

Legislative Assembly of Alberta

Title: **Tuesday, April 15, 2003**

1:30 p.m.

Date: 2003/04/15

[The Speaker in the chair]

head: **Prayers**

The Speaker: Good afternoon.

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.

Please be seated.

head: **Introduction of Guests**

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Community Development.

Mr. Zwozdesky: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's indeed a great pleasure to rise today and introduce to you and through you some very special guests. I often refer to them as Alberta's most precious resource. These are our students. Our group today comes from Blessed Kateri elementary school. There are 24 of them, and they are accompanied by their teacher, Brigitte Berube, and by parent helpers Jackie Playford and Louise Molenkamp. I would ask all of them to now please rise and receive the warm welcome of this Assembly. Thank you for coming.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Airdrie-Rocky View.

Ms Haley: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. This is really special for me to be able to introduce to you and through you some people from my constituency. A lot of rural MLAs don't have as many visitors as some of our urban counterparts here, so it's a really special day when we do. I have 12 guests in the members' gallery: 10 grade 10 students from the Airdrie Koinonia Christian school accompanied by Mr. Paul Holmes and Mrs. Shannon Rast. I would ask them if they would please rise and receive the warm welcome of our Assembly.

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

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's a pleasure to rise this afternoon and introduce to you and through you to all hon. members of this Assembly a couple from the Forest Heights district of Edmonton-Gold Bar. I am pleased to introduce Emilian Groch and Dianna Groch. They are the proud parents of Paul Groch, one of the pages here in the Legislative Assembly. Certainly, Paul and the other pages are a very good example of the young people of this province. They are all polite, hardworking, and intelligent. I certainly hope my children mature like Paul and the other pages in this Assembly. I would now ask the couple to please rise in the Speaker's gallery and receive the warm traditional welcome of this Assembly.

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

Mr. Bonner: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It gives me a great deal of pleasure to introduce to you and through you 77 bright and enthusiastic students from Bishop Greschuk school in Edmonton-Glenarry. They are accompanied by teachers Mrs. Aleksandra Nikolic, Mrs. Tina Madron, Mr. James Harris, and Mr. Hugh Esch and parent helper Mrs. Diane Spruyt. They are seated in

the public gallery, and with your permission I would ask that they all now rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of the House.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Government Services.

Mr. Coutts: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It gives me great pleasure today to introduce to you and through you to members of the Assembly Harold and Jean Healy, both proud members of the Kainai First Nation within the constituency of Livingstone-Macleod. Harold shares the distinction, along with our Premier, of being a member of the Kainai chieftainship. Harold is also recognized in his community for being a leader in youth justice issues. He is a 12-year member of the advisory board on the RCMP for K Division. As well, in his spare time he is the president of the Buffalo Nations Luxton museum in the beautiful constituency of Banff-Cochrane. They're in the members' gallery. I see that they're already standing, and I'd ask them to receive the traditional warm welcome of the Assembly.

head: **Oral Question Period**

Emergency Services in Calgary Health Region

Dr. Taft: Mr. Speaker, from the beginning the Calgary health region has been plagued by mistakes, dubious business deals, and a culture of denial. When Calgary was the country's fastest growing city, the CHR blew up a major hospital and sold two others to well-connected investors. Questionable deals have been made involving senior officials of the CHR, and the Auditor General has raised serious concerns about conflicts of interest. Now the report of the fatality inquiry into Vince Motta's death accuses the region of failing its responsibilities in the strongest terms. To the Minister of Health and Wellness: can the minister explain why Vince Motta died only six months after a previous inquiry into the death of a young girl made recommendations to prevent another such death from occurring? Why aren't these taken seriously?

Mr. Mar: Mr. Speaker, first and foremost, I want to express condolences to the Motta family. There were tragic circumstances resulting in the death of Vincenzo Dominic Motta. A public inquiry has been called into that. The results are found in a report that has been forwarded to me through His Honour Judge Delong. We will take the time necessary to review this report in its entirety. There are some 25 recommendations contained within it. We do take these things seriously. One ought not be in a position of trying to score political points upon the death of an individual, but it is important that we focus on how we can do better, how we can improve our services in emergency care.

There are thousands and thousands and thousands of people that go to emergency rooms every week in this province. In the city of Calgary, Mr. Speaker, there are some 250,000 emergency room visits. We're happy to report that in the overwhelming majority of cases people enter the system, they get treated, they get better, and they're released. We don't have an infallible system. We have a system that is very good. Occasionally it is excellent.

Perhaps, Mr. Speaker, we can say simply that at this time we need time to review Judge Delong's comments. I have spoken with the chair of the regional health authority in Calgary. He identified to me their desire to improve their service and that they have already taken steps similar to those recommended by Judge Delong in terms of improving their service. They've already done that. He also did explain to me that there was a concern that he had with respect to the conduct of regional health authority staff members in dealing with

the Motta family and that he himself was personally committed to looking into that, but we will move forward on improving patient safety in this province.

Dr. Taft: We'll go to the Premier then. Will this government follow the recommendations of the Motta inquiry and call a full public inquiry into the state of emergency services in Calgary?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, first of all, I would like to address the preamble to the first question. I listened very intently to the hon. minister's reply. It was polite, it was professional, it was courteous, unlike the preamble to the question, which was vicious and vindictive and uncalled for. I commend the minister for keeping his cool and providing an answer in such a polite and professional way.

Relative to the question, Mr. Speaker, the hon. minister has indicated that an assessment, I would assume in conjunction with the Department of Justice, is being done of the Delong findings and the recommendations contained therein, especially recommendation 1, which calls for a public inquiry into emergency services within the Calgary regional health authority, and once that assessment is done, then appropriate action will be taken.

Dr. Taft: To the Premier again then: given the years – the years – of controversy and problems in the Calgary health region, will the Premier have the guts to suspend this board and appoint an independent CEO, or is he content to let it remain a Tory patronage playground?

1:40

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, first of all, I would say that the Calgary regional health authority is among the best of all health administrations in the country. As the hon. minister indicated, there are literally hundreds of thousands of people, 250,000 people approximately, who attend emergency wards in the Calgary regional health district over the period of a year. Most of those people, a large percentage, I would suggest well in the 90s, attend, get treated, and are released or are hospitalized for further treatment and have no problems whatsoever with the system. When there are problems, we act on those problems. We address those problems in conjunction with the regional health authority as, indeed, we are reacting and assessing the situation relative to the Delong decision.

The Speaker: Second Official Opposition main question. The hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods.

Education Funding

Dr. Massey: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Calgary Catholic, \$14 million; Red Deer public, \$1 million; Elk Island public, \$6.9 million; Holy Spirit Catholic school district No. 4, \$2.1 million; Chinook's Edge school division No. 73, \$2.2 million; Calgary public, \$30 million; and Edmonton public, \$13.5 million: just some of the current and projected school board deficits across this province. My questions are to the Premier. Does the Premier support the layoff of hundreds of teachers and the increases in class sizes that are going to be forced on boards to wipe out these deficits?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, the hon. member makes all kinds of assumptions and contemplates layoffs that may or may not occur. The budget has been handed down, and we allocated to the various school districts an amount that we deemed sufficient to operate their various school districts. I think it's entirely premature and, I would suggest, irresponsible to suggest at this time that there are layoffs.

They may be talking about layoffs, but nothing will happen until there's been a full assessment as to the impact of the increased dollars and how far those dollars will go to accommodate the ongoing operations in the individual school districts.

Dr. Massey: Again to the Premier: what is the reason, Mr. Premier, for pursuing a government policy that will see such massive cuts to school classrooms across this province?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, I don't know where this educated person comes up with his ridiculous math. How can a 4.7 percent increase be construed as a cut? You know, this guy is a university professor, and an increase to him is a cut. No wonder some of our students suffer. [interjections]

The Speaker: The hon. member does have the floor.

Dr. Massey: The rhetoric just doesn't cut it, Mr. Premier.

When are you going to address the fast approaching funding crisis in this province, or are you just going to stand by as you did with the teachers' strike and let it happen?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, I completely disagree with the assertion that there is a funding crisis. I'll have the hon. Minister of Learning respond in further detail, but this is the difference between a cut and an increase. When you increase, you give more. When you cut, you give less. I mean, that is basic. That is economics kindergarten, never mind 101. Basically, we have increased funding for education by 46 percent over the past six or seven years – well, it's more than that now; it's probably in the 50s now – while enrolment has grown by something like 6, perhaps 7 or 8 percent by this particular time. Nevertheless, I'll have the hon. minister respond.

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Dr. Oberg: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Included in this budget this year was a \$191 million increase for the basic K to 12 system. The boards that the hon. member was talking about were boards that were putting out preliminary data for next year. There are no budget deficits this year. We have dealt with Edmonton public, and we feel that we have given them a solution so they will not be in deficit this year.

Mr. Speaker, the other really key issue here and the key point that people in Alberta need to realize is that enrollment in our schools is flat. Last year it increased by .25 percent, so two and a half new students for every thousand students in the public education system. This year we're predicting it to be absolutely zero. Some of the jurisdictions that he was talking about here are seeing a significant decline in the enrollment, which does lead to decreased funding because there are fewer students there.

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

Education Property Taxes

Dr. Massey: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Education property tax bills in Edmonton are going up an average of \$57 a household, yielding the province a \$17 million windfall. While the government basks in riches, the fund-starved Edmonton public school board crunches the numbers to determine not if, Mr. Premier, but how many teachers they will lay off next September. My questions are to the Premier. Why are Edmonton public ratepayers experiencing an 8 percent increase in taxes and fewer teachers in their schools?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, I would like to make it clear once again . . .

Mr. MacDonald: Your policies don't work.

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, our policies do work. I'm responding to a shout across the aisle by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar, who said that our policies don't work. Well, I'm going to tell this fellow something. Our policies must be working, because we have 74 members and they have seven, so something must be working.

Mr. Speaker, to address the question, the education portion of the property tax remains the same. There is no tax increase. I repeat: there is no tax increase. Now, if the value of the property, an individual householder's property, goes up through a reassessment, then there will be an increase in taxes according to the assessment base set down by the municipal council, but relative to the education portion, which accrues to the province of Alberta and is redistributed to the school boards, there is no tax increase. No tax increase.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Dr. Massey: Thank you. Again to the Premier: if, as you say, the tax grab is due to inflated property values and population growth, why aren't the same factors reflected in school board funding?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, while we froze the mill rate, we did give an increase in this year's budget to the various school districts averaging I believe 4.7 percent for learning. But I repeat – and this alludes to the preamble; he talks about inflated property rates – that we do not have anything to do with setting the mill rates for municipal properties or any property for that matter. That is entirely up to municipalities under the municipal taxation act, or it used to be. I don't know if it's under the MGA or the municipal taxation act. Basically, it's up to the municipal council as to whether they want to conduct a reassessment or increase the value of individual properties.

1:50

Dr. Massey: My question again is to the Premier. Given that Edmonton will contribute \$17 million more to education, why are they seeing no relief for their public school board?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, they are. They're sharing on a needs basis. They're sharing in what I think is a reasonable increase to accommodate population growth and a very, very minimal growth in class size. I would add also that \$51 million, I believe, is being allocated to Edmonton for capital, whether school renovations or new schools, where it's deemed to be a priority.

As the Minister of Learning will probably point out – and I'll have him supplement my answer – the budget is predicated on the priorities set down by the school boards. Perhaps the hon. minister can expand on the priorities of Edmonton public and Edmonton Catholic.

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Dr. Oberg: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. To start off, I will say that Edmonton will be increasing by \$17 million, but the actual dollar increase that Edmonton public and Edmonton Catholic will be receiving is around \$25 million. Interestingly enough, the Alberta school foundation funds now approximately 34 and a half percent of education. The general revenue funds approximately 65 and a half percent of education. The hon. Premier has given the reasons why the mill rate was frozen, but again a lot of it, on the capital expenditure for example, is the priorities of the school board. Really, to reiterate: a \$25 million increase for a \$17 million cost.

The Speaker: The hon. leader of the third party, followed by the hon. Member for Lacombe-Stettler.

Emergency Services in Calgary Health Region

(continued)

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The Calgary health region has been a cesspool of mismanagement, incompetence, conflicts of interest, and Tory patronage. All of this has led to the avoidable death of a 23-year-old Albertan. The fatality inquiry into the tragic death of Vince Motta has brought the CHR's failings into sharp focus. My first question is to the Premier. Given that Judge Delong cites the closing of three Calgary hospitals in the mid-90s as a contributing factor in Vince Motta's death, will the Premier now apologize on behalf of this government to Mr. Motta's family for the reckless decision to blow up the Calgary General and sell Calgary Holy Cross and Grace to private, for-profit interests?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, Mr. Motta's very unfortunate death had nothing to do with the old Calgary General hospital or the Holy Cross or the Grace hospital for women. Nothing whatsoever. It had something to do, according to Judge Delong, with the administration and the operation of emergency rooms and emergency procedures within the Calgary regional health authority.

I take great offence to the hon. member's reference to the Calgary regional health authority being a cesspool. You know, NDs get sick in Calgary and they get injured in Calgary and they have to attend hospital. When they attend hospital, they get treated. They get treated well, and they get released. For this person to stand up and call the Calgary regional health authority a cesspool is absolutely shameful, Mr. Speaker. You know, the Calgary regional health authority is big and they're honest and they're professionals and they're courteous. If this person ever gets sick or injured in or around the city of Calgary, you know what? They'll forget what he said completely. They'll close their ears to it, and they'll treat him like any other human being, and he will come out a better person hopefully.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My next question is to the Minister of Health and Wellness. By continuing to put his faith in the Calgary health region, why is the minister ignoring Judge Delong's finding that a system under siege or in crisis requires dramatic change, not incremental change?

Mr. Mar: Mr. Speaker, we are making dramatic changes in our health care system. It's better than it's ever been. We have a system that we can be proud of. We can look at objective evidence, if that's what the hon. member is looking for. We can look at the Canadian Institute for Health Information, which shows that the best place to have a heart attack, where you're most likely to survive an acute myocardial infarction – the top five places in all of Canada are all in Alberta. That includes the Calgary health region, and he ought to know that.

It is not mere puffery. It is not being a braggart to say that the Calgary health region when it comes to the treatment of strokes and heart attacks in their emergency rooms, in facilities in Calgary, will benchmark against the top 5 percent of places in the world, Mr. Speaker. We'll continue to express support for the regional health authority and the hardworking people who are on the board, who are physicians, who are health care providers, who are nurses, who continue to do an outstanding job in the city of Calgary for the benefit of all Albertans.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My last question is to the Minister of Justice and Attorney General. Given that the Minister of Health and Wellness has failed to act responsibly, will this minister heed the recommendation of Judge DeLong and call a public inquiry under the Public Inquiries Act of Alberta?

