We had an arbitration settlement that was 14 percent, and subsequently a good deal of those dollars were used for teachers' salaries. We fully expect that the rest of the dollars would be put into the classroom. As I've said probably 15 or 20 times in this Assembly, there was \$298 million allocated for a \$260 million issue. I fully recognize that there are school boards that have other costs, other issues, but when it comes directly to salaries, those are the amounts of dollars that were there.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Dr. Massey: Thank you. Again to the same minister: will boards be ordered in the future to hold back all classroom improvement dollars in order to cover possible increases in teachers' salaries?

Dr. Oberg: Mr. Speaker, the hon. member fully knows that BQRP funding or other infrastructure funding or, as he has called it, funding for the physical structures are related to the Minister of Infrastructure, and those dollars cannot be utilized for teachers' salaries, things like that. Those are very important dollars that are used to upgrade facilities, and in many cases it is something that is extremely needed.

The Speaker: The hon. member?

The hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands, followed by the hon. Member for Calgary-Currie.

School Utilization

Mr. Mason: Thanks very much, Mr. Speaker. We continue to learn about the financial problems faced by Edmonton public schools because of this government's underfunding of education. Four schools, including three in my riding, are being eyed by the board for closure. This will mean busing students to other schools and will kill efforts to revitalize neighbourhoods as few parents will move to an area without a school. My questions are to the Minister of Learning. How many schools have to close and how many neighbourhoods have to be cut loose before this minister stands up for education and properly funds Edmonton public school board?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Dr. Oberg: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I'm certainly glad that the hon. member asked me that question. I will go through the four schools that Edmonton public has said that they are looking at closing. The first one is Bellevue elementary school, which has 55 students. The utilization rate of that facility is 24 percent.

The second one is Horse Hill junior high program, Mr. Speaker, which is a program. The total school is ECS to grade 9, but they are

looking at the junior high program. The number of students in the junior high program is 34. The utilization rate of that school is 28 percent.

Mr. Speaker, the next one is the Sherbrooke program. There are 83 students in grades 5 to 9 that are going to be affected by that. The utilization rate of that school is 30 percent.

The last one is probably one of the more interesting ones, which is Stratford school. It presently has a grade 9 class which is an IB class that is being administered under Jasper Place school, but that school has 24 students, and the utilization rate of that school is roughly 28 percent.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Well, it goes well beyond those schools because given the minister's guidelines for utilization rates, the public school board is considering up to 50 schools that may be closed. Is the minister suggesting the closure of each and every one of those schools?

Dr. Oberg: That is so absurd that it really does not warrant an answer. Edmonton public currently is looking at four schools. [interjections] I will go on, Mr. Speaker. For example, the utilization rate for McCauley school is 35 percent. The utilization rate for Riverdale school is 57 percent. Those schools require dollars to keep them heated, to keep them on. Closing the schools that they were talking about – for example, I believe that two of the schools would have saved the Edmonton public school board \$613,000.

Mr. Speaker, school closures are never easy decisions, but I do commend the Edmonton public school board for taking a look at them. Their overall utilization in Edmonton now is approximately 68 percent, which means that 32 percent of their facilities are empty. They're taking a look at it. This 50 schools thing, though: those kinds of rumours, those kinds of innuendos with no basis in fact are extremely harmful to the Edmonton public school system.

2:30

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Will the minister admit that his utilization formula, which excludes things like playschools, computer labs, and so on, all of which are now considered empty space by his government, is contributing directly to those utilization rates that he's talking about?

Mr. Lund: Mr. Speaker, unfortunately the hon. member misrepresented the formula. There are a number of things that are exempt. As a matter of fact, when you look at high schools that were built before 1990, we use the old formula for establishing utilization. The reason for that is because there is space, like wide halls, that in fact cannot be utilized for instruction, so we exempt those. We exempt certain configurations in order to use the old formula. But it's really interesting that even if you apply the old formula to the overall utilization of the Edmonton schools, we still only increase the utilization by maybe 2 to 3 percent. So the idea that it's all because of a new formula is simply not true.

Dr. Oberg: Further, Mr. Speaker, I just want to allow the Legislative Assembly to hear what the former leader of the New Democrat opposition said. But to be frank about it, 54 in a school – this school is closing itself down.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Currie, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

Driving without Insurance

Mr. Lord: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Some years ago someone close to me was hit by a speeding car as she was walking through a crosswalk. She was knocked 75 feet and nearly died. Some years later the same person was again hit by another car crashing right through the store windows to where she was sitting inside, and again she was severely injured. In both cases it turned out that the driver was completely uninsured in spite of being able to produce a pink slip at the time. Since then I have heard similar stories from others such that I wonder what is going on. My questions are to the Minister of Transportation. In light of the dramatic increases in insurance costs recently what are the penalties for driving without insurance?

Mr. Stelmach: Mr. Speaker, the penalties for driving without insurance, of course, are a mandatory court appearance, and the first offence carries a fine of anywhere from \$2,500 to \$10,000. Then, of course, for companies the fines are more severe. For a second offence within the first year the penalty does carry a jail sentence of a minimum of 60 days.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Lord: Thank you. To the same minister: what are the trends of people being charged and being convicted of driving without insurance?

Mr. Stelmach: Mr. Speaker, taking into the context that the number of registered vehicles, both commercial and passenger, in this province has increased dramatically over the last 10 years, the actual trend is down. But you'd have to break it down into those three key areas from providing a pink card when stopped by a peace officer to the other side of the spectrum, being in an accident and having no insurance. We are stopping more people on the highway today that fail to produce a pink card. On the other hand, in terms of convictions following serious accidents, the number of those situations where a person was not insured is showing a downward trend over the last 10 years.

Mr. Lord: My final question to the same minister: what safeguards are in place in order to make sure people have a valid pink slip and haven't just canceled their insurance and got a refund after they got a pink slip to hang onto?

Mr. Stelmach: Well, Mr. Speaker, at the end of the day we certainly rely on the fact that all Albertans want to be honest and up-front with their insurance. A number of things do occur on a regular basis. One, whenever a police officer pulls a passenger or a commercial vehicle aside, they have the ability to confirm the insurance with the insurance agent, and the insurance agent has to provide the information when requested to do so by a peace officer. As well, because the fines have increased substantially, many Albertans are taking a second look at the cost of the fine versus higher insurance costs and are making provisions to ensure that they're properly insured.

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

Video Lottery Terminals

Ms Blakeman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The government has announced that it is going to be making upgrades or replacing VLTs in our province. This upgrade will be totaling some \$105 million.

Part of the costs have been attributed to new safety features which are said to help problem gamblers. My questions are to the Minister of Gaming. Is the government buying 6,000 new VLTs, or is the money for upgrades to existing machines?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Stevens: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Two years ago in our business plan we indicated that there would be a replacement of an aging VLT system. As the hon. member knows, in Alberta we have a cap. We've had a cap on VLTs since 1995 of 6,000 machines. Many of them came in in or about 1991 and accordingly at this point in time are in excess of 10 years old. They needed replacement some time ago. So the answer to the question is that the money is being spent on replacement of machines, which will give us an opportunity to utilize new technology to introduce responsible gaming features.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you. What evidence does the minister have that the new responsible gaming safety features will actually help reduce the time spent gambling and not be negated by the higher entertainment value of the new formats in programming?

Mr. Stevens: The issue of responsible gaming features on the electronic gaming machines is a relatively new one. The first province in Canada to introduce such features was Nova Scotia approximately two years ago. Such features are also located in some of the states in Australia. The research with respect to the effectiveness of responsible gaming features is still to be done in its fullness. However, there is preliminary indication that the features which we are bringing in here in Alberta and which were utilized in Nova Scotia will assist the people playing the machines to manage both their time and money more effectively.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you. Does the government see its role in providing these machines as one primarily of providing entertainment or as a revenue source?

Mr. Stevens: I think it's fair to say, Mr. Speaker, that in the plebiscites of 1998 Albertans said to this government that what they wanted was for this government to manage and control VLTs. They wanted us to ensure that the cap was maintained. They wanted us to do it in a socially responsible fashion. Part of the mandate of my ministry is that we are to address all those issues together with ensuring that the Alberta lottery fund, which is utilized for many community and public initiatives, is maximized. So it is a combination of all those things: social responsibility together with ensuring that there is revenue for the Alberta lottery fund and for the good work that it does.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Buffalo, followed by the hon. Member for Calgary-Bow.

Community Initiatives Program

Mr. Cernaiko: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The community initiatives program has been returning lottery dollars to community groups and not-for-profit organizations, including volunteer organizations, to support their worthwhile endeavours in the community. Since we are coming to the end of the first year of the program and recently

we've heard a lot of concerns about parents fund-raising for core items in schools, could the Minister of Gaming provide me with an update on how the program is doing since its introduction last June?

2:40

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Stevens: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. This is a nice tie-in to the questions asked by the last member because this is a very good example of the good work that is done as a result of Alberta lottery dollars. The community initiatives program was brought in and announced last June. It's a \$30 million per year program. I'm pleased to say that the feedback from volunteer groups who have availed themselves of this program is extremely positive. The year ends at the end of this month, March 31. At this point in time there are approximately 900 applications which have been processed. They're continuing to work on this, and by the end of the month we anticipate that well over a thousand will have been processed.

As far as the type of applications, Mr. Speaker, I can tell you that they are varied, with recreational initiatives receiving, according to my most recent data, about 25 percent of the money; social service initiatives, another 25 percent; cultural initiatives, about 20 percent; and the balance would include community service, education, heritage, environment, and health. The education initiatives which were funded at the time of this information, which is now dated, were approximately 5 percent.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Cernaiko: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My final question to the same minister: can the minister explain his department's policy relative to funding core items with lottery dollars?

Mr. Stevens: The Ministry of Gaming has had in place since 1996 a gaming proceeds policy, and as it relates to educational funding, I can tell you that we take that seriously. We have a list of approximately 16 specific paragraphs that deal with that that outline in detail what is and what cannot be funded. For example, funding includes resource materials but not textbooks. The Gaming ministry is also guided by the Alberta School Boards Association's policies. Those are in place, and I can advise that any funding that is done by this ministry is in compliance with those guidelines.

I think it might be of note to the members here that one year ago my ministry was FOIPed by the Liberals opposite. It's not something that they've talked about in this House, because it's good news. They wanted to get information on 20 schools throughout the province regarding the use of casino event proceeds. A year ago they were asking the same question with respect to the use of proceeds and the funding of textbooks and things of this nature. The fact of the matter is that I can advise that you haven't heard about it because all 20 of those schools were utilizing the proceeds in accordance with the AGLC policy.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Economic Development wishes to supplement an answer?

Energy Deregulation

(continued)

Mr. Norris: Yes. Thank you for the opportunity, Mr. Speaker. I would like to clarify one of the stats that I used earlier in explaining

the outstanding growth that we're experiencing in Alberta. I believe I said that the unemployment rate was the highest in Alberta. What I actually meant to say, clearly, is that the employment rate is the fastest growing in Canada.* That was obvious.

I would like to just offer quickly, Mr. Speaker, for clarification that in the year 2001 employment rose by 2.8 percent and in '02 rose by 2.6 percent, creating some 45,000 new jobs. I regret that that came out incorrectly and would like to reiterate that it is employment that is on the rise, not unemployment.

The Speaker: As per our rules, hon. members, when an hon. minister of the Crown supplements an answer, there's an opportunity given to the original member who first posed the question. Hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar, if you wish. I believe it was your exchange.

Mr. MacDonald: No, thank you, at this time, Mr. Speaker.

head:

Recognitions

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

Peace Rally

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I would like to congratulate more than 18,000 Albertans who took the time last Saturday to raise their voices on behalf of innocent people halfway around the world. Men, women, and children from all walks of life exercised the freedoms they enjoy in Canada and marched to the Alberta Legislature from city hall in support of peace in one of the largest protests the Alberta capital has ever seen. The Edmonton Coalition against War and Racism did a fantastic job of organizing the peace rally, and the crowd is to be commended for exercising its right to peaceful protest.

Congratulations to all those Albertans who know that they can make a difference with their words and their actions. All they asked was for this government to give peace a chance.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Banff-Cochrane.

Beaupre Community Hall

Mrs. Tarchuk: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. On Saturday I had the opportunity to witness Alberta community spirit at its best as I participated in the grand opening of the new Beaupre Community Hall just west of Cochrane. It was only a year and a half ago that fire destroyed Beaupre's treasured old hall at the hands of arsonists.

Local residents were shocked and saddened and mourned the loss of a facility that held decades of fond memories for them, but it was not long before a group of volunteers set their sights on a new and improved hall and through determination proved adversities can be and will be overcome when a community unites. Local municipalities, businesses, and individuals gave generously, and today we have a beautiful multipurpose, very impressive community building that everyone can be proud of. On Saturday friends and neighbours young and old filled the hall to reminisce and celebrate, and what a celebration it was.

Please join me in congratulating the Beaupre Community Association, their dedicated members, and all who contributed to this wonderful facility.

Thank you.

*See p. 662, right col., para. 9

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Olds-Didsbury-Three Hills.

Deanna Thompson

Mr. Marz: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's a pleasure for me today to stand in this Assembly and recognize a great young Albertan. On October 12, 2002, Deanna Thompson was vacationing in Bali with friends when tragedy struck in a nightclub right across the street from Deanna's hotel. Fortunately for her she was still in her hotel and not in the nightclub, where she was supposed to meet friends. The blast from the explosion shattered windows in her hotel, knocking her and her friend to the floor.

In the chaotic situation that ensued, Deanna went outside, where she encountered a young lady suffering from burns to her upper body and in severe pain. She immediately assisted in helping this young lady with another person and got this person to medical assistance. Right after that, Deanna returned to the scene to further assist with more than 30 other victims with no thought of risk or injury to herself. Mr. Speaker, Deanna has since learned that one of her friends from Hungary was in that nightclub that night and did not survive the injuries of this horrible terrorist attack.

This morning Deanna received the M.G. Griffiths plaque, which is the highest bravery award presented by the Royal Life Saving Society of Canada. On behalf of all Albertans I'd like to congratulate Deanna on the receipt of this award and say: we are all very proud of you for what you've done.

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

Spring into Spring Extravaganza

Ms Kryczka: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Today I'm very pleased to share with this Assembly a very positive and exciting education example, one that has been occurring in my constituency of Calgary-West for many years. Last Monday evening the Ernest Manning high school music department presented the ninth annual Spring into Spring extravaganza at Calgary's large, prestigious Jack Singer Concert Hall with special guest performers from two feeder junior high schools, Vincent Massey and A.E. Cross.

The wonderful performance for family and many friends demonstrated the excellent achievement of the music programs at these schools, achievement attained only through hours and hours of hard work, team work, and the support of many who value the fine arts. The calibre and versatility of the student musicians, Mr. Speaker, was truly impressive. The respect and camaraderie for their music teachers was also very obvious, as was their love for music.

Recognition must also be given to the talented and dedicated music teachers and conductors: Kevin Willms and Dwayne Engh, music directors at Ernest Manning high school; Ken Thackry, music director at Vincent Massey junior high school; and Paul Brown, director of music at A.E. Cross junior high school.

To the Calgary Philharmonic Orchestra: too bad you missed the massed band finale of 285 musicians. It was absolutely thrilling.

Thank you.

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

Esso Women's National Hockey Championship

Mrs. Ady: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'd like to take this moment to recognize some extraordinary Albertans who took part in the 2003 Esso Women's National Hockey Championship that took place March 12 to 16 in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan. Team Alberta captured

the coveted Abby Hoffman cup in front of over 1,100 fans at Saskatchewan Place, and Alberta finished the tournament with a perfect record of six wins and zero losses, outscoring their opponents 46 to 10.

Mr. Speaker, the teamwork and determination of these extraordinary women from Team Alberta was a testament to Alberta's contribution to keeping our national sport at the top of its game both nationally and here at home.

Along with capturing the gold, Danielle Goyette was awarded MVP for the tournament and Colleen Sostorics received the award for top defenceman. The other gold medal winners included Amanda Tapp, Danielle Aycarst, Delaney Collins, Blythe Wurm, Kayley Hall, Jenna Barber, Trina Rathgeber, Cassie Campbell, Becky Klein-Swormink, Meaghan Mikkelson, Dana Antal, Kerri Wallace, Corinne Swirsky, Jenel Bode, Kelly Bechard, Samantha Holmes, Karen Medhurst, and Brittony Chartier.

Mr. Speaker, these amazing athletes and their staff have brought Alberta hockey spirit to the national level, and on behalf of all members and all Albertans I'd like to send my congratulations to them.

Thank you.

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

2:50 Victoria School of Performing and Visual Arts

Dr. Massey: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Today I recognize the work of the Edmonton public school board in ensuring that the inner city will continue to have a high-quality high school.

In the early 1980s the board was faced with building a new centre for education. Consultants recommended that it be built on one of four possible sites: the old administration building property, McNally high school, Alex Taylor, or attached to Victoria high school. The view that attaching the building to Victoria high school would ensure a viable high school in the inner city convinced the board. Then minister of education David King went out of his way to assist the board with this project. Twenty years later that decision has proven sound, and Victoria has grown beyond expectations to become a K to 12, world-class fine arts school.

Today the public board is maintaining that commitment to the inner city. Faced with a host of other building demands, the board has made replacing the dated Victoria a top priority. A brand-new building to house that world-class school in the heart of the city will soon be a reality. Congratulations, trustees.

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

War in Iraq

Mr. Cao: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. With honour I rise to recognize the sacrifices made by those who fight for us. Having the advantage of being born and raised in Vietnam during the period of the 30-year-long war, I can say that my family and many others fought for freedom and democracy locally and globally. The local repressive regime made it hard and impossible without the help from outsiders to share the same humanity ideals.

As the wars are going on in Afghanistan and Iraq, I feel strongly for the fighting men and women on the front lines, far away from their homelands. I see those fighters as my family members who bravely stand up for me and many others. They help sustain our quality of life, freedoms, and democracy we enjoy locally and globally. They are not fighting against a people, a nation, or a faith. They are making their ultimate sacrifices for our freedom and

fighting against the regimes of tyranny that promote violence and hatred around the world.

Mr. Speaker, I believe that we all want to fight against tyranny. Our arguments and hesitation are on how and when and where to fight. Someone has made the tough decision for us. Let's now all work together to the end of the fight in helping the millions to build a life on the same freedom and democracy we enjoy.

In gratitude to the freedom fighters I remain.

Thank you.

Speaker's Ruling Recognitions

The Speaker: Hon. members, thank you. Today four members went over the one-minute rule mark, and I really don't want us to arrive at a situation one day where people are going to stand up on points of order and what have you because people have gone a few seconds beyond. So could I just ask again to try and find the ability with one's articulation to stay within the one-minute rule.

head: **Presenting Petitions**

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

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise on behalf of the working poor in Alberta to present a petition signed by 54 Calgarians. 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.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

head: **Introduction of Bills**

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Drayton Valley-Calmar.

Bill 33 Insurance Amendment Act, 2003

Rev. Abbott: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I request leave to introduce Bill 33, the Insurance Amendment Act, 2003.

The proposed bill contains two amendments to the Insurance Act that will ensure that awards resulting from an automobile accident return an individual to the same financial position they existed in before the accident occurred.

[Motion carried; Bill 33 read a first time]

The Speaker: The hon. Government House Leader.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I move that Bill 33 be moved onto the Order Paper under Government Bills and Orders.

[Motion carried]

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Drayton Valley-Calmar.

Bill 34 Livestock Industry Diversification Amendment Act, 2003

Rev. Abbott: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise today to request leave to introduce Bill 34, the Livestock Industry Diversification Amendment Act, 2003.

The intent of this bill is to make it easier for Alberta's diversified livestock industry to establish a domestic market.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

[Motion carried; Bill 34 read a first time]

The Speaker: The hon. Government House Leader.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I move that Bill 34 be moved onto the Order Paper under Government Bills and Orders.

[Motion carried]

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

Bill 35 Tobacco Tax Amendment Act, 2003

Mr. Cao: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I request leave to introduce Bill 35, the Tobacco Tax Amendment Act, 2003.

The amendments in this bill will strengthen the controls regarding the purchase and sales of tax-exempt tobacco at duty-free stores, over the Internet, and through the Alberta Indian tax exemption program. These changes will help level the playing field for all businesses that sell tobacco. It also further discourages smoking, making Alberta a healthier province in which to live.

Thank you.

[Motion carried; Bill 35 read a first time]

The Speaker: The hon. Government House Leader.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I move that Bill 35 be moved onto the Order Paper under Government Bills and Orders.

[Motion carried]

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

Bill 212 Alberta Personal Income Tax (Education Tax Credit) Amendment Act, 2003

Mr. Vandermeer: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I beg leave to introduce Bill 212, the Alberta Personal Income Tax (Education Tax Credit) Amendment Act, 2003.

This bill will amend the Alberta Personal Income Tax Act by introducing a nonrefundable tax credit to help parents pay for independent school tuition and also extracurricular tutoring programs. The intent of Bill 212 is to provide educational choice to families in Alberta who do not have the financial resources to pay for independent school education. It would also partially cover the cost of extracurricular tutoring and extra special-needs schooling.

Thank you.

[Motion carried; Bill 212 read a first time]

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Wainwright.

Bill 213 Canada Pension Plan Opting Out Act

Mr. Griffiths: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I request leave to introduce a bill being the Canada Pension Plan Opting Out Act.

This bill allows Alberta to create an Alberta pension plan that would benefit all Albertans better by serving demographics and Albertans' needs.

[Motion carried; Bill 213 read a first time]

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

Bill 214
Matrimonial Property (Division of
Property on Death) Amendment Act, 2003

Ms Graham: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I request leave this afternoon to introduce a bill being the Matrimonial Property (Division of Property on Death) Amendment Act, 2003.

Mr. Speaker, this act would amend the Matrimonial Property Act to ensure that the surviving spouse of a marriage terminated by the death of the other spouse has equivalent rights on the division of matrimonial property to a spouse in a marriage terminated by divorce.

Thank you.

[Motion carried; Bill 214 read a first time]

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Bow on behalf of the hon. Member for Edmonton-Beverly-Clareview.

3:00 **Bill 219**
Alberta Commission on the Status of Men Act

Ms DeLong: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I beg leave to introduce Bill 219, the Alberta Commission on the Status of Men Act, on behalf of the Member for Edmonton-Beverly-Clareview.

Bill 219 would establish a commission on the status of men to address issues of cultural bias, stereotyping, cultural discrimination, men's health, and family relations. For example, fatherlessness is considered by growing numbers of social thinkers in North America to be North America's foremost social problem. Studies have revealed a strong link between fathers' absence and substance abuse, juvenile delinquency, teen pregnancy, and educational failure. I understand that there are economic and social issues that still exist between men and women; however, I also believe that we are in danger of fueling these problems unless urgent health and social issues related to men are addressed. A commission on the status of men is a step in the right direction.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

[Motion carried; Bill 219 read a first time]

head: **Tabling Returns and Reports**

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

Dr. Pannu: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I rise to table five copies of a letter from Mrs. Elizabeth Anne Hayward, a proud grandmother and public education system advocate. It's a three-page letter very carefully written, but her message is very clear when she says:

When you cut to the chase, nothing in our society is as important as an excellent public educational system and an excellent public health care system. Both deserve, and will always require, our biggest dollars. We are not a poor province . . . Let's get with it.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: That's a good idea.

The hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie.

Ms Carlson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I have one tabling today. It's from Dennis Floate of Calgary, and he is urging the provincial government to "withdraw its draft management plan for the Evan-Thomas Provincial Recreation Area" in Kananaskis.

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

Dr. Massey: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. With permission I'd table the required number of copies of a document entitled Key Messages, a presentation made at the zone 23 MLA meeting on March 21, 2003, which focuses on school buildings, investing in the future, and the governance of public education.

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

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I have three tablings this afternoon. The first one is signatures from a petition. This brings the total to over 5,000. These are residents of Red Deer, Hinton, DeBolt, Barons, Lethbridge, and Camrose, to name a few. These citizens signed this petition: "We, the undersigned residents of Alberta, petition the Legislative Assembly to urge the Government to reinstate natural-gas rebates immediately." This petition can be accessed at altaliberals.ab.ca.

The second petition I have is a letter dated February 23 from Shirley Clarke, who is a parent of some children who attend Kenilworth junior high. This letter outlines her concern with funding to our public education system.

The next letter that I have is also from a parent of a grade 7 student at Kenilworth junior high. It's Nadia A. Munarolo-Kurjata, and she is expressing concern about the education crisis and how it can be alleviated by reducing the size of the government and putting valuable teachers first.

Thank you.

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

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The other day, I think during question period, a comment was raised with respect to the number of times in which time allocation has been used by the federal government. I'd like to table for the records of the House today a document which shows that time allocation has been used 71 times and closure used a further nine times by the Liberal government since its election.

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

Dr. Taft: Thanks, Mr. Speaker. The correspondence on education keeps rolling into my office. I have a series of postcards today addressed – well, this one's addressed to me. On the back is a child's drawing. "Edmonton Elementary attempts to smash the world record for number of Grade One Students in the classroom." It shows kids stacked up on shelves.

The next one, from a different constituency but addressed to me, is a report card for the provincial government. It grades under listening a grade of F. It says, "Easily distracted, only able to listen in an election year."

Another report card, this one from S. Dobrotsky. This postcard subject: education funding grade to the provincial government, F. Comment: "Seems to have an unrealistic expectation of how far a dollar can be stretched."

The next postcard is from Val West in Edmonton, saying, "Wanted: A government that listens and cares, previous applicants need not apply." So it continues.

This is one from Carla Spinola expressing concern that government has refused to fund the 8 percent for the teachers' salary allowance.