Mr. Hancock: Well, Mr. Speaker, the minister of health has eloquently outlined for opposition members raising questions today the need to carefully look at a 68-page decision that was delivered yesterday, to carefully consider the impact of that decision and what the recommendations were, to work with the Calgary health authority to determine whether progress has been made in some of the areas. He's got a lot more work to do in that area, and we have to look at the recommendations thoroughly and deeply. When you have a fatality review inquiry, it behooves you to be very careful and prudent in reviewing the results, the decision of that inquiry, and not to engage in the very knee-jerk type of reaction that we're seeing today.

Education Property Taxes

(continued)

Mrs. Gordon: Mr. Speaker, my constituents are seeking clarity. Having served for several years as Lacombe's mayor, I understand the need for and the use of municipal property taxes. Today I need to ask some questions related to the school side of things. Property taxes often go up as a direct result of a municipality experiencing overwhelming population growth. Property values are an integral part of this equation. With an increase in property value, up go the taxes. With a decrease in value – and this does happen – down they will go. The two appear very similar. To the provincial Finance minister: are they? What part of the school property tax does the province actually have control over?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mrs. Nelson: Well, thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. The Premier has answered some of this question in a previous question, but I'll say it once again. The role that we play in the school property tax, that goes out on an annual basis, is that we actually set the mill rate, and this year in our budget we chose to freeze the mill rate based on the previous year. So there was no increase in the mill rate for property tax assessment this year.

Mrs. Gordon: To the Minister of Municipal Affairs: who approves the value and/or formula used when determining market value assessment? How does it work, and who does it?

2:00

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Boutillier: Well, thank you. I share with the hon. member having sat on city council for 12 years, like many of my colleagues in the Assembly here. I want to say this. The value that is determined is ultimately market forces on each individual municipality, either urban or rural. What I would like to be able to say, though, is this. If the value of your asset in assessment goes up, then there will be an adjustment towards that on your tax bill, but if the value of your asset in fact stays the same based on the fact that the Minister of Finance has frozen the mill rate, there will be no change in your education property tax. Finally, Mr. Speaker, if in fact the value of

your assessed property goes down, in actual fact you will pay less in education property tax this year.

Mrs. Gordon: To the Learning minister: what is the Alberta school foundation fund, ASFF, and how does its application relate to school property tax and your overall budget with the many new and exciting initiatives including several new school construction starts as announced recently in the Learning budget 2003?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Dr. Oberg: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Well, first of all, the education property tax goes into the Alberta school foundation fund. To the hon. member, as well, this is a fund that must be spent on education. It cannot be taken and spent on anything else. It is a designated fund. So when the municipalities increase the amount of dollars that go into that, it goes directly into education.

Mr. Speaker, the other very important point must be made that approximately 34 and a half percent of education, of my budget, of the basic K to 12 budget, is actually paid for by property taxes. The other 64 and a half percent is paid for out of general tax revenue.

The final part of her question, Mr. Speaker, was: how much of the excellent construction program that Infrastructure has done is paid for by property taxes? The answer to that is zero. There is none from that that goes into the construction. That all comes out of Infrastructure's budget, which is general revenue fund.

Vote on Electoral Boundaries Commission Report

Ms Carlson: Mr. Speaker, MLAs are elected to represent the views of their constituents in what is traditionally called a free vote. However, it seems that not only are the Conservative MLAs willing to abdicate their responsibility to their constituents but that the Premier is willing to hand down autocratic dictates to those members on how to vote. The Premier calls this a controlled free vote. The opposition calls it undemocratic. To the Premier: if the Premier is confident in the quality of the Electoral Boundaries Commission report, why didn't he let Conservative members vote freely on the motion to accept the report?

Mr. Klein: Well, far from being autocratic or dictatorial, Mr. Speaker, caucus makes the decision. I don't know how it works in their caucus, nor do I have any desire to find out, but the way it works in our caucus is that the whip rules. She really tries to achieve consensus relative to the direction we're going to go, and the direction that we decided to go as a caucus and as a government relative to the electoral boundaries report, the legislation of which will be debated in this Assembly very soon, is to basically allow those who have really strong feelings about the changes to express their feelings in the way they vote. If that means voting no, then they will vote no.

Ms Carlson: Mr. Speaker, given that by his own admission if a free vote on this motion was allowed, it wouldn't have passed, how can the Premier claim that this government is representative or democratic or open or accountable when he hands down orders to MLAs instead of letting them vote the opinions of their constituents?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, I never ordered our caucus to vote any way or another. This is a caucus decision. These are 74 good-thinking men and women who decide for themselves how they are going to address a particular issue, and that can hardly be construed as being autocratic or dictatorial. To me this is the democratic way. Those

expressions of concern have already been demonstrated by some members and will be further demonstrated when the bill comes forward to bring about the boundary changes.

Ms Carlson: Mr. Speaker, to the Premier again: given that by their own statements in this House the majority of members obviously don't have confidence in the report, how are Albertans supposed to have any confidence in the report?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, you can not like a piece of legislation, but you can understand, as the Liberals might someday understand, the reality of the situation. The reality of the situation is that when you go through this exercise of changing boundaries, there are bound to be numerous, I would suggest, MLAs who are upset with the boundary changes. Nobody is happy with change, especially if the change is substantial and the particular MLA has become comfortable with the constituency that he or she represents, whether it's an opposition constituency or a government constituency.

But as the Justice minister so aptly pointed out – and I know that I ought not to be debating legislation that will be coming before this House – will we get anything better if we reject the recommendations of the commission and convene another commission? You know, that is the question. The answer, according to the consensus of our caucus anyway, was that, no, we don't like all of the recommendations, most of the recommendations, many of the recommendations, but are we going to get anything better? Do we want to go through the exercise again? The caucus decided: no, we don't want to.

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

Centennial Projects

Ms Kryczka: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. At the recent Premier's dinner in Calgary I was asked by some younger private-sector professionals whether the province has planned or is planning any special events to celebrate our centennial such as – and this was their idea – a festive promenade north on 108th Street from the Legislature to Jasper Avenue, and being a true Albertan who was born in Alberta, raised in Edmonton, and a resident of Calgary for 40 years, I took that sincere question seriously. The year 2005 gives us only one and a half years to plan, and a hundred years, I believe, is a very special event. My first question is to the Minister of Community Development. What plan is there for celebration activities in Edmonton and elsewhere in 2005?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Zwozdesky: Well, thank you. Mr. Speaker, there are a number of projects happening at the municipal level and certainly at the community level right across the province because everybody is so proud of our 100 years in Confederation. As a provincial government we, too, are planning a lot of projects on our own and many of those also in partnership with those communities and municipalities. Some of the projects on the drawing board at the moment include a re-enactment of the original inauguration day of September 1 – that could very well include a parade through the heart of our capital city, Edmonton; we'll see – a commemorative coin, a commemorative stamp, a commemorative medallion; events to honour Alberta's pioneers, the people who built this province; events to honour industry, business, community, and so on; as well as possibly an RCMP showcase – that might even happen in conjunction with a

royal family visit at some point; we'll see – official opening of a 50th anniversary time capsule; other special projects sprinkled throughout, possibly even a centennial day holiday. Everything is up on the board.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Ms Kryczka: Thank you. My first supplemental is to the same minister. Which October 2001 community-based deferred projects in Calgary have been reactivated due to last week's budget announcement regarding the centennial legacies grants program, phase 2?

2:10

Mr. Zwozdesky: Mr. Speaker, I want to be very clear that last Friday I announced the undeferring of projects under the centennial legacies program that were scheduled to have been announced in September of 2001. Unfortunately, tragic events of September 11 pre-empted us by about two weeks. We've been in a frozen mode since, but on Friday I did announce the go-ahead of about 31 community-based projects so far, which is in addition to several that were announced in September of 2000. Specific to the Calgary region, that includes \$3 million to help support the Heritage Park project.

The Speaker: Hon. minister, if I understand correctly, the minister announced this last Friday, so the information is freely available. Urgency is one of the parameters of question period.

Hon. member, please proceed.

Ms Kryczka: My second supplemental is to the same minister. What is the status of Calgary's Jubilee Auditorium renovations, also originally announced in October 2001?

Mr. Zwozdesky: Mr. Speaker, I didn't get into the specifics of that announcement, so there is some urgency to this, and I'm happy to answer it. In fact, we are going to be announcing the details of the specific plan for the auditorium renovations in both Edmonton and Calgary, and we will commit \$32 million to improve specifics such as sight lines, seat replacements, ventilation replacements, air conditioning replacements, all of those good things that the patrons of Calgary and Edmonton expect to see in the pride and joy of two of our provincial treasures insofar as arts and cultural facilities are concerned.

Provincial/Municipal Agreement

Mr. Bonner: Mr. Speaker, the Municipal Affairs 2003-2006 business plan says that the ministry plans to invest in relationships with stakeholders through initiatives such as the Minister's Provincial/Municipal Council on Roles, Responsibilities and Resources in the 21st Century. Recently the province refused to sign a fair and equitable working relationship agreement for this council. To the minister: why did the province refuse to sign the working relationship agreement?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Boutilier: Well, thank you very much. I want to thank the hon. member for recognizing the only type of committee of its kind in all of Canada, and the province of Alberta in fact is doing it. In fact, Mr. Speaker, in two weeks' time I'm going to be speaking to a delegation in Quebec because they're very interested in terms of what Alberta has been doing in this regard.

Relative to the issue of signing, it came to caucus, it came to cabinet, and we're moving forward with an agreement that we have with all of the municipalities that sit on that committee. So, contrary to what the member has said, we are in agreement as we move forward.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Bonner: Yes. The minister's own council developed and approved the working relationship agreement. Given that the minister has representation on the council and the council approved it, why is it taking so long to get this signed?

Mr. Boutilier: You know, Mr. Speaker, I want to say this. In my 16 years in public office I've never, ever been accused of moving slowly. I remain with that theory today, and I will continue to move in that direction at what I believe is lightning speed.

Mr. Bonner: His defencemen on his hockey team always said that he was slow at back-checking, Mr. Speaker.

Given that, does the province's refusal to sign the agreement indicate that it does not believe in these admirable goals?

Mr. Boutilier: Getting back to the original point though, I always remember Tommy Lasorda when he said: that guy is so slow that if he got in a race with a pregnant woman, he'd come up in third.

If you really think about that today, Mr. Speaker, I want to say this: we're moving forward. It's the first of its kind in Canada, and I'm very proud of the committee. The Member for Whitecourt-St. Anne and the Member for Edmonton-Rutherford sit on the committee. The Member for Calgary-Mountain View sits on the committee, as do the mayors of Calgary and Edmonton, the AUMA president, AAMDC, Alberta Economic Development Authority. The bottom line is that we're making good progress.

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

Interpretation Services in Courts

Mr. Cao: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Given that courts are not only the place to administer justice but also a place to educate people about the law of our land and given that languages are needed to have messages understood by those involved against the law, the service of language interpreters and translators in Alberta's courts is very important, again not just as a provision for equal access to fair trials but more importantly as deterrence and prevention factors through understanding. A group of court interpreters came to me last November and explained their concern. Their concern is their low rate of pay for their important and special qualifications, particularly compared with other jurisdictions in Canada. I have communicated with the Minister of Justice and Attorney General about this matter. My question today is to the same minister. Can the minister advise the members of the Assembly what the current fee structure is for Alberta's court interpreters?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Hancock: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. I agree that the role of court interpreters is very important, particularly in ensuring that all Albertans have access to justice and that language barriers do not impair the ability of the court or the ability of the participants in court to understand what is happening, to understand the relevant

testimony and the evidence that's being put in place in the courts. So the role of the interpreter for those people who are more comfortable in a language other than English is extremely important.

Under section 4, specifically to answer the question, the fees and expenses for witnesses and interpreters regulation, an interpreter is paid \$15 for each hour or part of an hour in which they're in attendance with court proceedings. They're entitled to expenses set out in that regulation for travel by public transportation or private automobile as well as meal expenses if they're required to work over a mealtime.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Cao: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My first supplemental question is to the same minister. Given that our Alberta court interpreters are advising me that the current fee rates have not been changed for 18 years, can the minister advise if there are any plans to revisit the current fee structure?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Hancock: Yes, Mr. Speaker. We are reviewing the current fee structure. We are cognizant of the fact that there hasn't been an increase in the fee structure for a considerable period of time. We are very prudent with our resources in the Department of Justice, but we recognize that there needs to be an opportunity to review the fee structure in that case to see whether it's still representative and still affords us the opportunity to ensure that we have qualified interpreters in the courts.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Cao: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. To the same minister: given that the needs are increasing and the quality of work tends to go with the dollar paid, is there anything the hon. minister can do now to address these concerns?

Mr. Hancock: Well, Mr. Speaker, the issue of fees not just for interpreters but fees paid to witnesses, expenses, and indeed salaries has been a concern in the Department of Justice over a number of years. We've been able to address a number of those concerns, and as resources are available, we'll be able to address additional numbers of those concerns. We will be dealing with the Department of Justice estimates on I believe the 1st or 2nd of May in Committee of Supply, and we can get into some detail with respect to what we're able to do with this year's allocation of funds under the budget that just came down. It's not easy, because in every aspect of justice there are more demands than there is supply in terms of the resources available. So we have to make the most effective use of the resources we have available, but we're very cognizant of the important role that interpreters play in our court system, and we're having a very close look at what we can do in that situation.

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

Aquila Networks Canada

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. In regard to Aquila the Member for Cypress-Medicine Hat stated at a standing policy committee meeting last week, quote: frankly, I don't see how it could get any worse. End of quote. Well, Aquila's parent company in Kansas City, Missouri, announced today a net loss for the last

quarter of over 1.2 billion Canadian dollars. Aquila's financial difficulties mean more trouble for Alberta's confused and frustrated electricity consumers. My first question is to the Premier. Who is going to be left paying the power bill in the Aquila service area if it is forced to abandon the deregulated, scandal-plagued Alberta energy scene?

2:20

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, the Alberta energy scene is not scandal plagued by any stretch of the imagination. The hon. member poses a hypothetical question. There were a lot of ifs in that question. That's the way they seem to operate: on the basis of speculation and innuendo. I don't purport to answer if questions. I tell the media all the time that you've put the wrong preamble on the question if it starts with if.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. To the Minister of Energy: what credit and prudential requirements does the government of Alberta require Aquila to have in place to ensure that there is no interruption of service for customers in case of a withdrawal from this deregulated, scandal-plagued Alberta energy scene?

Mr. Smith: Well, Mr. Speaker, there are so many errors in his preamble that it makes the question again hypothetical. Let me say that the EUB has in place measures which will ensure that no matter what happens, similar to what happened when Enron changed hands – not one gas shipment was missed. Not one kilowatt-hour of electricity delivery was missed. In fact, for example, one would ask the question: if one company with this much debt can still deliver power, how can one political party with so much debt still continue to function? [interjections]

The Speaker: The hon. member has the floor.

Mr. MacDonald: To the same minister: should not the credit and the prudential requirements for energy firms operating in Alberta be increased to provide Albertans more consumer protection – and this is all about consumer protection, not about raw politics – from energy firms with liquidity problems?