One from Mario Nascimento.

Another one, saying, "Fully Funded High Quality Public Education Now" from Stacey Pelechaty.

Thank you.

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

Mr. Bonner: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. With your permission I have three tablings today. The first is from Barbara Toombs, and she goes on to say, "I heard on the news today that Ralph Klein is requesting the Alberta MLAs to . . ."

The Speaker: Okay, okay, okay. Please sit down. Six times last week I said that you can't use names in this Assembly. Six times at least I said it. We're going to start again this Monday. You don't use names in this Assembly.

Mr. Bonner: She goes on to say that on the news today she heard that the Premier is requesting "the Alberta MLA's to draft a document in the name of and on the behalf of Albertans supporting the US attack on Iraq," and she goes on to say, "I would like to make it clear that I do not want it to be in my name or on my behalf."

My second tabling, Mr. Speaker, is the appropriate number of copies of a letter to me from the mayor of Edmonton, and he goes on to say:

I am writing to share with you my disappointment with the Province's decision not to sign the Vision, Principle and Fiscal Framework developed and approved by the Minister's Council. This document represented a milestone in provincial/municipal relations and clearly establishing Alberta as leaders nationally in acknowledging the critical need to address the financial crisis facing Canadian municipalities.

The third is a document which indicates that in a 120-page ruling issued today, Judge Allen Schwartz of the US Federal District Court, Southern District of New York, has thrown out Talisman Energy's motion to dismiss the suit brought against them on behalf of southern Sudanese plaintiffs.

Thank you.

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

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I'm tabling a number of letters today in connection with the situation in the Middle East. First of all, I'm tabling a letter from Mr. Charles B. Davison dated March 18 addressed to the Prime Minister and copied to the Premier of Alberta. Mr. Davison writes that the Premier does not speak for all Albertans as Albertans are clearly against the war in Iraq and Canadian involvement in this endeavour.

The second is a letter to the Premier signed by 139 individuals, Mr. Speaker, who state their objection "to your action, without even a debate in the Provincial Legislature, of sending a letter of support to the United States Ambassador."

I have an e-mail here addressed to the Premier opposing any motion in the Legislature expressing support for the policies of the Bush administration on Iraq.

I have an e-mail addressed to the Premier acknowledging his right to his opinions and his right to speak out on provincial matters while chiding him for overstepping his bounds by writing directly to the American ambassador.

I have another e-mail addressed to me expressing concern that the Premier's statement about the so-called war on terrorism and tyranny will only serve to increase terrorism and tyranny throughout the world.

I have an e-mail here, Mr. Speaker, addressed to me, pointing out that the Premier has no right to send letters to foreign officials on behalf of Albertans, particularly if such a letter supports an illegal war.

3:10

I only have a few more, Mr. Speaker. I have an e-mail from a

constituent who opposes the war and does not know any Albertans or Americans who do support the war.

I have an e-mail addressed to the hon. Member for Drumheller-Chinook opposing the legitimacy of any motion tabled in the Legislature supporting the war on Iraq.

An e-mail addressed to the Premier opposing any motion in the Assembly which supports the war on Iraq.

An e-mail to the Premier opposing the U.S. attack on Iraq.

I have a letter addressed to the Premier. The writer is appalled at the notion that the Alberta government would table a motion in the Legislature supporting an illegal war.

Two more, Mr. Speaker. I have an e-mail addressed to the Premier acknowledging his right as a Canadian to express his views but reprimanding him for claiming he represents all Albertans and for stepping outside his jurisdictional authority.

Lastly, I have an e-mail addressed to the Premier opposing any declaration by the Alberta government that supports the illegal military intervention in Iraq by the United States and Great Britain.

The Speaker: Were there any points of order today that the chair may have missed?

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 20, I now move that written questions appearing on today's Order Paper do stand and retain their places.

[Motion carried]

head: **Motions for Returns**

The Speaker: The hon. Deputy Government House Leader.

Mr. Zwozdesky: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Once again, proper notice having been given on Thursday, March 20, I would now move that motions for returns appearing on today's Order Paper do stand and retain their places.

[Motion carried]

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

Bill 201

**Emblems of Alberta (Grass Emblem)
Amendment Act, 2003**

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Highwood.

Mr. Tannas: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It's with great pleasure that I rise in the Assembly this afternoon to move third reading of Bill 201, the Emblems of Alberta (Grass Emblem) Amendment Act, 2003.

Mr. Speaker, as I mentioned before, *Festuca scabrella*, known as rough fescue, is a long-lived perennial bunchgrass with deep fibrous roots which tap soil nutrients and bind soil particles. It's self-curing, nutritious, a native grass that is a major component of the rough fescue grasslands which makes excellent winter grazing not only for

livestock but, of course, for wild animals as well, like deer and elk. Its relatively high protein content provides forage, then, for livestock as well as wildlife, and the deep roots facilitate water penetration and act as a water retention factor in the watershed, particularly on the eastern slopes of the Rocky Mountains. A tussock of rough fescue has a life span of well over a hundred years, and consequently it produces only a few seeds each year with the occasional heavier seed sets every few years.

With the passage of Bill 201, the Emblems of Alberta Act would be amended further to include rough fescue, designating it as our provincial grass. Provincial emblems, Mr. Speaker, are important as they reflect a province's history, its biodiversity and nature, and the nature of this province. Emblems such as this portray who we as Albertans are. Designating rough fescue as our provincial grass would recognize it as an official symbol of our prairie heritage. Provincial emblems are selected because they are symbolic of the province's history, nature, or culture, past or present.

You know, Mr. Speaker, Alberta's provincial tree is the lodgepole pine. This tree was used extensively in the early 1900s to construct railway ties. However, today its role has expanded, and it is a significant contributor to Alberta's forestry industry as the lodgepole pine is processed into many lumber products such as poles, posts, plywood, and mine timbers.

Another official emblem is the great horned owl, which Alberta adopted as its provincial bird in May of 1977. This bird was the first choice of Alberta's schoolchildren, and it proudly reflects the concerns of Albertans for the management, conservation, and preservation of our province's wildlife.

All of Alberta's emblems, from the wild rose to the bighorn sheep to the bull trout, reflect symbolic meaning and value to our province. Amending the Emblems of Alberta Act would serve to enhance the legislation through inclusion of another significant emblem.

Mr. Speaker, it has been affirmed before in this House that rough fescue is a dominant native grass on the Alberta prairie and foothills. While I acknowledge that it is only found in the southern two-thirds of the province, some other provincial emblems are not as widespread throughout the province. The lodgepole pine, for instance, does not grow in many areas of the province, nor will you find bighorn sheep or petrified wood present all across the province of Alberta. Nevertheless, they are still important emblems of Alberta. Furthermore, Alberta is the only jurisdiction in North America that contains all three species, or varieties, of the rough fescue complex. This native vegetation illustrates the biodiversity of the province from the prairies to the foothills and to the mountains.

Native grasses which have been designated by other jurisdictions have been chosen because they portray the history and culture of those regions and therefore have a specific meaning and value for each of those regions. The selection of rough fescue is consistent with Alberta's other emblems. The prairie landscape is part of our cultural history and has a significant value to our Alberta identity.

The prairie landscape may have appeared harsh to the early settlers. Many pioneers came to the west because the price of land was reasonable and there was an opportunity to fulfill their hopes of building a better life for their families in a land that promised prosperity as well as religious and political freedom. These settlers saw the Alberta prairie as a land of opportunity, a wilderness frontier to be shaped into a new home. The treeless prairies soon became dotted with farms and settlements. It took men and women of courage and perseverance to transfer this land to fertile fields. These pioneers lived off the land and depended on the native grasslands.

Before the opening of the west to settlement and after the transfer of the Hudson's Bay territory in the northwest to the Dominion of Canada, there developed a unique ranching life on prairie and

foothills grasslands on the open range of Alberta. Generations of Alberta ranchers have acquired strong, emotional ties to the land and to the animals which depend on native grasslands. They feel a deep sense of stewardship of the land. Individuals who depend on the land for their livelihood inevitably recognize and acknowledge the advantages and values of living in concurrence rather than in conflict with the land and will adhere toward its preservation and its conservation.

Grasslands in general, Mr. Speaker, have a great spiritual value for our aboriginal people. Such people as the Stoney, Sarcee, Blackfoot, Blood, Peigan, and Plains Cree hold native grasses as being significant to their prairie cultural heritage, and they honour their close connection to the land.

Mr. Speaker, rough fescue along with other native grasses are of biological and scientific interest in that the prairie is one of the major ecosystems in North America. Native grasslands in our province are rich in biodiversity. Natural processes have altered the landscape over thousands of years. The prairie was influenced primarily by aridity, fire, floods, drought, and the impact of herds of large herbivores like the buffalo. The prairie ecosystem has survived despite significant pressures and change.

Alberta's native grasslands provide valuable forage for our livestock. When prairie grasslands are used as rangeland for cattle, money gets contributed to the Alberta economy. The livestock industry is an important part of our province's economy. Alberta, as you know, is the largest beef-producing province in Canada. We have over 40 percent of the national beef cattle herd. In 2001 this sector contributed an estimated \$5 billion in farm cash receipts to our economy. Native grasslands have contributed to the economic value of the province. Designating rough fescue as our official grass would acknowledge its importance to farmers and ranchers and its economic significance, and it would acknowledge the historic and cultural significance of the First Nations people of the plains.

3:20

Mr. Speaker, it is evident that native grasses are an important symbol to Albertans. The deep roots of rough fescue portray a strong, stable grass, thus reflecting our western heritage and the strong secure people that built our province along with those that support and contribute to its prosperity today.

Through the passage of Bill 201, existing legislation would be amended to include another provincial emblem. Rough fescue would be designated as our official grass and would serve as another provincial symbol reflecting our heritage, celebrating our culture, and valuing our natural history. I urge you to strongly support and encourage all of my colleagues to vote in favour of third reading of Bill 201, the Emblems of Alberta (Grass Emblem) Amendment Act, 2003.

Thank you.

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

Mr. Jacobs: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's certainly a privilege to rise today to speak in support of Bill 201, the Emblems of Alberta (Grass Emblem) Amendment Act, 2003. Again in third reading I commend the Member for Highwood for bringing forth this proposed amendment. Many things have been said about this grass and its importance to Alberta, and I would just like to offer a few comments on a practical basis as one who has worked in the livestock industry for many years and has seen the benefits of this grass to the agricultural industry.

I think, Mr. Speaker, it's important to recognize history and factors that have made a difference to the diversification and

progress of agriculture in Alberta. I think it's important to recognize the importance of agriculture in Alberta. Much has been said the past few days in our debate about competition, and I would like to point out to the members of the Assembly that agriculture, to my knowledge, is one of the few, if not the only, industries in the world that basically operates under what is defined by economists as perfect competition. That basically says that no one seller or buyer could affect the market. Because of this competition and because of the nature of the agricultural industry we in Canada enjoy access to the best food in the world at a very reasonable price. If you look at it, we don't work very many days as Canadians or as Albertans to buy the food that we eat. So I think agriculture has done a great job in feeding Canadians and in feeding the North American economy, really.

Rough fescue as a grass has certainly had an impact on the agricultural industry and upon its success. From the point of view of the ranching community and their use of rough fescue, one has to look at the historical benefits of this grass. Many of the early settlers were attracted to this province because of good grass and lots of good grazing. So they moved their cattle herds here from other places to take advantage of grasses such as rough fescue.

Rough fescue has the advantage of being able to cure on the stem and remain palatable and maintain its nutrition throughout the year. Some of the tame grasses such as alfalfa and timothy do not have that advantage. They lose their palatability over the winter and are not good grazing grasses, whereas rough fescue is a grass that cures on the stem, and consequently it can be utilized by ranchers throughout the year. The advantage to this, Mr. Speaker, is that it allows the ranching community to minimize their costs. It's certainly a lot more efficient to graze animals over the winter as long as possible as compared to bringing in the cattle or the livestock and feeding them hay. Rough fescue has the advantage that its protein levels are pretty well good enough to maintain the basic beef cow for most of the year with perhaps a little bit of protein and vitamin supplement during parts of the year as the mature cow approaches the calving season. But for most of the year this grass can maintain a cow and even provide hay. If ranchers choose to cut the grass for hay, it certainly will work also as hay. So when you look at the advantage of the grass with a view to minimizing costs and allowing cattle producers to survive the cattle cycles, the high prices and low prices, certainly it's important for them to be able to minimize expenses, and this grass has done a good job of allowing them to do that.

So, Mr. Speaker, when you consider the nutritional value of this grass, its ability to maintain itself throughout the year and cure on the stem, and when you consider what the livestock industry is in Alberta today and how it has developed, part of its development has been due to a grass like rough fescue, and certainly I think it deserves to be historically preserved as an emblem of Alberta. I would urge all members in this Assembly to support this bill.

Thank you very much.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Olds-Didsbury-Three Hills.