Mr. Smith: Mr. Speaker, the EUB has in place, as well as the Electric Utilities Act, ample measures in which to ensure that Albertans are neither defrauded nor short of power deliveries. If it hadn't been for this competitive market model, there would be shortages of electricity, and in fact parts of the province would have been subject to brownouts and/or blackouts. What we have seen with this competitive market structure is a new era of transparency, an era of transparency that has forced utility companies and electricity providers to provide accurate, correct service, and by doing that, they are serving the customer better. Is it a rocky road? You bet it's a rocky road. But are the customers being better served, are they getting more truthful information, and are they being well regulated? The answer to that is yes.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands, followed by the hon. Member for Medicine Hat.

Electricity Deregulation

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Municipal districts and county councils are telling the New Democrat opposi-

tion that their power bills have gone through the roof since this government went down the disastrous and, admittedly, rocky road of electricity deregulation. Between 2000 and 2002 rural municipalities who contacted us saw their power bills rise by an average of 44 percent. Some even saw bills increase by as much as 75 percent. Now, we all know that there are only two ways that these local governments can absorb this hit, and that is to raise property taxes or to cut municipal services. I'd like to ask the Minister of Municipal Affairs a question. Does the minister know how much property taxes will rise in rural municipalities as a result of this government's deregulation mess?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Boutilier: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Having once been someone who taught mathematics, I understand the value of statistics. Sometimes it's not what is being told. The hon. member indicated that he's been in contact with numerous municipal districts and counties. What he failed to say is that 96 percent of them did not respond to his survey, so what is very important with this is that he's not being entirely accurate with those statistics.

Mr. Mason: Is the minister honestly trying to suggest that the ones that gave us their power bills have substantially different power prices than the ones that did not? Is he trying to just pass off this issue? Is he trying to just slough this off on all the municipalities of this province? [interjections]

The Speaker: The hon. minister has the floor.

Mr. Boutilier: The hon. member wants to talk about the 4 percent, which is fair. We want to deal with all municipalities. I can say this, Mr. Speaker. The hon. member did not make details relative to the fact of this. In a year-to-year comparison he actually fails to account for the fact that the 2002 bills include charges and rate riders for power consumed in 2000 and 2001. So let us be clear. With 96 percent of those municipal districts and counties that are going forward, we're making progress. As the Minister of Energy has indicated, it has been a rough road, but the bottom line is one of determination of our municipalities. They have worked with our government. They're continuing to work with our government because they have the attitude that we can find the solutions that are required in serving the citizens of Alberta.

Mr. Mason: Mr. Speaker, when will this minister stop playing with numbers, confusing people, and stand up for the municipalities of this province and tell the Minister of Energy that it's time to scrap this made-in-Alberta disaster they call electricity deregulation?

Mr. Boutilier: Mr. Speaker, one thing for certain is that this government doesn't play with numbers, and to reinforce that, I'm going to ask the Minister of Energy to supplement on this important issue where he has the facts and figures.

Mr. Smith: Well, Mr. Speaker, the survey had some 4 percent respond. There are 83 seats in this Legislature, two of which are held by his party. That equates to about 3 percent.

head: **Members' Statements**

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Little Bow.

No-Bull Marketing Ltd.

Mr. McFarland: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise to recognize an innovative group of individuals from the constituency of Little Bow. In the early 1990s six farmers from the Carmangay-Nobleford area formed a marketing club. The club was a grassroots support group for farmers who wanted to share ideas about how to make their operations more profitable. Those farmers, agribusinessmen are Dennis Benci, Dan Greene, Eldon Hubka, Terry Ross, and Ron Svanes from Carmangay as well as Doug Wright from Nobleford.

The club's earliest conversations focused on higher value crops. By 1996 their company, No-Bull Marketing, was in place. Over the next seven years these six farmers built and expanded a \$4 million investment in Carmangay, along the CP's main rail line. Their company now contracts, cleans, bags, and ships Alberta-grown chickpeas around the world. Agronomically chickpeas are a drought-tolerant dryland crop that boosts soil levels of nitrogen, thereby reducing the need to apply nitrogen-rich fertilizers for the next year's crop.

Mr. Speaker, due to the hard work and ingenuity of these six individuals and their families, the spirit of entrepreneurialism in the industry of agriculture is alive and well. I am honoured to take this moment to acknowledge and thank these individuals. They are examples of what this province was built upon: the dream that anything is possible given an equal and fair opportunity.

Thank you.

Alberta Ballet

Mr. Maskell: Mr. Speaker, I'm proud to rise today and share with the Members of this Legislative Assembly one of Alberta's great success stories, the Alberta Ballet and School of Alberta Ballet. Alberta Ballet is Canada's fourth largest dance company. Now completing its 36th season, Alberta Ballet has developed a distinctive repertoire and performance quality, winning critical acclaim at home and internationally. Its dancers have earned a reputation for their exceptional versatility and artistic excellence.

Founded in Edmonton, Alberta Ballet completed a successful merger with Calgary City Ballet in 1990. The organization, serving the entire province, relocated its core operations to Calgary. It maintains an administrative office in the heart of Edmonton's arts district.

The seed of Alberta Ballet was planted in the early 1950s by Dr. Ruth Carse. Today under the artistic direction of Jean Grand-Maitre the company has 23 professional dancers and two apprentice dancers. The company performs from October through April in Calgary and Edmonton's Jubilee auditoria and is accompanied in Calgary by the Calgary Philharmonic Orchestra and in Edmonton by the Edmonton Symphony Orchestra. Alberta Ballet tours extensively throughout Alberta, across Canada, and internationally, always to rave reviews from audience members and critics.

2:30

On July 1, 1991, Alberta Ballet established the School of Alberta Ballet in Calgary. The school's training is rooted in the classical ballet tradition. In 1998-99 a partnership was formed between the School of Alberta Ballet and the Calgary board of education to provide high school credits for dance courses, and the same year a bachelor of arts dance (ballet) degree was created at the University of Alberta, the first of its kind in Canada. Most recently Alberta Ballet established a hundred thousand dollar education fund which provides monetary assistance to successful applicants registered in the professional division.

I encourage members to attend an Alberta Ballet performance. For

the first timers I'd suggest attending the Christmas production of *Nutcracker* with family or friends. You will become a subscriber.

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

Protection for Persons in Care

Ms Blakeman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Some of this province's pioneers are unable to live in peace because of the horrific accounts of elder abuse within the system and this government's refusal to put adequate standards of care in place to prevent and detect neglect and abuse against some of our most vulnerable citizens. In the four years since the Protection for Persons in Care Act was enacted, there were over a thousand complaints of neglect and abuse in institutional long-term care homes, but the definition of abuse and neglect needs to be clearly defined and monitored.

Conditions are ripe for abuse since this government forced the closure of some acute care hospitals and changed others, resulting in the net loss of 8,300 active treatment beds since 1988. The number of long-term care beds has grown by only 1,400 in the last 10 years, while the number of seniors in this province grew by a third in the same period. Waiting periods can now reach six weeks.

Intolerable conditions have been created for our elderly. One Alberta seniors' organization says that it has 174 documented cases of alleged elder abuse in Alberta institutions including 14 resulting in premature deaths. How is it dignified to be diapered because staff are too busy to help residents to the bathroom? Who decided that a limit of one bath a week was adequate and acceptable?

In addition to adequately funding the eldercare system, this government must take steps to show that it takes elder abuse and neglect seriously. Special investigator positions should be created within the Alberta Seniors department to do random inspections and pursue complaints of neglect and abuse. Citizens must also be legally required to report all cases of suspected abuse and neglect.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

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

Providence Children's Centre

Ms Kryczka: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Last Thursday, April 10, I was honoured to represent the Premier and my colleagues at the facility tour and ribbon-cutting ceremony for new gym equipment at Providence Children's Centre, which is located in the Premier's constituency of Calgary-Elbow.

Providence Children's Centre is a developmental centre for young children with special needs and since 1943 has provided critical early prevention through unique and therapeutic services. Daily, 240 children ages one to six benefit from their mission, which is to enhance the health and development of children and their families.

The Rotary Club of Calgary Sarcee, of which I am proud to be an honorary member, through its fund-raising efforts provided the funds for the new gym equipment, and most members were at the centre for the happy event.

Community support enables the board and staff of the Providence centre to continue to meet their mandate, and the new gym equipment will improve the opportunities their therapists have to enhance the health and education of these children with disabilities. Ongoing funding and support for the centre is provided by Alberta Learning, Alberta Children's Services, and Alberta Health and Wellness through the Calgary health region.

There were many significant impressions for me that morning, three of them being, first of all, the high level of happy activity

involving so many little groups of little people; second, the dedication of qualified staff and volunteers; and third, the sensory room, only one of the amazing, very creative approaches designed by staff for these high-needs children.

My learning experience at the Providence Children's Centre was truly one of a kind and very memorable and would not have happened without these key people: Ian Playfair, president, Rotary Club of Calgary Sarcee; Rotary members; Special Olympian Stacey Kann and her sister/coach Cora Kann; and Providence staff and volunteers Lary Mosley, president; Patti Dragland, volunteer board member; Terence Creighton, executive director; Ann O'Donnell, manager of fund development; and Christine Keogh, fund development.

Thank you.

head: **Tabling Returns and Reports**

Mr. Jonson: Mr. Speaker, on behalf of the Premier I would like to make two tablings. First of all, a letter from the Premier to Premier-elect Jean Charest of the Liberal Party of Quebec congratulating him on his recent election victory and expressing our desire as a government to work co-operatively with the new government of Quebec.

Secondly, Mr. Speaker, I wish to table a letter from the Premier to Premier Landry expressing to him the appreciation that we have across Canada for the degree to which he has worked very, very hard and worked, as he saw it, in the best interests of Quebec over the past number of years.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Community Development.

Mr. Zwozdesky: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I have two quick tablings. One of them is an official letter that I'm sending on behalf of the government of Alberta congratulating the world curling championship team of Randy Ferbey.

Secondly, a letter of congratulations to the Masters tournament winner, the wearer and bearer of the coveted green jacket, the greatest Canadian golfer we have, Mr. Mike Weir, offering our government's congratulations to him as well.

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

Mr. Lord: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I have two reports today. Firstly, I rise to table the requisite number of copies of an extensive list of successful, indeed award-winning case studies of very successful and notable public/private partnerships. It lists everything from utilities to infrastructure to public services to schools and libraries. This list was developed by the National Council for Public-Private Partnerships, which is an excellent resource centre and has an excellent web site on the subject.

The second set of reports that I rise to table is the requisite number of copies of the speaking notes from a speech by our federal Liberal government's Minister of Transport in which he talks about the exciting and innovative developments and successes in the transportation field as a result of the introduction of P3s. He specifically praises the many advantages, including cost advantages and greater accountability that public/private partnerships have brought across Canada since being introduced into the federal government practices.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

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

Ms Blakeman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Three tablings today. The first is a letter to this member from the hon. Minister of Human

Resources Development on the federal level in answer to my query on eligibility for cultural workers for the EI program.

The second is a media release with information from the Cultural Human Resources Council announcing the release of their Face of the Future, A Study of Human Resource Issues in Canada's Cultural Sector, and it contains their recommendations.

Finally, a copy of an e-mail from a constituent, Ian Crichton, who expresses his dismay at the government's decision to divest Edmonton public schools of adult learners over the age of 20 at Metro Community College, asking that the decision be reversed or at the very least the government allow a transition period for these important classes.

Thank you.

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

Mr. Bonner: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. With your permission I would like to table the appropriate number of copies of a decision rendered in the Court of Appeal of Alberta between Wolfert and Shuchuk.

Thank you.

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

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I've got two tablings today. The first one is a summary of recommendations in Judge Delong's report to the Minister of Justice and Attorney General in the matter of public input into the death of Vince Motta, dated April 14, 2003. In the first two or three recommendations the judge calls for a nonpartisan commission of inquiry under the Public Inquiries Act.

The second tabling, Mr. Speaker, is a letter that I received from Mrs. Sharon Tucker of Medicine Hat, who is a recipient of AISH benefits. She expresses her extreme frustration and helplessness to live on those \$850 and has asked me to lobby on behalf of AISH and low-income people so that the government will "give us a break, and a cost of living, or something so that we could have at least a comfortable life."

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

2:40

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

Mr. Mason: Thanks very much, Mr. Speaker. I am tabling the appropriate number of copies of municipal government electric bills from the period 2000 to 2002 showing an increase between 29.2 percent and 74.7 percent, with an average increase over that period of 44 percent. I'm presenting reports from municipal governments including Barrhead, Bighorn, Clear Hills, Lesser Slave Lake, Lethbridge county, Mackenzie, Northern Lights, Peace, Pincher Creek, Provost, Red Deer county, Spirit River, Taber, Two Hills, and Westlock.

The Speaker: The hon. Government House Leader on a point of order.

Point of Order **Oral Question Period Practices**

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I wish to raise a point of order today with respect specifically to the questions raised by the Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie in question period relative to votes on Government Motion 13, which took place last night. In citation I would offer a number of citations. First of all, Standing Orders 23(f), "debates any previous vote of the Assembly unless it is that

member's intention to move that it be rescinded;" 23(h), "makes allegations against another member;" and *Beauchesne's* 409, 410, and 412.

There are a number of reasons that I wish to raise this issue today. We've had a number of circumstances and questions in the House over the last two weeks relative to questions not about government policy or government position or what the government is doing and not about the responsibility that a minister may have for the government, for their department, or that the Premier may have for government but rather questions with respect to, if I may say it, the actions of members of the Legislature in their capacity as members, specifically today the capacity of a member to vote in the Legislature. On previous occasions a question was asked of me as Government House Leader, and I commented at the time that I didn't have a responsibility to answer as Government House Leader but then answered the question anyway – because there's no secret to the activities that are engaged in by members of caucus – about members of caucus going to a reception outside the House.

Specifically today the question to the Premier was a question about votes in the House, and, Mr. Speaker, first of all it was a question which alluded to a vote last night where members attended and voted on Government Motion 13. Therefore, in my submission it's not in the hands of the hon. member to question the activities of members of the House in that vote or the result of that vote. That vote was done.

Secondly, under 23(h) she in essence was making an allegation against each and every member of the House who participated in that vote, that they did not participate freely in that vote, make their decision as a member of this House in attending on that vote.

Thirdly, under 409, Mr. Speaker, questions ought to be within the administrative responsibility of the government. Well, questions about a determination that's made by caucus, agreement made by caucus members as to a course of action, and votes made by members in the House are not the administrative responsibility of the House, but when they come to the House level, they are in the hands of each member of the House.

Under 410(17), "Ministers may not be questioned with respect to party responsibilities." With all due respect to the hon. member, the activities of caucus are party responsibilities and not government responsibilities. With respect to 410(10) the subject matter of questions again must be within the collective responsibility of the minister and of the government. Caucus activities are not government activities by their very nature.

And under 412 of *Beauchesne*, "A question may not be asked of a Minister in another capacity, such as being responsible for a province, or part of a province, or as spokesman for a racial or religious group." I would suggest that caucus is, again, another group.

The purpose of question period is to hold the government to account, to ask about government policy and direction, to ask about the administration of government, to hold the members of Executive Council to account for those actions. On two occasions, the latest being today, the first being the other day when the Member for Edmonton-Riverview asked the Government House Leader about attendance at social functions – but today specifically the question from Edmonton-Ellerslie to the Premier was relative to caucus discussion and caucus decisions on how to deal with a matter which was coming before the House. It should be clear to all members of the House, and I'm sure it is to all members of the House, that caucus discussions about how to deal with a matter are entered into voluntarily by members of a caucus who adhere to the terms of being members of caucus, and they make determinations as to how to proceed.

When we come into this House, each and every member of this House may vote in any way they please. That is their right as a member of this House. That right is not fettered by anything that happens outside of the House. However, members of a government caucus, as, I presume, members of an opposition caucus, make a determination to be a member of a caucus, to discuss within that caucus a direction, and then, whether they were supportive or not supportive, agree to go the direction that the caucus has determined.

That agreement doesn't fetter their discretion as a member of this House. They come into this House and vote as a member of this House. If they determine not to vote with the caucus in the direction that they've agreed on, they may or may not be able to participate in the same way in further discussions of the caucus or be effective in those discussions, but that's a personal decision of a member of the House. That's not a government decision, that's not a direction of government, that's not a responsibility of government, and it should be clear to members opposite that government cannot fetter the discretion.

I thought it was important, Mr. Speaker, to raise, however, this as a point of order today because we've seen on a number of occasions, specifically today, the opposition, and particularly this member today, asking questions of the Premier, asking questions of Executive Council not with respect to the administration of their departments, not with respect to the policy of government, but with respect to how a caucus, which is a political organization, carries out its business, whether that is with respect to who it meets or with respect to how members might proceed to vote or agree to work together in terms of the process.

So, Mr. Speaker, I raise that as a point of order today because I think there ought to be direction made in the future that questions should adhere to the rules, should be with respect to urgent matters of public policy, the direction that government is taking, the responsibility of government, and those things within the administrative competence of the members of government or Executive Council.

The Speaker: The hon. Opposition House Leader.

Ms Carlson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I think the Government House Leader comes very close to trying to breach one of my fundamental rights in this Assembly, and that's freedom of speech, and I would refer him to *Beauchesne* 75 and 76. It is, I believe, well within our rights as an opposition in this Assembly to question the Premier on his actions. As the head of the government he reflects the policies of the government in everything he says and does, and when in open discussions and in answering questions outside of this House he puts forward certain positions and decisions into the public domain, then it is well within our right to ask those questions in terms of how they determine the mandate of this government and its policies. Perhaps I could have worded my questions more directly back to determining policies, but I believe I was well within my rights in asking them.

The Government House Leader made a big deal about the separation between the Conservative caucus and the government, but in fact this very Government House Leader and his entire front bench have made a very big deal about blurring the lines between these two groups. I would use as an example the number of government bills the Conservative members have introduced not just this session but in many sessions. So those lines are very blurred.

We saw in the speeches that we heard over the last three evenings on the motion under question today many of the members making references to toeing the line on this particular motion. So I would say that if he doesn't want us to ask questions in those regards and

to have a clear separation between their caucus and their government, then they need to make that clear in all their actions.

I don't believe there is a point of order, Mr. Speaker.

2:50

The Speaker: Additional participants?

Hon. members, the chair does have the Blues in terms of what the specific questions were. To just sum up, the gist of the first question is – and I'll just extrapolate some words out of it to quote – “Why didn't he,” meaning the Premier, “let Conservative members vote freely on the motion to accept the report?” The second question, again I paraphrase:

How can the Premier claim that this government is representative or democratic or open or accountable when he hands down orders to MLAs instead of letting them vote the opinions of their constituents?

The third one, of less significance, I guess, to the debate in question: “How are Albertans supposed to have any confidence in the report?”

The chair has listened very carefully to submissions made by the Government House Leader and the response made by the Opposition House Leader. We'll spend several days pondering one conclusion, anyway, reached today, that the caucus is a political entity, not a government entity. That's quite a statement and quite a revelation, and I would suggest that perhaps all members might want to reconsider what this really means in terms of parliamentary democracy, the impact in this House, because of far-reaching consequences and implications in another venue that I'm not sure that one would really want to go into.

The gist of the matter is that the fundamental rule basically would report to be *Beauchesne* 411, and 411 would strike me to be the most important segment that one would want to raise with respect to this, and 411 says:

Some further limitations seem to be generally understood. A question may not . . .

(4) criticize decisions of the House.

The chair listened very attentively to the questions that were raised this afternoon and tried to find where the Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie was actually questioning a decision of the House. One might argue that there was an implication in there that it was a decision of the House that was being questioned and was being criticized and was being raised. If that would have been very, very clear, there would have been an intervention by the chair, as he has done on previous occasions, to basically say that that would be inappropriate and one is not in a position to criticize decisions of the House.

The Government House Leader has made it very, very clear, and a correct statement as well, that members in this Assembly – and no member has risen on a point of privilege to suggest that he or she had been intimidated or pressured by anyone to vote in a certain way, so it's pure speculation after that to suggest that everybody would vote in a particular way. Every hon. member in this Assembly comes here – and I use my own words but also to paraphrase others as well – very, very freely in this Assembly. There's no intimidation unless the member wants to rise and then say that there's an intimidation and raise such a question, but no member has. When that does happen, then quite clearly there will be intimidation. That would be a complete violation of every democratic principle that we want.

So it's pure speculation, I guess, to suggest, despite all the outside controversy that seems to be surrounding this particular subject, that in fact that kind of intimidation would exist or to imply that such intimidation did exist, and it's very difficult for the chair to find where this was a criticism of a decision taken in the House last night. There were some very skillfully used words by the opposition

member who raised the questions today and some degree of reflection on government policy, far-reaching but still a bit of a connection there, and there was no intervention by the chair with respect to these questions.

There will be no further statements made with respect to this particular point of order other than to say that it's very clear that decisions of the House are not to be criticized in the Assembly by any member. If any member chooses to rise on a point of privilege to suggest that their rights as a member in this Assembly have been conflicted with or intimidated by, breached by anyone else, they have that right to do this on any given day. It will be dealt with then accordingly.

head: **Orders of the Day**

head: **Committee of Supply**

[Mr. Shariff in the chair]

The Deputy Chair: Hon. members, we'll call the committee to order.

head: **Main Estimates 2003-04**

Human Resources and Employment

The Deputy Chair: The hon. Minister for Human Resources and Employment.

Mr. Dunford: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. I'm here to present the 2003-2004 estimates for Alberta Human Resources and Employment. Sometimes I'll refer to the full name; other times I'm sure I'll just use HR and E.

We have staff in the gallery today. We have Dan Thompson, who is director of budgets and forecasts. We have Duncan Campbell, the senior financial officer, and Mark Asbell, the chair of the Alberta Labour Relations Board.

As members will know, the ministry of HR and E has five components. We have the department, we have the Alberta Labour Relations Board, the personnel administration office, the Appeals Commission for workers' compensation, and the Workers' Compensation Board. Now, members, I'm asking for \$1.072 billion to support the work of our first four entities. WCB is entirely financed by employer premiums so is not part of these budget estimates.

First to the Department of Alberta Human Resources and Employment. The line items in these estimates reflect our three core businesses: investing in people, investing in skills, and investing in workplaces. Our first range of programs is people investments, and we provide monthly financial benefits to people in need. Expenditures this year will be about \$740 million. This is about 2 percent more than last year and calculates out to be about 70 percent of the department's overall spending.

The largest program in this ministry is assured income for severely handicapped, or the so-called AISH program. Now, AISH is the most generous program of its type in the country. Three hundred and fifty-seven million dollars in financial and medical benefits are provided to about 30,000 Albertans, and this is projected for '03-04. This is an increase of \$7.5 million over last year's actual expenditures. This program budget is increasing to cover the rising costs of prescriptive and health care and the costs of providing benefits to more clients.

We are making important changes to AISH for people who leave AISH because of indexed Canada pension plan disability benefits. Historically clients lost their medical benefits when their CPP disability benefits rose above \$851. We have now removed that

hardship. People who have left AISH after January 2002 because of higher disability benefits from CPP are now eligible for the health coverage. But, members, you must be aware of this: they need to apply to our department for that coverage. We already have been providing extended health coverage for AISH clients that move to the world of work. I encourage each hon. member to share this news with their constituents and let them know about this new initiative.

3:00

Now, supports for independence, commonly referred to as SFI, provide financial benefits to people who are in emergency situations. This is a situation of either transition or inability to meet their basic needs, and it provides a monthly benefit based on circumstance. Let me tell you about some of the people who must rely on the government.

Last July a married couple with a six-year-old child came into an Edmonton office. The dad had been working, but his hours were cut back several weeks earlier. The mother had just got a new job but would not be starting for two weeks, and they were unable to pay their utility bills and had just been cut off. Frankly, they were embarrassed to see our staff. They'd never been on SFI before, but they had reached a point where they could not cope. They explained the situation and received help to pay their utility arrears. A few months later our staff received a note. The family was back on track, and both parents were working. They just needed that hand up and required no further assistance from us.

A highlight of Budget 2003 is a \$20 increase for SFI clients who are not able to work and for families with children. Families with children will also see an increase of a further \$15 per month per child when the province allows a flow-through of the 2003 federal government's increase in the national child benefit supplement. The rate increase and flow-through decision will mean that about 72 percent of Alberta's SFI clients will have higher monthly incomes. Now, this marks a shift in approach. In previous years Alberta has offset the federal increase and reinvested the funds in programs that help parents stay working. This year we are letting parents keep the monthly increase versus a reinvestment strategy like the Alberta child health benefit.

A monthly increase in benefits is good for families, but more government spending isn't a long-term answer to poverty. Employment is the best answer, and we help people gain employment. We help clients look for a job, get the skills to be employable, and get the experience to get their foot in the door. Welfare reform in the early 1990s was focused on turning SFI from just a cheque into an active program. New employment supports, skills training, and the opportunity to gain hands-on experience were introduced.

An example of that is Alberta community employment, the ACE program. This is for employment of SFI or AISH clients who have been unable to find work in the competitive labour market. Developed in 1993, the six-month program provides Albertans with the opportunity to improve their job skills and gain valuable work experience and work for nonprofit societies such as municipalities, hospitals, and schools. Members, we have an example of this. In 2001 HRE staff in Red Deer helped find a young SFI client an ACE position with the city of Red Deer. That person made contacts during her employment term and showed a great deal of dedication to the work that she was doing, and now two years later she is working full-time. The contacts she made during employment with the city as well as her excellent references and dedication to her work all enabled her to qualify for this new position. The provincial government helped her reach her employment goals. About 80 percent of the people in our employment programs find steady work.

The Alberta approach has worked. We have about as many

households on SFI this year as we actually did in the 1970s, when the Alberta population was 1.6 million. The population is now 3 million, and that is about a 90 percent increase. So an increase in population of about 90 percent whereas we've been able to hold the number of households about level over that period of time.

Now, the question before us today is whether or not this is good enough. Moving 80 percent of the clients into employment is fine, but what is the right balance? Currently we support 30,000 households on SFI, which is the lowest ratio in the country, but can we get that number even lower, and can we help more people find jobs? We believe that, yes, we can, and we believe that that is an honourable mandate and an honourable objective because we need to make the most of every person's potential.

Each month that an employable person is on SFI is 30 days of lost opportunity. This is loss for employers who need workers – and many of them need skilled workers – loss for the person because they are missing the satisfaction and the cumulative self-respect that comes with working, and loss for the government because it means that we have let that person's skills set or that human capital go unutilized or actually slip away on us.

This province leads the nation in productivity. We have the highest workforce participation rates in the country, with 73 percent of our adults in the workforce. We have the highest worker productivity. We are aiming to have the safest workplaces, and I'll talk more about that later. We're saying that the best way for us to lead the country in social policy is to lead the country in labour market policy.

This session we are discussing Bill 32. This legislation is to integrate income support and skills training programs. We're saying that each person has potential, and we're saying that the government will support that potential to find employment. This year the department's second business, skills investments, will devote over a quarter of a billion dollars to ensure that people are trained for jobs and training for people who want upgrading. Now, these investments include four program streams: career information, which includes career workshops and skills planning; work foundations, which includes basic skills and academic upgrading; training for work, which includes work experience placements; and workforce partnerships which help develop human resource strategies. Also, this year the disability-related employment supports, DRES, will invest \$8.3 million in helping people with disabilities who want to work and to learn and employers who see ability first and disability second.

One of our staff in Edmonton tells the story of a teenager that we'll call for our purposes today Brenda. Three years ago she was working the streets. She was never able to follow through on anything and had no direction. Her mother described her as a nightmare teenager. Our staff helped Brenda get an assessment. She has attention deficit disorder, which means she is bright but learns differently. She is now doing high school upgrading at NorQuest and getting honours marks, and Brenda will be at school full-time this fall. Without funding for assessments and DRES support for three hours of tutoring every week, Brenda could still be on the street. Instead, Brenda is now a responsible person on the right path. We're giving this young lady a second chance.

Now, for some people it's a question of getting a first chance, a first job or a summer job that opens up a whole new career path. Across the province we help people who visit our labour market information centres, our career development centres, and of course the Canada/Alberta service centres. Staff in these offices help people be successful in job hunting and work with seminars on how to find a job or information on why one career path suits you better than another. Other people need information, and we provide, of course,

opportunities to them as well. Alberta Human Resources and Employment provides programs and services to help Albertans get skills and move into work.

We are also part of Alberta workplaces. In employment standards and other enforcement areas of the department our approach is to educate first and then regulate. We'll be devoting \$5.1 million to employment standards initiatives this year so that we can continue to help people and workplaces be fair. We also want Alberta workplaces to be safe, and our major initiative in that area is WorkSafe Alberta. Our objective is to reduce the injury rate by 40 percent, and this would keep 15,000 people per year from being seriously injured or, God bless them and their families, experiencing a fatality. We'll be conducting more inspections, we've changed the act, and we're looking forward to working with all of our partners, which include employers and employees, to achieve this goal.

3:10

The final component of our workplace is labour relations, and again we're responsible for mediation service, and you might have seen some of that in the news lately. Also, of course, we have a second component in our ministry that is tied in with mediation, and that's the Alberta Labour Relations Board. The recent passage of the Labour Relations (Regional Health Authorities Restructuring) Amendment Act, 2003, has set out a number of temporary tasks for the board in the coming year, so they're going to be busy. They include runoff votes between unions, determination and votes on collective agreements, and the settlement of issues arising from these votes. In the last fiscal year, for the purposes of an example, more than 57 percent of applications were resolved without formal adjudication, and this gets back to the fact that they have a disputes resolution mechanism in place that deals with matters before full hearings.