Mr. Marz: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It's a pleasure to enter into the debate again on Bill 201 in third reading. I supported this bill in second reading, and I'm pleased to do so again today. This bill will make rough fescue Alberta's provincial grass. Because the grass in its three forms covers the majority of our province and because of its special characteristics as well as its very positive environmental impact, I believe rough fescue should be named Alberta's official grass.

I'd like to make some comments on what rough fescue has done

in the past. It has played a very significant role in helping those who first began farming in our province, and it continues to do so today. Actually, it's one of the primary grasses that sustain much of our wildlife, such as deer, elk, antelope, and, in days gone by, the bison. Therefore, I believe it contributes to our hunting and our outfitting industries as well as tourism. I believe it's also responsible for future generations of farmers here in Alberta. Recognizing the benefits that rough fescue grasslands have had on our province and by naming it our provincial grass, we'll be helping preserve it for the future generations of Alberta farmers. Also, by doing so, we will be making a commitment to preserve farming as an integral part of Alberta's future. I believe it's our responsibility as members of this Assembly to protect and preserve and enhance the economic and social framework of this province. It's also our job to celebrate our province's heritage and ensure that knowledge of the history of this province is imparted to future generations and every person in this province. Given that rough fescue has a major role in sustaining our province, I believe it deserves a place among our provincial emblems.

Mr. Speaker, as a farmer myself to me farming is a way of life. However, I do understand that it's also a business. Rough fescue has helped maintain that way of life in this province, and it has also helped maintain our ability as farmers to make a successful living here in Alberta. According to the Prairie Conservation Forum, we're the only province which has all three subspecies of this grass, and they all exist in this province simultaneously today. The forum also states that it would be difficult to figure out how the parkland and the foothills regions of this province could have sustained any agricultural development in days gone by without the existence of this grass. It provided critical winter feed for our pioneers to sustain their livestock numbers and thereby helped to sustain those pioneers who plowed the land and raised livestock. It's also a very efficient retainer of nutrients, which helps to keep our soil in this province some of the most fertile soil around.

3:30

Passing Bill 201 may well have the effect of promoting an increase in the amount of rough fescue in our province by raising awareness of its importance. Given the economic importance of our rangelands, which generate some \$230 million a year – and the Minister of Economic Development would be happy to hear that – this bill would ensure that there's more rough fescue on those rangelands, and that would mean more successful agriculture activities for years to come.

It's been said that farming is our heritage, our present, and our future. Our land here will always be farmed. Unlike oil, which is a limited, unrenovable resource, our land is a renewable resource. In order for that farming to continue in the future, we need to ensure that the natural nutrients are renewed. Rough fescue has been identified as one of those key ingredients to keep renewing soil, and it's up to us today to ensure that rough fescue is there for future generations and to educate those that are in the farming industry on the role that rough fescue has played in our past and what value it has for future generations. By passing Bill 201, we'll be taking one more step in protecting rough fescue for future generations, and I'd like to take this opportunity to urge all members of this Assembly to support this bill.

I will be supporting this bill, Mr. Speaker, and in closing, I'd like to ask all members to recognize the work and the foresight put into this by the hon. Member for Highwood and to support this bill as well.

Thank you very much.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Redwater.

Mr. Broda: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure to rise today to offer my comments on Bill 201, the Emblems of Alberta (Grass Emblem) Amendment Act, 2003. I would like to commend my colleague from Highwood for bringing forward this bill, that would designate rough fescue as the official grass of Alberta.

Mr. Speaker, over the past number of years a growing number of Albertans have urged this government to recognize the role that rough fescue has had and continues to have in the socioeconomic development of our province. At no time was this more apparent than in April of 2002 when the Alberta conservation forum counted the votes that Albertans had cast to select what grass species would best serve as a symbol of our unique western heritage and identity. In this election Albertans had choices. In addition to rough fescue, four other shortlisted species were identified – June grass, blue grama grass, western wheat grass, and green needlegrass – but instead they selected rough fescue, a grass famous for its resilience, beauty, and agricultural value. Today this Assembly has the opportunity to tell the people of this province that they have heard their choice and that as their representatives in this House we are going to do something about it.

Mr. Speaker, I would like to explain why so many Albertans hold rough fescue in such high regard and how this valuable grass has helped shape who we as Albertans are today. Of all the grasses that occur naturally in Alberta, rough fescue has arguably played the most significant role in the history and the development of our province.

An Hon. Member: Who would argue that?

Mr. Broda: I don't know.

In the many years before European settlement rough fescue was the crucial ingredient which helped shape the identity and the traditional lifestyles of many of Alberta's native peoples. The same fescue plant that continues to carpet the grasslands and foothills of southwestern Alberta today also served as the ever important forage for herds of big game species including bighorn sheep, mule deer, elk, bison, and buffalo. Due to its ability to thrive and survive the cold winter conditions, rough fescue was the primary source of food for these animals throughout the year. Moreover, the various tribes of native people developed a very close relationship with this rich and seemingly inexhaustible source of forage as it ensured that the herds of game would remain sufficiently plentiful to allow hunting. It can be said that for the tribes that inhabited and hunted on the plains of southwestern Alberta, rough fescue was an essential agent of life which enabled their culture and society to thrive.

However, Mr. Speaker, not just native people recognized the value of rough fescue. Early European settlers, many of whom fled their former homelands as a result of war, instability, impoverishment, and persecution, came to the prairies in search of a better life. The vast majority of them saw farming as a way to earn money, rebuild their lives, and achieve prosperity, just as the native people before them had done. In time they, too, came to appreciate the significant role that rough fescue played in the life cycle of the prairies.

Just as wildlife appreciated rough fescue, the grass also proved to be an ideal source of forage for livestock. High in nutrients and resilient to erratic weather conditions, rough fescue became a mainstay in the diet of a number of our domesticated animals. The native peoples of Alberta and the early settlers both owe their experience of survival and welfare to this tall, exquisite, and abundant grass.

In a way, Mr. Speaker, it can be said that rough fescue was a factor

that contributed indirectly to the opening of the western frontier. Like the grass that they came to depend upon, these early Albertans were people of true grit and determination. As rough fescue had to adapt in order to survive in a tough prairie environment, these early pioneers also had to adapt to life in a new and vastly different land. However, they did not only adapt to life on the prairie, but through hard work and perseverance they laid down the foundation for the future economic success and prosperity which we are able to enjoy today. As it did in the past, rough fescue continues to play a significant role in Alberta's agricultural production. It remains a reliable source of high nutritional value for a number of domesticated animals.

Mr. Speaker, if Bill 201 is not passed, we will lose a terrific opportunity to increase awareness and understanding of the significance that rough fescue and other native grasses have had in shaping the Alberta we have today.

When the issue of the Kyoto protocol came up last year, this government argued that Alberta would be unfairly affected by the accord's carbon credit clauses. We felt that it was unfair to impose such a plan on our province, considering that Alberta has a very large number of naturally occurring carbon sinks. Rough fescue serves as one of our province's biggest carbon sinks. These grasslands are some of Alberta's leading conductors of carbon dioxide, a cycle in which plants take in carbon dioxide and in turn produce oxygen. Rough fescue, it has been proven, is particularly good in accomplishing this task and as a result has contributed greatly to keeping our environment clean. Mr. Speaker, if this province is serious about reducing the amount of the deadly greenhouse gases within our atmosphere, then we must take steps to protect rough fescue and Alberta's native grasslands. If we lost the prairies, we would not only compromise our ability to improve the state of our environment, but we would also compromise the quality of life for future generations of Albertans.

3:40

Apart from this environmental quality, rough fescue also remains the main food source for much of our wildlife, as indicated earlier. Unfortunately, many of these species are currently at risk of becoming endangered or, worse, extinct as a result of the loss of their natural habitat. According to the Prairie Conservation Forum 73 percent of the endangered animal species that live in Alberta currently depend on the Alberta grasslands for food. When combined with the fact that their natural habitat is shrinking, the survival of these species looks very grim. Mr. Speaker, if this province has any hope of replenishing the already depleting stocks of our endangered wildlife, we need to start protecting their natural habitat. This means protecting rough fescue.

I am convinced, Mr. Speaker, that designating rough fescue as Alberta's provincial grass will not only help educate Albertans about the importance of native grasses to our wildlife and environment, but it will also raise awareness of the need to sustain and preserve Alberta's native grasslands. Rough fescue has played and will continue to play a significant role in the development of our province if only we will let it do so. It is part of our identity, our culture, and our heritage. I urge all my colleagues to give it the recognition that it deserves by supporting Bill 201.

Thank you very much.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Medicine Hat.

Mr. Renner: Well, thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It's a pleasure for me to have an opportunity to discuss Bill 201 at this time. I'd like to use the time that's available to me this afternoon to

discuss three issues. First of all, the issue of provincial emblems: why is it appropriate, and why do we as a Legislature even spend our time dealing with issues such as provincial emblems? Secondly, I'd like to talk about: why would we choose to have a grass as a provincial emblem? Then, obviously and most important to this bill, why should we choose rough fescue as a grass? With your indulgence let me start down that path.

First of all, provincial emblems, I think, are something that we do with some reticence from the perspective that once we recognize something as a provincial emblem, we want to ensure that it represents the province and the people of Alberta in a significant way, and we don't think it would be appropriate for us to be dealing with 20 different bills recognizing provincial emblems at every session of the Legislature. So it is of some importance, and we recognize as a Legislature that from time to time members come forward and ask their colleagues in the Legislature to recognize and designate something as a provincial emblem. We do that for a number of reasons. Probably the most important reason, Mr. Speaker, is because we have pride in Alberta. We are very proud of the fact that Alberta is a unique place, and as such we want to have something that we can show as something that we have a lot of pride in.

For that reason one of the first provincial emblems that was designated, as you know, was a flag, and like all groups of people we have a lot of respect for that flag. From time to time there were other things added to that repertoire, so over the years we've added emblems such as an official tree. We've talked about an official trout. We've talked about a myriad of different things but always keeping in mind that they should be significant and that they should reflect Alberta's pride.

The second thing – and I think it probably is as important, particularly when we talk about the designation of natural wildlife and flora and fauna – is the issue of conservation and preservation. I think that it is absolutely critical that as we recognize something such as rough fescue, we keep in mind the natural habitat in this province. As we have a tremendous amount of economic activity and we have an explosion in population, an explosion in agriculture, an explosion in a number of areas, it has the tendency to put some stress on some of the natural ecosystems. By designating rough fescue as a provincial emblem, I think that that encourages an opportunity for us as legislators to keep in mind the importance of our natural spaces and also I think, probably, for Albertans to keep in mind the importance of natural space.

Finally, probably another reason why we choose to implement a provincial emblem program is from an educational perspective, and, Mr. Speaker, I know that you've had some experience in the classroom, and you know that oftentimes hands-on experience is the easiest way to teach someone and for people to remember. So whether we're talking about tourists or talking about children in our classrooms, if we want them to remember what Alberta is about, what things there are that we should be thinking about in Alberta, one of the most obvious things is to teach people about the provincial emblems. If you look at a jurisdiction and you look at their provincial emblems or their state emblems, you get a bit of an idea in sort of a microscopic form how the people in that jurisdiction and that vicinity think.

So for all of those reasons, Mr. Speaker, I think it's absolutely appropriate and probably of some urgency that we maintain a program of dealing with and approving provincial emblems here in the Legislature of Alberta.

The next thing I said that I would talk about, Mr. Speaker, is: why grass? Why would we choose to have as a provincial emblem grass? We talked about trees. We talked about fish. We talked about a

whole number of other areas that have already been designated, and the hon. member now is proposing that we designate a grass. Well, I'll tell you. It again gets back to what some other members have discussed in this Legislature, the fact that we, particularly in the non northern areas of the province, let's say, live the lifestyle and the history of a prairie people. Nothing can be more emblematic of what life on the prairies is than the waving grass.

I had an opportunity a couple of years ago – as a matter of fact, I'm hoping to have another opportunity this summer – to participate in a trail ride across Canadian Forces Base Suffield, which is one of the last areas where anyone can go and actually experience what it was like to be a pioneer at the turn of the century, because that's one of the few areas left in this province where you can literally stand on the prairie and for 360 degrees in every direction see nothing but waving grass, no fences, no telephone poles. There's nothing but the natural environment the way our pioneers saw it when they came here. As a matter of fact, as an aside, to say the least, I'm hoping to encourage other members to come with me on a trail ride across the base this summer, and other members will have a chance to experience that. But, Mr. Speaker, if you have had a chance to experience that, you can understand the importance of grass, particularly as it was in the early days in our history and as it is today, as the mainstay in our livestock industry in southern Alberta.

The other thing that I'd like to mention from a local geographic perspective. The area where I live is known as the Palliser Triangle, and it was an area that when the CPR was developing the land and bringing pioneers forward was designated as an area where you needn't worry about doing much development. No one could live there. Nothing grows there. Well, Mr. Speaker, nothing could be further from the truth, because as the first ranchers found out when they arrived in southeastern Alberta and southern Alberta, there is nothing better than the natural grasses in this area to raise livestock on. Literally millions and millions of cattle and other forms of livestock have subsisted almost exclusively on the natural grasses in the area.

So, Mr. Speaker, why name a grass? Well, obviously, we name a grass as a provincial emblem because of its tremendous historic significance in this province and its significance today as an economic driver within our economy

3:50

Finally, Mr. Speaker, I come to the final point in my presentation in the debate this afternoon, and that is: why do we name rough fescue of all the myriad of grasses? One just has to walk out onto that prairie and realize that this is not a monolithic type of an experience. There are literally hundreds of different grasses that are growing on the prairie, but rough fescue, as others have talked about in this House, has some significance that I think should be mentioned if we're going to talk about grasses in the Legislature. It has high nutritional value. It has the ability to sustain that nutritional value during the winter and has remained the most important forage on the prairies and in the parkland. Rough fescue has the almost unique ability because of its deep, deep roots to survive in that notorious Palliser Triangle that I talked about. It survives in many other parts of the province, but it does particularly well in the dryer areas in southeastern Alberta because it has such deep roots. In fact, in preparing my notes for this afternoon, I was reading that in many cases the rough fescue root system is actually more extensive below the ground than what you would see above the ground.

Mr. Speaker, I was just getting started, and unfortunately I've run out of time, so I will resume my seat and encourage all members to support this important legislation.

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

Mr. Horner: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It is my pleasure to rise today and speak in third reading to Bill 201, the Emblems of Alberta (Grass Emblem) Amendment Act, 2003, sponsored by the Member for Highwood.

In Alberta we have many different emblems and official symbols, everything from colours to rocks to fish, and I believe that making rough fescue the official grass of Alberta enhances the emblems we already have. Rough fescue is extremely important to the agricultural growing process in the southern part of this province, and it has many different benefits and is a big reason why agriculture has flourished here in Alberta.

As the Member for Redwater has pointed out as well, there can be little doubt that rough fescue possesses a tremendous ability to hold carbon and return nutrients to the soil. The best carbon sinks in the world are found on Alberta's grasslands. The fescue takes CO₂ out of the atmosphere and stores the carbon in its root system, putting carbon nutrients into the soil, which, in turn, benefit our agriculture. Through millennia the grasslands built the organic base and fertility that the major bread baskets of the world, such as Alberta, enjoy today. The soil that is so rich for growing here took many hundreds of years to develop, and our agricultural base could arguably be attributed in part to rough fescue.

When the pioneers arrived in this area and felt the ice and snow of a prairie winter and the hot dry air of a prairie summer, they may have thought of going back to wherever they came from, where there weren't quite the weather extremes as here, but as they began to cultivate the land and grow crops, they found that this land was among the best places to grow food anywhere. So the pioneers stayed and braved the extreme prairie weather, and as agriculture continued to grow so did the territory, and eventually the province of Alberta was born. As the years went by and studies were done on the land, it was discovered that the rough fescue was the main reason for the nutrient-rich soil. This is not to say that rough fescue is the sole reason for the birth of our province, but it surely didn't hinder the progress.

I think the most important point to take from this is that rough fescue has played a significant albeit uncredited role in the lives of Albertans. Rough fescue is an important part of Alberta and lends itself to many qualities that Albertans themselves have. As the Member for Medicine Hat was starting to get into, rough fescue has an extremely large root system. The deep, fibrous roots tap into the underlying soils, drawing nutrients and water while binding soil particles, improving water penetration, and acting as a stabilizing force in watershed quality. The grass keeps surrounding soil moist and healthy and provides stability for growing. The root system is a stabilizer. The fescue could be over 100 years old and have a root system that goes deep into the earth, a system that stabilizes the land.

This is just like an Albertan, Mr. Speaker. An Albertan has deep roots in this province. These roots have been here sometimes for more than a hundred years. The roots of the Albertans stabilized the province. The stronger the roots, the stronger the province. Just like the rough fescue stabilizes the land, the rough Albertan stabilizes the province. This is why I feel that we should make rough fescue an official emblem of the province. The benefits and the symbolism that are found in this grass are much better than in any other grass in Alberta, and since the fescue is so important to our land, it's time we recognized that fact.

There are other benefits that rough fescue has, Mr. Speaker. As I mentioned, the grass is extremely good at removing CO₂ from the atmosphere. Over the past couple of years there has been an

immense debate raging over the effects of CO₂ in our atmosphere. Many argue that carbon dioxide is the cause of the Earth's temperature warming up. Some argue that there is far too much CO₂ in our atmosphere and that we must change our lifestyles in order to save everything from our ice caps to our forests to our families. Rough fescue has been shown in a number of studies to be an excellent CO₂ eliminator. This is because those deep roots of the fescue store more carbon than any other type of plant, therefore reducing the amount in our atmosphere. We should consider policies that include growing rough fescue as a CO₂ reduction strategy. It could be one way of getting rid of all that nasty CO₂.

Mr. Speaker, the benefits of the rough fescue are immense. It is an important part of our province, and I believe it may have an important role to play in our future. Of course, more studies should be undertaken to show all the benefits that rough fescue holds for mankind, but if we can find a way to use rough fescue to our benefit in fighting greenhouse gases, we should pursue it. I think a first step would be to recognize rough fescue as the official grass of Alberta. It's a small step but one that will be appreciated by Albertans. Hopefully, once this government adopts rough fescue as Alberta's official grass, the benefits will be realized and its importance recognized.

I urge all hon. members to vote in favour of Bill 201. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Wainwright.

Mr. Griffiths: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It is with great pleasure that I rise in this Assembly today and speak in support of Bill 201, the Emblems of Alberta (Grass Emblem) Amendment Act, 2003. I'd like to commend the MLA for Highwood for bringing this legislation forward for discussion and debate. But I would like to add an interesting perspective, that being that I'm the youngest member in this House, and I'd like to speak a bit on why this bill is important to me.

Dr. Taylor: Do you even know what rough fescue is?

Mr. Griffiths: I know what rough rescue is.

Mr. Speaker, being the youngest person in this House, I have a great fascination with the history of this province. We have a very proud history, a very distinguished history, and I often sat reading books about the history of this province and imagined the settlers coming across the prairie and seeing the open plains and the wide grasslands . . .

An Hon. Member: The rough fescue.

Mr. Griffiths: The rough fescue. That's exactly right.

. . . the open opportunity that was there and presented itself to the entrepreneurs, to the young people who traveled thousands of miles to start new lives. When you read the history of this province, it was not formed and founded by just farmers. It was agriculture. Primarily Alberta was founded by ranchers, people who didn't want to break up the land, but they wanted to leave the grass the way it was, the rough fescue, and run cattle across those open prairies. That's the history of this province, Mr. Speaker. So rough fescue symbolizes our past, a strong past that this province was built on before oil and gas was discovered, before any other investment came.

Rough fescue also symbolizes our future, however. As we tour around this province and look at the wide open grasslands and the opportunities that are there, we see tourism growing in ecotourism and agritourism as people from around the world want to come to Alberta to not only see its great mountains but its vast prairies and

open plains. Mr. Speaker, there are even some cultures around the world where people who get off the bus and see those open plains actually have panic attacks. They've never seen so much open space. The first thing that they see is the blue sky and the rough fescue, the grass that spreads across this province. So the rough fescue symbolizes the tourism potential of this province.

An Hon. Member: It symbolizes panic.

Mr. Griffiths: No. It doesn't symbolize panic. It symbolizes the open, beautiful opportunities that this province has afforded us from the beginning of time.

Finally, it's a symbol of freedom because, once again, Mr. Speaker, not only did our forefathers, our ancestors who walked into this province, see the open and wide opportunities and realize that anything was possible, but we see that today. We see that as our farmers struggle through drought, struggle through government intervention sometimes, struggle through a lot of things, but rough fescue is always there. It survives drought, keeps the cattle going . . .

4:00

An Hon. Member: My vision is blurring.

Mr. Griffiths: Don't get too teared up.

Mr. Speaker, rough fescue symbolizes our history, the nobility of our past, our failures and our successes, our tragedies and our triumphs. It's a symbol of a strong past, and it's a symbol of a strong future to come.

I would ask, Mr. Speaker, all members of this Assembly to support this bill. Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Highwood to close the debate.

Mr. Tannas: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's an emotional afternoon. I'd like to now close third reading on Bill 201, but first I must express my appreciation to all the members who spoke at length in support of naming rough fescue as Alberta's grass emblem.

I also wish to acknowledge the work of our research assistants, in particular Frank Ostlinger, and to pay tribute to Cheryl Bradley of the Alberta Native Plant Council for her support, encouragement, and assistance.

Finally, I wish to recognize the fine work of the Alberta Prairie Conservation Forum, who made this bill possible.

Mr. Speaker, I would now ask all hon. members who feel so inclined to support rough fescue as our newest emblem and request that the question be now called on Bill 201.

The Speaker: Well, it certainly has been an emotional past hour.

[Motion carried; Bill 201 read a third time]

head: **Public Bills and Orders Other than
Government Bills and Orders
Committee of the Whole**

[Mr. Tannas in the chair]

The Chair: I'd like to call the Committee of the Whole to order.

Bill 203

School (Compulsory Attendance) Amendment Act, 2003

The Chair: Are there any comments, questions, or amendments to be offered with respect to this bill?

The hon. Member for Little Bow.

Mr. McFarland: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I am delighted today to again have the opportunity to make further comment at committee stage on Bill 203, the School (Compulsory Attendance) Amendment Act, 2003. As I had indicated at a previous time, the bill speaks to a topic that is and should be a top priority for this government and a major concern for citizens of Alberta, and that topic is educating our youth and keeping our children in school.

As we move into the new millennium, it will be intellectual capital that will be the measuring stick for success. How well a country, region, or province maintains high levels of educated individuals in its labour force will determine its future course in this new economy and not necessarily how many resources it has in the ground. It is well acknowledged within the private energy sector that our province's energy basins are mature, meaning that they're here in Alberta but they've reached the height of oil and natural gas supply, a nonrenewable resource.

One resource that has not matured, Mr. Chairman, in a literal and figurative sense, is Alberta's youth, our most prized asset. In light of this, one should consider education to be a completely renewable resource. We in Alberta have moved well beyond the past conventional means of extracting value from the land. We must also strive to improve the value and efficiency of our education system.

[Mr. Shariff in the chair]

The introduction of Bill 203 will hopefully continue this process of streamlining and improving that system. The ramifications of this type of legislation will run deep, Mr. Chairman, and for many years to follow. It's reasonable to believe that a parent who has and was encouraged to finish high school and perhaps even continued on to postsecondary training will in turn encourage their children to do the same thing. This multiplier effect, if you will, creates an exponential increase in educated individuals in generations to come. We have slowly evolved in this direction, and we must continue on this path.

One of the areas that has been identified as a problem area is those who are brought up in an environment where education is not emphasized. Mr. Chairman, I would like to take this opportunity to relay some of my own experiences on the subject and maybe enlighten those in this Assembly on real-life tragedies involving individuals who struggle to survive in this world without the necessary skills of a basic education.

A few weeks ago, just after the introduction of Bill 203 in this Assembly, I had the opportunity to meet and talk with a man who had a very interesting story about life and education. He described to me in heartwrenching detail what life was like for him, a man of limited education. This fellow approached me after he found out that I was sponsoring the bill seeking to increase the mandatory age of school attendance. He had been living in an environment where education was not the top priority for him or of any of the young acquaintances in his area. He worked mainly as a farm labourer, putting in long hours doing heavy manual work such as roguing fields, feeding livestock, or fixing the fence.

Life was not full of much leisure, Mr. Chairman, but he was learning the value of hard work and developing a solid work ethic. While these are very noble and in many ways diminishing traits among our younger generation today, there was one very important aspect of his upbringing that was lacking: a formal education.

At the tender age of 14 years old he decided that he was going to strike out on his own, test the waters outside the circle he grew up in, and move away to the city. He found a job as a mechanic for a small businessman here in Edmonton. Although only 14 he had worked around machinery for quite some time and had taught himself about the trade. Over the years he took on many different jobs involving

mechanics. One employer agreed to pay him a wage of \$14 an hour. Well, he thought that was a pretty hefty sum, especially since he'd never really earned any money of his own for the work that he had done back home. He thought he had struck it rich, that life wasn't that hard. And why would he need an education anyway?

Well, as he soon discovered, his lack of literacy proved to be a very severe handicap. He was ridiculed at work, taken advantage of by his superiors, and left confused by the everyday responsibilities we all might take for granted. He had no clue what a T-4 was, and only after a warning from the tax department did he even discover that he had a much bigger problem. While all along he had assumed he had agreed to a job that would pay him \$14 an hour, he discovered not too long after finally filing his tax return that his boss had only been paying him \$9 an hour. Because of his lack of education he was convinced into believing that whatever people told him had to be true. He was unable to properly verify facts because he did not have the proper training, the know-how, or the knowledge. He was determined, though, and after a consultation at a career counseling school here in Edmonton, it was discovered that this man was managing in the city at approximately a grade 3 level of education.