The third component is the personnel administration office, with a budget of \$8.3 million. As probably the largest employer in the province we face the same crucial challenges as other organizations. We're competing in tight labour markets, and we need to find, of course, the people that we're looking for. So we're out trying to find a new generation of civil servants that will come and replace those of us that are moving on in years. We do this through an intern program. We have an ambassador program that we're very pleased with, and of course we provide learning and development opportunities inside these particular areas. We're proud that the PAO has an excellent working relationship with the civil service and their main representative, which is the Alberta Union of Provincial Employees. Later this year we'll be involved in wage opener negotiations with AUPE.

The fourth and final component is the Appeals Commission for Alberta workers' compensation. They have a budget of \$6.4 million. This commission joined the ministry on September 1 of last year, so now we're talking about its first full year. The Appeals Commission, established under the Workers' Compensation Act, is a separate government entity independent from the WCB, and the Appeals Commission, or AC as we refer to it, hears appeals from a decision of the review bodies of the WCB that is being questioned either by the employer or the employee. The operating costs of the AC are paid from general revenue, which is reimbursed from the WCB accident fund. The accident fund is made up of the assessment contribution of employers. The Appeals Commission continues to bring about changes to make the appeals system open, transparent, and accountable. Now, recent changes that address recommendations of the Friedman and Doerksen reports include such things as an enhanced prehearing process and the publications of these decisions. By the way, they're currently available on the web.

So the Ministry of Human Resources and Employment has been an active part of thousands of Albertans' lives over the year and will continue to be over the year ahead. As stated earlier, we'll invest \$1.072 billion for Alberta people, skills, and workplaces. Of course, these dollars come with personal stories that make a difference to people every day in communities right across the province.

Now, because of the pressure of time I've skipped over some of those particular areas. I would have liked to have expanded on them further. Bill 32 will likely be up for debate either today or certainly later this week. We're very anxious to see that move forward. It is a meaningful attempt, a sincere attempt to move to a more integrated system as to how we deliver services to the most needy people that we have here in our province. I have for a long time been frustrated by our system of labeling and thus providing entitlements and what you do if the menu of entitlement that's there for a particular person isn't basically what they really need. So we are looking for a much more personal approach, an approach that would be considered more of a case management approach rather than just simply, I guess, a program that would allot some benefits to certain types of people. I think the basic theme that I would want to leave everyone in the House with is the fact that we are making a significant change in this particular area, because rather than trying to fit people into a program, we are trying to find programs, then, that will work for the people.

So I look forward to the comments and questions that all and any hon. members would have about these estimates. I certainly will answer questions as best I can, and thank goodness for *Hansard*, because if I don't get to them this afternoon, we will provide written answers.

With that, Mr. Chair, I think my time is close enough to being up. Thank you.

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

Ms Blakeman: Thanks very much, Mr. Chairman. I'd like to express my appreciation to my colleague who is actually the Official Opposition critic for the Department of Human Resources and Employment, the Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar, because he's allowing me to go first and get some of my issues on the table here, and I appreciate his being generous enough to do that for me.

There are three things that I would like to have a discussion about if the minister will be so accommodating. One is to continue the discussion we started last year around cultural workers. I think we have a part B that we can now talk a bit about. I'd also like to talk about an issue that I raised with the minister in question period and that I'm still trying to pursue, and that is the question of discrimination in being eligible to receive AISH benefits or AISH medical benefits based on source of income. Second to last, I'd like to talk a bit about the ACE program, that the minister mentioned.

But I'd like to start out by thanking the minister for his assistance in looking into a matter with the recreation groups. The department was a partial sponsor of a survey that the recreation groups were looking at doing in Alberta, and there was some question about including the definition of culture. The cultural groups have worked long and hard over the last 10 years to establish a very clear definition of culture, and this was causing some stress between the two groups. The last I heard of it, someone contacted me Friday and said that the parks and recreation group had in fact decided not to pursue including culture and the definition of culture and cultural groups and activities in their definition of recreation. So that came to a happy end. Thank you for that one.

Okay. I just want to work my way backwards then. The first thing on that list I gave you, as I work from back to front, is the ACE

program. I remember that quite clearly from when I was at the Advisory Council on Women's Issues, because I endeavoured to bring in a number of people from that program. Now, the minister says that that program started in 1993, and I left the advisory council in that year, so there must have been a predecessor program that was almost identical in that it took people who were currently on supports for independence. The employer received the wage subsidy for them, or I think it was in fact the entire wage plus an additional percentage to compensate the employer for the minor administrative costs of having an additional person in the office; for example, an extra telephone, an extra desk, perhaps a bit more paper used in the photocopier, a couple of more pencils used, that kind of thing. The question I am posing to the minister is: what sort of evaluation process is in place for the success of this program, and has it in fact been altered or updated? What has come out of monitoring an evaluation process? Have there been any changes in it?

3:20

The minister here is talking about a 10-year program, and I know that there was a version of it, perhaps a pilot project, that existed prior to that, because my experience around this program – and I think I've probably hired about four people on an ACE program – was that candidates who were in fact overqualified for ACE were the ones who were most likely to be successful. So out of the four that I hired, only one was able to successfully move on as the program had envisioned. In fact, on paper and in person in an interview she appeared overqualified for what was being considered here. As I say, she's the only one that was able to move on successfully. An awful lot was expected of the employer, and of course many in the nonprofit sector took advantage of this because they saw it as: hey, free help, free workers. I very quickly learned that that was not the case at all. There was a great deal that was expected from the employer in working with this employee.

The one woman that I had that was successful and went on into, I'm presuming, a long employment history with the civil service couldn't answer the phone. Now, this was part of her cultural background that she was struggling to overcome. She could not cope with picking up the phone and having people ask her things and, as she perceived, yell at her. Even though in fact I think I would have considered it a request or a firm request or a straightforward request, she very much saw that as being yelled at. So it was a great deal of work and effort from everyone in the office to help her move on, and she was in fact successful.

The point of all that is to say: what has the department looked at? What is the monitoring and evaluation process for the program overall? We're 10 years into it now. Is the program run the same today as it was 10 years ago, and if so, why? I would have thought that it would have needed to be updated. So what sort of changes have been made in the way the program is offered and operated?

Backing up, I guess the next thing I'll go to then is the discussion around cultural workers that the minister and I started some time ago, a year ago actually, in this same budget debate. What we were talking about a year ago was that the ministry in fact had done a great deal of work with cultural workers and the cultural industry sector, realizing that there's great potential for development in that sector, and there had in fact been a document that was produced. I had given the minister a series of questions: where was he expecting to go, and what was the department going to pursue with what was coming out of that document? I tabled in question period – and I did send over a personal copy for the minister – a media release from the Cultural Human Resources Council, that has now done a sort of part B to what in fact Alberta was looking at, and this was released on the 20th of January 2003 and includes a number of recommendations

that they are looking at. So I'd like to take about 10 minutes and just talk about what I'm still seeing as issues for cultural workers and where I'm looking to the minister and his department to be providing either leadership or providing direct programming.

Let me say before I start into this that we know and can prove a number of times over that the creation of a job in the cultural sector is around \$40,000. The creation of a full-time job in the manufacturing sector is about \$20,000. So investment in the cultural sector to create jobs for cultural workers is a great investment and a great payback for the province.

Secondly, we have a fairly rich cultural industry here in Alberta, but we are struggling with things like succession planning. We're struggling with getting into managerial positions people with some years of service and experience and training or even book learning under their belts, and then the low pay, the hours, the lack of appreciation comes down on them, and they leave. So we manage to get people to a certain point, and then they're gone. We can't seem to offer them that additional professional development, that additional lifelong learning track, the mentorship that is going to help keep people in that sector.

Let me be clear here. I'm not expecting or looking to this minister to be providing funding for the arts. That's not what we're talking about. It is about recognizing that there's a particular group of people working in a sector here that really contribute to Alberta, but they have some unique needs. Frankly, it's not unlike the unique needs of, say, the agricultural sector. A lot of the same sort of prohibitions exist there but also, one would say, opportunities. So I'm not asking for handouts here, but I am asking for the minister to recognize and to help lay out some programming that is going to attract people to a sector and keep people in a sector that has tremendous payback to the community that it exists in.

So I found a couple of things going through the document *Face of the Future: A Study of Human Resource Issues in Canada's Cultural Sector*, the findings and recommendations document. This was prepared by Mercadex International Inc. on behalf of or presented for the Cultural Human Resources Council. In it they talk about the significant strengths that are exhibited by the cultural sector, and they note things like the diversity in people and the activities of the sector, the motivation and tenacity and competence and the passion of the workers in the sector. That's important because that motivation and passion carry people through a lot of stuff where I think in other sectors they'd just say: "That's it; I've had enough. I'm out of here. If there's no paycheque, I'm not going to come back in on Monday." That motivation and passion bring people back the next Monday in the cultural sector.

Part of what I'm interested in is the economic impact of the sector, and particularly here we're talking about the leverage effect for other sectors. I've always been very clear that the cultural sector itself is not an economic driver, but when you put the cultural sector into a given geographic location, they will create an enthusiasm, a vitality, a buzz, an energy that attracts people to that area. Then business is able to take advantage of that, and those businesses become the economic drivers of that area. So the cultural sector has a lot of leverage possibility to it, but I want to be clear that I never consider that they in themselves are an economic driver, because they don't generate that much money. But the money they do generate stays in the community. It doesn't leave. It's not sent to the parent company in the States or things that happen in other sectors.

This document also notes the cultural sector's links with other industrial sectors and the ability of the sector to stick, to maintain and even increase its activities under pretty adverse conditions. I'm just going to read a section out of here.

Creators, performers and cultural workers across all sub-sectors and

disciplines are experiencing insecurity and instability in their employment and independent/contract work. The problem manifests [itself] in a variety of ways: the decline in available full-time and permanent jobs, the transitoriness of employment/engagement, the need to secure and balance multiple jobs to make a reasonable living, systemic barriers for the self-employed, the absence of a social safety net, and wholly inadequate remuneration.

So what the minister and I had been talking about last year were things like training programs and access to training programs. What we're looking at here is some of the difficulty of the working conditions like poor pay, heavy workloads, the lack of full-time work, overwork, high performance expectations despite insufficient training and support – so another area where this minister comes into play is that training section – and the human resource development, which this sector has never been involved in because they could never afford it and just didn't see themselves being able to take advantage of human resource theory and practice.

3:30

One of the other things I note is:

The cultural sector is a well-worn training ground that produces talented workers who, upon reaching a threshold skill level or a ceiling on their professional [development], leave the sector for opportunities elsewhere. The requirement to continually recruit and retrain workers is a huge drag on the already stretched financial and human resources

of the cultural sector.

Later on it talks about "the natural successors [having] been eliminated over the last decade of sustained funding cuts," so we don't have any succession planning happening here. The last time I talked to someone and they said, "Oh, I'm retiring," I said, "Oh, okay. Good. Then what are you going to do about succession planning? Who have you got coming along?" And they just looked at me and said, "It's over. We're closing." So there went that succession planning. I mean, they were going to shut down, and there went all possibilities for the future. But it is one of the areas that we're not taking advantage of.

Upon his request I had sent a letter to the federal Minister of Human Resources Development pleading the case that a number of the labour market programs that were offered as part of the dual agreement between the feds and the province required eligibility for employment insurance in order to be able to qualify for participation in the program. It didn't mean that you had to be on unemployment insurance, but you had to qualify for it. Of course, cultural workers almost to every being do not because we don't fall into all of the criteria like choosing work hours, choosing a place to work. All the artists are considered self-employed, and in fact we are specifically precluded from either paying into or drawing from unemployment insurance as artists. Now, if you're also working as a waiter somewhere or if you're a telephone operator or whatever and paying in, well, fine, you may be able to draw down for that. Whatever the many different ways that artists choose to supplement their income, they may be able to draw that way, but they're not able to draw through their training and experience as artists. So I had written to the minister pointing out this problem.

Now, the minister wrote back to me finally, February 17, 2003, and I did send a copy on to the minister's office. In the last paragraph the minister notes:

Your points with regard to the training and professional development programs available to cultural workers are well taken. However, it must be stressed that the authority to refer persons to a course of study has been devolved to Alberta since the signing of our Labour Market Development Agreement in 1996. Under the terms of this Agreement, all moneys for employment programs are in fact turned over to the province, which sets its own conditions as to eligibility and participation.

So the very thing the minister sent me to lobby his federal counterpart for was in his hands.

So I come back to him now and say: where can we start to work with this? If in fact it is in the hands of the minister and his department staff, where can we start to go to offer some of the human resource planning and management that is needed, the capacity building in the sector to be able to retain our senior members and senior administrators, and also to get access to some of the other skill development programs that people in the cultural sector need? Now, in a lot of cases we're talking administrators, but in many cases we are talking other kinds of support staff and artists themselves.

I'm noting that I'm coming down to the end of my time here, so I'm going to move on to the last issue that I had raised with the minister, and that was the issue around discrimination on source of income. The question, if I can refresh the minister's memory, that I asked in this House a couple weeks ago, a month ago, before the break, was that there was discrimination based on source of income to determine the eligibility of using other income and examining it. For example, if people were receiving CPP disability, that was looked at differently by the department, and the eligibility requirements were different than if someone had in fact a private disability from, let's say, Great-West, even from the disability insurance that is available to members in this House or to other staff in the government.

If you had a private plan, I think the first \$200 was knocked off, and the remaining \$700 was dealt with at 25 percent. Well, that brought the person's eligibility down under the mark, and they were able to then be eligible to receive and did receive the AISH medical benefits, which is what the individuals need. But if they have CPP as their source of income, it's not deducted. The first \$200 isn't lopped off, and the rest of it isn't discounted at 25 percent – I'm sorry; I can't remember what the exact method was that the department staff were using, but it's something like that – and as a result they don't come down. It doesn't bring them down below the line, and therefore they're not eligible for the AISH medical benefits, which is what they really need.

So we continue to have a discrimination here based on source of income, where their money is coming from: CPP disability versus a private plan. And it's all laid out on the minister's web site. You can go there. It says: if your income comes from the following seven places, bye, and if it comes from these other places, this is how we treat it. I think there's an issue here that could well be a Charter challenge, if someone chose to take it forward, because it is discrimination based on source of income, particularly where we have individuals in Alberta that are sent by the department to draw down CPP disability, and then when they return to the province and go, "Okay. I did that. All I need now is access to the AISH medical benefits," they're told: "Sorry. Out of luck. Bye." What can we do to address the particular problem, especially when their source of income is CPP disability? I don't think that we want to be discriminating against these people, but we are.

So those are the three issues I wanted to put before the minister, and thank you very much for his willingness to answer back to me. Thank you.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. minister.