There are several points in this man's tale where one wishes he might be able to go back and do things differently, but as he so adamantly stressed to me, he wished above all else that he could have had the opportunity to finish his schooling and obtain his high school diploma. The difference between this man's story and the story of so many of our youth who leave school before graduation is that they have the opportunity to get a formal education. This young man was never afforded that luxury.

4:10

Mr. Chairman, I would like to switch gears just a bit and address the purpose of the school board and to clarify the enforcement required under this Bill 203 amendment to the School Act by the individual school boards. As has been stated, currently under section 15(1) of the School Act attendance boards represent the ultimate authority in resolving truancy issues. Bill 203 proposes that sufficient powers currently exist for school boards to effectively enforce attendance, thereby making attendance boards redundant and obsolete.

Attendance boards were established to provide an alternative to the immediate use of the courts for enforcement of compulsory attendance. It was argued that a judicial approach would be not as effective or appropriate because it focused on sanctions rather than remedies. Well, Mr. Chairman, a school board superintendent or another individual designated by the school board has the power to locate a truant student during school hours, send the student home, and employ judicial backing if needed. When the board believes that all reasonable efforts to enforce the student's attendance have failed, the case can be brought to the attendance board.

As such, in its current form the School Act places only initial enforcement of school attendance with the school boards. Subsequent attendance board involvement represents the ultimate authority. Bill 203 proposes that sufficient powers currently exist for school boards to be effectively able to enforce attendance. Therefore, it's quite logical to surmise that attendance boards will only confuse the responsibility for attendance enforcement by adding another layer of bureaucracy to the problem.

Through this proposal of eliminating attendance boards, Bill 203 will make attendance enforcement more efficient. Truancy is a local problem and if given sufficient authority and responsibility can be solved from a local perspective. As both my rural and urban colleagues here can certainly attest to, this problem with noncompletion of students from high school stretches from the inner cities to

the far-out reaches of prairie towns throughout Alberta. Mr. Chairman, I only have to look back at that man in my office who did not have the education to see him through his life, a life that frankly took every bit of courage and perseverance just to survive.

Although this bill, Mr. Chairman, may not be the total answer to solving our high noncompletion rates here in Alberta, it certainly is the correct first step. Although we cannot change the past, we can surely make an impression on the future. I want to thank you and urge all my colleagues to support Bill 203.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. Member for Calgary-East.

Mr. Amery: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. It's a great pleasure for me to rise and speak to Bill 203, the School (Compulsory Attendance) Amendment Act, 2003. I would like to take this opportunity to express my sincere thanks and gratitude to the hon. Member for Little Bow for all the hard work that he has done in order to bring forward such an important piece of legislation.

Mr. Chairman, over the past 10 years this government has worked extremely hard in providing the best possible education system that our taxpayers' money can buy. Currently our children and our young people are provided with some of the best teaching facilities and techniques in Canada, and they are taught by some of the most committed and dedicated members of our province's communities. Alberta's high schools and postsecondary institutions, such as the University of Alberta and the University of Calgary, are renowned worldwide for their teaching excellence. As a result, our young people have continued to enjoy great success in their endeavours and are currently considered to be some of the most educated and brightest in the world. This noble feat was accomplished by giving Alberta's youth the opportunity to take advantage of all of the components of our superior education system. This system has time and time again continued to equip them with what is possibly the most important tool one can learn in life: the ability to think critically.

By having the opportunity to acquire this ability, Mr. Chairman, future generations of Albertans will be prepared to face all of the challenges and obstacles that come their way. By giving our children the opportunity to think, we have also not only ensured that they will lead our province and our country into a bright and prosperous future; we have given them the chance to guide the world into a global society which would promote tolerance and democracy.

As good as it may be, Mr. Chairman, our educational system does have a few faults which must be corrected. As my colleagues have mentioned before, section 13(1)(c) of the School Act currently stipulates that Alberta students can drop out of school once they reach the age of 16. Furthermore, section 13(5)(e) stipulates that certain students can be excused from attending school due to various factors including social or religious beliefs.

An Hon. Member: How about laziness?

Mr. Amery: That too.

I believe, Mr. Chairman, that in their current form these two clauses of section 13 impede our youth's ability to take advantage of all the wonderful opportunities that our education system has to offer. Allowing Alberta's youth to opt out of school at age 16 or giving their parents the right to take them out of school for whatever social or religious reason compromises their future success. At age 16 Alberta students are in no position to face the modern world. Many of them are not mature enough to make some of life's biggest decisions, let alone the decision to leave school. At age 16 it is their teachers who are in the perfect position to provide them with the

necessary knowledge and the understanding of what it takes to succeed in present-day Alberta and the modern world.

The world in which we find ourselves today demands an educated workforce, a workforce that can think, take initiative, and find innovative new solutions to the problems that we face, a workforce that is aware of and is willing to take advantage of the opportunities that are available to them. Mr. Chairman, the days when a person can drop out of school at the age of 16 and still have a bright future are gone. As we all know, a high school diploma today does not hold the same value that it held 20 years ago. Increasingly, our present-day economy demands that our youth pursue a postsecondary education before they can acquire decent jobs.

Mr. Chairman, studies conducted across Canada and the United States over the past decade have continued to show that students who drop out of school at the age of 16 face not only an uncertain academic future but are likely to turn to crime in order to make ends meet. According to one study conducted in the state of Nebraska, a common trait among 82 percent of the prison population was that they were all high school dropouts. The same study showed that if all of the high school dropouts had actually graduated, the state would be spending \$130 million less in social programs and that 35,000 fewer Nebraskans would be receiving public assistance. A study conducted in Canada showed that the annual dropout rate among high school students in our country was 18 percent, which costs the federal government approximately \$2 billion. In our province, according to a study conducted in 2001 by Alberta Learning, close to a quarter of our youth dropped out of high school before completion.

Mr. Chairman, I believe that we can do better than this. This province is capable of producing far better numbers. However, if we are prepared to do this, we have to take appropriate steps which would help minimize the terrible dropout rate that we are experiencing today. One sure way of accomplishing this task is for this Assembly to pass Bill 203 and amend the School Act, which presently permits students to drop out of school once they reach the age of 16. By amending section 13(1)(c), Bill 203 will extend that age to 17, which will bring the majority of high school students within one year of completing their secondary education. I believe that this one extra year will give our youth the time to mature and consider all of the opportunities and possibilities that education will open up for them. It will give them the necessary time to realize that by not completing at least their high school diploma, they may not only be shortchanging the chance to further their studies, but they may be shortchanging their goals and dreams in life.

4:20

Mr. Chairman, apart from increasing the mandatory attendance age from 16 to 17, Bill 203 also serves to amend section 13(5)(e) of the School Act, which permits our young people to be excused from attending school due to various family, social, or religious beliefs. Bill 203 will help alleviate this problem by repealing section 13(5)(e), and this bill will in turn allow the school boards to enforce the attendance rules and regulations on a consistent and fair basis. This means that the school boards will still permit students to be excused from attending classes due to particular holidays, sickness, suspensions, or expulsions, but they would not permit parents to neglect their children by not allowing them to pursue a proper education.

Mr. Chairman, our youth are the future of this province. Among them are the potential leaders of our province, our country, and our world. If we are going to entrust them with this momentous task, we had better make sure that all of them have the opportunity to receive the best possible education that we can provide. With this in mind,

I urge all of my colleagues to support our youth by voting in favour of Bill 203.

Thank you.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. Member for Airdrie-Rocky View.

Ms Haley: Thank you so much, Mr. Chairman. Thank you very much for the opportunity to speak to Bill 203, the School (Compulsory Attendance) Amendment Act, 2003. With respect – and I mean that sincerely – for my colleague for Little Bow, I must rise and speak against this bill today. I'm always sorry to speak against his bills as I know that he brings them forward with nothing but the very best of intentions, and besides that, he's a very good friend. I feel very strongly on the opposite side of this issue, and I'd like to share with you the reasons why I'm not supporting Bill 203.

At the outset I would like to say that in spirit I stand alongside my colleagues in the Assembly who do support this bill. As a parent I am proud to say that both my sons have completed high school and have attained some postsecondary education. My son Jeff has a political science degree from the University of Calgary, and my son Jason is currently in a golf management program. I know that education has opened many doors for them and will continue to do so throughout their entire lives. However, the reason behind their educational success was not legislation that made them stay in school. It was their willingness to be in school as well as their willingness to learn and family encouragement. Like everyone else in this Assembly I realize that staying in school increases a student's likelihood of prosperity and that lifelong learning will in fact become the norm for them, not the unusual.

Like all of my colleagues, I am acutely aware of the fact that the more educated a population becomes, the better a province or a state government would do. Simply put, the smarter we are, the brighter our future for everyone, for students as well as the society. But I believe that a strong education system works best when it is serving the needs of the ready and the willing students. We are not a successful province because we have forced students to be educated. We are successful because we have given people options for various courses of learning, and they have chosen the ones that are the best suited to their interests and their goals. As well, I also believe that in many cases forcing a student to remain in high school for an extra year, from the age of 16 to 17, will not necessarily accomplish anything. Young Albertans who want to get a high school diploma after the age of 17 will in fact get a high school diploma, and those who do not simply will drop out. Sometimes when we are struggling with something, we need to be able to step back from it, and many of those who do drop out eventually come back to learning, some through distance learning or Bow Valley College or a virtual school like we have at the Rocky View Virtual School in my area. Mr. Chairman, not all students wish to be inside a classroom, and some function better at home.

Furthermore, I think the bill skirts around the more important issue, which is that everyone would like to see all children finish high school, and if that's the case, then the bill should come right out and say it. If we measure success by whether or not students graduate from high school, then shouldn't we legislate that students must graduate from high school? Wouldn't that get us closer to the point? Related to this is the fact that in order to increase the chances of becoming economically successful, a young person today will almost certainly require some postsecondary education, and given that this bill is premised upon success, are we going to start forcing young Albertans to take postsecondary education whether they want to or not? That isn't our job, Mr. Chairman. These are decisions to be made by every Albertan as an individual and their families, not

their government. All we can do as a government is to try and provide the tools.

Secondly, Mr. Chairman, this bill speaks indirectly to the purpose of schools in this province. Are Alberta schools to be forced to provide a service to near-adult individuals who do not want to be there? Can you imagine the disruptive effect on some classrooms if that becomes the case? As all members here know, Alberta students consistently rank amongst the best in the world on standardized testing. This is the testimony to our education system, the one that we do have, one that stresses education above all else. Our schools are truly places to learn, not to coast. I believe that forcing someone to be in a school system against their will is bound to increase the number of problems in that system. This will hamper the ability of all students to learn, and if these students are not there to learn, then why are we trying to force them to be there?

As my third and final point, Mr. Chairman, I would like to state that during my 10 years as an MLA for Airdrie-Rocky View and, prior to that, Three Hills-Airdrie, not one parent, not one school board official, not one student, not one teacher has come to me with a request or a suggestion to increase the age limit for staying in school. I have over 50,000 people in my constituency, and none of them has ever asked me to do this. My larger point is that people learn best in places and in settings where they actually want to be. Possibly we ought to have the humility to realize that in the case of some of our older teenagers, school sometimes is not that place, at least not at that time in their lives.

This bill is based upon good sentiment and a noble goal, the education of all Albertans. However, due to the fact that the School (Compulsory Attendance) Amendment Act, 2003, attempts to keep people in a place where they clearly do not want to be, it will not be effective in ensuring that more Albertans graduate with a high school diploma, and that is why I will not be supporting Bill 203.

Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman, once again for the opportunity to be able to speak and put my point of view on the record.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. Member for Olds-Didsbury-Three Hills.

Mr. Marz: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. It's a pleasure for me to rise today and speak in support of Bill 203, the School (Compulsory Attendance) Amendment Act, 2003. Bill 203 is an important piece of legislation, because I believe that young Albertans need to be encouraged to finish high school. This will lay the foundation for their future in an increasingly competitive and demanding global economy.

Raising the mandatory age from 16 to 17 will bring young Albertans one year closer to graduation, which has become a basic necessity in today's world. A highly educated labour force that possesses the knowledge and skills needed for innovation and productivity growth and one that is flexible and adaptable in the face of ongoing change is a cornerstone of success for societies living and working in today's knowledge-based, globalized environment.

Mr. Chairman, in my opinion there are two important aspects in raising the mandatory school attendance age from 16 to 17. First, there are the individual or human benefits to achieving more education. Second, there are the societal and economic spillover effects of having a better educated province. A March 2001 study called *Literacy, Numeracy, and Labour Market Outcomes in Canada* discovered that each additional year of education raises annual earnings by about 8.3 percent. This statistic is astounding. In another study done by Statistics Canada there was a clear linkage between higher levels of education and higher rates of employment and lower rates of unemployment. With evidence like this, which

directly links education levels and income, Bill 203 should be seen as an investment plan for Alberta's future generations.

I do not believe, Mr. Chairman, that everyone is made for university education, but I do believe that everyone has a talent. To pursue this talent, training is needed, whether it be trade school or graphic design school, and while not a lot of these programs require a high school diploma, they most certainly demand specific higher levels of high school courses. Extending the mandatory age to 17 will give students thinking of dropping out at 16 an opportunity to achieve these specific courses so that they have a chance to realize their full potential.

Mr. Chairman, the basic issue that Bill 203 is addressing is that our society along with our economy has changed over the generations. Today almost any job that pays enough for an independent lifestyle requires some postsecondary education, training. Tradesmen need high school courses to get into apprenticeship programs, as do office management students. As you can see, there are very few professions left that are open to young adults without some kind of postsecondary training. This is why Bill 203 is so timely in our province's history.

4:30

Global economic fluctuations typically have a large impact on youth employment. Business leaders and social analysts believe that to succeed, Alberta's young people need to be adaptable and innovative and to have sophisticated communication and technological skills. Albertans who have not finished high school are disadvantaged when it comes to job security. When the economy takes a downward spiral, employees with low levels of education are more susceptible to losing their jobs. This stress places more burden on government social and economic programs. A report by the National Center for Education Statistics in the United States found that high school dropouts were three times more likely to receive public assistance than high school graduates who did not go to college. Once again, raising the mandatory attendance to 17 should be seen as an investment in the province's economy and its future.

One statistic published in a study called *Youth in Transition Survey* brought to my attention the cyclical effects that lower levels of education have on our society. The study found that high school graduates were more likely to have parents who had completed a postsecondary diploma or university degree, and the proportion of high school dropouts who had parents who had not completed high school were three times that of graduates. Mr. Chairman, this statistic makes it painfully obvious that high school dropout levels do not only affect the individual and his or her economic future, but they also affect the future of their children. The same study, which surveyed 22,000 Canadian youths between 18 and 20 years of age in the year 2000, found more evidence that the jobless rate was highest for high school dropouts with no postsecondary education.

There's some good news when discussing high school dropout rates among 20 year olds in Alberta over the past decade. In 1991 the dropout rate amongst 20 year olds was 14 percent, and in 1999 it was lowered to 12.5 percent. However, this still means that over one in 10 high school students are dropping out, and this is unacceptable. Another finding in the *Youth in Transition Survey* was that three-quarters of those who had dropped out later expressed regret over their decision. On a personal level, Mr. Chairman, in all my years I've not met one person who told me that they wished to have less education.

It should be noted that dropouts have a very difficult time re-entering the education system. The support network of the family is usually not there to provide financial and moral support for young Albertans looking to go back to school. Many in this segment of

society are living outside the home and are financially unable to go back to school. I can only imagine how difficult a decision it is for young people, once they're out of the home, to go back to their parents and say that they would like to be supported again to go back to school. Therefore, it's very important to pass this bill so that young Albertans are forced to attend school while they do have that support of their families. We have an opportunity to reduce the amount of regret and disappointment in the lives of these young Albertans. Raising the mandatory age from 16 to 17 will bring these disenfranchised youth one year closer to graduation. After spending this extra year in school, perhaps they will see the light at the end of the tunnel and go on and finish high school. Bill 203 is an extra push for Alberta's youth who for whatever reason are disengaged from the education system.

Building the requisite human capital for skills and knowledge begins with a strong educational foundation. The completion of high school is widely recognized in Canada and in other countries as the minimum education requirement. However, the labour market demand for skills and knowledge suggests that postsecondary education is fast becoming the new educational standard. Certainly, those youths who fail to complete high school will have particular problems integrating into the new economic society. Raising the mandatory age from 16 to 17 should be seen as an economic investment for this great province. It certainly is for the individual. The evidence is clear and blunt: education and income capacity are directly linked.

Some people are wary of this bill because of the costs attached to raising the mandatory age. However, the approximately \$43 million that it would cost this government to keep young Albertans in school for an extra year is a small price to pay. The long-term economic benefits far outweigh the short-term costs.

Mr. Chairman, people have raised the question of how this bill would be enforced. Well, Bill 203, by eliminating attendance boards, would place full and clear responsibility for attendance enforcement with school boards. It's my belief that people generally tend to obey the law, and by raising the mandatory age to 17, the mind-set of young Albertans would be changed, and 17 would become the new, accepted mandatory age. With more of the population having higher education, stresses on government services will decline, increasing the amount of money available for the province to reinvest in education and remain competitive in an increasingly demanding global economy.

Because Bill 203 makes plain economic sense for this province, I urge all my colleagues here to support this innovative piece of legislation and thank the Member for Little Bow for bringing it forward.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Norwood.

Mr. Masyk: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. It's my pleasure to speak on behalf of Bill 203. I believe it's the right step for our education system, and I believe that our province will receive some benefit from this small but not insignificant change to the School Act. I'd like to speak on section 2 of Bill 203 with special reference to the constituency I represent, Edmonton-Norwood. I'd also like to pay special attention to the comments made in second reading debate by the members for Vermilion-Lloydminster and Edmonton-Rutherford. While these two members found themselves on opposite sides of the debate, I believe they both made important comments regarding the larger aims of our education system that we ought to look at more closely.

The Member for Edmonton-Rutherford talked about the impor-

tance of getting students ready for a different sort of economy that we would enter. In this new economy knowledge becomes an important tool, especially when we consider the specialization of every sort of job that is out there as well as the explosion of technical achievements that we've seen over the past 20 years or so. It isn't just a particular segment of our economy and particular careers that are subject to this change.

I think back to the '70s and '80s when, if you wanted to become a mechanic, you just helped your dad or went down the street to the local gas station or service garage; hopefully, the guy took you in, saw what you could do, and hired you. Nowadays, however, that doesn't happen. When you go walking into a mechanic's garage, it doesn't look like a service station did back then. One of the things you notice is a computer and diagnostic machines. Then you might see a wrench or a tool set. But if you want to be a mechanic or if you want to operate these machines, you have to know how to read and how to determine and interpret their outputs so you can make the right decisions. You also have to know what the machine is giving you so you know how to fix the problem. In order to do all this, you have to finish high school, and then you have to take one or two years of tech school or community college. All this shows that while the essence of being a good mechanic always involves getting your hands dirty to fix a car, the mode by which mechanics operate has been radically altered.

A larger point is the knowledge that the economy is touching every career in sight, and our students have to be ready for that change, Mr. Chairman. The Member for Vermilion-Lloydminster made an interesting comment on this point. He suggested that perhaps our focus ought to be in looking at the whole school system. Perhaps as MLAs we ought to be asking ourselves the greater question of how our schools should be preparing students for the economy that we're facing.

Finally, the member suggested that we should be looking at all the other sorts of classes we're offering in our schools to ensure that we offer a variety of courses that teach students a whole roster of skills that may be used by them. This is a point that ought to be taken by every member, by the province's learning commission. I know that Alberta's larger centres' apprenticeship programs are helping many students who have thought about dropping out or staying in school, and they may give it another shot. As well, the school system here in Edmonton is the one that caters to different reasons for kids that are in school. Of particular personal interest to me, Mr. Chairman, is Edmonton-Norwood, but this isn't the case for all the other areas of the province. There are those where initiatives and incentives to stay in school are not for all the kids without an aptitude for quote, unquote, learning from books. As well, aside from looking at the environment inside the schools, we've got to look at the environment outside our schools. We can't consider our schools in a vacuum. Rather, we've got to see our schools as connected to the larger community they serve.

4:40

In this light, Mr. Chairman, I would like to talk a bit about Edmonton-Norwood and say that for many students in my constituency a school is the best place they can be. I know that many kids in Edmonton-Norwood have big dreams, big plans, and I know that their parents like any other parents across the province have the highest hopes for the future success of their kids. However, Edmonton-Norwood has many challenges. There are pockets in the constituency of different levels of crime. It's on the news: on 118th, the prostitution; the break and enters. These are coming from young kids. You talk to the beat police, and they'll tell you that the youth are getting more and more wise about the law, what they can and

can't get away with. If it keeps them in school for one year, there is a likelihood that they might change their course or their pattern of thinking. One of my principals had told me that sometimes one year makes a drastic change in their attitude, from being a young, foolish child to becoming a young adult, and with that comes a different outlook on life.

It's sad in some areas of the inner city where a hot lunch program means learning. Does that reflect on the parents' ability to be a parent, or does that reflect on just the neediness of a community? You look at some of the kids that vandalize the school and are in lower grades. You know, what would possess them to do such things? If they could stay in school one more year, I think we could probably curb a lot of those things. And that's in just one area of the city. What if it made a difference? What if one year made a significant difference? You know, it's definitely not going to hurt, and I think we have a perfect opportunity here, being MLAs and receiving money from the taxpayers, to make a contribution in this segment of our jobs.

I would ask the members of the Assembly to really have a good look at section 2 of Bill 203. I would ask them to really think of the unfortunate kids who might, if they would stay in school one more year, not go on the street, who would not have to take a lesser job, who would have their horizons broadened. Mr. Chairman, I think we owe that to young people. I think we owe that to less-than-fortunate people and young kids that wouldn't otherwise have a chance. It's only one year, and I would encourage everybody to have a deeper look at it.

Thank you so much.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona.

Dr. Pannu: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. I'd like to take this opportunity to make a few observations on Bill 203 while we are studying it in committee, the bill with the title of School (Compulsory Attendance) Amendment Act, 2003. The bill obviously calls on the Assembly to amend the compulsory attendance portion of the School Act so that high school students would be required to stay in school a year longer than they presently do.

I've been listening to the debate with considerable interest, as I'm sure high school students themselves, teachers, school boards, parent organizations, and the government itself are looking at this bill. There are some good assumptions on which this extension in compulsory attendance that's sought by way of this bill is based. Those assumptions are about the fact that an additional year of staying in school will improve high school completion rates, would assist young Albertans to take more seriously their commitment to complete high school. So that's a laudable assumption. That's a very good starting point.

In this day and age high school completion is a minimum. You know, you have to go beyond that to be able to survive and succeed in the work world that we find ourselves in given the complexity and the high-tech nature of the economy that we live in and the rapid changes that are required in learning our skills so many times over during a career, the fact that most Albertans and Canadians do have to in fact retool themselves every five, ten years given the rapid changes in the work world and the changing requirements of skills accompanying this technological change as well as change in the structure of occupations and job skills required. So the more education one has, the better it is. In that sense I congratulate the member for bringing this bill forward so that we can look at this one element that might help improve high school completion rates for our young people.

At this stage I'm simply looking as someone who's interested in

having some questions that come to mind addressed. The compulsory attendance will obviously have ramifications for school boards, schools, school superintendents, teachers, parents, and perhaps other groups. All of these stakeholders are, I'm sure, watching and listening, and what I would hope will happen in turn is that we have their input in some systematic way with respect to how they approach this extension of the compulsory attendance from 16 to 17 years, this increase in the number of years that we require by law of our students to attend.

So I wonder if the hon. member, the sponsor of the bill, has some information on whether or not school boards have been consulted, and, if so, have all of them been consulted? Has the Alberta School Boards Association perhaps been a partner in the development of this bill? The same pertains to, of course, the Alberta Teachers' Association as Alberta Teachers' Association represents all those high school teachers who are doing a wonderful job of helping our students who'll be affected by this extension. If so, what position has ATA taken on it? What input did the hon. member have from the ATA on the development of this bill?

4:50

Similarly, school superintendents and their association is another stakeholder that comes to mind. Certainly, I'll find it most instructive and reassuring to know that we have heard from them. The hon. member responsible for the bill will, I'm sure, have that information, and he'll share it with me and with the members of this House.

There are many parent associations, parent advocacy groups who are vitally interested in making our schools more successful, more effective in helping young people of Alberta to do better in school, to stay longer in school, to complete high school at a higher percentage of the student body. So what's their position? Any consultation that has taken place with parent advocacy groups would be another question that I would have that I hope the hon. member would have some answers for.

High school completion rates are also one of the many questions that are receiving extensive and detailed and expert attention from the learning commission. Since the terms of reference of the learning commission include specifically this particular item – that is, how we can improve the rate of completion of Alberta students through high school – I wonder if it wouldn't be, in fact, wise for us to hear from the learning commission. I'm sure everyone perhaps agrees that if we are to improve the high school completion rates, more than one measure will have to be taken, more than one change may need to be made. It's the interactive effect of those multiple changes that we may make as a result of the deliberations and recommendations of the learning commission that are likely effective in not only identifying increasing high school completion rates as our goal but in achieving that goal in order to be sure that the measures that we take will have a desired impact. Might it not be wise for us to wait, therefore, for a comprehensive look that the learning commission has been busy taking on the issue of how to improve these completion rates?

With those remarks, Mr. Chairman, I'll take my seat. Thank you.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Meadowlark.

Mr. Maskell: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. It is my great pleasure to rise today in support of Bill 203, the School (Compulsory Attendance) Amendment Act, 2003. I'm very pleased to be able to join the debate on Bill 203, and I'd like to commend the hon. Member for Little Bow for bringing forth this initiative.