Mr. Dunford: Yes. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. In addressing the three items, I want to defer my answer on the AISH program evaluation. I want to deal more thoroughly with that and do it in writing.

On the area of cultural workers I think the hon. member is on to

something here. I'm not sure what the actual numbers are, but I believe that even a tight definition of cultural activity probably would lead to well in excess of a hundred thousand workers here in the province of Alberta. I think that this is something, then, that we need to pay attention to. I know that she has raised it on a number of occasions, and perhaps we haven't responded to meet the satisfaction of some of the members here in the House or indeed perhaps some of the people that are involved or could be involved in the so-called cultural industry.

There have been a couple of things that have happened since a year ago when we were discussing the estimates. One of them was, admittedly, a social event, but there was a discussion regarding the economic drivers here in Alberta and thus the differences between Calgary and Edmonton. There was, surprisingly to me, a general agreement within this informal group that I was involved with but who were made up of recognizable industry people that the future of Edmonton from an economic development standpoint was in fact around the arts, that there is a huge infrastructure here in this city and there is a huge amount of interest on its festivals and all of the cultural activities not just within this province but actually throughout this nation, this continent, and indeed around the world.

3:40

So the articulation that was coming out that particular evening was that the business community in Edmonton needed to start paying better attention to what was happening within the cultural industry right here at their own doorstep and that in fact this was perhaps the economic and cultural future of this particular area. Now, whether or not this was perhaps an elaboration to some extent of what is actually taking place and could take place, nevertheless the interest was that here we had responsible people acknowledging and forecasting what could happen within this particular industry and within this particular region. That was the signal to me, then, and of course now to our department of some things that we need to be cognizant of and start to plan for.

I want to deal delicately with the suggestion by the hon. member that I may have tried to get her involved in a lobbying activity and that it went there and then came back to me. I have a lot of time and a lot of respect for the federal Minister of Human Resources Development Canada. She has a tremendous mandate, a range of responsibilities that far outstrip anything that I would certainly be involved in. To her credit I think she is a minister of the federal Crown that has understood and continues to understand where the provinces are coming from when we try to deal with our federal counterparts and we try to get involved in all of these sort of jurisdictional issues. She seems to be a minister that understands the term flexible federalism. Now, part of that flexible federalism has been that this minister has been very active in signing labour market development agreements. Of course, for those that might not be as up to date as others, basically it is the recognition by the federal authority that it is a provincial jurisdiction in terms of the education of workers. Therefore, because they want to participate in that particular area, we use the technique of labour market development agreements, and I believe that in large part these have worked very well, but we find that they are too restrictive.

I think that the hon. member in her comments hit on one of the points that is a particular sore point at the present time between provinces and the federal minister but particularly this provincial minister and the federal authority, and that is that it is very tightly wound to being employment insurance eligible. I agree with what the hon. member has talked about, that many people in this particular area just cannot meet that criteria. So what has happened is that there have been virtually millions of dollars across this country that

were out there under planned labour market development agreements, but because in all jurisdictions we couldn't meet the employment insurance eligibility requirement, there have been many of those millions of dollars that have actually gone unused and have flowed back to the federal coffers.

Now, I don't want to be too sad about those kinds of things, because I'm first and foremost a fiscal conservative and there is only one taxpayer in this country and that taxpayer is trying to feed three levels of government. But once that tax has gone to Ottawa and is in the hands of the federal government, then I'm not too shy about trying to get those dollars back into Alberta and to do something with them. I think that maybe with the combined efforts of the members of this House we might be able to find an area where some of these previously lapsed . . . [interjections] Was it as good for you as it was for me? [interjections] Oh, is that going into *Hansard*?

We really have a situation here where all members might be able through letters and through discussions with various contacts that we all have with our federal partners to find a way, then, to loosen up these constraints, and it would seem in cultural activities that there's likely a compelling case that could be and should be made.

In any event, we are here discussing cultural workers in more detail than I think we ever have previously. Again, *Hansard* is picking up our discussions in this area plus we have department staff in the gallery who are hearing, then, the interest that the minister is displaying in this particular issue.

The third one, in terms of AISH benefits, I want to deal with in a more global fashion than just focusing on the source of income. The estimates, of course, indicate an increase in spending, and if one isn't careful, one might think that somehow there was an increase in benefits at this particular time, and, no, that is not the case.

When we were putting Bill 32 together in terms of the income and employment supports, even though the low-income review committee had recommended that we look at just one program that would include of course our supports for independence, would include our widows' pension, would include the skills development program, they also asked us to consider including the AISH program in that area, and through our internal processes that we go through as a government and as a government caucus, we have chosen not to do that at the particular time. So Bill 32 only covers the first three that I mentioned, and AISH will continue for the time being and maybe for time immemorial as a stand-alone program.

But as a stand-alone program it is not sustainable, and this is a prime concern that many people have certainly within this government and this caucus. It's a concern that I know opposition members have because of the nature of the questions that I've received on it, and also, of course, it is a concern for the general public as to whether or not people that need government assistance are truly getting the kind of service that they need. In particular, it is a real concern for someone that has been diagnosed, has been found to fit the criteria of severely handicapped so that they qualify for this assured income. I have to tell you that the dollars that you see in that area are there to pay for existing services, existing benefits because of the tremendous upward pressure we always see on costs within our health system, particularly as it relates to prescription drugs and of course, then, just the general growth that has occurred within the AISH program in terms of numbers.

3:50

Now, people are aware that I have been in contact and meeting on a regular basis with the stakeholders groups that are all involved, then, in and around the AISH program, and at some point in time, if not within this particular quarter certainly within the next quarter, sometime before the end of September, in my view we will have to

have an in-the-room, sit-down meeting, all-cards-on-the-table kind of situation where they must help me determine how we are going to, one, achieve sustainability on this particular program. Secondly, of course, how can we ensure that the truly needy within that particular program are getting the income and getting the health and the other supports that they need?

I always worry when I get into anecdotal situations because there is the tyranny of the anecdote. We're all aware of it. One particular situation might not be, I guess, symbolic, then, of the whole situation. I do know that it's a favourite technique of critics of this government, in particular this department, you know, to broaden the mandate and come up with anecdotes, then, that would see that good work that we do day in and day out almost seem unreasonable and perhaps ridiculous. So we have to be very, very careful, hon. members, when any of us use anecdotes. I know I did in my opening remarks, but it was again trying to provide examples of actual situations that we do run into.

So, in that regard, we find even within the AISH program concerns that families have about their, if I can use this term, "grown children." They want to ensure that these grown children that need assistance – they are severely handicapped – are being looked after by someone, and of course they look to the government, then, in order to do that. We know – and again this is the anecdote – that they don't need the income, but they feel that they're obligated to accept that income because that ensures that their loved one is on that AISH program.

One of the early recommendations that's come back from some of the people that I've been able to talk to says, "You know, Clint" – that's what they say; can I say that? – "we don't really need the income, but we want the assurance that this government is going to be looking after them, and we want the assurance that they have that medical card." So you saw one of the things that we've done is to try to move forward on keeping people eligible for the medical card.

It hasn't reached the formality yet of a recommendation, but one of the suggestions is: why don't you look at splitting income and splitting the health benefit so that you can look at one or the other and don't have to automatically do both and when one stops, then the other automatically is lost? So I think there's something there. Like many suggestions, of course, we have to look at it, massage it, work it around a bit to see how we can deal with it, but it sounds like the makings at least of an attempt on this group's part to acknowledge some of the concerns that we as a government have over this program and again share our sincere interest in finding a way to provide the sustainability of AISH.

So with that, Mr. Chairman, again, thank you for the time you've allotted me.

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

Ms Blakeman: Thanks. Just a few quick clarifications to close off the exchange between myself and the minister. Again, I'm conscious that I'm taking time from my colleagues, and I appreciate their patience.

The minister has referred a number of times to what he finds in Bill 32, and I'm not questioning him on that because there will be time scheduled for debate on Bill 32 and I didn't want to take debate time away from the estimates and from the policy that goes along with the estimates. So that's why I haven't responded to or referred to Bill 32 at all thus far.

I'm interested to hear that even in a social setting the minister heard others talking about the importance of the cultural sector. I just want to tell him a little story, a true one. I participated as an observer in a cluster group sponsored by the EDE, Economic

Development Edmonton. It was very interesting because in the beginning everybody talked about how important the cultural sector was and, oh, yes, we had to have that, and, yes, it was a driver, and blah-blah-blah, and, oh, yeah, it was going to be right up there. But as the group met over a series of times, over six months or more, by the time we got to the end, culture was gone. And when I said: excuse me; where did it go? "Oh, it's so important, but you know, we needed those roads for the truck routes, and we needed the technology and the telecommunications sector, and we needed the sales sector." It was really, really important, yeah, yeah, but it was off the table.

My point to the minister specifically for what his department offers: when we talk about capacity building for this sector, I'm glad to hear that he's now recognizing how important it is and in fact that it is part of an underpinning for other economic drivers in Alberta. The point I keep trying to make – and I'm obviously not making it very clearly – is that the infrastructure in the cultural sector is intellectual property. It is in the heads of the people. The physical infrastructure is sporadic and in varying degrees of usability. So we have facilities like the Citadel Theatre. Great, wonderful, terrific; wonderful to have it. We now will have a reno at the 50-year mark of the Jubilee auditorium, another facility that's part of the cultural infrastructure. Great, wonderful; glad to have it. But beyond that, you're dealing with people that are working out of, you know, unheated warehouses and garages and all kinds of other physical space which is pretty crappy frankly. So when we talk about trying to keep this sector alive, it's about nurturing and looking after the people because it's all in their heads, and when we lose people out of this sector, a lot of our infrastructure walks away.

I talk about institutional memory a lot and the loss of institutional memory, and it's priceless because this stuff is not written down. You know, who do you call if you are trying to figure out how to fly Peter Pan? That is not stuff that's written down. It's in somebody's head. You happen to call the Foy brothers; that's who does it in North America. That's the point I'm trying to make to this minister: when I talk about capacity building, I'm talking about support, training, mentoring programs, labour market development programs available for the individuals in the cultural sector. I hope that I've been clear this time.

Just as a final closing note and I guess a bit of a gentle prod: why are the minister's anecdotes excellent examples but my anecdotes are hyperbole? You know, I think I have a valid issue here, and I will continue to press the minister to address it. There are the two examples that I have brought before you. I'm not going to bring you one example; that's not fair. But when I start to see two examples, that's indicative to me in a fairly small market – I'm talking my own constituents – that there are more there. Now, I can try and find it as proof, but, I mean, how much time do you want me to spend in order to prove that there are enough people there to make it worth your while to work on it? I think the issue is: we have a discrimination factor here, probably inadvertent, that we need to deal with, and that's why I keep bringing this back before the minister.

Thanks for listening to me wrap up on a number of those points, and I'm now going to let my colleagues get on with it. Thank you.

4:00

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

Mr. Bonner: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. It is indeed a pleasure to get to speak today on estimates. As well, I would like to start out by thanking the minister's department for being here today and certainly assisting with any questions that might require more research and more time than what can be answered here and as well

to certainly let him know that we appreciate the demands that are put on the department by a booming economy and particularly in two of the three areas such as skills and workplaces.

Certainly, when we're talking of a budget that is in the neighbourhood of 5 percent of the entire budget, then we are talking about a considerable amount of money. In looking at estimates and particularly at skills and workplaces, we do have a situation in Alberta where there is a tremendous demand for skilled workers. Of course, because of this demand we also get a young and inexperienced workforce. There is a huge demand and a stress to meet deadlines, and certainly with a young, inexperienced workforce this does lead to safety issues.

Now, then, currently in the province I believe it's somewhere in the neighbourhood of 27,000 injured workers who could possibly get new hearings, and these of course are the long-term and contentious claims. Given that many of these have had to resort to AISH, welfare, CPP, EI and that in some cases their medical costs have not been borne by the Workers' Compensation Board but by Alberta health care, then when we look at the settlement of these claims, if it is indeed found that their claims were justified, that for whatever reason WCB should have been responsible for all these costs – and these were costs that in some cases, such as AISH or Alberta health care or supports for independence or welfare, have been the burden of the taxpayer – I'm wondering if the minister could let us know how these issues will be rectified as to who pays for costs that should have been borne by WCB but were paid by the taxpayer. Would this money be coming from present employers in the province, or would these benefits be paid out of some of the investments that WCB has?

Now, then, as well, earlier today I tabled a memorandum of judgment in the Court of Appeal of Alberta, and this was between Randy Wolfert, the Workers' Compensation Board, and Gene Mudry as the appellants and Thomas Shuchuk, the respondent. I think that it is a very timely memorandum in that certainly when we look at the possibility of 27,000 injured workers getting new hearings and that in this particular case – and I'll just quote from the paper from Mr. Justice Ritter.

(1) The appellants appeal a chambers decision in which the chambers judge held that the respondent was entitled to advance a claim against the appellants based on the tort of abuse of public office. They argue that the statement of claim should have been struck in its entirety or, in the alternative, that they have established a case for dismissal pursuant to the summary judgment rule.

Now, I'm certainly no lawyer and don't pretend to be, but point 12 in this particular memorandum indicated that the appeal which was put forward by Randy Wolfert, the Workers' Compensation Board, and Gene Mudry was dismissed. This certainly has absolutely huge implications when we look at the 27,000 new hearings that potentially could be overturned. If in fact it is found that there was an abuse of public office in the case of case managers or employees of the WCB, then who would be responsible for the costs of such claims? Would this be WCB, or would this in fact be the Alberta taxpayer? Part of my concern is from the fact that the Appeals Commission and the members of the board of directors aren't government appointed. So does the responsibility rest on WCB, or does it rest on the government of Alberta?

So those are a few questions I have for the minister at this particular stage. Thank you.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. minister.

Mr. Dunford: Sure. Well, just to talk briefly about an item that's currently on our work list, the long-term contentious claims, when we released a status report some time ago on the recommendations

of both the Doerksen and the Friedman reports, of course we had to deal with, then, the recommendation that had called for an independent tribunal to look at some old claims. If my memory serves me correctly, I believe that we indicated that this was under review. Now, it's been under review for quite a long time, and what we've been trying to do is find a way in which we could get the various stakeholders to come to some kind of an agreement – we knew it would never be unanimous, but some kind of an agreement – to deal with this particular area. It's very, very controversial – extremely controversial – because every MLA has cases within their files in their offices, and they've tried to bring these forward on behalf of constituents. Even myself; I'm no different. You know, we have a couple of situations where what actually occurred just doesn't sound right. So there's been a desire on the part of many people to see if somehow that couldn't be resolved in some manner.

On the other hand, you have people with experience that have the attitude, and I think justifiably so, that have said: look; there were good people making decisions that they thought were the right decisions under, of course, the rules that then existed at that particular time. Yes, we have come along, and we've changed some of those areas, but that's what progress is all about, that's what change is all about, and then you keep moving forward. You don't continually get into retroactivity or get into revisionist history. So that probably in a matter of a couple of minutes has shown the huge chasm that we as a department have been trying to build a bridge over.

4:10

Now, I had put together a task force. I asked them: if we were going to find a way to review some of these longtime claims, what would the things be that we should look for and what would the criteria be? Men and women with sincere hearts have tried their best and submitted a report. We made the report public as to what they thought, you know, a criteria might be. We've had discussions of: if this were to be set up, who would pay? I think there was a general agreement that of course in the administration of any kind of process to relook at these things, that would fall, then, on the department, on this ministry, and thus on the taxpayers of Alberta. But if there was a decision that was overturned – and I guess it's a one-way street when I think about; I'll get into that in a minute – to the benefit, then, of an injured worker, this would be the responsibility of the workers' compensation system and its accident fund to actually look after those particular costs.

What we have not dealt with to any great extent – and I can tell you that I do have some although not many employers that are wondering why we're not going ahead with this situation as well, because they feel that they have an appealable situation where a worker was deemed to have had an incident in the workplace leading to injury and to long-term benefits that was not correct, did not happen in the workplace, did not prevent the employee from ever working again either for themselves as an employer or for other employers. They, too, are waiting for an opportunity to have this case looked at once again. There's been very little if any discussion or suggestion as to: if that case was overturned, how does that wrong get righted, then, in terms of costs that were experienced in the past by way of assessments on a single employer or on an employer group? So there's a tangled little situation here that we can get into very quickly.

But, you know, one of the things that we have discovered throughout the analysis of this whole situation is that to some extent we've had the development of an urban myth in this area, and that is that all workers who have not been successful in their appeals in terms of WCB somehow have ended up on AISH or SFI. As a

matter of fact, we looked at that. I don't think there's any question that the relations between certainly our ministry and this government generally and the WCB have improved over the last two to three years. We had actually received a level of co-operation where we felt confident to ask for a study with our officials and with WCB to see whether or not the allegation of AISH and SFI was in fact true.

Now, there were some limitations, of course, certainly in the passage of time, other limitations as well in terms of protection of privacy and freedom of information, but they were able to study a number of cases where they thought: well, there might be something here. And I don't have the numbers in front of me, so it might lead to a question in QP sometime – I mean, who knows? – but I believe that it was .04 percent of the investigated files or situations where there might have been some kind of a direct relationship. But, hon. members, at that kind of a percentage, I mean, this is not the kind of incident rate, then, where you're going to invest a huge number of dollars.

The thing that all of us have to understand is that workers' compensation, first of all, is not a government department. It's not a government program. Certainly, there is an act where this government is charged with the responsibility of overseeing the activities of workers' comp, but the understanding, then, amongst the general population has to be that workers' compensation is not a government department. These are not taxpayers' dollars that we are talking about. Workers' compensation, while a monopoly, is a beneficial monopoly that provides insurance, actually wage loss insurance to be more particular, but also, then, some rehabilitation and some other benefits as well to cover a worker should an incident happen at the workplace that creates a disruption and a separation from the workplace.

Now, as an insurance company surely all of us would know and understand that there isn't an insurance company in the world that would accept a hundred percent of the claims. So if you've had someone who applied for WCB and was not successful and ended up on SFI or on AISH, you can't necessarily just draw a line between the two dots. The fact that an overwhelming percentage of WCB claims are in fact accepted every year – and it's something in the order of 98 percent or something, you know. I guess the actual number from last year would be available, but they accept a tremendous number of their claims, and employers complain to me about that. They think that there's an inherent bias on the part of workers' compensation on behalf of the injured worker. Now, doesn't that sound surprising to MLAs in this House that have to of course deal with the injured worker whose claim wasn't accepted? We don't see the tens of thousands of WCB claimants that are successful each and every year.

So we have a number each year that are not accepted. They start to accumulate. The people try to go through the appeal system as best they can. We've tried – and I believe that we've been successful – helping with the appeals for the benefit of injured workers not only inside the WCB but, of course, as mentioned now, through one of the components of our ministry, which is the Appeals Commission.

4:20

In any event, hon. member, the use of the number of 27,000 injured workers who might have a justifiable grievance under the old system I think is far too high. Again, good people try to make good decisions. I can't for the life of me understand why it would be anywhere near, anywhere close to that kind of number. As a matter of fact, knowing the hon. member's sincere efforts on behalf of not only his constituents but on behalf of injured workers across the province, I am frankly surprised that he would use that kind of

number because those numbers are so scary that in all likelihood it is meant to scare off anybody from actually taking a look at this area. In fact, the 27,000, if I'm not mistaken, is a number that's been used by employer groups to try to get me, the minister, not to venture, not to tread into this kind of territory, because they're saying: Mr. Minister, you simply have no understanding of what it is that you're trying to do. I don't believe that for a minute. I don't believe 27,000 for a minute. I don't believe 7,000 for a minute. I do believe that every MLA in this province has a sum that they would like to look at. Again, I think the exaggeration in terms of those numbers has been used by parties and by advocates without any kind of discrimination on what they were doing and what kind of game they were playing, and it has really been to the detriment of injured workers in this province.

Certainly, Bill 27 was an attempt to change some of the appeal systems that we are currently involved in inside of Alberta. Of course, we did provide within a section of that act that the minister may provide some kind of mechanism to look at those areas. You folks were in the House at the same time I was to hear the reaction of the injured workers in the gallery. I have to tell you that that was a very low moment in my political career because I've never had the employers on my side on this situation from day one, but I did think that to a large measure I had support from the injured workers. Well, they made it pretty clear that particular day that they weren't there either. So you want to talk about a lose/lose situation, then I think that's exactly what we're looking at here.

We have it under review. We still have time to move forward on this in some way in which to do something, but I'll tell you that the way this whole thing has unfolded, it's really shown the kind of acrimony that can get involved in systems when there's a lack of good evidence and a lack of, in some cases, sincerity. This thing has been used by people that have been carrying around WC baggage all their lives as a way to kick the hell out of the WCB system. I say again that those that have participated in that have not done a favour to the injured workers of this province, and they have not done a favour to the employers of this province, and they have not done a favour to the WCB system of Alberta, which is a beneficial monopoly and one of the best WCB systems that you're going to find operating in North America.

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

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. It's a pleasure to participate, as usual, in the budget estimates for the Human Resources and Employment department. I listened with a great deal of interest to the minister talk about Bill 27, but I believe it was Bill 26, the WCB legislation, that had closure, and Bill 27 had to do with labour relations.

I don't share the hon. minister's view in regard to the WCB. I think, unfortunately, the passage of time is proving that Bill 26 was not an improvement of the adjudication process. I thought I would give it a chance, but with the calls that I'm getting to the constituency office and the length of time that it's taking for decisions to be made at the WCB, it's just not working out. But I will at this time tip my hat to the minister for going where others have refused to go, and that's at least trying.

Certainly, with the WCB, Mr. Chairman, we look at the compensation board premiums and we see that Alberta's are the second lowest in the country after Manitoba, and I understand that Manitoba has a rebate system for good employers. When you consider that our WCB premiums are the second lowest among the provinces and on average are slightly less – they're about \$1.87, I believe; they're less than \$2 on a hundred dollars of gross payroll – we are doing well.

But with a little bit of bad luck, I suppose you could say – and we have a high number of accidents – we would surpass Quebec, B.C., and Saskatchewan and maybe even New Brunswick or Ontario.

So we have to be diligent to keep accident rates down and, as we saw, keep premiums down. The hon. minister I think is on to some good ideas there. At the same time one cannot argue poverty and refuse to pay out the long-standing contentious claims. As the hon. Member for Edmonton-Glengarry has so often reminded me, these are debts that we owe, not future costs. There are just too many people falling through the cracks.

Now, I would be curious if the minister could provide an answer before I go any further, Mr. Chairman, in regard to age discrimination for older workers; that is, those workers who are over 65 and still active in the workforce. As the population ages and more and more people are still active in the workforce after 65, are there any programs in the WCB to ensure that they are not discriminated against because of their age when they're injured on the work site?

In our constituency office I have a file where a gentleman is still injured, and WCB insists that this man can work at something. He can hardly get from the sofa to the fridge. He's crippled, and everyone but the WCB seems to recognize that, including his doctors. This gentleman is over 65, and I'm concerned that there's age discrimination going on here. I would prefer that the minister could have a look at not only workers under 65 but those over 65 because certainly there's going to come a time in this province where we're going to have incentives to keep workers active. I'll be one of them.

Now, we dealt with the cost of settlement for long-standing contentious claims a little earlier. I would like to move away from the WCB for a minute. Before I go, I would like to talk a little bit about my concerns – and they're not addressed in this budget – about the skyrocketing health care costs and the use of for-profit health providers. Are they responsible for those increases? I will give WCB this: they are quite straightforward with FOIP requests. There's room for improvement, as far I'm concerned, with openness and transparency, but they're a lot better off than a lot of respective departments in this government as far as being straightforward with FOIP. Some documents we have received show that the WCB's total health costs have ballooned 78 percent while its use of for-profit health care providers has been steadily increasing as well. Now, in 1997 the WCB's public health care expenditures comprised 26 percent of total health spending. In 2001 these expenditures comprised only 19.3 percent of total health spending. The WCB's total health spending grew, which is interesting to note, from \$77 million in 1997 to \$148 million in 2001.

4:30

Now, it seems that the WCB's increasing use of for-profit health care providers is driving up total costs. When we look and see the businesses in this province, how premium rates jumped an average of 27.3 percent in the past year due to rising health costs, and we are now looking at higher costs that may be related to the use of these expensive for-profit facilities, I would like to know where we're going to go with this in the future. It seems to me that premiums are going up, but where these workers are being treated is going up as well. I have a document – and I would certainly share it with the hon. minister – where an injured worker from Edmonton was sent to Calgary for a week to one of these private, for-profit outfits, and it was a \$5,000 invoice for a week, and I don't think that included his accommodation. I could be wrong. But I was astonished at the cost of this. I think it merits checking out.

Certainly, there is another issue that I would like to commend the minister on because the minister has gone, Mr. Chairman, where

others have failed to go – others have failed, and I'm disappointed in their failure – and that was to enforce and show a willingness to enforce the workplace health and safety laws and regulations in this province. This minister in the time that the hon. minister has been in this department has in my view on this matter made a significant positive improvement in workplace safety, and I think the improvements will continue to happen.

The minister admitted in question period the other day that there were 101 workers, either through auto accidents or occupational diseases or fatalities in the workplace, for the year 2002. The previous year I believe there were in the range of 118, maybe 120, but that is a significant drop, and I attribute that drop to this minister's willingness to enforce the laws that are under his command. Other ministers have failed to do that, but this minister did that, and we see the immediate results.

Now, Mr. Chairman, there are other initiatives that have been implemented by this minister, and we will see how they work out. Certainly, his call centre. I would like an update on that call centre. I would also like to know how the minister is planning on advertising that call centre because I believe it was last year I reminded the minister that I was on a work site and I was astonished to find out that particularly the younger workers, which he is targeting – and that's a good idea – were completely unaware of his call centre. I don't know how we advertise that in some of the higher risk towards injury job categories, but surely something can be worked out so that they know that they can comfortably call that call centre up the hill here and get answers to their questions. I think that can be accomplished. There are a number of ways of doing it, and I'm not going to repeat them this afternoon, because I have suggested that earlier to the minister and his department. But this call centre is also a good idea, and perhaps it could be part of supervisors' training program. I'm sure this is already part of the apprenticeship programs in the province, to take a half an hour out of the curriculum and explain how the call centre works and explain how workplace safety regulations and laws work, who is responsible for what, and as workers leave SAIT or NAIT or wherever they are being trained, they will take that with them to the site.

We often talk in this province and it's been pointed out to me that we believe in a market economy, and I certainly do, but this government doesn't believe in the market forces as far as supply and demand of labour goes and workers and wages. When you have poor planning, as is obvious to this member, by this government, particularly in the health care professions and in a lot of the construction trades, where we have recognized that there is a shortage of workers but we have done very little to train the appropriate numbers, now because market forces are indicating that there is a shortage and as a shortage more employers are willing to pay top dollar to attract those workers, the government's answer to market forces is Bill 27, to restrict and limit what the market will bear for labour costs. Now, that is a philosophical contradiction of this government.

I know the minister is looking a little bit puzzled at that last statement, but I'm sorry. If market forces are going to apply, then they're going to apply to everyone. Why restrict and limit what people can get? Instead of doing that, I would have thought that the hon. minister and the other members of the government would have worked co-operatively with other provinces in Canada and resolved our labour shortages together. Perhaps it's time for this minister to get on a plane. I shouldn't say that too loudly, but someone from the department could get on a plane and get together with other department officials from across Canada and decide that we're going to train one group of RNs here in this province, and this province is going to become a centre of excellence in training, let's say, nurses to deal with neurology, and the universities in Saskatoon or Regina

are going to train nurses to look after ICU patients or open-heart surgery patients. We could work at this together instead of graduates from the University of Alberta, the University of Saskatchewan, the University of New Brunswick or wherever going to the job fairs, driving the price up by competing with one another for that pool of labour instead of working together to resolve the issue on a national basis. Instead of pointing fingers at other jurisdictions, perhaps we should look at working together with them a little bit more. The same would apply for teachers, as well, and petroleum engineers.

Now, we look at Bill 27, and again another reason why not only this hon. member but many Albertans have difficulty with restricting and limiting what we can do with collective bargaining is that we look at the labour productivity from page 110 of the so-called Alberta Advantage. It states in here the annual average between 1998 and 2002, the dollars of real GDP per hour worked. "Albertans are the most productive workers in Canada, as measured by real GDP dollars." We are followed closely by our cousins in Saskatchewan, and after that Ontario ranks third. We're above the national average certainly in this province, so why would we accuse Alberta workers – and I've heard this not from that member, to be fair, Mr. Chairman, not from that member, certainly, but from other members in this Assembly that union workers are lazy and unproductive. When we look at that statistic, that just doesn't bear it out, that bar chart there.

4:40

On the same page we look at the labour record between 1998 and 2002, the person days lost due to disputes, and that is 10,000 person days worked, and with this bar chart Alberta is again the lowest in the entire country. The Canadian average is around eight days per 10,000, and in Alberta it's slightly above two. Now, I know there are those that will say: well, none of the workforce is unionized, and the majority of the public-sector workforce that is unionized doesn't have the right to strike, so that doesn't mean anything. But when you have a record like that, why do we need legislation such as Bill 27? That's puzzling, and many people have pointed that out to this member, Mr. Chairman.

Getting on to certainly other issues, Mr. Chairman, I'm very disappointed in this government and in this department and in this minister in the fact that only \$20 has been made available to certain groups that receive SFI benefits. When you look at inflation as a result of energy deregulation and what that has done to the disposable income of that group of Albertans, 20 bucks a month is not enough. I heard before the budget from undetermined voices in this section of the House: "Wait. Be patient. Wait for the budget, and you will see a significant increase to AISH benefits and to SFI benefits." That has not happened, and those individuals deserve a wage increase or a benefit increase too. All of them. I'm sorry; many of those individuals through no fault of their own cannot find and keep gainful employment. We in this province can help them out.