You know, initially I wasn't sure whether or not I could support this bill and in fact shared many of the views of the hon. Member for

Airdrie-Rocky View. Then the faces of students past appeared before me and all of those students who said to me, "Mr. Maskell, why didn't you make me stay in school?" I know this business of legislating students to stay in school is a challenge and is a difficult one.

I need to share a little story with you. In my first year as an assistant principal one morning at about, oh, 9:30, 10 in the morning a father and a brother came to my door at the school and wanted to speak with me, and they told me: you know, my son was killed this morning in a motorcycle accident on the James McDonald Bridge, and we're here to clear out his locker and finish his school time. So I went to our records – and thank goodness he wasn't one of my students – and we discovered that he wasn't registered at school. He had dropped out some time ago, quite a long time before that. But this young man was getting up every morning with his lunch and his books and getting on his motorcycle, leaving the house, and heading off to school. The parents believed for all those months – and this was in the early spring of that school year – that their son was going to school every day.

I'll never forget the look on the father's face when he said to me: Mr. Maskell, I can never tell his mother about this, because she just couldn't handle the fact that he was living this false life for all of that time. Nobody from the school had ever let the parents know that this youngster was not attending school. Nobody had phoned and nobody had checked. We were supposed to be sending out attendance records and all of this kind of thing, and it hadn't happened at all.

I made a vow from that day forward and for the rest of my career that I would work very hard at keeping students in school. So any strategy that we can come up with that will help students stay in school is important, and I believe that if this is another way that we can retain a few more students in school, it's worth all of the effort.

Mr. Chairman, the purpose of this bill is rather simple and straightforward: it's a means by which we would ensure that more of our children stay in school and, I hope, graduate. You know, according to a recent study by Alberta Learning 72 percent of Alberta students graduate from high school, and, members of this Legislature, that's not good enough. We have to improve that result. We have to increase that. It's got to be at least 80 percent or more. We can't be satisfied with 72 percent of our students graduating. In fact, although we have wonderful results in this province, this result isn't our finest.

Since July 1, 1999, New Brunswick is the only province where the minimum mandatory school age is 18 years of age, and prior to that date it was 16 in that province just like it is throughout the rest of our country. To my way of thinking our colleagues in New Brunswick should be commended for passing the amendment to raise the mandatory minimum school age there.

So, Mr. Chairman, it was recognized long ago that all children should have access to education, be it in a public or a private setting. It seems fair to assume that by making schools universally accessible to all children in Canada, the implied message is that going to school, that getting an education, is important. That our own provincial Ministry of Learning shares this belief is made clear in its 2001 report, *Removing Barriers to High School Completion*. At the very beginning it is explicitly stated that

Alberta Learning is committed to ensuring Albertans have the knowledge and skills they need to be successful and to learn quickly and flexibly throughout their lives. This process begins at an early age and reaches a key milestone when students complete high school and begin their adult lives by moving on to further education or employment. As such, the ability of every student to successfully complete high school is fundamental to continued success and quality of life.

Mr. Chairman, as the ministry's own report considers completing

high school a key milestone and states unequivocally that completing high school is fundamental to continued success and quality of life, I was surprised to learn that the ministry opposes Bill 203. Why? Has the importance of completing high school ceased to be of fundamental importance? I do not believe that to be the case, and here's why: look around and see what's driving our economy. To be sure, our province has a highly resource-driven economy, but it does not exist in a vacuum. We cannot, nor should we, rely exclusively on what our resources can bring us. As much as any other jurisdiction Alberta also needs to have a qualified workforce in today's burgeoning information and knowledge-based industries. Indeed, in today's competitive economy advanced technology skills and competence dominate. Completing high school is more than a key milestone in an individual's educational process; it has in many cases also become the minimum level of education needed to have an opportunity to compete in the labour market, obtain an entry-level job, and to secure a basic standard of living. Much more education and training is required for decent jobs, incomes, and life chances. Anything less than the minimum may restrict you to long hours, tedious jobs with little opportunity for advancement, and a low quality of life.

5:00

Mr. Chairman, we talk a lot about making sure that our children do not get saddled with debts incurred long before they reach adulthood. This concern has been and remains a key factor in this government's vow to pay off Alberta's provincial debt, and rightly so. Another issue of great concern is that we do what we can to make sure future generations are not restricted in their opportunities. It's our duty as legislators, as students, and as parents and grandparents to make sure that we do not place unnecessary hurdles to prevent our children and our children's children from being able to realize their goals, dreams, and ambitions.

A moment ago I said that high school dropouts are at a disadvantage in seeking meaningful employment. What they face are, if not unemployment, long work hours and low income levels. As the disadvantages they face accumulate, they will face increasing difficulty furthering their education, training, or skill development. This to me reads like a recipe for disaster. I want to make sure that all of our children have opportunities to succeed. Bill 203 won't ensure success on its own, but it is a step in the right direction.

Another argument I've heard against Bill 203 is that it could be seen as infringing on the freedom of young adults to choose when to leave school. I must say that I find this to be one of the most confounding and troubling arguments I've heard in opposition to Bill 203. I say this because when you think about it, there are a lot of things we don't let 16 year olds do and, I might add, with good reason. For instance, we don't let 16 year olds purchase alcohol, and in but a few weeks it will be illegal for anyone under 18 to buy and smoke cigarettes in public places. There's more. Those not yet 18 cannot purchase and register a gun of any kind. Starting this year, significant limitations have been placed on the circumstances and manner in which 16 year olds are allowed to operate motor vehicles.

The list, Mr. Chairman, goes on, but I think I've made my point. We have placed restrictions on certain kinds of activities, rights, and duties for certain age groups. We've done so because we and those who came before us felt it necessary in the ever present tug-of-war between individual rights and social responsibilities that there be some areas in which responsibility must take precedence over rights.

Quite frankly, I would also like to add that I think there are many issues about which 16 year olds cannot and should not make decisions whose impact may be felt throughout the rest of their lives. One such issue is whether or not they must attend school. Mr.

Chairman, I think we need only recall our own adolescence and teenage years to know that teenagers do not always fully appreciate the scope or impact of the decisions they make, let alone the decisions others make. Adolescents are much more likely to give greater consideration to what they like rather than what is good for them. I realize this is a generalization, but I think that with time we gain the maturity and experience necessary to make informed decisions that aren't guided solely by what we enjoy doing but also by what we have to do whether we like it or not.

As children grow up and are expected to take on more and more responsibility for their own lives and their decisions, they tend to realize . . . [Mr. Maskell's speaking time expired] Well, I'm out of time.

Mr. Chairman, I urge all those in this Legislature to support this bill. Thank you.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. Member for Calgary-Fort.

Mr. Cao: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. It is an honour for me to join the debate in the Committee of the Whole on Bill 203, the School (Compulsory Attendance) Amendment Act, 2003, sponsored by the hon. Member for Little Bow. I would like to address what the drawbacks in section 2(a) may pose to Alberta high schools and explain why these risks are worth the rewards.

Mr. Chairman, I accept the fact that there are issues with Bill 203. First of all, there's a risk of students simply riding out an extra year. There is an assumption that 16 year olds who don't want to be in school are no different than the 17 year olds who miss their classes. It may also be possible that these students may do more harm than good to the atmosphere in a classroom. I think it's safe to say that students who don't care about their own education care even less about the education of their classmates. Finally, it may also be true that the students who cause disruptions will only cost money because schools finance their programs based on the government's per student funding formula.

We must acknowledge that there may be drawbacks to this bill. Increasing the mandatory age of attendance could be problematic, but we should also make sure that we do not abandon those students who may only need a stronger push to stay in school. I know from firsthand experience the importance of promoting education through whatever means necessary. Mr. Chairman, I had the pleasure of chairing the Athabasca Tribal Council's school review committee. I traveled to northern Alberta and heard about the significant barriers to learners in northern Alberta. The committee heard about the need for more parent involvement and more collaboration between parents and teachers to help improve the learning programs required for students, but the most common concern among all of the schools in the region was the need to improve student attendance.

Now, one could argue that funding education in the far north is expensive in the first place. The schools are located far away from any major centre, students are scattered throughout the region, and facilities are in need of improvement. But it is not our place to decide who qualifies for education funding. The goal of Alberta's learning system is to educate all of Alberta's youth regardless of where they live, their ethnic background, or their current level of education. The best way to address all of these issues was to ask them what they wanted. What did the student want to achieve? What does the school board want to achieve? Mr. Chairman, these same questions need to be answered by those students who have not bought into the importance of basic education. This bill helps families, schools, communities encourage students to stay in school. Most Albertans realize the importance of education and work hard to ensure that students reach their full potential.

Mr. Chairman, Bill 203 plays an important role in the push and pull of education. Government, parents, schools, and society push students to succeed and reach their goals. Students are pushed to go to school and get their high school diploma. Students are pushed to earn high marks and think seriously about postsecondary education. Many students are pushed to be eager, disciplined, and hard-working. Finally, students are pushed to balance life, work, and school pressures. On the other side of this schools pull students into classrooms by making education more attractive. Students are pulled into the world of work to attain independence. Students are also pulled into education with the thought of doors opening as a result of their commitment to education.

This Assembly heard members speak about the need to make education more appealing to students. I agree that the Department of Learning should always be on the lookout for new learning strategies and programs. Updating and tweaking the curriculum is the best way to keep students' interest, but there are others. There are other factors such as programs designed for specific students and proper facilities that contribute a great deal to help attract and retain students who have not fully bought into the importance of education. Learning opportunities that encourage meaningful employment such as job shadowing and more connections to work would help pull students into the classroom.

5:10

I believe that Bill 203 also reflects the importance society places on education. The days of working a whole life with anything less than a high school diploma are gone. Sure; there may be certain professions that allow for a lower level of education in place of a good work ethic. There are many part-time jobs that do not require a high school diploma, but these jobs are hardly a career. The career opportunities available for adults without basic education are fewer in number.

The reality is that teenagers are not in the best position to decide their futures. Mr. Chairman, how can anyone know his or her full potential at such a young age? This is why the longer students spend in school the better. Young people must ask themselves what they want to do and where do they want to be. In other words, high school students must decide and define their success. Increasing the mandatory age of attendance to 17 will help those students who do not take their education seriously, but we all know it can be very difficult to force a teenager to do something they may not want to do. If these students spend an additional year in school and achieve anything, no matter how small, then Bill 203 has served its purpose.

Another aspect Bill 203 will address is the attendance boards, which many believe have failed to serve their purpose. These boards were designed to be an alternative to the immediate use of the courts to enforce compulsory attendance. It was thought that the court approach was not effective or appropriate in all cases. It focused on sanctions rather than remedies, and it did not try to get to the cause of nonattendance. However, the complex issues surrounding nonattendance are addressed easier through the school boards. The attendance boards are often viewed as a complicated process. Rather than urging students to stay in school, finding a resolution or applying sanctions are two other duties of the attendance boards that are a more effective result with the student, the school, and the guardian. Again, attendance boards only confuse the responsibility for attendance enforcement.

Mr. Chairman, I would like to refer back to the meeting with the Athabasca Tribal Council school review committee. Parents, teachers, tribal members did not mention the role or legitimacy of an attendance board because they were not considered part of the equation. My experience has proven to me that a local problem can

be best solved by a local perspective. Let's remember that urging students to complete their education provides them with the foundation of basic skills. These skills help prepare young people in their journey in the world of work.

Mr. Chairman, I strongly support Bill 203, and I urge all members to vote for it. Thank you.

The Deputy Chair: Are you ready for the question? Bill 203, School (Compulsory Attendance) Amendment Act, 2003. On the clauses of the bill are you agreed?

Some Hon. Members: Agreed.

The Deputy Chair: Opposed?

Some Hon. Members: Opposed.

The Deputy Chair: Carried.

[Several members rose calling for a division. The division bell was rung at 5:15 p.m.]

[Ten minutes having elapsed, the committee divided]

[Mr. Shariff in the chair]

For the motion:

Ady	Horner	McFarland
Cao	Jablonski	O'Neill
Carlson	Lukaszuk	Renner
DeLong	Marz	Strang
Dunford	Maskell	Taft
Evans	Massey	Taylor
Griffiths	Masyk	Zwozdesky
Herard	McClelland	

Against the motion:

Broda	Haley	Ouellette
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Cenaiko	Jonson	Snelgrove
Forsyth	Knight	Stelmach
Friedel	Lougheed	Stevens
Graham	Melchin	Tarchuk
Graydon	Norris	Vandermeer

Totals: For - 23 Against - 18

[The clauses of Bill 203 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.

Mr. Zwozdesky: Mr. Chair, I would move that the committee now rise and report.

[Motion carried]

[Mr. Shariff in the chair]

Mr. Lougheed: Mr. Speaker, the Committee of the Whole has had under consideration and reports Bill 203.

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

Hon. Members: Agreed.

The Acting Speaker: Opposed? Carried.

Hon. members, since it's 5:30, the House stands adjourned until 8 p.m.

[The Assembly adjourned at 5:30 p.m.]