Whenever I think of the cuts to those programs and the fact that there's been very, very, very little money put back into those programs – you look at the caseloads, and you see the reduction in caseloads – this is shameful. This is just shameful, Mr. Chairman, that a government would turn around. Now, in the last couple of years whenever we compare the horse racing industry to these individuals that need these benefits to live very modestly, sure, the horse racing industry this year got a \$4 million increase, the same ironically as what these SFI people got, but the year before the horse racing industry went from roughly about \$17 million to \$33 million, and this is just shameful. Our priorities are wrong. [Mr. MacDonald's speaking time expired]

Mr. Dunford: Talk about a nose at the wire, I guess.

There were quite a number of things here, but is the Member for Edmonton-Strathcona going to speak? Later?

Dr. Pannu: Perhaps. Please go ahead.

Mr. Dunford: All right. Well, I'll try and keep this to about 10 minutes then.

The Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar, of course, has a long experience in the workforce, and he's quite right. We're probably going to need to put him back to work after he's 65 not here in the House but as a plumber and a pipe fitter. You know, we're still going to need . . . [interjection] No? Was it boilermaker? Yeah, okay. So he's right. As I stand here, I don't know of concerns about age discrimination, but, again, now that it's on the record, certainly we'll investigate and respond in writing as to our findings.

The member is absolutely right, though, about health costs. This is a huge issue for the WCB and then of course for employers that have to pay the assessment. The numbers that I saw about a year ago when they were discussing what the rates were going to have to be for the 2003 year: I remember seeing something of the order of a 90 percent increase in health care costs in, you know, the last – I don't know – three or four years, so it's a huge issue for them. The member also talked about the average assessment being \$1.87, and he's right. What is very interesting is that even though we've had all kinds of angst and animosity about huge increases in WCB assessments, the actual rate in 2003 is less than it was in 1997. So what's the beef here?

Now, one thing that WCB has decided to do, which I support fully, is that from here on in – 2003 is the first year – the assessed rate is going to reflect the actual costs, then, of dealing with the incidents that have led to injury and fatality and the dislocation from the workplace and the costs of getting these folks back into the workplace. That's how it should be. This is an insurance system, and the rates ought to reflect what is actually happening. I think this is what makes WorkSafe Alberta such an important initiative. With an objective of a 40 percent reduction of incidents in the workplace that lead to injury or fatality, this has huge benefits not only just from the humanitarian side of it in the sense that 15,000 fewer Albertans are injured in a particular year, but let's just move ahead for a moment and talk about: if there's already a shortage of skilled labour, just think of taking another 15,000 out of the Alberta economy for short or long periods of time through injury. Just think what kind of an impact that has.

Let's go to the attainment, then, by the end of 2004 when we achieve that particular goal. What is this going to mean in terms of WCB assessment? It means a reduction of \$200 million – \$200 million – in assessment. To translate this into what would be the general assessed rate on a hundred-dollar payroll basis, well, it's pretty simple. Four million dollars of cost to WCB is one penny on the assessment, so we're looking at a 50-cent reduction in the general assessment across this province. Now, that's not only going to put us below Manitoba; it'll probably put us below Singapore, you know, where, I'm constantly being reminded, they have better safety records than we do. [interjection] Well, the whole concept of WorkSafe Alberta came about from a discussion I had with the Construction Owners Association of Alberta. They asked to see me. We knew from our annual report what our incident rate was, and we felt actually pretty good about it because we were meeting our objective. We were in the bottom third of the jurisdictions in Canada, and that's how we were willing to be measured. Well, they came in, and they looked me right in the eye and said: Mr. Minister, we want you to know that Alberta is a dangerous jurisdiction in which to operate.

4:50

After some flurry and some negativism and defensiveness on my part we finally decided: "Well, all right. Let's have a look at this." They assured me that they have operations in Alberta, they have operations in the Gulf coast, they have operations in the Middle East, they have operations in Singapore, and they do the statistics the same way around the world in all their operations, and Alberta then was a difficult place. Well, that was all we needed to take off our cloak of complacency that had been existing.

Mr. Smith: The cloak of complacency?

Mr. Dunford: The cloak of complacency. We took off the cloak of complacency in this province.

Mr. Smith: That's like the mantle of mediocrity.

Mr. Dunford: Absolutely.

Mr. Smith: The pants of pulchritude.

Mr. Dunford: Mr. Chairman, will you straighten this guy out? No. I know you can't, so we'll let it go.

Mr. Smith: The socks of sobriety.

Mr. Dunford: No. I like "cloak of complacency," hon. member, and I'm going with that.

In any event, that was the genesis of WorkSafe Alberta. That was the reason for setting the 40 percent reduction, because we wanted to forget about all the comparisons that we'd been making previously as far as Canada was concerned, and Alberta was going to lead the way in these reductions. We're calling upon the employees of this province. We're calling on the employers of the province, the private providers that educate and have safety programs. The WCB itself is funding a large part of it that we're involved in here with WorkSafe Alberta, and we're going forward with it.

Of course, part of that, then, has been a clearer definition of what the principles are that we act under here. Hon. members, we have five principles. The first one is education and the second one is education and the third one is education and the fourth one is education and the fifth one is enforcement. We want to send a clear message to all the employers and employees throughout this province that we will educate first but that we're no longer shy about enforcement.

We made the changes in Bill 26 last session to increase fines. Now we're providing on-the-spot fines as a pilot project within construction. You know, we've allowed judges now to go to alternative sentencing. We're doing what we can, and of course we did raise the maximum fine from \$150,000 to \$500,000 on a first offence. The courts of course have recognized this. They're taking this into account. We now have our own dedicated prosecutor that we fund through the Department of Justice, and we're moving forward in this area. So the call needs to go out that there's a new paradigm, that there's a new objective and motivation on the part of the government of Alberta, and that is that there will be fewer incidents in the workplace.

Now, hon. members might have noticed that I've yet to use the word "accident." I don't believe in it. Every one of us, especially the boys here in the Legislature – we all know how we dealt with our moms when we got into trouble.

An Hon. Member: Oh, not the towel.

Mr. Dunford: No, no, not the towel. You know: "It's not my fault. It was an accident." Is there a male in this House that hasn't used that? "It's not my fault. It's an accident."

Mr. Rathgeber: Still do.

Mr. Dunford: Yeah, still do. So you know what I mean.

There are no accidents anymore. There are incidents, and incident leads to responsibility. We all have our part to play in that area.

I'll need to get more information for the member on the call centre. I don't have up-to-date stats on the actual number of Albertans that are using that call centre. It is huge, but more importantly what it's done is relieved our inspectors of a huge amount of administrative work in the sense of trying to provide just general information, because now there are people that are operating those telephones. There's information on the Internet now that can provide all that, and it frees up our people to educate, educate, educate, educate, and of course enforce.

Moving from that area – and I'll wrap up so others can speak – I can't resist a comment about Bill 27 and what we're trying to do there. I want to repeat again in the estimates here, as I have in question period and as I have in public, that it has a very unique name for a bill: labour relations, bracket, health care restructuring, whatever it is, another bracket. I mean, it's a very unwieldy title for a bill, but the whole idea was to send a message to everyone and especially to the labour movement in Alberta that what we are talking about here is a specific situation. We're talking about a restructuring that is going on in terms of the regions and the realignment of the employer component, then, in employer/employee relationships. Bill 27 is simply a bridge to get from where we are now to where we're going to be, we believe, by September of 2004. Now, that date is important. The chairman of the Labour Relations Board is here in the gallery today, and he needs to hear what the time frame is that we're placing him under and that this will be one of the measurements, of course, that we'll be using in terms of our movement toward the goal.

Twenty dollars on the SFI on June 1, \$15 a child in August: that is an amount that was deemed we could do with the particular estimates that we had to work with, but it transcends the dollars in terms of the significance because this is the first increase that we've had in this area now in 10 years. I hope that all folks noticed that these were for people not expected to work and for parents because they have children. If you are expected to work and you don't have a child, there is no \$20 and there is of course by definition no \$15 in August because you don't have children. But if you're expected to work, then we mean that: you're expected to work. The member talked about the shortage of skilled labour. There are jobs available, so we need to send a clear message to all Albertans that if you have the ability to work, then get out there and work and don't expect to rely on the government. I made the commitment at question period the other day. I'll review the minimum wage if that'll help. I don't think it's particularly relevant right now with the economy that we have because even the member talked about supply and demand, so probably the real starting rate in Alberta these days is well north of \$6. I'm not sure just what the review would find, but in any event we will do that and always, always keep our philosophy clearly in front of us that we want to provide people with hand-ups rather than handouts and that you'll always, always be better off working that relying on a government.

5:00

Mr. Pham: Mr. Chairman, it is my pleasure today to join the debate on the budget of the Ministry of Human Resources and Employment.

First of all, let me put it on the record that I think that the minister who looks after this ministry is an excellent minister. He has tried very hard to improve the service provided not only to workers but also to low-income Albertans. For many of the critics maybe what he has done is not enough, but to me as a member of government I know that he has tried his best, and it's a lot easier to talk about things than to get things done.

Having said that, today I would like to focus my comments on two areas. The first one is the Workers' Compensation Board, and the other one is the program for severely handicapped people in Alberta. As many members of the House know, I have been a critic of the WCB for many years now. I believe that the Workers' Compensation Board has done an adequate job with many injured workers, but also at the same time the WCB has neglected a fairly large number of long-term injured workers. I have always hoped that the WCB will improve the service for the long-term injured workers. I have waited for many years, and I have seen some small improvement here and there, but overall the service WCB provides for this group of workers is still not very good.

A common practice, then, by the case manager is that after an injured worker has spent a year or a year and a half on the benefit roll, WCB will try to kick that person out of the benefits, and then the workers will have to try to climb back in again. That process is not easy. The fence is set very high, and for many of the injured workers the stress of the injury, the stress of the loss of income, and the stress of the family all compound together and make it almost impossible for them to prove their case. The WCB case managers most of the time are very articulate. They can formulate really well-written decisions, and they can always pick and choose the most beneficial medical decisions to defend their position. It is quite difficult for an average injured worker to fight against the system. I grant that there are also some people who try to abuse the WCB benefits, but by and large, you know, people who have spent a year or more on WCB benefits usually have significant injury, and for the WCB to have a pattern of kicking them off the benefit roll really disturbs me.

I have many cases in my office, but I had a really interesting case that I brought to the minister's attention. When the worker got out of the rehabilitation program from Columbia Rehab centre, on the medical discharge information it was stated that this injured worker cannot sit for more than six minutes, cannot stand for more than one minute, cannot walk for more than one minute. Throughout the 14 months that I worked with the WCB on this case, from the case manager level to the supervisor to the CEO of WCB, all of whom are very reasonable people, intellectual people, and extremely capable, all of them seemed to be of the same mind-set that somehow if they reverse this decision, if they admitted a commonsense thing, that a person who cannot stand for more than one minute cannot return to work, the world will cease to exist, everybody will climb on the WCB benefit roll, and it will cost the WCB a huge amount of money.

The cost argument and the fear that it will cost the WCB a significant amount of money is being used again and again and again, not only in this case but also when it comes to dealing with all of the long-term contentious claims. This really intrigues me because on one hand the WCB claims that they want to do the right thing. On the other hand, they say that they can't do these things because it will cost them so much money. If it is true that what we want them to do for the long-term contentious claims will cost them a lot of money, that means that there are many, many cases out there where the long-term injured worker was treated improperly in the first place. If that is the case, then is it important to do the right thing? Is it important to do what is just, or is it important for the

WCB to worry about the bottom line and just ignore these people?

I, like the minister, do not think the cost is very high. I think that the number of long-term contentious claims that need to be reviewed and dealt with is relatively low. But this guy has a funny situation because in this case you have both the advocate for injured workers and the WCB seeming to sing from the same song sheet. The WCB used the argument that there are many people in this category, and therefore they reject doing it because of the cost.

Of course, the WCB is a very, very powerful organization. Every time that they talk about the cost, it excites the employers who have to pay the bill. The employers get on the phone and start a letter-writing campaign, and many of us as elected officials listen, and we begin to second-guess whether it is the right thing to do or not.

I still remember that last year during the introduction of Bill 26, about the WCB, I had the pleasure of exchanging e-mail with some of the business leaders in Calgary. In fact, I got some very nasty e-mail. Some of them went as far as threatening me that they would do everything they could in their power to make sure that I don't get re-elected again. Mr. Chairman, I have heard that threat many times before, and it's kind of interesting that it came from the people that I didn't expect to hear it from. But life goes on, because as elected officials we try to do what we think is right and what we think is best for Albertans.

Coming back to the case that I mentioned earlier, after 14 months WCB came up with a new medical report saying that my constituent's condition was not as bad as they first said it was. In fact, he has a limitation of 10 minutes walking, 10 minutes standing, and 60 minutes sitting. The irony is not in the new condition. The irony is that given their belief that the limitation was one minute standing, one minute walking, and six minutes sitting, they still reached that conclusion that he was able and fit to return to work. That was the irony of it. You know, under that restriction the case manager, the Claims Services Review Committee, the CEO of WCB say that that poor man was able to return to work, and, Mr. Chairman, if that logic applied to every case, then I wonder: is there anybody that the WCB thinks is not capable of returning to work?

A case like that really makes people like me feel that there has to be a better accountability framework in the system, because today I really feel sorry for the minister every time when I . . .

5:10

The Deputy Chair: I hesitate to interrupt the hon. Member for Calgary-Montrose, but pursuant to Standing Order 58(5), which provides for the Committee of Supply to rise and report no later than 5:15 p.m. on Tuesday, Wednesday, or Thursday afternoons, I must now put the question on the proposed estimates for the Department of Human Resources and Employment for the fiscal year ending March 31, 2004.

Agreed to:

Operating Expense and Equipment/Inventory Purchases	\$1,072,188,000
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The Deputy Chair: Shall the vote be reported? Are you agreed?

Hon. Members: Agreed.

The Deputy Chair: Opposed? Carried.

The hon. Government House Leader.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I would move that the committee rise and report and beg leave to sit again.

[Motion carried]

[Mr. Shariff in the chair]

Mr. Lougheed: Mr. Speaker, the Committee of Supply has had under consideration certain resolutions, reports as follows, and requests leave to sit again.

Resolved that a sum not exceeding the following be granted to Her Majesty for the fiscal year ending March 31, 2004, for the following department.

Human Resources and Employment: operating expense and equipment/inventory purchases, \$1,072,188,000.

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

Hon. Members: Agreed.

The Acting Speaker: Opposed? So ordered.

The hon. Government House Leader.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I would move that we adjourn till 8 this evening, at which time we return in Committee of Supply.

[Motion carried; the Assembly adjourned at 5:14 p.m.]